

University of Nevada, Reno

A Social Constructionism Study Using Discourse Analysis of Rural Elementary Principals' Perceptions of a State Law on Reading Literacy by Grade Three

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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Abstract

Successful implementation of a new law begins with administrators and their perceptions of the law. As stated by the U.S. Department of Education (2015), “Principals are at the center of most new State-level system reforms” (p. 14). In 2015, Nevada lawmakers passed a new law titled Read by Grade 3 (RBG3) (Nevada Department of Education, 2016a). RBG3 required all students to be reading-literate by the end of third grade or risk retention. Elementary principals were tasked with leading their staff members through the process of implementing the various mandates of the law. As such, elementary principals from three rural school districts in Nevada were invited to participate in this research study which sought to explore their perspectives on the reading literacy law. As Preston, Jakubiec, and Kooymans, (2013) stated:

Leadership in rural schools is multifaceted, place-conscious, and relationship dependent; the needs and priorities of students, parents, and community members require a leader who is knowledgeable about educational policies, yet receptive to the distinctive needs, perceptions, and culture of educational stakeholders of that rural community. (p. 11)

Even though many states have passed reading literacy laws as far back as 2001 (Huddleston, 2015), research on rural elementary principals’ perspectives on implementing these laws was inadequate at the time of the study. This study sought to answer the questions:

1. What perceptions do rural elementary principals hold about the Read by Grade 3 (RBG3) law?
2. What factors contribute to these perceptions?

Rural elementary principals were interviewed about their perceptions of a new state reading literacy law titled the Read by Grade 3 (RBG3) Act. Social constructionism was used with discourse analysis to determine the significant findings of the data. Further analysis of the data was conducted to discover possible contributing factors to the perceptions.

Three main themes were identified: the benefits were pretty great; RBG3 was not perfect; and RBG3 was all about the students. Subthemes were identified under the main theme, the benefits were pretty great: the law afforded principals the opportunity to meet their needs as leaders and the resources were beneficial. Subthemes were also identified under the main theme, RBG3 was not perfect: the consequences of retention, the time required to implement, and the concern about teacher stress.

For state level stakeholders, the results of this study provide a launching point for a variety of discussions on the development or modification of state reading literacy laws and, quite possibly, state education laws in general. Furthermore, district and site level administrators may use the findings to begin their own discussions on how they approach the implementation of new initiatives. The finding that the rural elementary principals overall perceived the law favorably for a variety of reasons may encourage other states to explore the possibility of the benefits of state education laws.

Keywords:

Reading literacy, initiative, initiatives, state education legislation, state education laws, retention, Read by Grade 3, RBG3, response to intervention, RTI, multi-tiered system of supports, MTSS, educational leadership, implementation, retention, social constructionism, discourse analysis

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my amazingly supportive husband and children, my late father, and my loving mother.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A new reading literacy law, coined Read by Grade 3 (RBG3), was passed in Nevada in 2015 (Nevada Department of Education, 2016a). The law has a variety of mandates, such as:

- identification of students who are reading deficient through a school-wide universal screening assessment;
- notification to parents of a student identified as deficient;
- providing an intervention for and progress monitoring of a student identified as deficient; and
- retention should a student not achieve mastery of reading literacy by the end of third grade (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b).

The new state law was strikingly similar to an educational framework called response to intervention (RTI), also known as multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). Within the framework of RTI, students are identified as needing support for deficiencies determined through school-wide universal screeners (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012; Johnsen, Parker, & Farah, 2015; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Structured interventions targeting the identified skill deficiency are provided to the student through a three-tiered process (Buffum et al., 2012; Martinez, Nellis, & Prendergast, 2006). Data are collected through progress monitoring to appraise how the student responds to the applied intervention and to assist educators in planning the next steps in the RTI process (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Johnsen et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2006).

One difference between RBG3 and RTI is that RTI is a framework and not a mandate. Further, the RTI model does not have a recommendation or requirement for

retention. Instead, if a student who has gone through the RTI process at all three tiers and does not master the necessary skills, the multiple data points collected through the RTI process *may* indicate the need for special education services (Fuchs et al., 2003). Those data points can support the educator's recommendation to parents to further assess the student for a possible specific learning disability (Fuchs et al., 2003). Response to intervention became a more mainstream framework in education after the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). The IDEA of 2004 articulated that states must allow school districts to use the RTI framework to identify students with disabilities; however, IDEA does not *require* school districts to use the RTI model to identify a student with a specific learning disability (IDEA 2004, § 300.307 (a)(2); U.S. Department of Education, 2007; Smith, 2005).

In the state of Nevada, the RTI model and severe discrepancy model are both allowed for identification of students with specific learning deficiencies (Berkeley et al., 2009; Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Said differently, some school districts might not employ the RTI framework, whereas others may. Therefore, an elementary principal serving in a school district with an RTI system already in place may perceive the RBG3 law and implementation of the law as easy considering the new law has significant similarities to the RTI structure. On the other hand, if a school district has not implemented RTI, an elementary principal implementing RBG3 may perceive the law as cumbersome and challenging as he or she is essentially building an intervention system from scratch. Perceptions about the new RBG3 law are of paramount importance as the "figured worlds" (Gee, 2014, p. 95) of the principals as developed through "personal knowledge"

and “social knowledge” (van Dijk, 2014, p. 21) are passed on to staff members through “D/discourse” (Gee, 2014, p. 25).

The perceptions rural elementary principals had about the new RBG3 law was of interest in this research study. How rural elementary principals developed their knowledge about the law and, in turn, perceived the law from inception to implementation provided insight for future research studies on educational laws and possibly for future initiatives in education. Rural elementary principals serve in unique educational communities where teacher satisfaction is often high, but funding resources are low compared to urban communities (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Herring, & Xie, 2007). Implementing a new state initiative can be challenging for any administrator (U.S. Department of Education, 2015) and the perspectives rural principals had about the RBG3 law were of interest due to their unique setting. Discovering the various perceptions of elementary principals from different rural school districts allowed for a deeper understanding of how their distinctive knowledge was developed through the social constructs of both serving as an elementary principal and in a rural setting. At the time of this study, there was limited research available on the perspectives rural elementary principals have about a state reading literacy law.

Background of the Study

Early in the millennium, many administrators were faced with leading staff members through a multitude of changes due to both federal and state education laws intended to improve student achievement across the nation (Cusick, 2014; Klute, Welp, Yanoski, Mason, & Reale, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 was

one of the federal laws that impacted multiple school districts across the nation (Berkeley et al., 2009; Martinez et al., 2006). Under the IDEA of 2004, school districts were authorized, but not required, to use the RTI model to “consider a child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the [specific learning disability] SLD determination process” (U.S Department of Education, 2007, p. 1). A review of state policies and practices across the nation conducted by Maki, Floyd, and Roberson (2015) found “45 states provide guidance on RTI implementation; however, there is great variability on how such guidance is provided” (p. 465).

As new state laws and guidance were developed in response to the various federal mandates and initiatives, some state legislators also developed reading literacy laws with retention clauses (Diffey, 2016). Diffey (2016) stated, “Sixteen states plus D.C. require third grade retention and 14 of those offer conditional promotion options” (p. 1). Nevada was one of the 14 states with RBG3 signed into law in 2015 (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). As already mentioned, RBG3 parallels many of the features of RTI such as conducting school-wide universal screeners to identify students with deficiencies, implementation of interventions, and notification to parents (NEV. REV. STAT. § 388.157, 2015). In addition, every principal must designate a learning strategist to provide training and support to classroom teachers in reading literacy practices (NEV. REV. STAT. § 388.159, 2015). Further, the learning strategist must provide professional development in the area of reading literacy to teachers assigned to teach kindergarten through fourth grade (NEV. REV. STAT. § 388.159, 2015). When the RBG3 Act was passed as Senate Bill 391, there was also an appropriations provision for the 2015-2016

and 2016-2017 school years (Fiscal Analysis Division Legislative Counsel Bureau, 2015).

How leaders guide employees through a new initiative, such as RTI or RBG3, can determine the success or failure of the new program or method (Fixen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). Implementing a “system of interventions” may not be new for some principals and teachers who were involved in the implementation of the RTI framework as allowed under the IDEA of 2004 (IDEA 2004, § 300.307 (a)(2)).

However, principals who have served in districts where RTI was not implemented, a new state law on reading literacy with a methodical approach to applying interventions may be a challenge. In addition to the law itself, rural elementary principals face unique benefits and challenges when implementing a new policy in rural communities (Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013).

Elementary principals can first experience a new state law in a variety of ways. An administrator may learn about the new legislation through observation as the law is crafted, passed through the legislature, and signed by the governor. If an administrator is hired from out of state, he or she may first experience the new law through professional development and a mentoring program provided by a professional learning department in the school district. Still another administrator may become familiar with a new law as a teacher and is then required to implement the mandates as an administrator. Such personal experiences along with social identities can influence the perceptions or constructed knowledge about the law (Gee, 2014; van Dijk, 2014). Further, the knowledge about the law developed through social group interaction and conversations will influence the social discourse used by each administrator to articulate the law to

others in the educational community (van Dijk, 2014). The complexity of the social construction of knowledge is not to be taken lightly (van Dijk, 2014). There is very limited research on the topic of administrators' perceptions of new state reading literacy laws.

The implementation of a new law starts with administrators and the discourse they use to discuss a new reading literacy law. This discourse can provide insight into the individual perceptions and value placed on the new law (Gergen, 2015). Gergen (2015) cited Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* when Gergen discussed how powerful organizations such as government entities or educational institutions create through discourse "institutional realities" (p. 51). To apply this idea to the implementation of RBG3, administrators either adhere to the "institutional realities" constructed in the reading literacy law and demonstrate compliance with the law by following the mandates or face the consequences. These consequences may be great for the educational system in Nevada considering that retention was a component of the law.

On the other side, however, Gergen (2015) argued that there are both positive and negative consequences to the power of institutions and the development of "institutional realities" (p. 51). When Gergen presented opposition to "resisting power" of institutions, he argued, "Rather than outright rejection [of institutions], we can look into the consequences of various orderings, both negative and positive" (p. 52). Therefore, some principals may construct the institutional realities of the state reading literacy initiative in a more positive context. They may recognize the strong parallels to the RTI framework that may already be in place their school. They may perceive the new law as beneficial for all students to become reading-literate by the end of third grade. As there was limited

research conducted in the area of rural elementary principals' perceptions on a state reading literacy law, an exploratory research study could be beneficial.

Elementary principals are the educational leaders who must not only understand the various mandates of the law, but also consider the needs of the educational community, especially in the rural communities (Preston et al., 2013). This research study was conducted in three rural school districts with varying demographics to discover the perceptions of rural elementary principals about RBG3. The impact of a new state reading literacy law was first addressed through basic analysis of the discourse of individual administrators to glean themes and categories. The researcher was also interested in the possible influences on the perceptions of the rural elementary principals. Therefore, a more in-depth analysis was performed with social constructionism theory, which recognized participants "personal knowledge" and "social knowledge" (van Dijk, 2014, p. 21) and how their schemas influenced each administrator's experience, understanding, and perception.

Social constructionism through discourse analysis was the theoretical approach for this research study. Social constructionism theorizes the individual experiences of each person, intertwined with the various experiences he or she has within social groups, influences perceptions (Gergen, 2015). Through social constructionism and discourse analysis, this research study sought to analyze rural elementary principals' perceptions of the new reading literacy law and determine if there are common constructs within the discourse. As Gergen (2015) posited, no discourse is void of political meaning and inferences and both the individual and society provide the meaning to the discourse. Gee (2014) theorized, "Discourse analysis can illuminate problems and controversies in the

world. It can illuminate the issues about the distribution of social goods, who gets helped and who gets harmed” (p. 10).

Statement of the Problem

Successful implementation of a new law begins with administrators and their perceptions of the law. As the U.S. Department of Education (2015) stated:

Principals are at the center of most new State-level system reforms. Strong principals not only lead the implementation of these reform efforts in their school buildings, they also lead the professional development and support for their teachers to bring about improvements in teacher practices and increase student success in their classrooms. (p. 14)

The RBG3 law compelled elementary principals to work with their district level administrators to learn the requirements of the law, to determine how to best approach the implementation of the law, and to serve as instructional leaders. There was limited research on the rural elementary principals’ perspectives about state laws on reading literacy available. As such, the perspectives rural elementary principals had about the RBG3 law were not well-understood. This research study provided exploratory findings, which may support future research.

Elementary principals who served in rural school districts had unique insight on the implementation of the RBG3 law based on the communities in which they served. As Preston et al. (2013) stated:

Leadership in rural schools is multifaceted, place-conscious, and relationship-dependent; the needs and priorities of students, parents, and community members require a leader who is knowledgeable about educational policies, yet receptive to

the distinctive needs, perceptions, and culture of educational stakeholders of that rural community. (p. 11)

The rural elementary principals' perceptions about the RBG3 law were significant in this study to help discover what these instructional leaders perceived to be of value and what challenges they may or may not have encountered in the implementation process. At the time of this research study, there was limited research on the perceptions rural elementary principals had on a state reading literacy law. The impact, positive or negative, that the RBG3 Act may have had on the educational system in rural schools and on students both academically and socially was unknown at the time of the study.

Purpose of the Study

This research study sought to explore the perspectives rural elementary principals had regarding a new state law on reading literacy by grade three. These data provided insight as to what rural elementary principals perceived to be the important parts of the law and how they implemented the law within rural educational communities. Further, the intent of the research study was to provide an understanding of the factors, or social constructs, that may or may not have affected perceptions rural elementary principals had regarding a new state reading literacy law.

Research Questions

The research study sought to answer the questions:

1. What perceptions do rural elementary principals hold about the Read by Grade 3 (RBG3) law?
2. What factors contribute to these perceptions?

Theoretical Framework

Knowledge is defined by van Dijk (2014) as “beliefs that can be trusted as correct representations of the environment [that] come to function as beliefs with a special status and role” (p. 20). Therefore, every person has unique schemas from which his or her perceptions are formed. The theoretical framework for the research study was based on social constructionism developed from grounded theory with a sociocognitive approach of discourse and knowledge (Charmaz, 2014; van Dijk, 2014). Every individual has a unique set of memories and thoughts developed from life experiences. The various experiences, thoughts, and insights each person has developed are what van Dijk (2014) called “personal knowledge” (p. 21). Still, an individual is also part of a larger society, and the larger society can influence his or her personal knowledge and, therefore, the individual has what van Dijk (2014) called “social knowledge” (p. 21).

Each rural elementary principal possessed unique personal knowledge combined with his or her social knowledge. Therefore, the complex nature of how each participant in the study shared his or her knowledge through discourse provided insight on his or her unique knowledge. Using social constructionism, the data were examined for social knowledge; said differently, common threads within the discourse of participants that revealed similar perceptions based on shared knowledge within a social group.

An important acknowledgement was made that within the context of the research study two people were interacting and sharing Discourse at each interview: the participant and the interviewer. Gee (2014) articulated when two or more people interact there is Discourse with a capital D. Gee (2014) stated, “D/discourse theory is about seeing interactive communication through the lens of socially meaningful identities” (p.

25). D/discourse theory takes into account that two discourses are occurring at the same time. The discourse of the participant is influenced by the individual principal's "socially meaningful identity" as an educational leader, in contrast to the interviewer. As Gee (2014) stated:

Meaning is not general and abstract, not something that resides alone in dictionaries, or seen in general symbolic representations inside people's heads. Rather it is *situated* in specific social and Discourse practices, and is, in fact continually transformed in those practices. (p. 103, italics in original)

Finally, as the research study was a qualitative study based on a fundamental theory "framed within grounded theory methodology...[the study is] designed so that the data are collected first, and then a theory is derived from those data" (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 123).

Significance of the Study

Even though many states have passed reading literacy laws as far back as 2001 (Huddleston, 2015), research on rural elementary principals' perspectives on implementing these laws was inadequate at the time of the study. Preston et al. (2013) conducted a literature review of the unique challenges of rural principals and stated, "...further research is required to more adequately understand the contextual issues faced by rural school leaders" (p. 8). The factors that influence rural elementary principals' perceptions on a state reading literacy law provided new insight on the effect such laws have on the educational process in the rural school districts. This study provided a starting point for future research on the implementation of state reading literacy laws in rural elementary schools. Understanding the factors that influence rural elementary

principals' perceptions on a state reading literacy law may contribute to the development of appropriate professional development, a streamlined implementation process, or leadership development opportunities in rural school districts.

Limitations

The study had some limitations:

1. As the results of the data came from a single state, the results may not be generalizable to other states.
2. As the results came from rural elementary principals from three unique rural school districts, the results may not be generalizable to all elementary principals regardless of urban or rural setting.
3. The researcher was the primary interviewer and interpreter of the data. The researcher recognized that discourse and Discourse practices are not static (Gee, 2014); therefore, while all efforts were made to analyze the data as factually as possible, the researcher cannot fully guarantee objectivity in the final results.
4. The discourse within an interview is conversational; therefore, both the researcher and the participant make the discourse dynamic and, in turn, the “figured world” or knowledge is also dynamic (Gee, 2014; van Dijk, 2014).

Assumptions

This research study had certain assumptions made: (a) the rural elementary principals participating in the study would articulate their perceptions truthfully; (b) the rural elementary principals participating were familiar with the common terms surrounding the reading literacy law and common discourse used by school

administrators; and (c) the interpretation of the data was consistent with the perceptions articulated in the discourse of the administrators participating in the study.

Definition of Terms

Discourse Analysis – “The analysis [or study] of language in use” (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 1; Gee, 2014, p. 8)

Grade Retention – “Requiring a student who has completed a grade level to repeat that grade for an additional year” (Dombek & Connor, 2012, p. 568).

Implementation – “A specific set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions” (Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2009, p. 5).

Interactional Discourse – Discourse used to “express social relations and personal attitudes” (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 1).

Learning Strategist – Teacher leaders identified by the district to assist other teachers in the implementation of the new Read by Grade 3 law. Districts are allowed to provide stipends to the identified Learning Strategists (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b).

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support/Multi-Tiered System of Supports – “Consists of principles of response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) and integrates a continuum of system-wide resources, strategies, structures, and evidence-based practices for addressing barriers to student learning and discipline” (Utley & Obiakor, 2015, p. 1). See also Response to Intervention.

Professional Development – “Information and training provided to staff designed to improve skills and knowledge regarding [Response to Intervention] RTI” (as cited by Harlacher & Siler, 2011, p. 20).

Professional Learning Community – “An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016, p. 10).

Response to Intervention – “An integrated, schoolwide method of service delivery across general and special education that promotes successful school outcomes for all students” (Martinez et al., 2006). Using a tiered system of instructional approaches, all students are provided Tier 1 instruction and universal screening identifies students who may need more intensive supports at a Tier 2 level. Students identified as needing Tier 2 supports receive both Tier 1 instruction with the whole group and instruction within a small group setting that focuses instruction on the skill deficiency using an intervention. Students in Tier 2 are progress monitored to determine if an intervention was or

was not successful. If a student is unsuccessful at the Tier 2 level, a more intensive intervention is developed at the Tier 3 level with continued progress monitoring of the student (Martinez et al., 2006).

Sociocognitive Approach – Individuals and social groups use discourse to build, define, and inform knowledge (van Dijk, 2014).

Social Constructionism – “A theory of knowledge of sociology and communication that examines the development jointly constructed understanding of the world” (Galbin, 2014, p. 82).

Transactional Discourse – Discourse used to share content knowledge within social groups (Brown & Yule, 1983).

Acronyms

AYP – Annual Yearly Progress

CCSS – Common Core State Standards

ELL – English Language Learner

EL – English Learner

ESEA – Elementary and Secondary Education Act

ESSA – Every Student Succeeds Act

IDEA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IDEIA – Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act

IEP – Individualized Education Program

ILP – Individual Literacy Plan

ISI – Individualizing Student Instruction

LS – Learning Strategist

MTSS – Multi-Tiered Systems of Support or Multi-Tiered System of
Supports

NCLB – No Child Left Behind

Nevada K.I.D.S. Read by Grade 3 Program –Keeping [their] Individual
Dreams Strong

PM – Progress Monitoring

RB3—Read by Three (initial title of the law)

RBG3 – Read by Grade 3

RTI – Response to Intervention

RTTT – Race to the Top

Organization of the Study

The research study is presented in five chapters. The first chapter presents the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, significance of the study, definition of terms, acronyms, theoretical framework, research questions, limitations and assumptions. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on the Read by Grade 3 Nevada State Law of 2015, administrative leadership through change, social constructionism and discourse analysis. Chapter Three presents the methods for the research study including: context of the study with district background, the qualitative design, the research questions, the participants, data collection, data analysis, and the role of the researcher. Chapter Four presents the results. Finally, Chapter Five presents the discussion points and conclusions.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the start of the new millennium, administrators have had to determine how to adhere to the various educational changes mandated by the federal and state governments. Under the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1964 with the new title of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, administrators were expected to demonstrate academic success as measured by the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) report of each state, district, and school (Cross, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Under the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, some administrators began to focus on the response to intervention (RTI) process to ensure students were given proper supports prior to qualification into special education services (Martinez et al., 2006). Under the Race to the Top (RTTT) grant program, if the state adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and common assessments were developed (U.S. Department of Education, 2009b), administrators were expected to lead teachers through the implementation of the new standards that required new curricula and new assessments.

With the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA in December of 2015, more commonly known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, states and districts have reflected on current educational systems to determine how to meet the new federal regulations set forth with more control resting in the authority of the state (Burnette, 2016). Further, due to the many federal changes in education laws and initiatives, states across the nation have passed laws requiring students to be proficient readers by the end of third grade or risk retention (Workman, 2014) and all of the implications that come

with retention (Wilson & Hughes, 2009; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). The multitude of changes in the various education laws with certain initiatives and mandates attached to funding sources creates leadership challenges. The educational leaders must not only know the law, but also be able to implement the law to the fullest extent regardless.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004

Within three years of the reauthorization of the ESEA as NCLB, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1994 was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 (Martinez et al., 2006). As administrators were implementing new mandates of NCLB, they had to also implement the new regulations under the new provisions of the IDEIA. As part of the criteria for identifying students with a specific learning disability, the IDEIA of 2004 requires that “a state...must permit the use of a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention” (IDEA 2004, § 300.307(a)(2)). The IDEIA provided authorization for schools to use the response to intervention (RTI) framework as an appropriate system to qualify students for special education in lieu of the existing discrepancy model (Restori, Gresham, & Cook, 2008; Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007). However, RTI was not required under IDEIA, only permitted as an option.

Within the RTI process, teachers and administrators provide specific interventions, assess students throughout the implementation of the intervention to progress monitor students’ achievements, and analyze the data to determine if a student did or did not respond to specific interventions (Martinez et al., 2006). As Johnsen et al. (2015) stated, “Most RTI models occur within a multilevel system of continuous supports

that become more intensive and individualized as students move through the tiers of primary, secondary, and tertiary support” (p. 227).

The RTI framework is sometimes referred to as the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and provides a systematic approach for educators to meet the academic and behavioral needs of all students (Freeman, Miller, & Newcomer, 2015). The successful implementation of the RTI/MTSS framework requires administrators at all levels, including district level administrators, to take an active role in the process (Freeman et al., 2015). The RTI/MTSS framework, with the additional required assessments to progress monitor students’ achievements, is intended to enhance students’ success using scientific, research-based interventions (Martinez et al., 2006); however, administrators have to provide training and support to teachers to facilitate the systemic change needed to successfully implement the RTI/MTSS framework (Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2011).

Read by Grade 3 Nevada State Law of 2015

The state of Nevada passed a new reading literacy law in 2015 known originally as Senate Bill Number 391 (SB391) and eventually became known as the Read by Grade 3 (RBG3) Act of 2015 (Nevada Department of Education, 2016a). Within the new law, school districts are required to identify students with reading deficiencies through universal assessments and develop intervention plans for identified students to master reading literacy skills by the end of third grade or risk retention. The law outlines requirements for districts to hire teacher leaders to assist other teachers in the implementation of the new law. Each new teacher leader identified to support RBG3 is bestowed the title of Learning Strategist (LS) and districts can provide stipends to the

LSs. The law also articulates that teachers who serve kindergarten through fourth grade students are required to attend professional development focused on reading.

The Nevada reading literacy law outlines the policy regarding the identification, implementation of interventions, and progress monitoring of students classified as deficient in reading literacy. Further, the teacher and school administrator of a student identified as reading deficient are required to notify the child's parent or parents "within 30 days after the date on which the deficiency is discovered" (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b, p. 8). In the event that a student is retained, the administrator must provide the parent and student with at least one of the following options for support: supplemental reading literacy tutoring, a plan for parental support such as a plan for reading time at home and reading literacy training, or a mentor or tutor who is a reading literacy specialist (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). At the time of this research study, the retention clause was not in effect.

The RBG3 law and response to intervention. Key components of the RBG3 law are structured similarly to the response to intervention (RTI) process. Each school district must develop a plan to improve reading literacy skills that includes universal screening of all students from kindergarten through Grade 3 (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). Within the universal screening process, students identified as reading deficient are provided an intervention plan. Each school must have a dedicated small group reading time and targeted instruction specifically designed to address deficiencies in the reading literacy areas of "phonological and phonemic awareness, decoding skills, and reading fluency" (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b, p. 5). Additionally, teachers and administrators must provide progress monitoring of students identified as

reading deficient and communicate with the parent of a child identified as reading deficient regarding the intervention plan to address any deficiencies (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). The structure within the RBG3 law is similar to the RTI model that provides tiered instruction to support all learners with different learning needs (Shapiro, 2016).

The process of using common, universal assessments to identify students who have academic deficiencies is not a new concept, nor is the concept of targeted interventions as determined through data-based decision making. As Shapiro (2016) stated:

Although the assessment components of RTI (universal screening and progress monitoring) are essential elements of implementation, it is the instruction that occurs as a function of the outcomes of the assessments that truly drives the changes we hope to see in students who are identified as being at some level of risk for not meeting academic expectations. (para. 1)

Through the RBG3 law, teachers and administrators are required to use universal screening to identify reading deficiencies, which is identical to the universal screening process within Tier 1 of the RTI framework (Martinez et al., 2006). While not specifically addressed as the RTI model, “response to scientifically, research-based intervention” is articulated in the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004 ((IDEA 2004, § 300.307(a)(2)); 20 USC §§ 1400). Over a decade has passed since the IDEIA provided educators the option of using RTI to identify students with learning disabilities instead of using the IQ Discrepancy Model (Restori et al., 2008; Richards et al., 2007). Therefore, the requirement of the identification process of students who are

deficient in reading literacy should not be new to school personnel who have already implemented the RTI model.

The RTI model uses a three-tiered approach by which all students are provided core, differentiated instruction within the first tier (Richards et al., 2007; Shapiro, 2016). Students identified as deficient through universal screening are provided targeted, small group intervention at tier two. Using data to drive decisions, a student's progress is monitored throughout the targeted, small group intervention, tier two. If multiple data points demonstrate that the student is not making academic gains with a particular intervention, then a different intervention may be implemented. Additional progress monitoring data are collected to determine if the new intervention is effective in meeting the student's instructional needs. However, the data may indicate the need to develop a more intensive intervention plan; that is, a specific individualized plan will be developed for the student, tier three (Richards et al., 2007; Shapiro, 2016).

The RTI process is parallel to the RBG3 law in the universal screening of students, identification of students with possible reading literacy deficiencies using data, the design and application of targeted interventions to meet the needs of the students, progress monitoring, and continual review of the data to determine the effectiveness of the interventions. The parallels between RTI and RBG3 do not end with the process of identification and interventions provided to students. Professional literature supports the need for teachers to be provided professional learning opportunities to properly implement RTI in reading (Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2011). Similarly, the RBG3 law requires professional development for kindergarten through fourth grade teachers in the area of reading literacy (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b).

Professional development. Learning strategists and professional development specifically tailored to working with teachers on reading instruction are embedded in the RBG3 law (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). Read by Grade 3 requires the Nevada State Board of Education to “prescribe by regulation:”

- any training or professional development that a learning strategist is required to complete;
- any professional development that teachers at the K, 1, 2, 3, 4 levels are to receive in reading; and
- the duties and responsibilities of the learning strategist. (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b, p. 6)

Furthermore, districts are granted the choice to pay the LSs a stipend for their additional duties (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b).

The need for professional development as included in the RBG3 law is supported by professional literature. Professional development is a necessary component to improving reading literacy across the nation (Denton, 2016). Denton (2016) stated, “Providing quality classroom reading instruction with certain research-validated characteristics can make a big difference for struggling readers” (para. 3). Denton further posited that quality reading literacy instruction and implementation of scientifically based reading programs and interventions designed to address areas of deficiency require professional development. The approach to professional development is provided based on the needs of the staff. For instance, one professional development approach could have a reading literacy coach deliver specific training on reading literacy instruction to a large group of teachers. Whereas, another professional development approach could have

individualized training in a one-on-one capacity or train teachers in a small group setting (Hartnett-Edwards, 2011).

The importance of providing reading literacy teachers with appropriate professional development is articulated throughout a variety of research studies. Hartnett-Edwards (2011) stated, “[Reading L]iteracy coaches...intervene at the classroom level to raise student achievement by raising teachers’ skills” (p. 60). Vanderburg and Stephens (2010) stated, “Teachers valued how the [reading literacy] coaches created a space for collaboration, provided ongoing support, and taught about research-based instructional strategies” (p. 141). Connor, Alberto, Compton, and O’Connor (2014) stated, “Combining multiple professional development strategies, including coaching, linking student assessment data to instruction, using technology, and participating in communities of practice, can support teachers’ learning and implementation of research-based reading instruction” (p. xi).

Reading literacy and retention. The RBG3 law clearly articulates that a student who does not demonstrate mastery of reading skills must be retained unless the child is granted a “good cause exemption” or has already been retained in that grade level for one year (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). If a student is retained in third grade for the additional year and does not master the necessary reading literacy skills, he or she is promoted to fourth grade on a “good-cause exemption” (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b, Sec. 10, para. 3). A student may also be retained in Kindergarten or grades one or two; however, “no pupil may be retained more than one time in the same grade” (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b, Sec. 14, para. 3).

The controversial practice of student retention is identified in professional literature. Dombek and Connor (2012) defined grade retention as “requiring a student who has completed a grade level to repeat that grade for an additional year” (p. 568). Workman (2014) stated, “Including retention in this analysis [of state reading literacy laws] should not be considered an endorsement but rather a recognition that it is an available strategy some states have chosen to use” (para. 3). There are a variety of reading laws implemented across the U.S. whereby retention is not a requirement for students who do not reach reading literacy by a certain grade level. Some of the state reading literacy laws provide support for students who are not reading-literate by a certain grade level and include providing reading deficient students with an extended school day or school year, tutoring programs, or summer programs designed to address reading deficiencies through interventions (Workman, 2014). Of the states that require retention for students who do not demonstrate reading literacy by the end of third grade, there are various “good cause exemptions” to allow certain students to move forward based on each individual case (Workman, 2014, p. 2).

Some research indicates the practice of retention is not beneficial to student growth, both academically and socially. Willson and Hughes (2009) cited meta-analytic reviews when they stated, “The increased use of retention runs counter to the preponderance of empirical evidence from studies investigating the effects of grade retention on children’s subsequent school adaptation, which indicates that retained students show little or no benefit or are harmed by this practice” (p. 252). Further, retention is often viewed as an ineffective method to support students in achieving

mastery of academic deficiencies (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2007; Xia & Nataraj Kirby, 2009).

In a longitudinal research study, conducted to analyze the effectiveness of students retained, retention was found ineffective in improving academic achievement (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Further analysis of behavioral issues in the same study found students who had been retained had increased aggression in adolescence (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Xia and Nataraj Kirby found in their literature review that, while some studies have shown short-term academic benefits, the long-term academic benefits are negligible and retained students are more likely to drop out of school. The research conducted by Xia and Nataraj Kirby (2009) also suggested “mixed findings on attitudinal, socioemotional, and behavioral outcomes among the retained students” (p. 29).

Huddleston (2015) conducted a study of the 2001 retention policy in the state of Georgia and found the following:

As with social promotion, massive retention is economically unsustainable and politically unattractive also. Consequently, policy makers naturally respond by implementing what appear to be rigorous policies to end social promotion while tacitly allowing schools to “place” large numbers of students in the next grade behind the scenes. Unfortunately, a few students are actually retained through these policies, placing them at risk of the negative outcomes of retention. (p. 22)

Further, Marsh, Gershwin, Kirby, and Xia (2009) found through a literature review on grade retention and academic success that “grade retention alone is not an effective intervention strategy for improving academic and longer-term life outcomes” (p. 3).

The debate continues about whether or not grade level retention is the answer to students achieving academic benchmarks. Research suggests that if students are not reading-literate by the end of third grade they are more likely to not graduate on time, or completely dropout and not graduate at all (Hernandez, 2011). Connor et al. (2014) stated, “Children who do not read well are more likely to be retained a grade in school, dropout of high school, become teen parents, or enter the juvenile justice system” (p. viii).

Researchers have found that, while retention is written into various state laws, providing differentiated instruction and scientifically-based interventions using assessment data to guide decisions is where educators should focus efforts to improve academic achievement (Dombek & Connor, 2012; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Workman, 2014). Workman (2014) stated, “With little consensus regarding [retention’s] efficacy, the most effective policies must undertake a comprehensive approach that begins with early, high-quality instruction and rapid, effective interventions” (para. 3).

Dombek and Connor (2012) found that students were less likely to be retained for reading literacy deficiencies in first grade if they were provided interventions using the “Individualizing Student Instruction” (ISI) model. Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) stated, “Research shows that neither grade retention nor social promotion improves educational success. Familiarity with this research is essential when seeking intervention strategies” (p. 1). Research by Otaiba et al. (2015) concluded that an RTI model focused on providing students immediately with appropriate interventions and supports in a dynamic fashion can provide reading success for all students.

Parent notification. Under the RBG3 law, parents of a student identified as having a reading deficiency must be notified of their child’s deficiency in writing within 30 days (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). Furthermore, the notification to parents must include a multitude of items such as: an intervention plan to improve the reading literacy of the student; a plan for progress monitoring; the possibility that the student will be retained if grade level reading literacy is not achieved by the end of Grade 3; and strategies parents could use at home to support the student’s reading literacy (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). The portion of the RBG3 law that articulates parent notification is similar to the “Parents’ Right to Know” provision of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Under NCLB, “schools receiving federal Title I Funds must send parents...information on the child’s level of achievement on state assessments” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009a, p. 8). Under NCLB guidance for teachers, the U.S. Department of Education (2009a) articulated, “Parent notifications are meant to encourage parent involvement and improve communication between the family and the school” (p. 8).

In a research study conducted by Fan, Williams, and Wolters (2012) that analyzed parent-school communication and ethnic groups, one of the findings demonstrated “parent-school communication regarding student school problems was a strong negative predictor of students’ motivation” (p. 31). The study also found that students whose parents had received negative academic or behavioral communications had less self-confidence and decreased engagement in school (Fan et al., 2012). The RBG3 law requires schools to provide notification to parents that their student was identified with possible deficiencies in reading literacy and that, if the student is not reading-literate by

the end of third grade, there is a possibility of retention. The implication of the RBG3 parent-school communication and the impact on student self-confidence and school engagement had not been researched at the time of this study.

Funding. While RBG3 is state law, the funding is provided through a competitive grant program (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). Each district must develop an application to include: “the certification page, a narrative (up to 20 pages), a budget and expenditure summary with forms, and the assurances page” (Lexalt, 2016, slide 5). Lexalt (2016) stated ten districts were awarded RBG3 grant funds for the 2015-2016 school year. As the funding was competitive, Lexalt (2016) explained that there was no guarantee of funding for the 2016-2017 school year even if districts were awarded the grant in the previous year.

Administrative Leadership Through Changes in Education

Regardless of serving in an educational setting or in a business setting, how a leader guides his or her employees through a new initiative can determine the success or failure of the new program or method (Fixen et al., 2005). There are a variety of theories on how to motivate personnel in the field of education. Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) promoted the theory of leverage leadership as the best approach in leading educators through change. Ubben et al. (2007) stated, “Principals lead from their values!” (p. 11).

Meyer and Behar-Horenstein (2015) who specifically studied leadership practices when implementing RTI confirmed “the importance of...strong administrative leadership” (p. 397). Meyer and Behar-Horenstein reviewed the need for site and district-level administrators to lead teachers through the systemic change by providing proper funding, appropriate professional development opportunities, and opportunities for open dialogue

between the administrator and the teacher about best instructional practices. As RBG3 is similar in structure to the RTI/MTSS model, district and site leaders could provide teachers with “a consensus-based vision and mission for MTSS” (Freeman et al., 2015, p. 70) paired with implementation of the RBG3 mandates. The RBG3 law is clear in the mission that every student achieves grade level reading literacy by the end of third grade (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). How the mission statement and other parts of the RBG3 law are communicated to site level leadership and, in turn, how the mission statement is communicated to teachers may influence how the law is received and implemented at the ground level.

The RTI model is similar to the guidance within the RBG3 law in identification of students through universal assessments, development of an intervention plan, and the use of progress monitoring to inform decisions on whether or not the intervention is working. The RTI/MTSS process requires administrative support when implementing and sustaining the MTSS framework (Freeman et al., 2015). Freeman et al. (2015) stated:

District leadership can contribute to the sustained MTSS practices of its schools by establishing training and technical assistance infrastructure, providing schools with access to data-based decision making systems, creating communication feedback systems for sharing information, and articulating a consensus-based vision and mission for MTSS. (p. 70)

“Data-based decision making systems” are expected within the RTI framework and data-based decisions are clearly articulated within the RBG3 law as stated that “the public elementary school must establish a progress monitoring plan for students identified as ‘deficient’ in reading” (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b, p. 9). The

“communication feedback system” as mentioned by Freeman et al. (2015, p. 70) within the RTI/MTSS structure is also articulated in the RBG3 law, which states, The local literacy plan must include “procedures for facilitating collaboration between learning strategists and classroom teachers” (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b, p. 5). Further, teachers and site-level administrators are required to clearly communicate to parents about their student’s deficiencies and the intervention plan to help a student achieve the goals (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b).

Providing staff with professional development opportunities is echoed throughout various literature on effective leadership practices regardless of the focus. The first four levels of what Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) coined “Leverage Leadership” in education include: “data-driven instruction, observation and feedback, instructional planning, and professional development” (p. 10). Ubben et al. (2007) dedicated an entire chapter to the essential component of data-based decision making in education and a different section of the book on the importance of professional development opportunities to assist staff members to “construct new knowledge based on collective understanding” (p. 186). The site level administrators are required, under the RBG3 law, to “assign the learning strategist the responsibility of training the site’s classroom teachers to provide intensive instruction in reading” and “require teachers at the K, 1, 2, 3, and 4 grade levels to complete professional learning in reading offered by [the] learning strategist” (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b, p.6). The research supports current verbiage in the law regarding expected leadership practices that professional development opportunities are provided to staff to help support the implementation of the new law and that all children should achieve reading literacy by the end of third grade.

Social Constructionism and Discourse Analysis

Administrators tasked with the implementation of the RBG3 law share a commonality in the requirement to implement the law. Still, each individual administrator has his or her own perspective due to the unique experiences in education and within the construct of the environment in which he or she experiences the new law. A sociocognitive approach to discourse and knowledge proposed by van Dijk (2014) provides a perspective by which to understand how discourse and knowledge work on a personal and societal level. With van Dijk's (2014) sociocognitive approach, individuals and social groups use discourse to build, define, and inform knowledge. Brown and Yule (1983) stated individuals use language to communicate knowledge through "transactional" and "interactional" discourse (p. 1). Transactional discourse is the discourse used to share content knowledge within social groups; whereas, interactional discourse is the discourse used to "express social relations and personal attitudes" (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 1). Gee (2014) argued, "Often in discourse analysis, what we are trying to do is to study language-in-use in order to uncover the workings of Discourse in society" (p. 128). To understand sociocognition as proposed by van Dijk (2014), social constructionism and constructivist grounded theory are first described.

As Walker (2015) stated, "Proponents of [social constructionism] seek to understand the world of lived experience from the perspective of those who live it" (p. 37). Language is how individuals and social groups construct an understanding of the world (Walker, 2015). Rather than assuming something exists because of an objective reality, social constructionists believe something exists because society has developed a subjective understanding of the existence (Walker, 2015). As Galbin (2014) stated,

Social constructionism is “sometimes called a movement, at other times a position, a theory, a theoretical orientation, an approach; psychologists remain uncertain of its status” (p. 86). Charmaz (2014) argued that a researcher could not separate him or herself from the interpretation of the research data; therefore, the researcher must acknowledge the influence he or she may have on the construction of the data analysis. Charmaz (2014) developed a new theory called “constructivist grounded theory” about which Charmaz stated, “subjectivity is inseparable from social existence” (pp. 13-14).

Van Dijk (2014) articulated the concept of knowledge when he stated, “natural knowledge is relative” (p. 21). What is said in one social circle and interpreted to be true and factual may be interpreted by another social circle as false (van Dijk, 2014). Gee (2014) argued that an individual’s use of language within social circles has three basic connections: “saying (informing), doing (action), and being (identity)” (p. 2). People experience “different ways of being in the world at different times and places for different purposes” (Gee, 2014, p. 3). The various discourses used within different social circles are constructed, defined, and understood by both the individual and the social group (van Dijk, 2014; Gee, 2014). The sociocognitive approach used by van Dijk (2015) recognizes that the complexity of how knowledge is developed within certain social groups is constructed based upon shared experiences and discourse, called “social knowledge” (p. 21). Yet, an individual also has “personal knowledge” that is unique to his or her experiences and interactions in the environments in which he or she lives (van Dijk, 2015, p. 21).

Conclusion

There have been many changes in education over the years. The IDEIA of 2004 offers districts the opportunity to use response to intervention in lieu of the discrepancy model to identify students in need of special education services. In Nevada, the RBG3 Act of 2015 requires all students to be reading-literate by the end of third grade or risk retention. As outlined here, RBG3 has similar features to the RTI framework. If a principal has already implemented RTI, he or she may not view RBG3 as a challenge to implement. Professional development is required under RBG3 and literature supports targeted professional development for improving reading literacy (Denton, 2016; Hartnett-Edwards, 2011). Research studies on retention, however, do not support the retention clause required under RBG3 (Willson & Hughes, 2009; Xia & Nataraj Kirby, 2009; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2007). Still, research studies do support the need for students to be reading-literate (Connor et al., 2014; Hernandez, 2011).

With the many research studies on the RTI model, the importance of reading literacy, and retention, research in the perspectives of rural elementary principals on a reading literacy law was inadequate at the time of the study. This research study sought to explore the principals' perceptions through their discourse. Knowledge is developed as discourse is exchanged and thoughts are produced; schemas are developed through the process of social interaction and personal experiences within and outside of each interaction (van Dijk, 2015; Gee, 2014). Principals develop their schemas from interactions with district level administrators and also with their own staff on site. Further, each principal has different schemas based off of his or her own educational

backgrounds, professional backgrounds, or conferences he or she may have attended. Additionally, the parallel between RTI and RBG3 could influence principals' perceptions of the law based on whether or not they have had experience with the RTI model and see a possible connection. Using social constructionism theory, the discourse used by the rural elementary school principals can be analyzed to determine their perceptions about the RBG3 law. This research study sought to answer the questions as to what perceptions administrators may have about a new state reading literacy law and what factors might possibly contribute to the perceptions.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

In Nevada, the Read by Grade 3 (RBG3) Act was passed and signed in to law effective July 1, 2015 (Nevada Department of Education, 2016d). The Read by Grade 3 Act was initially referred to as Read by 3 or SB 391, then became Read by Grade 3 or RBG3. As stated by the Nevada Department of Education in 2017, a new name was adopted, and it was announced that “Nevada K.I.D.S. [Keeping their Individual Dreams Strong] Read is Nevada’s new Read by Grade 3 Program” (p. 1). Regardless of the title, the expectation of the lawmakers was clear: all students will be reading proficient by the end of third grade. As the Nevada Department of Education (2017) stated, “The true spirit of [the Nevada K.I.D.S. Read program’s] entire effort is to provide effective early interventions for all K-3 students who are struggling in reading” (p. 1). If a student is not proficient by the end of third grade, he or she must be retained in third grade unless granted a “good-cause exemption” by the superintendent of the school district (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b, Sec. 10, para. 1).

This research study was conducted to explore the perspectives rural elementary principals had about the RBG3 Act. This research study also sought to examine differences and/or similarities in the perspectives of rural elementary principals. Further, this research study was conducted to examine factors that may have contributed to the perspectives of the administrators.

Research Design

The research study sought to explore the perceptions of elementary principals on a state reading literacy law. Discourse analysis with social constructionism theory was used to garner an understanding of the perceptions that elementary principals have

regarding a state reading literacy law. Analysis of the discourse used in the interview allowed the researcher to review fragments of sentences and words to construct themes (Brown & Yule, 1983). The themes were further analyzed to determine common themes among participants and common categories within each theme (Brown & Yule, 1983; Gee, 2014). Additional discourse analyses were performed “using comparative methods” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 132) to determine what factors may have contributed to the generalizable themes and categories that emerged from the data (Brown & Yule, 1983; Gee, 2014).

Research Questions

The research study sought to answer the questions:

1. What perceptions do rural elementary principals hold about the RBG3 Act?
2. What factors contribute to these perceptions?

School Districts

The superintendents of four rural school districts in the state of Nevada were invited to have their elementary principals and one learning strategist per school district participate in this research study. Of those four school districts, three superintendents responded in a timely manner. The superintendent of the fourth school district responded to the invitation after the data collection had concluded; thus, only three districts were involved in the study. Each school districts were renamed to School District A, School District B, and School District C for this research study.

Within Nevada, school districts and counties are exactly the same geographical areas. The elementary schools involved in this study were located in or near the county

seat of respective districts (counties). Small, remote elementary schools were excluded from this study.

School District A. School District A served 8,000 students in 2016-2017 (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2018). As of 2016-2017, there were a total of 13 schools in the district with 18.61 students per teacher (NCES, 2018). In the same year, the number of English Language Learners (ELL) in the district totaled approximately 1,400 and the number of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) totaled approximately 1,100 (NCES, 2018). The total expenditures in the district in 2013-14 were \$10,169 per student (NCES, 2018). The third-grade reading literacy data for the district from 2015-2016 demonstrated 50.9% of students proficient, whereas, the third-grade reading literacy data for the district from 2016-2017 demonstrated 44.8% of students proficient, a decrease of 6.1% (Nevada Department of Education, 2018). For the 2016-2017 school year, School District A was awarded \$1,079,680.69 under Phase II of the Read by Grade 3 grant program (Nevada Department of Education, 2016c).

School District B. School District B served approximately 3,500 students in 2016-2017 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). As of 2016-2017, there were a total of 14 schools in the district with 18.35 students per teacher (NCES, 2018). In the same year, the number of English Language Learners (ELL) in the district totaled approximately 500 and the number of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) totaled approximately 550 (NCES, 2018). The total expenditures in the district in 2013-14 were \$9,076 per student (NCES, 2018). The third-grade reading literacy data for the district from 2015-2016 demonstrated 40.9% of students proficient, whereas, the third-grade reading literacy data for the district from 2016-2017 demonstrated 35.5% of

students proficient, a decrease of 5.4% (Nevada Department of Education, 2018). For the 2016-2017 school year, School District B was awarded \$463,512,45 under Phase II of the Read by Grade 3 grant program (Nevada Department of Education, 2016c).

School District C. School District C served approximately 10,200 students in 2016-2017 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). As of 2015-2016, there were a total of 32 schools in the district with 19.11 students per teacher (NCES, 2018). In the same year, the number of English Language Learners (ELL) in the district totaled approximately 1,100 and the number of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) totaled approximately 1,100 (NCES, 2018). The total expenditures in the district in 2013-14 were \$10,996 per student (NCES, 2018). The third-grade reading literacy data for the district from 2015-2016 demonstrated 43.6% of students proficient, whereas, the third-grade reading literacy data for the district from 2016-2017 demonstrated 35.3% of students proficient, a decrease of 8.3% (Nevada Department of Education, 2018). For the 2016-2017 school year, School District C was awarded \$783,134.00 under Phase II of the Read by Grade 3 grant program (Nevada Department of Education, 2016c).

Participants

From three different school districts, a total of 19 rural elementary principals were invited to participate in this research study and 12 principals voluntarily agreed to participate. In addition, one learning strategist from each district was selected by the superintendent and was invited to participate in this research study. Each learning strategists, one from each school district, voluntarily agreed to participate. In summary, the rural educators who voluntarily agreed to participate included:

- Four out of six principals from School District A
- Three out of three principals from School District B
- Five out of ten principals from School District C
- Three learning strategists—One LS from each school district

In an effort to keep responses from being identified, typical participant demographic data were not collected; however, the following information provides the general characteristics of the participants. Of the twelve principals, there were nine female principals and three male principals. All three learning strategists were female. There were seven principals who served at Title I schools and five principals who served at non-Title I schools (NCES, 2018). The background of the principals varied considerably. A little over half of the principals had served in education for ten or more years as a teacher. Whereas, a little over half of the principals had served for less than ten years as an administrator. All three learning strategists had worked in education for longer than ten years.

Data Source

An important part of the interview process was based on the approach Seidman (2013) recommended; specifically, the interviewer does not lead a participant's thoughts through directed questioning. Instead, the interviewer allows a participant to share thoughts and lived experiences freely based; however, the interviews are guided by the open-ended prompts and questions. The initial interview prompt afforded the participant to share their experiences in education and educational leadership. This first prompt provided an opportunity to open up the conversation between the participant and the interviewer.

The second prompt invited the participant to reflect on a prior experience with the law and articulate the recalled thoughts about the law; this provided a chance for the participant to guide the interviewer through a “mini-tour” of the lived experience of when they first heard or learned about the RBG3 law (Seidman, 2013, loc. 1889). The additional interview questions were designed with this same process in mind of utilizing open-ended questions or prompts to inviting the participant to discuss their perceptions on an experience or perspective without the expectation of a specific answer. The list of prompts and questions used in the interviews for principals is provided in Appendix D. The list of prompts and questions used in interviews for learning strategists is provided in Appendix E.

Data Collection

Upon approval by district level administrators and approval of the university Institutional Review Board (IRB), data collection began. Basic data were collected using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website and the Nevada Department of Education (NV-DOE) website. Each potential participant was contacted by email or telephone to set-up an interview with contact information provided by the superintendent. A script for recruitment of participants is provided in Appendix A.

A follow-up email was provided to those who agreed to participate in the study to confirm the date, time, and location of the interview (Seidman, 2013). A copy of the Information Sheets, one for the elementary principals and one for the learning strategists, was provided via email to allow participants time to review the document prior to the interview. The Information Sheet for the elementary principals is provided in Appendix B and the Information Sheet for learning strategists is provided in Appendix C. The

Information Sheet was also reviewed in person with each participant and each participant was offered a hardcopy prior to the start of the interview.

Participants were interviewed at a mutually agreed upon time and place. The interview began by providing each participant an introduction to the process with the following explanations:

1. This research study seeks to discover the perceptions rural elementary principals have about the RBG3 Act and the factors that contribute to the perceptions identified through the study.
2. Involvement in the study is completely voluntary and your identity will not be directly revealed using your name; however, I do need to caution you that there is a risk that when the results of the data are presented readers may deduce the school district, school, or participants through the demographic information provided and through other data sources in the paper (Seidman, 2013).
3. The interview will be captured on a digital recorder to allow for proper transcription and analysis of the data. As such, you were provided a digital copy of the Information Sheet in my email confirming this interview. If you would like, I have a hard copy of the Information Sheet (Appendix B: Principal Information Sheet or Appendix C: Learning Strategist Information Sheet).

Interviews were conducted in single 30 to 45-minute sessions. While multiple interview sessions with individual participants are typically recommended for gathering data (Seidman, 2013), the structure of this research study allowed only one interview session. The interview process utilized a social constructionism approach whereby participants were deliberately asked open-ended questions that focused on key research

topics (Charmaz, 2014; Seidman, 2013). The structure of the open-ended interview process allowed each participant to articulate his or her experience and point of view related to the reading literacy law by drawing from his or her schemas (Charmaz, 2014; Seidman, 2013).

The data were captured on a digital voice recorder and the researcher transcribed each audio-recording verbatim. Brown and Yule (1983) stated, “In the transcription of spoken data we always attempt to record as faithfully as possible what was said and we have avoided ‘tidying up’ the language used” (p. xxi). The capture of the spoken text on a digital voice recorder allowed for proper analysis of the data.

When the interview was complete, a follow-up “thank you” card was provided (Seidman, 2013). All efforts were made to complete interviews within a six-month timeframe to ensure administrators were providing reflective comments with a similar frame of reference about the RBG3 Act.

Data Analysis

The discourse was analyzed to discover common patterns and to identify relationships within the data. As Gee (2014) stated:

Discourse analysis is a reflexive, reciprocal, and cyclical process in which we shuttle back and forth between the structure (form, design) of a piece of language, and the situated meanings it is attempting to build about the world, identities, and relationships in a specific context. (p. 148)

The concept of social language throughout the discourse was considered when seeking relationships within the data (Gee, 2014). As Gee (2014) stated, “We speak and write not in English alone, but in specific *social languages*” (p. 72). For example, there were

specific educational terms, such as acronyms, that were found in the data. The interpretations of these terms reflected the social language of educators or were indicative of social language specific to principals. The coded discourse, including the social language used, was delineated into specific thoughts or ideas of each participant, which were analyzed to identify relationships (Brown & Yule, 1983).

The data analysis was conducted in three phases. In phase one, the transcripts were read for holistic understanding and preliminary identification of themes. The transcripts were then coded line-by-line to further sift and sort through main themes and possible subthemes during phase two. Phase two was a “cyclical process” (Gee, 2014, p. 148) and “the key concepts [were] derived from the data through a process of coding, sifting, sorting, and identifying themes” (Litchman, 2013, p. 243). In phase three, the themes and subthemes were analyzed in relation to the research questions. This final analysis of the discourse sought congruence of the themes and subthemes within and among the three rural districts to identify factors that may have contributed to the identified perceptions.

Initial coding. Each transcript was read through to get a holistic sense of the data and to identify preliminary themes. For example, some of the initial themes included: data use, resources, time, accountability, mandates, students’ needs, fiscal impacts, teachers, professional development, parents, and frameworks. With the identification of preliminary themes completed, the transcripts were then coded line-by-line.

Focused coding and categorizing. After the transcripts were analyzed to identify preliminary themes, the transcripts were coded line-by-line, the preliminary themes were grouped, and key themes were identified. For example, one key theme

identified was “the benefits were pretty great.” The initial theme of accountability, when data was analyzed in line-by-line coding, indicated a perception that principals appreciated the accountability afforded under RBG3, a perceived benefit. In further sifting and sorting of the data, accountability and data-based decision making were two themes that were subsequently grouped together. A subtheme was identified that “the law afforded the principals the opportunity to use the mandate to meet their needs as leaders.” This new subtheme was then subcategorized under “the benefits were pretty great.”

As subcategories emerged throughout the analysis, they provided more depth understanding of the theme. For example, financial resources and human resources were also perceived as positive aspects of RBG3; thus, they were subcategorized under “the benefits were pretty great.” The order in which the themes and subthemes presented themselves was not of consequence in the analysis. Of value was that each key thoughts and phrases were identified through the process, which were further “sifted” and “sorted” to determine commonalities and characteristics of the themes and subthemes (Litchman, 2013, p. 243).

Themes analyzed in relation to research questions. Once the responses were sorted based on various ideas and themes presented themselves, the themes and subthemes were grouped into categories (Brown & Yule, 1993; van Dijk, 2014). Themes naturally emerged from the responses by reviewing the text (Brown & Yule, 1983; van Dijk, 2014). The researcher analyzed the themes in relation to the two research questions.

Conclusion

In 2015, the governor of Nevada signed Senate Bill 391 (SB 391) titled the Read by Grade 3 (RBG3) Act into law (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). The law stated that if a student is not literate by the third grade, he or she will be retained to Grade 3 for an additional year to help the student become reading-literate (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). This research study sought to explain the perspectives rural elementary principals have regarding the RBG3 Act. The rural elementary principals were chosen from three rural school districts in the state of Nevada. The research study sought to answer the questions: what perceptions do rural elementary principals have about the state reading literacy law? What factors contribute to the perspectives of the state reading literacy law? Discourse analysis was used to determine the results of the data collected.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This research study sought to explore the perceptions that rural elementary principals had regarding a new state law on reading literacy by grade three. As rural elementary principals worked to implement a reading literacy law with a variety of mandates, including student retention, this study provided insight on how principals understood the law and implemented it within the contexts of their schools. Further, the research study provided an understanding of the factors, or social constructs, that have affected perceptions rural elementary principals had regarding a new state reading literacy law.

A total of 12 principals, assigned to schools located in three school districts participated in the research. After the 12 principals were interviewed, one learning strategist (LS) from each district was interviewed to glean additional information about key concepts. The results of the data analysis suggested that the principals' perceptions of the Read by Grade 3 (RBG3) law fell on a continuum. There were some with very positive perceptions, yet some of the discourse suggested underlying unease about particular parts of the law. There were some principals whose circumstances at the school drove their activities which were independent of how they thought about the law.

Upon closer examination of the data, three main themes emerged: (1) the benefits were pretty great; (2) RBG3 was not perfect; and (3) RBG3 was about the students. The first theme, that the benefits were pretty great, was further subcategorized into two subthemes: an opportunity to meet their needs as leaders, and the benefit of resources. The second theme, that RBG3 was not perfect, was further subcategorized into the three

subthemes: the consequences of retention; the law required time; and the concern about teacher stress. The final theme identified was simply that RBG3 was about the students.

The Benefits Were Pretty Great

A vast majority of the participants indicated an overall positive perception of the RBG3 law. One principal explained how she had heard of other states that were focusing on literacy and “that literacy just matters so much in the early formative years.” She continued, “I was very happy to know our state was pushing and emphasizing that as an area of focus.” Another principal said, “So, when I first heard the law, I thought it was actually a very good law because literacy is extremely important for success.” One of the LSs stated, “I felt like a lot of kids were falling through the cracks...and I was pleased that the state was looking at that and saying, we need to do something.”

Some principals discussed research studies that supported the importance of reading literacy by the end of Grade 3. One principal mentioned, “I think, we know through research, you know, that literacy just matters so much the early formative years. And if we don’t catch them by third grade, then the chances of catching them are very slim after that.” Another principal said, “Studies have shown that if you are not reading at grade level by third grade you have a higher propensity to become involved in the justice system in not a positive way.”

Some principals discussed the positive intent of the lawmakers and were thrilled with the support for education. One principal stated, “I just liked what I had heard from the governor, what was said through the media. Okay, this is good. I think this is going to be awesome for education.” Other principals’ positive perspectives of the law evolved

over time. One principal articulated, “The philosophy behind it I never doubted. I really think that we needed to have more of a push to really identify kids or help the kids.”

Some principals found the new law to be beneficial as it supported structures that were already in place. One principal said, “For me, we had done response-to-intervention at this school for 12 years. So, the Read by Grade 3 law didn’t change what we were doing. It gave us more resources, but it really aligned with what we had been doing over time.” Another principal stated:

So, after going through everything, our team looked at this and said this is response-to-intervention. This is what we’re doing. We’re doing all this stuff.

With a few tweaks here and there, you know. So, we were gung-ho. We thought, No problem!

Other principals had positive things to say about their staff embracing the law. One principal stated, “The experiences that I had were very, very positive. The teachers took it on head-on.” Another said, “Our school is very, I think they’re really pretty positive and proactive. They’re like, Okay, what do we have to do? How do we get in front of this?” Another principal explained, “We did ILPs K through 5 at our school.” She added:

So, it was kind of a, um, even though it was a lot for our teachers it was kind of something our kid...our staff decided we’re gonna do this and let’s see if it works.

Let’s see if we really put the energy and the effort into doing interventions and differentiating for our kids if it makes a difference with our population.

Beyond a general appreciation for the law, there were two ideas or subthemes in particular that they appreciated about the law. First, the new law afforded the principals

the opportunity to use the mandate to meet their needs as leaders of the educational process. Second, principals used the benefit of additional human resources afforded by RBG3 grant money to support implementation efforts. Each is described below.

An opportunity to meet their needs as leaders. The first subtheme identified as a benefit of RBG3 was that the law afforded the principals the opportunity to use the mandate to meet their needs as leaders. Some recognized that the law could be used as a tool to support accountability. One principal expressed his pleasure that now *everyone* was held accountable for reading literacy. He said:

Teachers don't have a way out of this. It's the law. We have to do it. And administrators, me, too, I'm in that boat. It's not just teachers, it's administrators. It's our school district. It's the districts. We are all held accountable.

Another principal stated:

It wasn't that I said, you need to do RTI. This is good for kids. Now, I've said it, now the law is saying we need to do it. And so, it gave that support that we needed as educational leaders to get the teachers to—I mean—we have a great staff but when you have that law backing you that says, okay, you have to do this. This is what we're going to do.

Various principals indicated that the law required teachers to be aware and focused on the importance of early literacy and on meeting individual student's needs. One principal noted, "I would just say; we are just ultra-focused on how important success in literacy is. And that we're—it's kind of forcing the issue of all kids getting the intervention that they need and not kind of falling through the cracks."

Some principals discussed how RBG3 helped teachers “know” their students on an individual basis. One principal discussed how she would conduct classroom walkthroughs and the teachers could quickly identify the needs of individual students.

The principal said:

I think that you have teachers just knowing their students. And having that purposeful planning for individual students. Not just I know my kids need this or this group should do this. It's Johnny needs this. Suzie needs this. Jose needs this. And planning, that purposeful planning, too. To really think, what am I gonna do for that student?

Another principal admitted that before RBG3 teachers did not really know where specific students were in their development of reading literacy skills. After the implementation of RBG3, she found the intervention plans and progress monitoring requirements of the law to be very beneficial as a principal. She said:

For me, as a principal, it allows teachers...it's kind of like that accountability piece...it allows teachers to be focused on where students are and where they need to be. I think that now, when I walk into a teacher's room and I say, I just listened to Johnny read. Where is he? What level is he? (snap of fingers) they know. Whereas before, they really didn't know.

Another principal said:

Overall it was a great thing to have happened to our school...to force us to look at kids individually. And not that we were ever not looking at kids individually, but it just forced it to a greater degree and it helped our kids significantly.

She explained how her school won a prestigious award and said, “I do relate a lot of [the award] back to RBG3 because if we hadn’t’ve put the focus on it like we did, you know, certainly we wouldn’t have made the progress that we did.”

Two LSs also mentioned the importance of how RBG3 held teachers accountable for students’ growth. One LS talked about how in the past if students were “low” readers and not reading at grade level, teachers may have just, as she said, “Let it slide.” Under RBG3, however, she said, “Now we’re being held accountable for all kids.” Another LS stated, “I was very happy about it because I felt like a lot of kids were falling through the cracks.” She explained how the classroom teachers have “to actually sit down with their students and listen to them read because now they have to take responsibility and ownership of that.”

Some principals used the RBG3 law to guide teachers through data-based decision making through a particular structure or framework. Possibly by design, one district structured discussions around the individual learning plans (ILPs) and the other two districts used the response to intervention (RTI) framework. The two frameworks and how the principals used RBG3 to make data-based decisions are discussed next.

All of the principals in one district mentioned ILPs. One principal stated, “I am in favor of the individual literacy plans because it really does pinpoint the teacher’s approach in interventions for students who are struggling with reading.” Another principal stated, “I really think the emphasis on individualized learning plans, the literacy plans, that really changed my mind. I thought, How wonderful for every student to really have something like this.” She stated, “ILPs have been—that’s changed our conversation at PLCs [professional learning communities]. Being able to have a greater awareness

of—we're seeing a pattern of students really needing to focus on this particular area in phonics or, you know, phonemic awareness.” She described how the discussions led to various decisions such as “pulling our resources and coming up with a plan.” One principal acknowledged the relationship of the RTI framework to RBG3 when she said, “I see now, at least in our district, how you can coordinate it with your RTI, whatever system you're using; program.” Another principal discussed how “it was exciting for us to be able to watch our kids that we put on ILPs to be able to make progress.” She explained the best aspect of RBG3, “It has to be the individual interventions. Just really taking the time to look at each kid as an individual and planning specifically for that kid.”

The principals discussed how ILPs were used to make data-based decisions. One principal explained, “If the student reaches the benchmarks in one school year, the individual literacy plan still needs to be reviewed for the next year to make sure they are still meeting those benchmarks.” Another principal discussed how she used the RBG3 data to work with the teachers to change the process for conducting class placements for students in the following school year. She said:

We made it really based on that data so next year's teachers, you know, we—we know that we've done a better job of; so that changed our practice. So, for me that was one of the best things that came out of it.

Each principal from one district explicitly mentioned the integration of RTI with RBG3. One principal discussed the importance of “braiding” RBG3 with RTI when she said, “If you're running things all parallel, it just doesn't work. You have to just kind of braid them all together. If you don't braid them all together, none of them work.” She continued:

Honestly, we're really working. The last three years we've worked really hard on data-based decision making. And that goes right with it. You know what I mean? Because they're keeping those data on those data trackers. It's like, okay, are they moving or are they not moving? And, if they're not moving, what are we going to do?

One principal stated, "So, as far as interventions and response to intervention and all the tiered process, really, we were already doing all of that. So, it really just put some extra layers of things in accountability-wise." Another principal noted that after the initial assessments are completed under RBG3, "we have to have a scientific-based remediation of some sort. And for us, that is, instructional consultation is what we use. It's our RTI basically." He stated:

I think people are starting to get it now, that instructional consultation really is to meet teacher needs and meet student needs. To make an instructional match between what the teacher is doing in the classroom and what the student needs. And so, that being said, it's forcing teachers to look at their instruction to make sure that it's making a match between instruction and student needs.

Most of the principals in another district discussed RTI as the framework used for implementation of RBG3. One principal who implemented RTI prior to RBG3 said with excitement, "And then we get this law and I'm reading through it. And we're all reading through it and we're like, Oh, this is RTI!" He explained how thrilled he was about the connection because "RTI is powerful. If you know how to do it, it's amazing. It's phenomenal." Another principal articulated:

So, for me Read by Grade 3 is more of an RTI or an intervention program where we need to look at some specific data, we need to pinpoint our subgroups, and find out what we can do to move these kiddos ahead in coordination with our parents because they do need to know about how their kids are doing.

She added:

It's having that data discussion about kids, where the I thinks and the I think I know where my child is out of when we talk during PLCs and give me some— give me some data. Give me what the data says. So, it brought that data discussion back to the forefront, which has been nice.

One principal in the district explained the ease of implementation because RBG3 matched the RTI framework that was already an integral part of instructional practices at her school. She said, "We did the response to intervention forever and the law just kind of went right along with what we had. We made some adjustments. Maybe tried to find new strategies or different approaches, different data to see what the kids needed." She articulated, "For me, the conversations that these teachers could have over the data really impacted instruction and the law has helped with that because we've needed to do that more deeply than we were before."

Some principals explained how RBG3 provided them the opportunity to guide teachers through professional development to focus on reading literacy instruction. For example, one principal said:

The other thing for me is its really kind of spearheaded some professional development that was really needed in things like guided reading and skills

groups. How do you figure out where a student is struggling? How do you analyze a running record and find a focus for those students?

She further articulated the need to teach educators “how to truly do guided reading, teaching them what reading strategies work, what strategies don’t work.” Another principal said, “We spent a lot of PLC time talking with them about, like I said, the reading hierarchy. You know, helping them figure out how to choose their interventions.”

Other principals discussed how conversations in grade level meetings or PLCs changed and how, as principals, they guided teachers through those discussions. One principal talked about how she worked with her teachers in meetings and would prompt them by saying:

Let’s list what we show the deficiencies are. Is it phonemic awareness? Is it vocabulary? Let’s list—with the kids that—or we know are in this percentile or below. Or who are in this group? What is it? What is it? Are there common things?

Another principal discussed how the intervention plans “changed our conversation at PLCs” and that teachers had started to use data to group students with similar literacy deficiencies to meet their individual needs. Another principal, who served as a LS the previous year, worked with teachers first on screening data and then she worked with the teachers on “how to use that data then to design the intervention plans.”

One principal explained how her teachers worked to group students. She stated: So, they, you know, they went back and looked at all these kids and they grouped ‘em so they were those who needed this type of work were together, and the tutors

tracked and worked very closely. And if a kid, you know, was, had mastered that, then let's go back and find out, what's the next thing we need to do?

Another principal explained how she worked with her staff to implement RBG3 and to support the goal of the administrators. She said:

So, with RBG3 and what we wanted to do overall as an administration, we took on reading as our overall, what we were going to look at this year. And we put a focus on our kids' reading for pleasure. And once they started reading for pleasure we saw a huge shift in our kids.

A few principals used RBG3 to support students in unique ways; for example, an after-school tutoring club or a school-wide program for all students. One principal discussed how she used RBG3 to provide "noticed students" interventions during the school day, but also invited them to an "afterschool homework club." She discussed how the afterschool students "actually got a whole 'nother dose of small group reading."

Another principal explained how he used RBG3 with his staff to implement the law across all grade levels, not just K-3. He said, "We're gonna go big on this!" He discussed how he and his staff worked to meet the needs of all students, not just the students identified as reading deficient. He said, "And using it not just as a remediation thing, but also as an acceleration. So, where it becomes a little bit more flexible with identifying reading groups." He explained how he and his staff developed the "golden time." During this time, an upper grade teacher was paired with a lower grade teacher and students would go to the appropriate intervention to support their specific needs. Students with higher-level reading skills received instruction to "accelerate" their literacy skills and students identified under RBG3 received the "remediation" support they

needed. Another principal explained how she and her staff decided to implement the RBG3 process school-wide. She stated, “We did ILPs K through five at our school.” She explained, “Our staff decided we’re gonna do this and let’s see if it works. Let’s see if we really put the energy and effort into doing interventions and differentiating for our kids, if it makes a difference with our population.” Overall, most of the principals indicated that they were able to use the RBG3 law to support their efforts to improve teaching and learning.

The benefit of resources. The second subtheme identified was the importance of the additional funding and the human resources that came with the RBG3 grant. One principal stated, “Another thing I want to add about the law is that there’s supports and there’s funding for the law. For example, we have a learning strategist that we use.” Another principal explained how pleased she was by the support from both RBG3 grant money and her district to implement the law. She articulated:

I appreciate that our state is taking a focus on really building that early literacy and supporting it by putting money behind it. To offer personnel and being able to have time with substitute teachers to have time to do the best job on creating those. So, I think I’m proud to be a part of that.

Another principal briefly explained how the district provided support when the funding was not available through the state grant (e.g. professional development). He said:

Some of the unfunded aspects of RBG3, that was a concern at the beginning. How are we gonna pay for this? Certain aspects of it weren’t. Some of the professional development and things like that weren’t exactly supported. But we

still made it work. Our district was very, very supportive and made sure that everybody got what they needed. So, that helped.

Many principals articulated the benefit of extra personnel to support the implementation of RBG3. Some of the human resource positions listed by principals as important to RBG3 included: learning strategists, literacy aides, tutors, substitute teachers, and resource teachers to include special education teachers and English Learner (EL) teachers. Some of the human resources listed were funded by the state RBG3 grant. Some principals used as many additional human resources as possible along with the additional human resources provided by RBG3 to support the implementation process. Some principals explained how they arranged their schedules to “flood” various grade levels under RBG3 with as many human resources as possible to support the classroom teachers and, ultimately, to support development of students’ reading literacy. After listing the variety of human resources used in the implementation of the RBG3 initiative, one principal stated, “It’s been neat being able to see how many more people we can surround a grade level with that we didn’t have before as an option.” Some principals indicated that even having just one additional person funded through RBG3 to support the implementation efforts was beneficial. As one principal stated, “The aide could go to group to group to group and she could assist sometimes in the classroom, sometimes in a pullout in her own classroom. She’s helping those kids.” The principal continued, “The aide was funded. So, that was extremely helpful.”

Some principals articulated the benefit of the extra human resources to support teachers by helping with the paperwork and other management tasks necessary under RBG3. One principal stated, “We have a literacy specialist that’s paid through the grant.

And those people, between the aide and the literacy specialist, they take care of the paperwork and stuff which helps [the vice principal].” A vast majority of principals indicated that human resources were an important and beneficial part of RBG3. One principal stated, “Well, this is great, with RBG3 we’ve gained people, personnel.” She continued, “Four tutors that are here all day. So that has been wonderful, being able to help focus them in our K, one, two, and three classes. We also have an interventionist, a reading interventionist.” Another principal mentioned, “Our interventionist, we got to hire her mid-year which was neat because RB3, because of the grant that we got, each school was offered money for an interventionist.”

Another principal explained, “And, you know, they hired a, someone overall in charge of, a teacher out of the classroom, overall in charge of RBG3. So, she came to schools and supported, you know, whatever we needed as well.” Another principal explained the “support” needed for RBG3 in the scheduling when she said:

Utilizing your teacher assistants to go in and help instruct those small groups.

Utilizing your specialists so maybe your ESL staff to support, so if they’re going in and they’re working with a group anyhow and they’re ESL kids, having them implement the curriculum that’s needed for the kids.

One principal said, “Here it’s our dean of students. So, it’s actually...it’s not somebody in the class, so she takes time out of her dean of students to go do those things.” Another principal explained the grant writing process. She said, “And so, they included myself in those initial discussions about getting bodies into schools. That if we were going to do this, this is a small group intervention, that’s a person.” Another principal explained:

Getting extra resources to help through the grant and a couple more people. We have two teachers in one grade level, kind of needed that third person so we could do the three different levels. So, I think that was huge.

The principals articulated the importance of additional human resources. From the learning strategists who supported the teachers with professional development to the literacy aides who provided direct support in the classrooms, the principals indicated the extra human resources were an essential component of RBG3.

Analysis of the discourse indicated that most principals perceived RBG3 favorable with many benefits identified. Some principals appreciated that RBG3 highlighted the importance of reading literacy and supported education in general. Many principals appreciated the accountability afforded by RBG3 and used the law to meet their needs as educational leaders. Additionally, many principals perceived the additional resources, more specifically the human resources, provided under the law were very beneficial. Still, the principals also indicated that the law and the implementation of the law was not perfect.

RBG3 Was not Perfect

While the principals articulated many positive aspects about the law, they also acknowledged that the law itself was not perfect. Over half of the principals struggled with the retention clause of the law that was not yet in effect at the time of the research study. The majority of the principals, however, suggested that implementing the law required time, which was in short supply. The principals indicated they perceived that teachers were stressed; further, the principals seemed to be concerned about the teacher stress linked to of RBG3.

The consequences of retention. Over half of the principals articulated concern with the retention clause of the law. More specifically, the consequences that come with the retention clause of the mandate. One principal stated, “So, you know, retaining children is always very controversial.” Another principal stated, “There’s so much research about the negative impact of retaining, why are we striving to get a result with a strategy that we know can be harmful?” One said, “I’m not a big believer in retention.” Another principal articulated, “I’m not a huge fan of retention. In the long term, I think they’re destructive. Well, maybe destructive is not the right word. They’re definitely problematic.”

One principal stated, “I had extreme apprehensions about the mandated retention part.” Another principal articulated his frustration when he said, “Here’s the law. The law says we’re going to fail kids when they don’t pass third grade.” He continued, “I think the pressure of telling us that a kid is going to fail if they don’t get to proficiency by the end of third grade, because we know of kids that may not and it scares us.” One principal stated that “any academic research will tell you that one of the number one indicators for students not graduating from high school is a retention.” Another principal explained his frustration when he said, “It’s just like, all of these things come into play, and then, Oh, by the way, now here’s legislation that says if your kids aren’t reading we’re gonna retain them.”

Another principal articulated initial concern with the retention piece when he said:

My first gut reaction, I thought, I really did, I thought it was horrible because I could imagine, you know, just overall dramatic, we’re gonna have third graders

driving to school because they're never gonna be, you know, we're gonna have to expand the parking lot at elementary schools across the state.

He continued that he “misunderstood” that part of the law, but his initial reaction was that “class sizes were gonna explode at the third-grade level.” Another principal stated, “I guess if these kids hit third grade and there is a huge—I just don't see it happening.” She continued, “I guess if a huge portion really had to be retained that would be—again, I don't see it happening.”

The LSs were also concerned about the retention component. One LS stated, “Retention isn't always the best for all kids.” Another LS stated, “Personally, I don't believe in retention. There's a lot of research that supports that it doesn't work for kids. Socially and emotionally, it wrecks and ruins them. And that piece really concerns me.”

The time required to implement. A majority of principals acknowledged that the law required significant time in a variety of ways and that finding time to fulfill the requirements of the law was difficult. The theme of time was articulated in different ways by different principals. One principal stated, “It's time consuming. You know, the amount of time that it takes to have something individual for every kid.” Many principals acknowledged that their staff members wanted to do what is best for students, but the lack of time was overwhelming. One principal articulated how she and her support staff tried to “lessen the burden of the paperwork, the setting things up for teachers. We did try to have other people putting this paperwork together for them.” She continued:

We knew time...that was the biggest negative of the whole thing. Not that people didn't want to do it. Or didn't have the expertise or the resources. It—the time. So, we tried every way we could to alleviate as much as we could.

Some principals articulated the need to rearrange their master schedules to make time for the interventions. One principal discussed how teachers had rearranged their own schedules to accommodate the intervention time and said, “It wasn’t a long time because, like I say, our day is so full that it was maybe a 30-minute and that meant that you had to give up your block.” She continued, “I mean, something has to give.”

Another principal said:

It just adds another layer of interventions. We, already having to provide Tier 2 and Tier 3 and then you add Tier ones in there. So, it becomes really a scheduling issue of, I have a 30- to 45-minute block for interventions. How am I going to structure this so that everybody receives the intervention?

Another principal stated:

When do you do interventions? When do you fit that in? Like, there’s no—we have 90-minute reading blocks, 75-minute math blocks, and 60-minute science block that are supposed to be uninterrupted. So, where do you do one-on-one pullout interventions? How do you do that?

Some principals mentioned the time it takes to provide support to the teachers, so they can learn how to interpret data and plan interventions. One principal said, “We just knew we needed to spend a lot of time with them. Teachers don’t know automatically how to do that.” Earlier in the conversation, the principal stated:

So, they would collect their data, but to actually put it on the graph and all that. So, we gave them that PLC time where we all sat together, and we could answer questions or help ‘em. But that’s time consuming and that’s hard for them to fit in.

Another principal explained frustration with the lack of time in the day to implement the many parts of the law when he said, “They also have to teach. They also have lives. They don’t have any prep time. They have all these different things.” One principal indicated the implementation of RBG3 took time when she discussed how she supported teachers throughout the implementation. She said, “Personally I would help write-up a plan with the teacher. Help give them resources to be able to implement. That includes scheduling, coaching, supplies, whatever they needed to be able to do it.” She explained how she helped “the teachers monitor the progress of the kids.” Another principal indicated the importance of the time needed to meet the professional development needs of the teachers to successfully implement RBG3. He said, “Thank God for our district. I’ve got to give them credit, too. They’ve allowed us the time every Wednesday; we get early outs and that allows for that PLC time for our teachers.” One of the LSs who also served as a classroom teacher stated, “It always comes down to time. We’re crunched for time.”

Some principals discussed the amount of time it took to meet with parents. One principal indicated how he got creative with scheduling parent-teacher meetings to maintain the integrity of the teachers’ contract hours. He said:

We tried to schedule those during the day. I would go in and cover a class.

Another teacher would go in and cover a class, so they could have those meetings.

Often times the aide would run those [parent] meetings because, again, she was in the data up to the neck.

He explained:

Sometimes we would try to coordinate the meetings during the specials periods so

if the kiddos were at PE we could have the parent come in during the teacher's prep or we could do a comp time thing or something of that nature.

Another principal said, "My gut was, Oh my goodness, how am I going to meet with all of these parents beyond just the SIT [student intervention team] meeting that we usually have?" She continued, "But we also realized that, you know, we needed to talk as teachers first sometimes and it was finding the time."

Some principals indicated the need for a fulltime LS to successfully support the implementation efforts of RBG3. Some principals, who had a fulltime teacher who also served as the stipend LS, described the difficulty with the LS serving in both capacities. One principal explained that she and the grant writing committee included a line item in the grant proposal for each school to be afforded a fulltime LS. She stated:

And we just didn't feel like if you have the teacher in the classroom, how would they be able to do that because they would be teaching their own classes? So, how would you release them to help coach? And we really felt that was really important.

Indeed, one principal lamented, "Unfortunately, our LS was also a classroom teacher, which is different from here, because they're actually—they have a separate position which actually allows them to do the work." Another principal was quite passionate about how vital it was for the state to consider funding fulltime LSs for each school. He said:

She was my right-hand woman. She was the one who took the bull by the horns and helped me, guided me. We worked together. She was my part-time strategist while she was teaching. And I say that tongue-in-cheek because that position is a

fulltime position. I don't care what the state says. I don't care what our district says. They're short changing schools by not having a fulltime specialist in there, strategist if you will. I'll call it the RTI strategist, because really without a fulltime person in there it's not as effective as it can be with that person fulltime.

One LS acknowledged the time and challenges for her to serve as a learning strategist while also serving as a classroom teacher. She said, "I thought to myself, There's no way one person at a school site can be responsible for all of these things." She continued to explain how she "really had to contemplate and think about whether I wanted to be a part of it or not." Later she said, "When I looked at those responsibilities and the enormity of the responsibilities of the strategists, I really had to think about it because my main responsibility was to the children in my classroom." She indicated the LS position requires an enormous amount of time.

The concern about teacher stress. A majority of principals in each district indicated that they perceived that the teachers felt overwhelmed, stressed, apprehensive, and/or fearful about RBG3. Additionally, principals' responses indicated that they were empathetic because of their perceptions that the teachers were stressed, in part, linked to RBC3. One principal voiced concern for the kindergarten teachers and articulated her perception that they were stressed. She said, "I think our kindergarten teachers are feeling like this burden is on them to make sure our, their students are reading where they need to be reading by the end of kindergarten." Another principal voiced concern for the third-grade teachers when he discussed the "parking lot" concept:

The idea of the third grade becoming a parking lot of students that you're just going to have more and more and more below level students was frightening for

me as a site level administrator and also for third grade teachers, because their big concern was, “How am I going to help all these kids if I just keep having more and more kids that are below grade level?”

Some principals indicated teachers were overwhelmed with the amount of work required under RBG3. One principal recognized the worst nightmare as “the teachers being overwhelmed by all that it takes.” She explained, “The amount of time that it takes to have something individual for every kid. So, as good as it is, it’s also very difficult for everybody.” Some principals explained efforts to relieve the burden of the paperwork as much as they could. One principal stated:

We tried so hard to support them and let them know we understood. And trying to, at every point, support them with time and What can we do to help? Here’s the next step. What do you need us to do? kind of feel. And I just felt if we didn’t do it that way it—it was overwhelming. I mean, that’s a lot of work.

Some principals suggested that the teachers’ stress came from the sheer number of students identified as reading deficient. One principal said:

It’s just the realization that I have 14 students that are, so, you know—so to develop 14 plans, and have 14 conferences, um, really monitor that data weekly, and, you know, being able to share that data monthly was just—it was just an extra, um, task. And, you know, and something that had to be done. And I felt bad for our teachers.

Another principal explained a similar perception:

So, I think that puts a lot more stress on the teachers who normally would be responding anyhow, but now it’s more formalized. They have to assess along

with their other tiered kids. You can have a classroom teacher who maybe has 12 to 15 kids they have to assess sometimes once a week, twice a week, monthly, and it just takes away from teaching.

One principal indicated teachers were apprehensive about the new law. She was involved in the facilitation of the RBG3 trainings and stated, “Every time we would present, we would really take into account their questions and their apprehensions. And then we would design the next training for them to kind of alleviate some of that apprehension they were feeling.” One principal explained the stress of the deadlines on the teachers and the perception that teachers were beginning to hate the law. He said, “I know that there are a lot of deadlines. I know it puts a huge amount of stress on the teachers.” He continued, “And, in fact, they are starting to resent it.” Another principal acknowledged how her teachers felt when she said, “I know it wasn’t fun for our teachers, but it was exciting for us to be able to watch our kids that we put on ILPs to be able to make progress.” One principal stated, “So, the teachers, I think, felt really overwhelmed; but...and to their credit, you know, they always did whatever we needed of them or I needed of them.”

Overall, the principals perceived the teachers to be stressed and/or overwhelmed by the implementation of the RBG3 law. Most principals indicated empathy for teachers linked to their perceived stress of the teachers; as illustrated by one principal who stated, “And I felt bad for the teachers.” Additionally, many principals perceived that, as one principal stated, “finding the time” to implement different aspects of the mandate was a challenge. Moreover, a majority of the principals indicated concerns related to the

retention clause. Still, most of the principals recognized that RBG3 was about meeting the reading literacy needs of individual students.

RBG3 Was All about the Students

A majority of the principals indicated that, ultimately, RBG3 was all about the students. As one principal said, “I think the best aspect of Read by Third Grade is that we are zeroing in on those children who need support.” One principal stated the best part of RBG3 was that “overall it was a great thing to have happened to our school. To force us to look at kids individually.” Another principal said, “It’s made us have a greater awareness and focus on what each individual need is of each child.” Another principal said the best part of RBG3 was “teachers just knowing their students and having that purposeful planning for individual students.”

One principal expressed his initial concern that students who were identified as reading deficient might “feel stigmatized” as they went to their “golden time” of interventions. The principal’s worries dissolved once he and his staff had implemented the fluid intervention process. He explained, “Kids are going here. Kids are going there. You just happen to be going there. And the kids just, Yeah, whatever, I’m getting help reading.” He continued, “The earlier you can catch the kid if you can identify if they have a reading issue, the better. So, that to me was absolutely outstanding.”

One principal identified both her excitement for individual students and groups of students whose data demonstrated growth, but she recognized the amount of effort it took to get them there. She said:

I know it wasn’t fun for our teachers, but it was exciting for us to be able to watch our kids that we put on ILPs to be able to make progress. And for some of our

grade levels where the kids really made progress, it was very exciting in the end after all the work was done.

The LSs indicated how good RBG3 was for the students. A learning strategist stated, “I think the teachers became more aware of individual students and what their issues were in reading.” Another LS stated, “In my mind, the best aspect is really making teachers look at data, look at each student individually, writing that intervention plan, and holding them accountable for each students’ learning.” Another LS discussed how much growth first grade students, identified as reading deficient, made after implementation of RBG3. She said, “I want to say we had 44 ILPs last year and 19 of them dropped off in the fall so of those 44 we dropped that by 19. So almost 50%.” As is, 19 students made significant gains in reading literacy.

As one principal stated, “There’s a lot of focus on helping those kids.” Another principal affirmed that “It’s kind of forcing the issue of all kids getting the intervention that they need and not kind of falling through the cracks.” One principal brought up the idea of the need to bring back “data boards” and that it was once again okay to use data boards to guide teachers’ conversations about the specific reading literacy needs of individual students. Another principal said, “And it helped improve the students. The whole point of it.” One principal stated, “If you do it right, it’s what’s best for kids. It’s plain and simple. You can’t tell me it’s not.”

Conclusion

The results of the data analysis indicated that principals perceived that the benefits were pretty great. The RBG3 law afforded the principals an opportunity to meet their needs as leaders. They also articulated the benefits of additional resources, both fiscal

resources and human resources that supported the implementation efforts. The principals recognized that RBG3 was not perfect. A few principals found frustration with the overall mandate itself and a little over half wrestled with the mandated retention component of the law. Principals also mentioned how the law required time in a variety of ways. For example, the law required time to do the paperwork, time for teachers to meet, time within the master schedule to provide interventions, and time to meet with the parents. Additionally, principals suggested that the teachers were overwhelmed and stressed, but that they were willing to do the work. Ultimately, the principals indicated that RBG3 was all about the students and, as one principal stated, “It’s what’s right for kids.”

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In 2015, the state of Nevada passed a reading literacy law with a retention clause titled the Read by Grade 3 (RBG3) Act (Nevada Department of Education, 2016a). Nevada was one of the sixteen states with a reading literacy law with a retention clause (Diffey, 2016). Of those sixteen states with retention mandates, Nevada was one of fourteen that has a “good cause exemption” as part of the law (Diffey, 2016; Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). At the time of this study, there was very limited research available on the perspectives rural elementary principals have about a state reading literacy law. Therefore, an exploratory study was conducted to begin to discover principals’ perceptions about the reading literacy law and to identify perceived strengths and challenges of such an important initiative in rural elementary schools.

Rural principals face unique challenges and, as Preston et al. (2013) stated, “Further research is required to more adequately understand the contextual issues faced by rural school leaders.” Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education (2015) articulated that implementing a new state initiative can be challenging for any administrator. The results of the discourse analysis were presented in Chapter Four. In this chapter, a summary of the study is presented. The results are analyzed in relation to the two research questions posed and conclusions are drawn. The findings of the study reveal insight into the principals’ perceived benefits and challenges of the RBG3 law.

Using social constructionism theory and discourse analysis, common factors were identified that contributed to some perceptions about the RBG3 law. As van Dijk (2014) pointed out, the complexity of the social construction of knowledge is not to be taken lightly. Van Dijk (2014) defined “social knowledge as the shared beliefs of an epistemic

community, justified by contextually, historically and culturally variable (epistemic) criteria of reliability” (p. 21). Further, the discourse exchanged in social groups both expresses and develops knowledge (van Dijk, 2014; Gee, 2014). Using social constructionism theory, Gergen (2015) explained, “In a broader sense, we may say that as we communicate with each other we construct the world in which we live” (p. 5).

This research study sought to understand the perceptions rural elementary principals had about a new state reading literacy law and what factors contributed to the perceptions. Three rural Nevada school districts were included in the study. A total of twelve rural elementary principals voluntarily participated in the study. A total of three learning strategists were participants in the study, one learning strategist from each school district. The learning strategists were interviewed to seek additional data related to perceptions about RBG3. Therefore, the participants included: four principals and one learning strategist from District A, three principals and one learning strategist from District B, and five principals and one learning strategist from District C.

Each participant was interviewed one time. A social constructionism approach was used in the interview process whereby the principals and learning strategists were deliberately asked focused, yet open-ended questions on the research topic (Charmaz, 2014; Seidman, 2013). The intent was to provide participants opportunities to articulate their experiences and points of view related to RBG3 by drawing from their own schemas (Charmaz, 2014; Seidman, 2013).

The discourse of each interview was analyzed to discover common patterns and sought to find links within the data. The three main themes emerged and were categorized as: the benefits were pretty great, RBG3 was not perfect, and RBG3 was all

about the students. There were further subthemes identified within two of the main themes. The first theme, the benefits were pretty great, had two subthemes that emerged: an opportunity to meet their needs as leaders and the benefit of resources. The second theme, RBG3 was not perfect, had three subthemes that emerged: the consequences of retention, the law required time, and the concern about teacher stress. There were no subthemes identified in the last main theme, RBG3 was all about the students. It was difficult to separate the analysis into two distinct sections as the answers to the two research questions posed were quite intertwined; therefore, the research questions were addressed jointly.

The Fundamental Belief: All Students Can Learn

While the principals' responses fell along a continuum, there was a fundamental belief threaded throughout the discourses that all students can learn if provided the proper instructional supports to meet their individual needs. Perhaps this is the result of the years these educators have worked under the mandates of the reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1964 to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and, the newest iteration, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. The labels of these two consecutive laws imply the very notion identified in this research study, the belief that all students can learn. The RBG3 law appeared to reinforce two "institutional realities" (Gergen, 2015, p. 51) that educators have experienced for 17 years: the urgency to have all students academically succeed, and the need to demonstrate student growth through accountability.

The principals demonstrated a passion to articulate the various pro-active methods that they utilized to demonstrate this fundamental belief that all students can learn. They

seemed to treat the law as a tool to meet their overriding commitment to supporting universal student academic growth. While the law focused on reading literacy, there were many aspects of the discourse that suggested that principals were developing teachers' skills that could be applied to any subject area. The law appeared to be a mechanism used by principals to: (1) develop teachers' skills in data-based decision-making; (2) help teachers identify and implement targeted interventions to meet the needs of individual students; and (3) ensure a systematic approach be employed, such as the RTI framework, to guarantee no students "slip through the cracks."

Consistently, most principals supported the premise of the law; all students can be reading-literate by the end of third grade if given the proper supports. Still, other statements revealed the complexity of the situation. There was an ongoing suggestion that these educators were clearly aware of the state of things in real world of rural education. These reality checks were illustrated by statements that discussed the magnitude of implementing a law and related challenges. Over half of the principals struggled at some point with the retention clause and the consequences of retention.

Further, while the statewide achievement data for each district was not discussed during the interviews, achievement data for each district indicated that more than half of the third grade students were not reading proficient in the 2016-2017 school year (Nevada Department of Education, 2018). Additionally, while principals perceived the resources as beneficial, the appreciation for additional resources was seemingly focused on the needs of the community at the moment in time when the interview took place; not the human resources that may or may not be needed when the retention clause goes into

effect. It is also important to note that the discourse about retention was general in scope and did not reflect discourse on specific students who may be retained.

Still, for those that mentioned retention as a concern, most indicated that the benefits of the law outweighed their trepidations about the retention clause. Many principals greatly appreciated the accountability aspect the law afforded; however, this accountability may have contributed to their perceptions about teacher stress and concerns about the pressure the teachers were under. Additionally, the amount of time that implementation took may also have been a contributing factor to the perception that teachers were stressed. Clearly, the mandates of the law are complex and the principals perceived the complexities to interact in non-linear ways within their schools.

The Institutional Realities

The positive “institutional realities” (Gergen, 2015, p. 51) identified in the results of this study demonstrated that: (1) the focus on the reading literacy needs of individual students was perceived as a good thing; (2) the accountability afforded by the law was appreciated and used to make the law work in their schools; and (3) the additional human resources, especially in a rural community, were greatly appreciated. Still, the institutional realities identified as unintended consequences of implementing RBG3 included: (1) the concern over teacher retention; (2) the perception that teachers were overwhelmed and/or stressed by “all that it takes;” and (3) the implementation required time for a variety of reasons.

As institutional realities are constructed in society through conversations (Gergen, 2015), or as Brown and Yule (1983) suggested as interactional discourse, the perception and concern about teacher stress and the time required to implement the law were both

interesting findings. These two institutional realities, or perceptions, are not necessarily the a result of only the RBG3 law; other educational initiatives may have been contributing factors to these two perceived negative institutional realities. Additionally, the perceptions or social constructs of these two findings are those of the participants as principals and may or may not reflect the reality in which the teachers construct their lived world.

It was generally accepted that all students should be reading-literate. The RBG3 was law was virtually universally accepted as an important initiative. The law focused on the importance of reading literacy that the principals appreciated. Additionally, the law required that the needs of individual students be addressed, which was supported by the principals.

The resolve to have all students reading-literate may have been heightened by RBG3; however, the “social knowledge” (van Dijk, 2014, p. 21) of the necessity to have all students reading-literate is also supported by a variety of research studies. If students are not reading-literate by third grade, they are more likely to not graduate (Connor et al., 2014; Hernandez, 2011) and students who are retained are more likely to not graduate (Hughes, 2009; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Lack of early reading literacy is a proverbial double-edged sword. Should a student be socially promoted when he or she is not reading-literate by the end of third grade? Or should the student be retained to provide additional support and interventions? Either way, research has shown the student is at increased risk of not graduating. The principals seemed to perceive the additional resources and requirements of the law as the creation of a possible alternative; they could develop schools to enable students to become reading literate.

For many principals, the framework to help develop teachers' skills in improving instruction through data-based decision making already existed within the RTI process; however, the difference was that prior to RBG3 the RTI process was not mandated. Under the IDEA of 2004, the implementation of RTI as a means to address the individual needs of students was not required by law; it was an alternate option to the IQ Discrepancy Model (Restori et al., 2008; Richards et al., 2007). The RBG3 law provided the support that principals perceived was needed for them to implement systemic change with all teachers in grades K-3 and to use data to make informed instructional decisions. The principals described implementation of targeted reading literacy interventions based on the needs of individual students, which was no longer voluntary.

Additionally, principals who had already implemented RTI indicated that it was relatively easy to implement the RBG3 procedural requirements. In most cases, RBG3 enhanced the framework that was already in place. As one principal suggested, RBG3 "really just put some extra layers of things in accountability wise." The existing framework of RTI was used by many principals to support implementation efforts of RBG3 by guiding professional discussions at PLCs, by using the data to inform decisions on interventions and to support overall reading literacy instructional practices.

For the district that approached RBG3 using individual learning plans (ILPs), the framework of ILPs was seemingly used for the same purposes as the RTI framework. These principals used data to determine instructional practices and to guide professional discussions to meet the needs of individual students. The findings that principals perceived data-based decision-making, professional discussions, and professional development as important components of the systemic change are supported in

professional literature (Shapiro, 2016; Connor et al., 2014; Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Martinez et al., 2006).

When the principals within each district were considered, either all principals or a vast majority of principals identified a common framework, which they utilized to lead teachers through the implementation of RBG3. In two districts, the principals identified RTI as the framework and in the other district, the principals identified ILPs as the framework. This finding may be due to the common social construct employed by the district leaders to support the implementation efforts of RBG3 and/or the RTI framework. As Freeman et al. (2015) stated, “District leadership can contribute to sustained MTSS [multi-tiered systems of support or RTI] practices of its schools by...providing schools with access to data-based decision making systems” (p. 70). The shared “social knowledge” (van Dijk, 2014, p. 21) identified in this study suggested a social construction of knowledge which was perhaps communicated by district leaders to provide systemic consistency related to implementation efforts.

The perceived importance of providing guided support to teachers gives credence to the critical role of the professional development mandate of RBG3 law. The law mandates that all K-4 teachers attend professional development focused on instructional practices on reading literacy (Nevada Department of Education, 2016b). Additionally, a review of current literature supports the need for targeted professional development and coaching to improve reading literacy instruction (Connor et al., 2014; Denton, 2016; Hartnett-Edwards, 2011).

The principals seemed to acknowledge that their teachers need professional development to learn how to analyze data to identify reading literacy deficiencies, to

determine appropriate interventions, and to effectively implement the interventions. This was evident in comments made by the principals such as teachers needed to learn “how to truly do guided reading” and that teachers needed to learn “what reading strategies work, what strategies don’t work.” As such, the principals used the framework as outlined in RBG3 to improve reading literacy instruction through focused professional development and professional discussions at PLC meetings.

As could be expected, principals perceived the current resources provided by RBG3 to be very beneficial. Research by Provasnik et al. (2007) found that funding resources in rural educational communities are low compared to urban communities. A vast majority made statements about their appreciation for the funding; for example, “I appreciate that our state is...supporting it by putting money behind it to offer personnel and being able to have time with substitute teachers” or “Our interventionist, so she, we got to hire her mid-year which was neat because RB3 because of the grant that we got.” The additional human resources provided because of the RBG3 law were perceived as important to the successful implementation.

Regardless of whether or not the principals’ positive perspectives of the law were immediate or evolved over time; overall, they acknowledged the inherent benefits of the law. The spotlight focus on reading literacy in the early grades, the framework outlined in the law to guide educators through data-based decisions, and the accountability afforded under the law were perceived as highly beneficial to a majority of the principals. Principals also identified the need to build capacity among their staff; for example, they discussed teachers’ needed guidance on the data-based decision-making process.

Beyond the challenges of RBG3, principals perceived the law as an important initiative that helped all stakeholders strive to meet the individual needs of the students identified as reading deficient. After a year of implementation efforts, principals found teachers were “zeroing in on those students who need[ed] support.” Students were no longer going to “slip through the cracks” because RBG3 was holding teachers and administrators accountable for every child’s reading literacy skills. One principal stated, “And it helped improve the students. The whole point of it.” Another principal stated, “If you do it right, it’s what’s best for kids. It’s plain and simple. You can’t tell me it’s not.”

Implications

The implications of this research study are vast as the RBG3 law has many stakeholders: state lawmakers, Nevada Department of Education staff, district leaders, elementary principals, teachers, parents, and students. The immediate implications of the findings of this research study are the most significant for state lawmakers, Nevada Department of Education staff, and school leaders.

State lawmakers should consider the findings when conducting a review and possible redesign of current state reading literacy laws. State lawmakers outside of Nevada who are drafting new reading literacy legislation should carefully review the results of this research study to mitigate foreseeable issues. The finding that a majority of the principals in this study perceived RBG3 as a beneficial law could be of interest to lawmakers. One of the most intriguing findings was that many principals appreciated that the law provided an accountability measure that was not available prior to RBG3. It was not enough that the principals expected teachers to use data to make informed

instructional decisions, to develop targeted intervention strategies, and to guide professional discussions. The RBG3 law seemed to support their efforts as educational leaders.

Additionally, the perceived benefit of resources, in particular the human resources, afforded through the RBG3 grant funds should be considered an essential component to the implementation. Furthermore, the challenges identified in this study may have implications for state lawmakers. The lawmakers could review and discuss the perceived challenges such as the time required for the implementation of various parts of the law or the concern about teacher stress. These findings provide insight on the unintended consequences of the state law. Thus, state lawmakers could use findings to mitigate the challenges through the design of the law. The lawmakers may also want to consider the need to work with the state Department of Education to alleviate these negative impacts.

State Department of Education staff should consider the findings that a majority of the principals appreciated the law. The principals appreciated the accountability afforded under the law to address unique needs. It would behoove state Department of Education staff members to consider these findings when working within districts as each district has unique structures and needs.

Additionally, the state Department of Education staff members should consider the finding that most principals in two districts connected the RBG3 law to the RTI framework to guide professional discussions and data-based decision-making. In one district, the structure of ILPs was perceived as beneficial to guiding the professional discussions and data-based decision making. The state Department of Education could

collaborate directly with district and site level administrators on effective implementation practices for RBG3 and other state laws that enhance existing educational frameworks. When reviewing grant applications for educational initiatives, the state Department of Education should consider the finding that principals perceived the funding of human resources through the RBG3 grant as quite beneficial.

District administrators are charged with supporting elementary principals throughout the implementation and sustainability of a state law such as RBG3. Therefore, district level administrators can use the findings of this study to mitigate the identified challenges to support the inherent benefits and to meet the unique needs. The accountability requirement afforded by the law paired with the finding that the principals perceived and were concerned about teacher stress are both of paramount interest. District administrators may want to consider principals' perceptions as current and future changes in education are planned and implemented. District administrators may reflect on these findings to determine alternate approaches to mitigate the perception and concern about teacher stress while still holding educators accountable.

In the review of the culture of continuous change in schools, district administrators may want to review the finding that principals perceived the time required for implementation as a significant challenge. District administrators can proactively work with elementary principals to determine appropriate steps to alleviate the challenge of finding the time for the implementation of new initiatives and current initiative requirements. Such proactive discussions could include teacher input and address how to lessen the perceived stress level of the staff members.

The implications of this research are significant for the principals who are directly involved in the implementation process of various state and district initiatives.

Elementary principals across the state should consider the results of this study when reviewing their own perceptions and approaches to implementation and sustainability of the RBG3 law. The law was perceived as supporting needs of educational leaders, but also that the principals perceived that the teachers were stressed. Principals may want to consider how they might hold teachers accountable in other subject areas without the mandates of a law. Is the accountability factor causing the perception and concern about teacher stress? Is there a way to approach the global expectation that all students can and should learn without the mandate of a law? Finally, principals may want to explore ways to work with teachers to include them in shared decision making to help mitigate the perceived challenges of the law; after all, the teachers must implement the law at the grassroots level.

Educational stakeholders should consider the findings to inform future educational discussions on the implementation of state reading literacy laws and other initiatives. More specifically, the state level leaders should discuss the results of the study with both district and elementary level administrators to explore the principals' appreciation for the law in supporting reading literacy, the accountability afforded by the law, and the other benefits that the law provided.

The connection that principals made between the RTI framework or using ILPs to guide the RBG3 implementation process will also be of interest to all stakeholders, especially when implementing other initiatives. Braiding new initiatives with other processes that are already in place may ease the principals' perceptions and concerns

about teacher stress and the time factor involved in implementation. Ultimately, the biggest implications of the results of this study will rest with the students as the implementation efforts continue to be honed and crafted. As one principal stated, “If you do it right, it’s what’s best for kids.”

Recommendations for Future Research

The goal of this research study was to investigate the perspectives rural elementary principals had regarding a new state law on reading literacy by grade three. As this study focused solely on rural elementary principals’ perceptions of a reading literacy law, a future study could mirror this research but include teachers. The study could compare and contrast teachers’ perceptions with the principals’ perceptions. A separate study could be conducted just to explore the perceptions that teachers hold about the RBG3 law. Such a study could explore whether or not the principals’ perceptions that teachers were stressed is accurate.

As the study focused solely on rural elementary principals’ perceptions of the reading literacy law, no urban school district principals were included in the study. A future study could mirror this research study in structure but include principals from both rural and urban school districts. Another study could be crafted based on this study but include multiple interviews of each participant. A multiple-stakeholder study could be conducted to explore the perceptions of district level administrators, site level principals, and teacher leaders in the implementation of a reading literacy law. A case study could be conducted to explore the perceptions of stakeholders at all levels: district level administrators, principals, teachers, parents, and students.

Future studies on this topic could include principals from both rural and urban school districts to explore the similarities and differences between principals with different social constructs. As this study focused solely on rural elementary principals, their perceptions are unique to their educational community in a rural school district. A research study that includes both rural and urban elementary principals could provide insight about the shared perceptions of elementary principals regardless of rural or urban status. Additionally, a research study with both rural and urban principals could ascertain the contrasting perceptions of each group.

As the principals were only interviewed on one occasion, the data were limited to the perceptions of participants at that one moment in time. Future studies could include a minimum of three interview sessions per participant (Seidman, 2013). The data gathered from multiple interviews would provide a deeper understanding of the social construct of the individual participants, as well as, a better understanding of the group of principals within a school district. Multiple interviews would afford the interviewer time to review and reflect on the discourse previous interview with the participant to determine appropriate prompts to gather a deeper understanding of the participant's perceptions (Seidman, 2013).

A multiple-stakeholder study could be conducted to explore these perceptions and possible unique social constructs of each group of stakeholders: district level administrators, elementary principals, teachers, and parents. District level administrators could provide insight on working directly with the state Department of Education and implementation efforts with site level principals. Site level principals could provide insight on how the state level and district level information is received and delivered to

teachers. Considering the impact of an early literacy law such as RBG3 on primary teachers in particular, garnering insight on their perceptions could be of paramount interest to the educational leadership community. Additionally, parents could be considered for a multiple-stakeholder study.

Finally, an in-depth case study of a single school could be beneficial in understanding the perceptions about a reading literacy law on multiple levels. Interviews could be conducted with various staff members, parents, and even students over the course of a year of implementation. An in-depth case study at the site level could provide a broad understanding of the implications and impacts of the reading literacy law. A mixed-methods approach could be utilized to analyze student growth data with the qualitative data collected throughout the course of a full school year.

Conclusions

In a nation where 16 states have a reading literacy law with a retention clause, 14 of those states that have “conditional promotion options” (Diffey, 2016, p. 1), and other states possibly considering enacting a state literacy law, the results of this research study are important and provide a starting point for future research. State reading literacy laws impact a variety of stakeholders: state lawmakers, state education departments, district level leadership, site level administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and, most importantly, the students. Implementing a state reading literacy law such as RBG3 in a rural elementary school can have unique challenges and can also be quite rewarding. As this research study was exploratory in nature, an understanding of the perceptions rural elementary school principals had about a reading literacy law was just the beginning. This research study provided unique insights for all educators.

For any stakeholder, the results of this study can provide a launching point for a variety of discussions on the development or modification of state reading literacy laws and, quite possibly, state education laws in general. Furthermore, district and site level administrators could use the findings to begin their own discussions on how they approach the implementation process of new initiatives. The findings that the rural elementary principals perceived the law favorably for a variety of reasons may encourage other states to explore the possibility of the benefits of state education laws.

District and site level administrators may use the results on the positive perception of the accountability and resources when launching a new initiative that may or may not be driven by state law. Is it enough to implement a new initiative without some sort of accountability measure? What funding is provided to support the implementation efforts? Human resources were identified as an important part of the benefits of the state grant funding. If funding is provided, should human resources be considered an essential component to successful implementation of an initiative? As identified in the results of this study, many principals used a framework that was already in place to guide implementation such as RTI. Does the school district already have another framework in place with which the new initiative could be braided? These questions could become launching points for future research and also for current educational leaders to consider when discussing the implementation and enhancement process of such an important initiative where the individual reading literacy needs of students come first.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Script for Participation

Elementary Principal

“My name is Bridget James and I am a Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership at the University of Nevada, Reno. I am conducting a research study on the Read by Grade 3 (RbG3) Act and the perceptions and possible contributing factors of the perceptions of administrators regarding the RbG3 Act. Findings from this study may be used to inform educational policy makers about how the individuals who are actually responsible for implementing the law understand it. Only rural elementary principals will be selected, and I would like to invite you to be a part of this research study.

If you agree to be a part of the study, I will interview you at a mutually convenient date, time, and place for you; the interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. The questions that I will ask focus on your understanding of the RbG3 law and how you have implemented it at your school. Other than getting a bit of your professional background, no personal questions will be asked. If you are willing to participate, I would love to set up a date, time, and location for the interview. I will also send you an information sheet about the study via email. Thank you for your time today and for agreeing to participate in this research study.”

Appendix B: Information Sheet for Principals

**University of Nevada, Reno
Educational Research Information Sheet**

Title of Study: A Social Constructionism Study Using Discourse Analysis of Rural Elementary Principals' Perceptions of a State Law on Reading Literacy by Grade Three

Principal Investigator: Dr. Bill Thornton

Co-Investigator: Bridget James

You are being invited to participate in a research study. The research study seeks to explore the perspectives that rural elementary principals have regarding the new state law on reading literacy by grade three.

We are asking you to participate in this study because you are a rural elementary principal involved in the implementation of the Read by Grade 3 (RbG3) Act. If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to participate in a single, audio-taped interview with Bridget James. The single interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Involvement in the study is completely voluntary and your identity will not be directly revealed using your name; however, you are cautioned that there is a risk that when the results of the data are presented readers may deduce the school district in which this study is conducted.

We cannot promise that you will benefit from being in this study; however, findings may add to our understanding of how educational policy is understood by the individuals responsible for implementation.

No costs are associated with participation in this study, nor will you receive payment for participation.

We will treat your identity with professional standards of confidentiality and protect your private information to the extent allowed by law. We will not use your name or other information that could identify you in any reports or publications that result from this study.

The researchers, the University of Nevada, Reno Institutional Review Board, and US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) will have access to your study records.

At any time, if you have questions about this study or wish to report an injury that may be related to your participation in this study, contact Bridget James. You may discuss a

problem or complaint or ask about your rights as a research participant by calling the University of Nevada, Reno Research Integrity Office at (775) 327-2368. You may also use the online *Contact the Research Integrity Office* form available from the [Contact Us page](#) of the University's Research Integrity Office website.

Appendix C: Information Sheet for Learning Strategists

**University of Nevada, Reno
Educational Research Information Sheet**

Title of Study: A Social Constructionism Study Using Discourse Analysis of Rural Elementary Principals' Perceptions of a State Law on Reading Literacy by Grade Three

Principal Investigator: Dr. Bill Thornton

Co-Investigator: Bridget James

You are being invited to participate in a research study. The research study seeks to explore the perspectives that rural elementary principals have regarding the new state law on reading literacy by grade three.

We are asking you to participate in this study because you are a rural learning strategist involved in the implementation of the Read By Grade 3 (RBG3) Act.

If you agree to be in this study you will be asked to participate in a single, audio-taped interview with Bridget James. The single interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Involvement in the study is completely voluntary and your identity will not be directly revealed using your name; however, you are cautioned that there is a risk that when the results of the data are presented readers may deduce the school district in which this study is conducted.

We cannot promise that you will benefit from being in this study; however, findings may add to our understanding of how educational policy is understood by the individuals responsible for implementation.

No costs are associated with participation in this study, nor will you receive payment for participation.

We will treat your identity with professional standards of confidentiality and protect your private information to the extent allowed by law. We will not use your name or other information that could identify you in any reports or publications that result from this study.

The researchers, the University of Nevada, Reno Institutional Review Board, and US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) will have access to your study records.

At any time, if you have questions about this study or wish to report an injury that may be related to your participation in this study, contact Bridget James. You may discuss a problem or complaint or ask about your rights as a research participant by calling the University of Nevada, Reno Research Integrity Office at (775) 327-2368. You may also

use the online *Contact the Research Integrity Office* form available from the *Contact Us* page of the University's Research Integrity Office website.

Appendix D: Interview Questions for Principals

- Tell me about your background in education and educational leadership.
 - Length of experience as a teacher
 - What subjects did you previously teach?
 - At what level? Elementary? Middle? High?
 - Length of experience as an administrator.
 - Have you been an administrator at any other school?
 - If so, where and what was the length of time you served at the other school(s)? In what level of administration did you serve?
 - How long have you served as a principal/administrator in your current school/position?

- There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions.

- I want you to relive your first experiences with Read by Grade 3 (RbG3). When did you first hear or learn about the law? What did you think about the new law?

- Think back to when you first heard of RbG3, what was your understanding of it?

- Has your understanding of RbG3 changed?
 - If so, how?
 - What caused the change?

- Tell me about your experiences in the implementation process of RbG3.

- In your mind, what is the best aspect of RbG3?

- In your mind, what is the worst nightmare about RbG3?

- Do you have any thoughts that you have not shared already about RbG3 that you would like to share?

Appendix E: Interview Questions for Learning Strategists

- Tell me about your background in education and teacher leadership.
 - Length of experience as a teacher
 - What subjects did you previously teach?
 - At what level? Elementary? Middle? High?
 - Length of experience as a teacher leader.
 - Have you served at any other school?
 - If so, where and what was the length of time you served at the other school(s)?
 - How long have you served as a learning strategist/literacy specialist?
- There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions.
- I want you to relive your first experiences with Read by Grade 3 (RBG3). When did you first hear or learn about the law? What did you think about the new law?
- Tell me about how you became a learning strategist/literacy specialist.
- Tell me about your role and experiences as a learning strategist/literacy specialist in the implementation of RBG3.
- Think back to when you first heard of RBG3, what was your understanding of it?
- Has your understanding of RBG3 changed?
 - If so, how?
 - What caused the change?
- In your mind, what is the best aspect of RBG3?
- In your mind, what is the worst nightmare about RBG3?
- Do you have any thoughts that you have not shared already about RBG3 that you would like to share?