TEACHER (USE AND) SCAFFOLDING OF COMPLEX TEXTS: SUPPORTING ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFTS IN CORE READING COMPREHENSION

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Doctor of Education

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by

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Abstract

Proficient reading is defined not only as the process of accurately and fluently decoding words but also as the ability to construct meaning from what is read (Oakhill et al., 2015). Yet national reading scores on standardized assessments have continued to decline over recent decades (NAEP, 2024), demonstrating students' ongoing difficulties with reading comprehension (RC). Hawks Elementary School (HES), the local context for this capstone, grapples with these same RC difficulties, particularly as texts become increasingly complex in the upper elementary grades. To comply with new mandates set forth by the Virginia Literacy Act (VDOE, 2022), HES adopted and implemented a new core reading program, *Benchmark Advance*. The implementation of *Benchmark Advance* led to significant instructional shifts for teachers at HES. This study explored the instructional shift of integrating complex, grade-level texts in RC instruction. Data collection included: 1) a document analysis of complex texts and corresponding RC lessons from *Benchmark Advance*, 2) a focus group, and 3) one-on-one follow-up teacher interviews. Based on limited experience in teaching RC with complex texts, HES teachers noted that one of the greatest instructional challenges of implementation was learning how to effectively use and scaffold complex texts, particularly for multilingual learners. Findings from this study informed recommendations for instructional leaders on how to best support teachers in using and scaffolding complex texts during RC instruction.

Keywords: reading comprehension, complex texts, core reading, RC instruction, scaffolding, teacher support, instructional shifts, multilingual learners

Dedication

This capstone is dedicated to my mom (Yoko June), my dad (Charles), and my brother (Ryan). Thank you for the endless support and encouragement you've provided throughout my doctoral journey these past four years. I love you all!

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Reflecting back on my four-year-long journey, I still remember the initial Zoom call I had with Dr. Catherine Brighton in Spring 2021, when she informed me of my acceptance into UVA's Ed.D. program. Filled with joy and amazement, I could not begin to imagine the personal, professional, and academic growth I would undergo in the next four years. It has been an incredible journey, and I am so thankful to UVA for the opportunity.

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instructional knowledge for reading made you a wonderful addition to my committee. Thank you both for dedicating your time and energy in my academic endeavors.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Proficient reading is defined not only as the process of accurately and fluently decoding words, but also as the ability to construct meaning from what is read (Oakhill et al., 2015). In order for one to demonstrate full reading comprehension (RC) of a text, an individual must fluently decode a text and have a thorough understanding of what they have read. Yet, national reading scores on standardized assessments have continued to decline over recent decades (NAEP, 2024), demonstrating ongoing difficulties with students reaching proficient levels of RC.

Based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; 2024) assessment report, 40% of fourth-graders scored below *Basic* in reading, with scores declining most sharply among the lowest-performing subgroups, further widening the achievement gap. When comparing fourth-grade subgroups, the average of monolingual learners fell within the *Proficient* range with a mean score of 219, whereas, multilingual learners (MLLs) had a mean reading score of 185, a 34-point deficit from their monolingual peers, falling below *Basic* (NAEP, 2024). These results suggest that achieving proficiency in RC persists as an issue for fourth graders nationwide, yet it is an even larger concern for MLLs.

Hawks Elementary School (HES), the local context for this capstone, grapples with these same RC difficulties for the majority of their students, particularly as the texts become increasingly complex in the upper elementary grades. In general, kindergarten and 1st grade students at HES tend to perform well on standardized reading assessments. For example, in Spring 2024, 87% of kindergarten students and 82% of 1st grade students at HES reached or exceeded the benchmark score on the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screener (PALS), which was a state-wide screener measuring word recognition skills. When broken down further, 82% of kindergarten MLLs and 80% of first grade MLLs reached benchmark proficiency on PALS in

Spring 2024. These data points demonstrate that early readers at HES were achieving high rates of word reading proficiency, regardless of language status.

However, these earlier positive results have not typically led to continued gains in upper grades. For example, based on Spring 2024 data, only 54% of third-grade students and 44% of fourth-grade students passed the Virginia Reading Standards of Learning (SOL) assessment. Furthermore, percentages of the Reading SOL pass rates were disproportionately low for MLLs at HES, with only 28% of third-grade MLLs and 27% of fourth-grade MLLs passing. Although MLLs had similar outcomes for WR in the early elementary grades, clear gaps emerge in RC by the upper elementary grades. These trends are especially relevant given the Reading SOL primarily serves as a standardized measure of RC. This raises the question, why is student reading proficiency in the early grades not translating into full RC in upper elementary, particularly for MLLs?

Chapter 1 begins with a review of relevant theories of RC. These theories provide a framework to analyze how students process text and present additional context for the declining reading scores of HES students. As a Title I school with a nearly 70% MLL population, HES stakeholders want to better understand the underlying mechanisms of RC for two reasons. First, this will allow them to identify specific areas in RC where students struggle, which will then enable them to best address students' instructional needs. Second, theories of RC can help identify current systemic or instructional barriers and challenges that are preventing HES students from reaching high-levels of reading proficiency, especially MLLs.

This chapter also dives into the complicating factor of teaching with selected texts during RC instruction, specifically when using complex texts. HES has a new core reading program, *Benchmark Advance*, that identifies complex text as a key component of effective RC

instruction. Implementing a new core program, however, can be challenging for educators; particularly when these programs shift away from longstanding instructional practices (Gaitas & Alves Martins, 2017; Maniates, 2017). Specifically, in the context of RC instruction, teachers at HES have noted that one of the more difficult aspects of the new core reading program is making complex texts accessible and comprehensible to *all* students (personal communication, 2024).

Reading Comprehension Theories: SVR & RAND Model

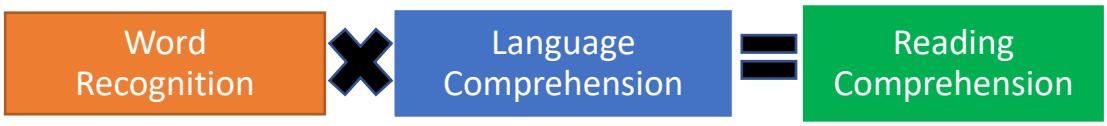
Theoretical frameworks of reading are designed and tested by researchers. These frameworks help us understand how reading comprehension develops, and in turn, shapes instructional practice and teacher beliefs. The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and the RAND model (Snow, 2002) are both frameworks of understanding reading comprehension, though they differ in the scope and focus.

Simple View of Reading

The Simple View of Reading (SVR; Figure 1.1) is an empirically validated framework (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Tunmer, 2020) that is frequently cited in reading literature. It states RC is a product of word recognition (WR) and language comprehension (LC), often notated as WR x LC = RC. Based on the SVR, students must achieve competency in both WR and LC in order to fully comprehend the text (Hoover & Tunmer, 2020). In this framework, both WR and LC exist as two distinct facets of RC. For example, if a student has strong WR but limited LC, then RC will not be achieved, even though the student may be able to read words and decode fluently. Simply put, RC cannot be assumed, even when WR is strong (Duke et al., 2021). Conversely, if a student has limited WR but strong LC, then RC will still not be achieved, since the student will be unable to independently decode the text for meaning. Therefore, proficiency in both WR and LC skills are required for RC.

Figure 1.1

Simple View of Reading Framework (Gough & Tunmer, 1986)



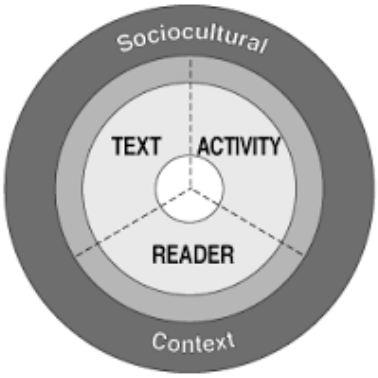
RAND Model

The RAND Reading Study Group defined RC as "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (Snow, 2002, p. xiii). The SVR demonstrates how this extraction and construction depends on proficiency in both WR and LC, whereas the RAND model (Figure 1.2) further expands upon the different components that contribute to RC. The RAND model is a well-supported framework for understanding RC based on extensive research on the complexities of developing students' RC (Snow, 2002).

In this heuristic model, the reader constructs knowledge and makes meaning from the text. More specifically, the RAND model acknowledges that building RC is an active process, and posits that RC is based on the interactions between the reader, the text, and the activity (i.e., task). In this model, the reader refers to how individual factors contribute to RC (e.g., background knowledge, vocabulary, reading skills), the text refers to specific complexities or demands that the text places on the reader (e.g., content-specific vocabulary, text/sentence structure, word choice, text features, required prerequisite knowledge), and the activity refers to how readers are expected to interact with the text (e.g., purpose for reading, necessary application of skills/knowledge, specific comprehension focus).

Figure 1.2

RAND Model (Snow, 2002)



The Reader. The first component of the RAND model is the reader. Each reader possesses their own unique experiences, skills, and background knowledge, all of which come into play during the reading process. These individualized components can also directly contribute to student engagement and motivation in interacting with and comprehending complex texts. In fact, the reader serves as the most important factor in RC, since RC is greatly dependent upon how the reader interacts with the text (Snow, 2002). By understanding how the reader works to access and comprehend the text, the teacher will be able to provide more targeted instruction on RC (Snow, 2002). In short, the teacher will be able to provide instruction and supports that address the demands of the text placed upon the reader (e.g., cognitive capacity, text difficulty, prerequisite background knowledge). In the specifics of this capstone, the reader's experiences, skills, and background knowledge are noteworthy because they impact their access to the complex texts of the core reading program, *Benchmark Advance*.

The Text. In the RAND model, the text refers to what students are expected to read and comprehend. Generally, the more complex the text, the more cognitive demands are placed on the reader to access and comprehend the text (Amendum et al., 2018). The role of the text is especially important since complex texts are a key element of a more comprehensive and

enriching approach to RC instruction; thereby, better supporting students' RC development in the long-term (Fisher & Frey, 2015). As students build their RC skills and proficiency, the goal is to comprehend increasingly more complex texts over time. When considering the importance of text selection for RC instruction, teachers need to be intentional about the types of texts they select, understand the purpose for the chosen text, and think about how to best scaffold the text to support comprehension.

Scaffolding is an effective approach to supporting students' RC of complex texts and can be particularly beneficial for elementary learners who are still developing their RC skills (Clark & Graves, 2005; Johnson, 2019). Generally, when the text is more complex, then RC begins to break down (Amendum et al., 2018). In the context of the RAND model (Snow, 2002), scaffolding the complex text enables students to access and comprehend the text as a reader and also engage with the text more thoroughly through a specified activity. Therefore, the ideal approach of RC instruction is not to take away student opportunities to engage in complex texts but rather to intentionally scaffold and support student comprehension of these texts.

The Activity. Finally, the activity pulls in how the reader interacts with the text to demonstrate comprehension (Snow, 2002). While the specific activity will vary based upon the selected text, task, and purpose, different activities can demonstrate varied levels of understanding. The teacher considers text selection as well as the specific activities that align with the text and support students' growth in RC proficiency. Furthermore, the use of different activities can help students progress towards a more independent application of RC skills as teachers increase complexity of the activity and lessen support over time.

In 2nd grade (the chosen grade-level for this capstone) the core reading program, *Benchmark Advance*, selects comprehension activities in alignment with each complex text.

While students in kindergarten and 1st grade focus more on comprehension through listening to teacher read-alouds, readers in 2nd grade and above are expected to read and comprehend complex, grade-level texts with limited teacher support. The activity may require students to acquire or build content-specific vocabulary and relevant background knowledge, understand more complex sentence and text structures (e.g., syntax), identify the author's purpose or intent, or construct meaning through both literal and inferential tasks. Similar to scaffolding complex texts, the teacher can also integrate scaffolds in the specific activity (Clark & Graves, 2005; Johnson, 2019), such as providing students with oral language practice opportunities, utilizing sentence or paragraph frames, incorporating a graphic organizer, or guiding students through the gradual release approach of teacher modeling, guided practice, and independent application.

Sociocultural Context. According to the RAND model, RC is the ongoing interactions between the reader, the text, and the activity (Snow, 2002). Meanwhile, all of this meaning-construction of the text is occurring in a sociocultural context, which means that a reader's varied experiences and perceptions are shaped by their social and cultural environments (e.g., race, ethnicity, language, family, community). In other words, each reader has their own unique perspectives and experiences, which directly influences their interaction with the text and thereby influences their RC development. While the SVR introduces elements that contribute to RC (i.e., WR, LC), the RAND model expands deeper into the importance of text, how the reader is situated in relation to the text, and how the complexity of a text directly relates to RC outcomes (Snow, 2002).

Connecting Theory with Practice

A common practice in early elementary grades is to prioritize instruction related to WR given *learning to read* (e.g., learn letter-sound correspondences, use phonics to decode words,

build a bank of known 'sight' words) as a main goal in these grades (Duke & Block, 2013). HES early elementary practice is no different. Historically, the early elementary grades (i.e., K-1st) at HES have dedicated a significant amount of the 120-minute ELA block to explicit phonics instruction (45-60 minutes), phonological awareness (10-15 minutes), and small-group instruction (45-minutes) centered around decodable texts and phonics-based activities. As a result, there has been limited time allotted to the skills related to LC. During the limited LC instruction, teachers read-aloud complex texts. This limited attention to LC can impact student progress in the upper elementary grades (Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2021; Filderman et al., 2021), highlighting the SVR's components of WR and LC as equally important to RC.

Past Implications on Reading Comprehension Instruction

Historically, two contrasting schools of thought for reading instruction were argued as the more effective pedagogical approach, known more commonly as the "Reading Wars" (Castles et al., 2018). Constituents of the reading wars argued between either a phonics-based approach, which explicitly teaches sounds as they connect to letters/spelling patterns (Chall, 1967; Flesch, 1955) or a whole-language approach, which focuses more on language acquisition and recognizing words as meaningful wholes (Goodman, 1967; Smith, 1971).

In an attempt to merge these two schools of thought, Pressley and McIntyre (1996) coined the term "balanced literacy," which was intended to combine the approach of phonics-based and whole language instruction, in order to promote a well-rounded set of literacy skills. While Pressley pushed the practitioner-field towards balanced literacy, this approach ended up emulating more components of whole language rather than explicit and systematic phonics-based instruction (Reinking et al., 2023). A cornerstone practice in balanced literacy was matching readers to texts through a practice of assigning readability levels to texts and determining

students' instructional reading levels. Essentially, a student's instructional reading level is the readability level of text that is determined to be their most appropriate fit for optimal reading accuracy, speed, and understanding. This practice has not been validated in research with some even positing that it limits reading achievement rather than supports it (Young, 2023).

Balanced literacy remained a common instructional approach in the elementary grades until the 2020s; however, this approach is now criticized as ineffective due to its lack of structured phonics, an overemphasis on whole language, and the continued practice of grouping students by matching their reading performance to a text level (i.e., an instructional reading level), rather than by discrete skills for reading instruction (Goldberg & Goldenberg, 2022). Balanced literacy became core to teacher preparation programs and commercial reading programs commonly used in schools (Schumm et al., 2000). As school practitioners and legislatures began to recognize the important implications of a growing body of research on reading instruction, educational reforms began to emerge at the state level (e.g., Virginia Literacy Act). These changes led to state-mandated shifts away from balanced literacy and towards a more comprehensive and evidence-based approach to reading instruction, commonly referred to as the "Science of Reading" (Schwartz, 2022).

Implications of the Virginia Literacy Act

The Virginia Literacy Act (VLA) is a new educational state mandate from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) that aims "to improve early literacy outcomes for Virginia's young readers" (VDOE, 2022, para. 1). The VLA serves as a catalyst for this proposed study and marks major shifts in literacy instruction for elementary public schools. Beginning in the 2024-2025 school year, the VLA requires that all students in grades K-5 receive core literacy

instruction, based on a state-approved program grounded in evidence-based literacy instruction (VDOE, 2022).

In response to this requirement of the VLA, HES just completed its first year implementing *Benchmark Advance* as its core reading program for grades K-4. One large instructional shift at HES with the implementation of *Benchmark Advance* was the integration of complex, grade-level texts in core RC instruction. This change required teachers to provide evidence-aligned core RC instruction to their students, while simultaneously selecting and embedding effective scaffolds that support student access and comprehension of these complex texts. This new shift has been a challenge for multiple teachers at HES, since they are no longer able to select or switch the texts (personal communication, 2024). In fact, the state review for *Benchmark Advance* noted that "veteran teachers may struggle with the lack of autonomy in selecting books and implementing unique, crafted lessons" (VDOE, 2023).

The Role of Complex Texts within a Core Reading Program

The integration of the VLA and *Benchmark Advance* at HES has shifted instructional reading practices away from balanced literacy. Previously, RC instruction at HES was primarily done through mentor texts and read-alouds, with intermittent shared reading excerpts. Within a balanced literacy model, the majority of differentiated RC instruction included the use of leveled texts matched to the students' instructional reading level during small-group instruction, rather than ongoing exposure to grade-level texts. In contrast, *Benchmark Advance* requires all students in 2nd grade and above to read complex, grade-level texts as part of core RC instruction.

Two important terms to define in the context of this capstone are *complex text* and *grade-level text*. While both terms are often used together in the context of *Benchmark Advance,* since the complex texts within the unit also typically fall within or above the range of grade-level

texts, it is still helpful to distinguish between the two terms. Complex text refers to a text that is challenging due to a variety of qualitative factors (e.g., purpose and levels of meaning, text structure, language conventionality and clarity, knowledge demands) and often requires a greater cognitive capacity from students to comprehend the text. Whereas grade-level text refers to a text that falls within a predetermined quantitative range (e.g., Lexile level) based on readability, which is generally dependent upon sentence and word length. A grade-level text may or may not be considered a complex text, and vice versa.

While *Benchmark Advance* provides explicit, scripted RC lessons centered around complex texts, there is limited guidance for how teachers can scaffold these texts. In fact, scaffolding these complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* has proven to be one of the greatest difficulties of implementation for HES's new core program (personal communication, 2024). Prior to implementation, teachers were used to manipulating text selection based on their own discretion. This practice often resulted in selecting text levels matched to perceived student instructional reading levels. Rather than decreasing the complexity or readability of the text, HES teachers are now expected to use the complex texts in the program lessons and incorporate scaffolds that enable students to access and comprehend these complex texts (personal communication, 2024). This shift to complex texts during RC instruction has been noticeably difficult for upper elementary readers at HES, and teachers have noted it being especially challenging for MLLs (personal communication, 2024). In other words, teachers are seeking ways to more effectively scaffold complex, grade-level texts for their students given the previous practice of changing the text is no longer an option.

Purpose and Rationale of the Study

How teachers learn to use and scaffold complex texts within RC instruction is worth researching because the findings will provide additional insight about how to best support teachers' use of complex texts in the new core and intentional scaffolding of complex texts. As a result, the findings can indirectly support students' comprehension of these complex texts. Therefore, in this study, I aimed to deepen my understandings in a few key areas.

First, I wanted to thoroughly comprehend how *Benchmark Advance* supports teacher use of complex texts for RC instruction and what specific scaffolding guidance is provided to support students, including additional considerations for MLLs. Second, I aimed to understand the role that teacher beliefs, knowledge, and experiences have in providing evidence-aligned core RC instruction through the use of complex texts. Third, I wanted to consider the duality between the role of the reader and teacher scaffolding of complex texts, both of which directly influence student accessibility and comprehension of complex texts. Finally, I planned to capture teacher reflections on the implementation of the new core literacy program, *Benchmark Advance*, and its effects on RC development for the diverse student population at HES.

HES teachers have offered a myriad of reasons on why students are struggling to achieve proficiency in RC (personal communication, 2024), particularly with the new core program. The reasons often cited include: 1) limited teacher autonomy and decision-making in their instructional practice, 2) limited knowledge about evidence-based instructional supports for students who are simultaneously acquiring English language and reading skills, 3) inadequate teacher supports or trainings, 4) complex texts that are too advanced for their students to decode and/or comprehend, and 5) a lack of knowledge in how to best scaffold complex, grade-level texts for their students. While these reasons offered a glimpse into the problem of practice, this

study helped me uncover teacher reflections of using complex texts for core RC instruction as well as the challenges that persist for both teachers and students.

Theoretical Framework

When considering the application of SVR and the RAND model, the influence of the teacher is crucial when considering how to best support the RC of students at HES. While knowledge and experience both affect teachers' instructional practice, teacher beliefs can also be a factor in approach and decision-making for RC instruction. Specific to the context of the study, teacher beliefs, knowledge, and experiences all serve as driving forces behind planning structures and implementation supports for effective RC instruction within the context of 2nd grade's use of complex texts in *Benchmark Advance*. The theoretical framework centered around these teacher factors (i.e., beliefs, knowledge, experience) that emerged was self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy theory (SET) refers to an individual's belief in their own capabilities to complete a task and is a subset of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977). SET focuses on how an individual's perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and interactions between their internal cognitive processes and social communications shape their learning experiences. Specific to the study, SET refers to teachers' perceptions of their ability to effectively teach RC (through the use of complex texts) to elementary learners, and differentiate instruction based on the needs of their students (e.g., MLLs).

Given the focus of this problem of practice, SET provided insight into how individual teacher beliefs in their ability to teach RC can influence their teaching practices and instructional approach. Typically, teachers with high self-efficacy levels will set more rigorous goals, commit to these goals, and persevere when facing challenges (Woodcock et al., 2022; Woodcock &

Hardy, 2023; Zee & Koomen, 2016). High self-efficacy also helps teachers develop a stronger locus of control in supporting their students' RC development. In contrast, teachers with low self-efficacy are more likely to attribute student underachievement to external factors, due to the underlying belief that they personally lack the necessary skills to support their students' learning or positively influence student learning outcomes (Woodcock et al., 2022).

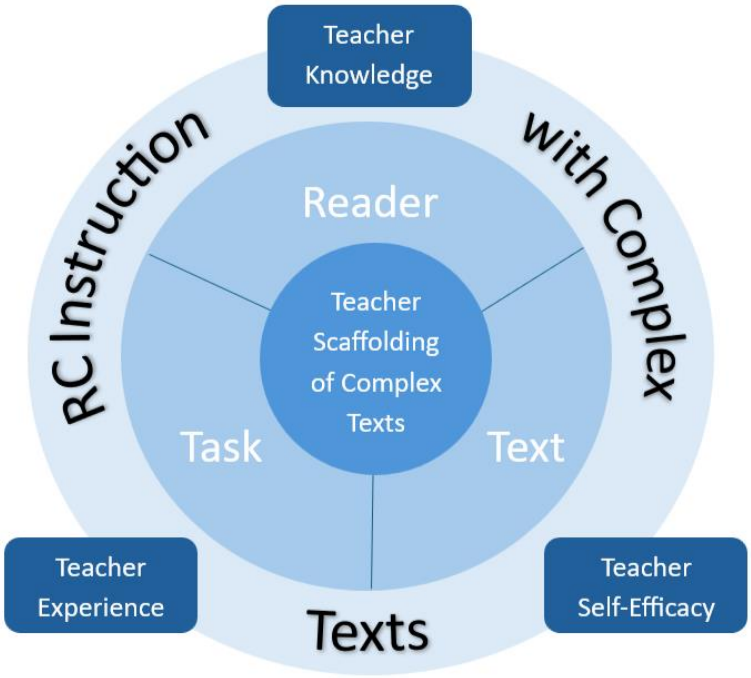
Additionally, teachers with low self-efficacy tend to think they lack the skills, knowledge, and experience needed to provide effective instructional supports, and often perceive students' RC difficulties as beyond their control or expertise. Teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy, on the other hand, tend to feel more competent and successful, recognize their own role and influence in student achievement, hold all students to higher expectations regardless of ability levels, and incorporate instructional strategies that lead to greater positive learning outcomes (Woodcock et al., 2022; Woodcock & Hardy, 2023; Zee & Koomen, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

Building off of the theoretical framework of SET, two validated RC models (i.e., SVR, RAND), and current evidence-based practices regarding RC instruction, the conceptual framework (Figure 1.3) illustrates the different components of developing students' RC of complex texts. The main components of the conceptual framework include: 1) teacher factors (i.e., knowledge, experience, self-efficacy), 2) the interactions between the text, the task, and the reader, and 3) teacher scaffolding of complex texts. Each piece of the conceptual framework overlaps and cohesively builds towards successful student comprehension of complex texts. In the context of this capstone, complex texts refer to rigorous, cognitively demanding texts that are typically challenging for students to comprehend, and often require inferential thinking and a deeper application of comprehension skills.

Figure 1.3

Conceptual Framework



Teacher Factors

The first piece of the conceptual framework is teacher factors, which encompasses teacher knowledge, self-efficacy (e.g., beliefs in their ability), and experience. Teachers are the driving force behind this capstone, and thus serve as the outer part of the conceptual framework. It is important to have a sense of the individual teacher factors and recognize the important role a teacher plays in students' RC development. According to Hattie (2008), the quality of instruction provided by a teacher is shown to be the greatest contributing factor to student achievement. Therefore, grounded in SET (Bandura, 1977), teacher knowledge, beliefs, and experiences are all important components for student learning outcomes. While content knowledge (CK) refers to a teacher's understanding of the content matter for a specific subject and pedagogical knowledge (PK) refers to general teaching practices (e.g., classroom management, learning theories), pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) combines both CK and PK and is defined as a teacher's

ability to effectively teach a specific subject and adapt instruction based on the diverse range of student needs, by having knowledge in the theoretical and practical applications of instruction (Shulman, 1987). In the context of this study, teacher PCK encompasses the quality of RC instruction that a teacher provides for their students during core instruction, specifically RC lessons through the use of complex texts in *Benchmark Advance*.

Whether looking at novice teachers or experienced teachers, teacher perceptions of their instructional practice and knowledge can directly influence their impact on RC development for elementary readers (Woodcock et al., 2022; Woodcock & Hardy, 2023; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Ultimately, SET is built upon teacher beliefs of their own practice. In the context of this study, when teachers perceive themselves to be competent and effective in their instructional practice, they are more likely to have higher levels of self-efficacy and have more positive perceptions of rigorous instruction. They also are more likely to persevere past challenges compared to those with lower levels of self-efficacy, who are more likely to disengage or give-up when setbacks occur. Finally, teachers' prior experiences of scaffolding complex texts during RC instruction and their current experiences with *Benchmark Advance* further connects with their beliefs about effective RC practices.

Interactions between the Text, the Task, and the Reader

As referenced extensively in the RAND model (Snow, 2002), the reader brings their own individualized experiences and knowledge into reading, which directly influences how the reader interacts with, engages with, and comprehends the text. While the focus of the study primarily homes in on the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences of the teacher, it is also important to recognize the role of the reader within the RC process, particularly when working within a complex text and engaging with a related activity. For example, if the reader is grappling with a

complex text or struggling to complete a specific comprehension task, then the teacher must consider factors that could be contributing to this challenge. These contributing factors may include (but are not limited to) lacking: 1) requisite WR proficiency to read the text, 2) background knowledge needed to gain access to the content, or 3) syntactic understanding to navigate the advanced sentence structures commonly found in complex texts. Therefore, the teacher needs to draw upon their own PCK when providing RC instruction through complex texts and address diverse student needs (e.g., anticipate difficulties or linguistic and language complexities, select effective scaffolds and supports aligned with student needs).

Scaffolding Complex Texts

As illustrated through the RAND model (Snow, 2002), RC is dependent upon the interactions between the reader, the text, and the activity. Therefore, the complexity of a text plays a key role in determining how to effectively support and develop students' RC proficiency. As the conceptual framework illustrates, the scaffolds that teachers select are dependent upon the interactions that occur between the text, the task, and the reader. When teachers consider each piece of the RAND model, then instructional decisions are based on the anticipated needs of the reader, which maximizes the effectiveness and intentionality of the selected scaffolds.

Within the context of the problem of practice, upper elementary teachers at HES have noted that one of the greatest instructional challenges of implementing a new core program (i.e., *Benchmark Advance*) is figuring out how to effectively scaffold complex texts in order to make them accessible and comprehensible to their students (personal communication, 2024). As a result, teacher scaffolding of complex texts in the conceptual framework serves as the final piece of supporting students' RC development. To support student access and comprehension of

complex texts, the interactions between the text, the task, and the reader, alongside intentional teacher planning and scaffolding of complex texts should all be taken into account.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the specific problem of practice was situated at the national level relating to poor RC outcomes for elementary learners, with additional implications for MLLs, before being situated within the local context. By recognizing the historical implications on RC instruction, the current body of reading research paired with the theoretical frameworks of the SVR (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and the RAND model (Snow, 2002) have led to revised, evidence-aligned RC instruction for elementary learners. At its core, RC is a combination of WR and LC being applied to authentic texts with increasingly strategic and fluent reading (Hoover & Tunmer, 2020). While RC is a multifaceted skill with multiple interactions occurring between the reader, the text, and the activity (Snow, 2002), student access to and comprehension of the text lies at the heart of RC.

Additionally, the influences of self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977) situate the teacher as an integral part of developing students' RC skills, often through the planning and implementation process of RC instruction using complex texts. The conceptual framework brings together key components related to supporting RC of complex texts: 1) teacher knowledge, experience, and self-efficacy, 2) interactions between the text, the task, and the reader, and 3) teacher scaffolding of complex texts. When evidence-aligned RC instruction is paired with high-leverage scaffolds, students are given the necessary instructional supports to access and comprehend complex texts. Therefore, this study aimed to capture teacher experiences and perceptions on integrating a new core reading program, using complex texts during RC instruction, and scaffolding complex texts based on diverse student needs. The following research questions guided this study:

- RQ 1: How does *Benchmark Advance* scaffold complex texts for 2nd grade students?
- RQ 2: What are 2nd grade teachers' reflections on using complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* for RC instruction?

Key Terms and Definitions

This section contains a list of key terms used throughout the capstone.

- **Background Knowledge (BK):** the personal knowledge and experiences that an individual has about a specific topic
- **Complex text:** a text that is more cognitively demanding, rigorous, or challenging for students to comprehend, due to additional factors that increase a text's complexity (e.g., domain-specific vocabulary, complex sentence and text structure, demanding background knowledge, multiple-meanings, may require both literal and inferential comprehension)
- **Content Knowledge (CK):** the teacher's knowledge related to a specific subject
- **Core instruction**: evidence-aligned, grade-level instruction that all students receive
- **English Learners (ELs)**: describes a group of people who are learning the English language and whose native language is not English
- **Evidence-based literacy instruction (EBLI):** an instructional approach to teaching literacy that is proven to be effective, explicit, systematic, and grounded in research
- **Explicit instruction:** a structured instructional approach that uses clear, direct teaching to help students learn new information
- **Grade-level text**: a text that is considered to be appropriate for a specific grade based on the text's readability (e.g., Lexile level), grade-level content, and grade-level skills
- **Instructional reading level:** the level of text at which a student can read with at least 95% accuracy and demonstrate at least 75% comprehension

- **Language Comprehension (LC)**: the ability to understand and make meaning of language through multiple contexts (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, writing)
- **Multilingual Learners (MLLs):** a student who is developing proficiency in two or more languages (e.g., including English as an additional language)
- **Professional Development (PD):** targeted teacher training intended to support teachers in learning and developing new skills and instructional strategies to implement
- **Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK):** the combined knowledge of content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, or the knowledge in how to effectively teach a specific content area and accurately adjust instruction based on student needs
- **Pedagogical Knowledge (PK):** a teacher's understanding of instructional practices that can be applied to teaching across multiple content areas (e.g., student engagement, classroom management, student motivation)
- **Reading Comprehension (RC):** the ability to independent decode a text and proficiently understand what was read
- **Scaffold**: a temporary instructional support to help students access content and gain new concepts or skills
- **Word Recognition (WR)**: the ability to decode words and understand its meaning

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Reading comprehension (RC) is critical for any student's overall academic success starting at the elementary level and extending through graduation (Hall et al., 2021; Joshi et al., 2009); therefore, students with inadequate RC are at-risk for school failure. As outlined in Chapter 1, RC is the product of word recognition (WR) and language comprehension (LC); readers need to be proficient in both WR and LC in order to achieve RC (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Tunmer, 2020). While WR skills are essential for decoding text and contribute to RC, particularly in the early elementary grades, LC skills (e.g., oral language, vocabulary, background knowledge, language structure, verbal reasoning) are equally (if not more) important for students' development of RC skills long-term (Kendeou et al., 2009). In fact, students are shown to be more successful readers when receiving LC and RC instruction concurrently with WR instruction (Solari & Gerber, 2008).

The intricacies of RC instruction for MLLs make an already arduous task more complex. In addition to developing the multiple prerequisite skills needed to achieve RC (e.g., word recognition, phonics, fluency), MLLs are simultaneously working to acquire oral language, vocabulary, grammar/syntax, and contextual meanings in English (Babayigit & Shapiro, 2020; Farnia & Geva, 2013; Li et al., 2021). In response to these challenges, this literature review explores tangible solutions and instructional practices that will enhance the teaching of RC through complex texts for elementary students, with additional considerations for MLLs.

Based on a review of the literature, the main themes regarding effective RC instruction for elementary learners include: 1) the multiple complexities of RC instruction and development, 2) the intricate considerations in planning and implementing core RC instruction, particularly

through the use of complex texts, 3) the robust pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) necessary for teachers to effectively support students reading complex text during RC instruction, and 4) the implementation of evidence-based scaffolding approaches that increase access to and comprehensibility of complex texts for students, particularly MLLs. To begin, this chapter is grounded in models of reading development with a specific focus on RC (i.e., SVR, RAND model) and how RC develops across the elementary grades.

Theoretical Models in RC Development

When considering theoretical frameworks for RC, the Simple View of Reading (SVR; Gough & Tunmer, 1986) is a widely accepted, validated framework for RC development. Gough and Tunmer (1986) posit that RC is the product of word recognition (i.e., decoding) and language comprehension, and that students must achieve proficiency in both areas in order to achieve RC. It follows then that students' RC abilities vary for many reasons, starting with, but not limited to, WR and LC. Snow (2002) acknowledged the importance of the SVR model:

> …[LC] processes and higher-level processes affecting [LC] do not become fully operative in comprehending text until the child has acquired reasonable fluency. However, we also know that fluent word recognition is not a sufficient condition for successful [RC]…other variables…directly or indirectly influence [LC] are also critically important determinants of [RC]. (p. 22)

Extending the foundational work of the SVR, Snow (2002) developed the RAND model to more intentionally demonstrate the complex process of understanding texts and the factors that influence RC. Beginning with the definition of RC as the ability to access (i.e., decode and recognize words) and understand the meaning of a text (Kendeou et al., 2016), the RAND model

sought to more fully explore RC through the interrelated pieces of the reader, the text, and the activity, all within a broader sociocultural context (Snow, 2002).

To illustrate the interrelationship between the reader, a text, and the activity, and their combined influence on RC, Snow (2002) developed a sociocultural model of RC entitled the RAND model (see Figure 1.2) in which students construct meaning from the text through an active process. Based on this heuristic framework, the reader draws upon their own prior knowledge, reading capabilities, and sociocultural contexts (e.g., language, perceptions, experiences, culture) to construct meaning from the text, and apply different RC skills depending upon the specific activity (e.g., how the reader demonstrates comprehension of the text).

RC Development and Instruction Across the Elementary Grades

Building from the SVR and the RAND model, developing RC in elementary learners is a gradual process that incorporates a multifaceted approach to instruction. While WR is the greatest indicator of RC for beginning readers (typically students in K-1st grade), as students become proficient in decoding, LC becomes the greatest predictor of long-term RC performance (Oakhill et al., 2015; Shanahan, 2023; Smith et al., 2016). Furthermore, van den Broek and Kendeou (2017) recognize that LC is necessary for readers to extract meaning from the text. More specifically, readers construct meaning from the text through the use of mental representations as they leverage metacognitive strategies and make connections between texts and their own background knowledge. The specific text also directly influences students' RC (van den Broek & Kendeou, 2017).

As students progress through the elementary levels, the responsibility of RC development and learning gradually shifts from the teacher to the student. For example, it is typical in the early elementary grades (i.e., K-1st) for RC of complex texts to occur through interactive teacher

read-alouds, in which the teacher reads the text aloud, models comprehension through think-alouds at planned teaching points, and facilitates the LC development of students through intentional questioning (Brabham & Brown, 2002). Over time, as students solidify their decoding skills, build reading fluency, and progress into the upper elementary grades (i.e., 2nd-5th), teachers and students engage in shared reading of the texts where both the teacher and students are reading the text. In shared reading, the teacher provides a high level of support (e.g., text scaffolds to support reading, guided practice with text comprehension). Through a gradual release framework, teacher supports fade as students transition to independent reading of the text with RC (Fitton et al., 2018). The level of teacher support, however, remains dependent on the complexity of the text and the reader's abilities.

Historically, elementary teachers focused their core reading instruction in the early grades almost exclusively on WR skills, and neglected to provide instruction on developing oral reading fluency, vocabulary/language, or other comprehension skills (Duke & Block, 2013). Although this approach can lead to early gains on standardized reading assessments, these effects are typically short-lived and do not support long-term reading success as students encounter more complex texts (McArthur et al., 2018). It is important for teachers to recognize that achieving mastery in decoding is a prerequisite (rather than the end goal) for RC. At this turning point in students' reading development (e.g., once students achieve proficiency in decoding), the greatest instructional benefits for student reading outcomes shift towards oral reading fluency, LC, and high-utility RC strategies (Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2021; Shanahan, 2023; Smith et al., 2016).

The SVR places WR as only one component of RC. When LC is underdeveloped, students face increasing challenges in later grades as they are expected to comprehend more complex material (Amendum et al., 2018; Young, 2023). Research shows that explicit instruction

in vocabulary, oral language, fluent reading, and comprehension strategies benefit learners across all grades (Kendeou et al., 2009; Verhoeven et al., 2011). Moreover, students with stronger English language skills, regardless of language background, tend to develop more robust RC over time, underscoring the long-term value of LC development (Babayigit & Shapiro, 2020; Farnia & Geva, 2013).

Considerations for MLLs

As previously noted, traditional reading instruction for beginning readers leans heavily into WR while underemphasizing LC. Shifting toward a more balanced approach is especially beneficial for MLLs, who bring rich linguistic and cultural assets to the classroom. While phonics instruction has been shown to support WR and decoding skills, its impact on long-term RC outcomes, particularly for MLLs, can be limited (McArthur et al., 2018; Suggate, 2016). For example, Cho et al. (2019) studied 510 struggling fourth-grade readers (n=299 MLLs, n=211 native English speakers) and found that while WR contributed to RC for all students, LC played a more significant role in RC outcomes for MLLs. This highlights the importance of leveraging MLLs' existing language and providing explicit, targeted instruction in LC (e.g., vocabulary).

Similarly, research by Geva and Farnia (2012) and Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux (2017) demonstrated that when MLLs and monolingual peers had comparable WR skills, differences in RC outcomes were primarily linked to LC skills (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, background knowledge, literacy knowledge). While students in the early elementary grades relied more heavily on WR skills for RC outcomes, upper elementary students needed to develop more advanced LC skills to achieve proficient RC outcomes, particularly when dealing with more complex texts and topics (Geva & Farnia, 2012; Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2017).

A proficient reader requires strong skills in both WR and LC; however, LC is far more impactful on long-term RC, especially for MLLs (Silverman et al., 2020). Instruction that integrates multiple components of language (e.g., vocabulary, morphology, semantics, syntax) can be especially effective in supporting MLLs' RC development (Silverman et al., 2020). While MLLs may benefit from additional WR support, integrating this with LC instruction allows teachers to build on students' full range of language abilities (Silverman et al., 2020).

Even when MLLs and their monolingual peers have similar WR skills, differences in RC often reflect opportunities to further develop LC (Shanahan & Beck, 2006). Recognizing the unique language trajectories of MLLs helps teachers design instruction that honors their strengths and supports their continued growth. By understanding both the shared and distinct aspects of reading development among MLLs and monolingual students, teachers are better equipped to prioritize LC while continuing to build WR skills.

The Role of the Core Program in RC Instruction

Core reading instruction refers to a comprehensive, systematic, and evidence-based approach to teaching grade-level reading standards in whole-group contexts with (optional) small groups for reteaching and differentiation. Due to the implementation of the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA; see Chapter 1), Virginia elementary schools are now implementing core reading programs. In order to become a state-approved core program under the VLA (VDOE, 2022), core programs had to meet expectations for a variety of criteria (e.g., phonics/word study, vocabulary, comprehension, writing). The indicators of effective core RC instruction include a clear scope and sequence, explicit teacher modeling of text structure, high-utility words (e.g., key vocabulary), comprehension strategies, suggestions for supports and differentiation based on student needs, and a focus on complex texts. More specifically, comprehensive core reading

programs need to include ways to scaffold students' reading of complex texts, lessons centered around comprehending complex texts, and a collection of connected texts that build vocabulary and content knowledge across shared themes or topics (Dole et al., 1991; Duke & Pearson, 2009; Reutzel et al., 2014).

All students, regardless of reading ability or language status, should receive 100% of the evidence-aligned core reading instruction, since core instruction encompasses direct teaching of grade-level content and standards. Hall et al. (2021) point to the importance of explicit instruction for RC during the core. Explicit instruction involves direct teaching of reading strategies and follows a gradual release model where the responsibility of learning gradually shifts from the teacher to the students. Instruction moves through a progression of teacher modeling and scaffolding, to structured guidance with corrective feedback, and finally towards independent practice opportunities (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Fien et al., 2011; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Hall et al., 2021). These systematic lessons tend to follow a logical scope and sequence such that specific RC skills build on previously taught reading skills and strategies. Ultimately, in order to maximize the benefits of core instruction for RC development, students need to be actively engaged in the process of reading (Slavin et al., 2009).

Challenges within Core RC Instruction

Even with the implementation of evidence-aligned core reading programs, however, comprehension difficulties persist. While it can be difficult to pinpoint the exact cause of breakdowns in RC, relating back to the RAND model (Snow, 2002), a lack of RC can be based on factors related to the reader, the text, and the activity (e.g., including teacher instruction). By exploring potential factors related to each of these areas, considerations and implications for RC instruction emerge, particularly in what it means for the role of the teacher.

Factors Related to the Reader. Readers may struggle with RC for a variety of reasons. For example, a student may have limited WR skills, which according to the SVR framework (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), explains that if students are unable to access (i.e., fluently decode and read) the text, then they will be unable to adhere to the meaning of the text when reading the text independently. If decoding and word reading are proficient, however, and the reader still struggles with RC, then this points to limited LC skills (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). A breakdown in LC skills suggests that students are unable to construct meaning from the text due to a limited understanding of the language (e.g., vocabulary, text structure, sentence complexity, word usage, text features) or having insufficient background or content knowledge directly related to the text. Therefore, teachers need to consider the unique needs and perspectives each reader brings to their interaction with texts.

Factors Related to the Text. The text also directly influences students' RC outcomes, since increased text complexity generally results in decreased comprehension (Amendum et al., 2018). Factors that directly influence the complexity of a text include word length, language usage, content-specific vocabulary or prerequisite knowledge, sentence length and complexity, text structure, levels of meaning within the text, and knowledge demands placed upon the reader (Reutzel & Fawson, 2021; Hervey & Spencer, 2013). As a teacher, having a thorough understanding of the complexities of a specific text enables them to better support the anticipated needs of students and pinpoint specific teaching points or scaffolds to implement before, during, and after reading.

Moreover, the interaction between the text and the reader becomes evident. For example, a complex text used in a core lesson might exceed a reader's word reading proficiency (i.e., difficulties with WR), or the topic of the text might be unfamiliar with a heavy load of complex

vocabulary (i.e., difficulties with LC). Conversely, if a student is highly engaged or motivated to read the text, or has high levels of background knowledge and concrete experiences to further connect with the text, then RC is more likely (Langer, 1984; Reutzel & Fawson, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). These scenarios illustrate the interaction between the reader and the text.

Factors Related to the Activity. When considering the role of the activity, breakdowns in comprehension could be due to decoding at the expense of RC, limited strategy instruction, or ineffective instructional practices. If students are spending the bulk of their cognitive capacity on decoding, then limited cognitive resources will be available for demonstrating comprehension through the related activity (Amendum et al., 2018; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). Another potential challenge is that students lack the necessary comprehension strategies to apply when attempting to comprehend a complex text (Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2021; Filderman et al., 2021). For example, students may not have received explicit instruction in how to summarize, draw inferences, generate and answer questions, or self-monitor their own comprehension when reading. Additionally, explicit vocabulary and comprehension instruction is shown to directly enhance students' comprehension of complex texts (Medina et al., 2021). As a result, teachers need to be intentional about how to support students' access and comprehension of complex texts through the specified RC activity.

Historically, when providing RC instruction, teachers selected texts based on students' instructional levels, rather than utilizing grade-level texts (Young, 2023). As defined in Chapter 1, an instructional reading level refers to a text that a student can read with some instructional support from the teacher (e.g., 95-98% accuracy, 75-89% comprehension). However, a long-held belief around effective RC instruction (based on tradition rather than scientific evidence) was teaching students solely with leveled texts that fell within their instructional level (Fountas &

Pinnell, 2018; Tompkins, 2010), despite limited research supporting the use of leveled texts (Young, 2023).

The concern with utilizing instructional reading levels is that struggling readers are rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to access, read, and comprehend complex, grade-level texts (Amendum et al., 2018). Placing struggling readers in texts that are significantly below grade-level leads to issues of equity. These students are not getting the same amount of exposure (if any) to grade-level texts that are at the expected levels of complexity and content in comparison to peers who are proficient readers (Amendum et al., 2018; Conradi Smith et al., 2022; Hall, 2009). Instead, all students (regardless of decoding proficiencies) benefit from ongoing, explicit RC instruction through the use of increasingly complex texts that fall within the recommended grade-level range.

Considerations for MLLs

When considering RC instruction for MLLs, Babayigit and Shapiro (2020) highlight the importance of unique language profiles of MLLs. Their research found that elementary-aged MLLs tend to perform differently on RC measures relative to their monolingual peers, even when WR skills are comparable. This suggests that MLLs' RC outcomes are closely tied to their developing language-based skills (e.g., oral language structures, background knowledge, verbal reasoning) rather than only influenced by WR challenges. These findings underscore the need to build on MLLs' existing linguistic strengths while providing explicit LC instruction. Importantly, misconceptions about LC persist with many equating it narrowly with vocabulary instruction. LC instruction, rather, encompasses a broad range of interconnected language skills.

Li et al. (2021) further explored the diverse pathways to RC among MLLs and native English speakers. Their study found that MLLs with proficient WR skills but limited

comprehension tended to score significantly lower on vocabulary, LC, and morphological awareness compared to MLLs that were average to strong comprehenders (Li et al., 2021). However, Li et al. (2021) also found that MLLs with limited comprehension scored lower than their monolingual peers on vocabulary, LC, and morphological awareness, highlighting significant differences between MLLs and native English speakers, even with comparable WR skills. Drawing from the SVR, Li et al. (2021) deduced that if students have adequate WR skills but still struggle with RC, then it is reasonable to anticipate that persisting RC difficulties are due to LC deficits. This reinforces the value of comprehensive LC instruction, especially for MLLs, as a key driver of long-term reading success.

A Closer Look at Text Complexity: What Is Text Complexity?

A key component of evidence-aligned core reading programs is the integration of complex texts, which can directly impact all factors of the RAND model (i.e., the reader, the text, the activity). Text complexity refers to specific features or components of a text that make it challenging for the reader to comprehend. While there is no single, agreed-upon way to measure the complexity of a text, parameters around qualitative factors, quantitative factors, and the relationship between the reader and text factors (see Figure 2.1), all contribute to a text's complexity (Reutzel & Fawson, 2021; Hervey & Spencer, 2013). Variables related to RAND offer insight as to how the reader interacts with the text, what individual skills and experiences the reader brings, and the specific activity selected for readers to demonstrate comprehension.

Qualitative Factors

In terms of text complexity, qualitative factors refer to the text's purpose, structure, language, and knowledge demands (Reutzel & Fawson, 2021; Hervey & Spencer, 2013), for both literary and informational texts. First, purpose refers to the author's intent, purpose, or

meaning within the text. The purpose of a text is considered complex when it requires the reader to analyze the text to infer the author's purpose (e.g., not explicitly stated in the text), or the text has multiple purposes or levels of meaning (Reutzel & Fawson, 2021).

Next, structure refers to the specific layout or organization of an informational text, or the cohesiveness of a narrative text and additional text features (visual or written) that are embedded within the text (aside from the main body of text). A text's structure is complex when it requires readers to adhere to multiple features (e.g., graphic organizers, charts, photographs or visuals, captions, dialogue, text boxes, etc.), make connections between ideas or themes within the text, and comprehend text features or graphics that provide additional context and information not directly discussed in the main text (Reutzel & Fawson, 2021).

Third, language refers to the usage and clarity of words within the text (e.g., complexity of sentences, use of figurative or literary language, formal and academic-specific vocabulary). Language is considered complex when the text incorporates multiple complex sentences, includes discipline-specific vocabulary, uses abstract or figurative language which requires the reader to infer meaning, or includes content-specific words that are not clearly defined in the text (Reutzel & Fawson, 2021). Finally, knowledge demands refer to the background knowledge or content-specific knowledge needed to comprehend a specific text. In regards to knowledge demands, complex texts require students to have or acquire extensive content or background knowledge to fully comprehend the text (Reutzel & Fawson, 2021).

Quantitative Factors

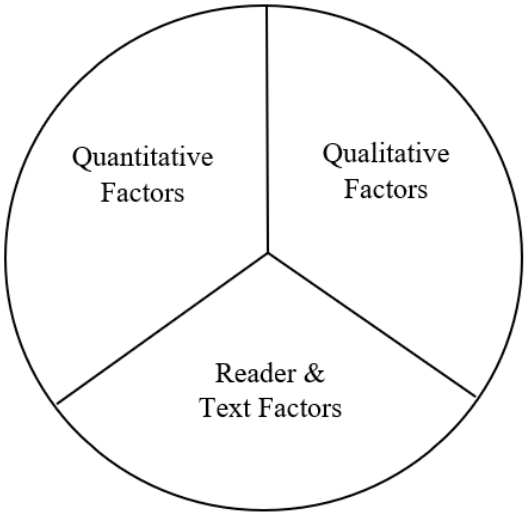
Quantitative factors of text complexity typically refer to readability and text cohesion. One common quantitative measurement in complex texts is through Lexile levels, a formulaic approach to leveling texts based on their anticipated accessibility, difficulty, and comprehension

challenges to readers (Hervey & Spencer, 2013; Reutzel & Fawson, 2021;). Text readability is based on a variety of factors including text length, word usage (e.g., frequency), word complexity (e.g., vocabulary), and sentence complexity (Dale & Chall, 1949). Text cohesion refers to how well the sentences and paragraphs flow and connect within a text.

Drawing from this idea of readability and cohesion, findings from Zainurrahman et al. (2024) show that readability and cohesion of texts are directly related to RC outcomes, with easier texts generally leading to higher levels of RC and more complex texts resulting in lower levels of RC. This is not to suggest that teachers should prioritize using texts with easier levels of readability and high levels of cohesion, but rather that when selecting more complex texts, teachers need to think about how to best scaffold complex texts to make the texts accessible and comprehensible to students.

Figure 2.1

Factors Contributing to Text Complexity



Reader and Text Factors

The final factor contributing to text complexity is the interaction between the reader and the text, which closely aligns with the RAND model (i.e., the relationship between the reader, the

text, and the activity; Snow, 2002). This last piece looks at what the individual reader brings to the text and the specific activity. Since students' reading capabilities will greatly range within the general education setting, teachers need to be intentional about what complex texts they select for instruction, what corresponding activities will be used with the selected text, and how they will scaffold the text and support enhance students' comprehension (Reutzel & Fawson, 2021; Harvey & Spencer, 2013).

A Closer Look at Text Complexity: How Should We Scaffold Complex Texts?

Amendum et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of taking the complexity of texts into consideration when supporting the development of students' comprehension. Furthermore, Amendum et al. (2016) found that students (i.e., 1st-3rd grade) who were reading texts significantly above grade-level struggled with RC, even with sufficient accuracy and fluency rates. In comparison, students with the same accuracy and fluency rates on grade-level texts outperformed peers reading the more complex texts (Amendum et al., 2016). These findings highlight that RC extends beyond just word recognition and fluency rate, and text complexity also plays a key role (Amendum et al., 2016). Recognizing that text complexity needs to be taken into account for RC, careful text selection is needed to ensure that the texts are developmentally appropriate in both content and complexity.

Importance of Selecting Complex Texts

Teachers need to be intentional about the texts they select and utilize appropriate scaffolds and instructional supports to assist students with accessing more complex texts (Amendum et al., 2018; Conradi Smith et al., 2022; Young, 2023). When selecting texts, it is important to consider the text's complexity. Additionally, selected texts should still fall within the recommended ranges of complexity, depending upon the specific grade-level (Amendum et

al., 2016). On one hand, if texts are deemed too complex (e.g., two levels or higher above grade-level) then students will typically struggle to comprehend the full meaning of the text, even with additional supports and scaffolds (Amendum et al., 2018). Limiting struggling readers to "instructional level" texts based on their decoding skills is equally detrimental. In fact, limiting student access to complex, grade-level texts can lead to inequitable practices of decreased learning opportunities for students already at an academic disadvantage, and can (unintentionally) result in lowered expectations (Conradi Smith et al., 2022; Hall, 2009). Rather than defaulting to simplifying texts when students struggle with RC, teachers need to be knowledgeable in how to effectively scaffold complex texts for student access, in order to build students' RC and prepare them for increasingly complex texts over time (Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013).

The Importance of Scaffolding Complex Texts

When elementary readers work within complex texts, teachers will often need to provide additional support or scaffolds, in order to make the text more accessible for the learner (van de Pol et al., 2010). When used purposefully, scaffolds should help teachers establish an ideal balance between high challenge and high support, in which students are still held to rigorous, grade-level expectations, but given the necessary supports to access the content (Johnson, 2019). It is also important to avoid the potential for over-scaffolding, which can diminish the rigor of instruction and limit student learning opportunities (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2014; Johnson, 2019). As a result, teachers need to be intentional about how they scaffold texts to support student accessibility and comprehension, while keeping the rigor high.

Comprehension instruction with complex texts leads to increased long-term RC outcomes; students who receive appropriate scaffolds when interacting with complex texts

outperform students who only work within simplified texts (Paige et al., 2019). Although higher text difficulty can negatively impact fluency and RC, this is mainly for when students are not adequately supported (Amendum et al., 2018). Therefore, the intentional use of scaffolding can enable students to access and comprehend complex texts, leading to greater RC gains long-term, as they grapple with more challenging texts (Amendum et al., 2018, Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013).

Scaffolding to Support Readers in Complex Texts

In order to avoid selecting inadequately complex texts, the use of vetted high-quality core reading programs can help ensure developmentally appropriate text selection, since texts are already pre-selected for instructional purposes (Amendum et al., 2016; Conradi Smith et al., 2022; Neitzel et al., 2021). Within these contexts, effective, intentional scaffolding of complex texts include (see Figure 2.2):

- the use of questioning
- previewing the text
- chunking the text
- incorporating fluency practice
- providing explicit RC strategy instruction

Teacher Questioning. Wolf et al. (2005) found that planning for rigorous, yet effective questioning led to greater student gains and demonstrations of comprehension for grade-level texts, often through the use of read-alouds. In this study, Wolf et al. (2005) noted that the quality of classroom talks and its relation to academic rigor in RC was strongly correlated to the rigor of teacher questioning. These findings further emphasize the value in preplanning questions for texts, in order to best support the RC development of students.

Similarly, Blything et al. (2020) studied the impact of teacher questioning on students' RC. Within this study, Blything et al. (2020) observed teacher RC lessons in small group settings, and noted teacher use of both low-level and high-level question types, as well as the linguistic complexity of student responses (ages 6-11). The study's findings showed that high-level questions were more effective in eliciting more linguistically complex student responses, regardless of age or reading ability. Teachers also shared an overall positive perception of questioning and recognized its value as an important strategy for supporting students' RC development, even for beginning readers (Blything et al., 2020).

Previewing the Text. Previewing a text typically involves preteaching certain ideas and setting a purpose before reading. For example, previewing the text may include activating prior knowledge, identifying text structure, pulling out key vocabulary, and/or focusing on a specific comprehension skill (Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2021; Filderman et al., 2021). Previewing texts with students prior to reading is shown to increase and build-upon student background knowledge, which leads to improved RC outcomes (Langer, 1984; Smith et al., 2021). Additionally, previewing texts while teaching vocabulary in context is also shown to significantly improve comprehension for MLLs (Huang, 2009; Johnson, 1982).

Chunking the Text. Chunking refers to breaking a complex text down into smaller, more manageable sections for students to read and comprehend (e.g., specific stopping points). Chunking can increase RC outcomes since it focuses students on comprehending smaller amounts of text at a time, allowing them to pause, analyze, and comprehend each chunk of text before moving onto the next section (Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2021; Sporer et al., 2009). Annotating chunked pieces of text can also support RC development, because it helps students attend to specific aspects of the text that may directly relate to comprehension.

In a controlled experimental study (Maki et al., 2021), third-grade students who engaged in partner reading with paragraph shrinking showed significantly greater gains in both fluency and RC outcomes, compared to the control group. Paragraph shrinking is a specific reading strategy in which students read a text, one paragraph at a time, stop after each paragraph, and summarize or highlight the main information from that paragraph (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). When students engaged in chunking the text through paragraph shrinking, their RC improved compared to peers who did not use paragraph shrinking while reading. This study highlights the role that chunking plays in bridging RC difficulties in complex texts.

Fluency Practice. Reading fluency is the ability to read a text quickly, accurately, and with prosody (e.g., expression and phrasing) and is essential for comprehension (NICHD, 2000). Based on the theory of automatic information processing (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974), skilled readers achieve automaticity when they are able to read text fluently without needing to use cognitive resources to decode. Fluency practice can help scaffold complex texts through a continuum of support, such as teacher modeling, practicing prosody through chunked phrases, and engaging in repeated readings with differentiated levels of support (NICHD, 2000; Nichols et al., 2008). Fluency-specific strategies, such as echo reading, choral/partner reading, and repeated readings, have been shown to increase students rate of reading and prosody of a familiar text over time (Ardoin et al., 2013; Dowhower, 1987). In fact, fluency is considered the bridge from decoding to RC (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; & Nichols et al., 2008).

Comprehension Strategy Instruction. Comprehension strategy instruction is important to developing RC; however, it is often a neglected instructional practice at the elementary level (Ciullo et al., 2016; Khaiyali & Tiyb, 2014). According to the National Reading Panel report (NICHD, 2000), eight different instructional strategies were shown to be most effective for

supporting RC development, namely comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, graphic/semantic organizers, text structure, question-answering, generating questions, summarizing, and multiple-strategies. During the reading process, the learner is an active participant in their interactions with the text. Therefore, in order to fully comprehend the text, the reader needs to interact with the text, often with a myriad of RC strategies (Ali & Razali, 2019).

More recently, Vaughn et al. (2025) conducted a pilot study investigating the effect of text-based teaching practices on student learning outcomes for both content knowledge and RC. The strategies utilized in this study include purposeful, direct teacher instruction in building background knowledge, presenting overarching focus questions for the unit, and explicitly teaching (and reinforcing) high-utility vocabulary words to build content knowledge and support comprehension. Furthermore, Vaughn et al. (2025) found that these high-utility practices were also shown to be highly effective for building content knowledge and supporting RC development for MLLs. These findings highlight the importance of building background and content knowledge, adhering to the meaning of the text, and using multiple RC strategies as a support for comprehending the text.

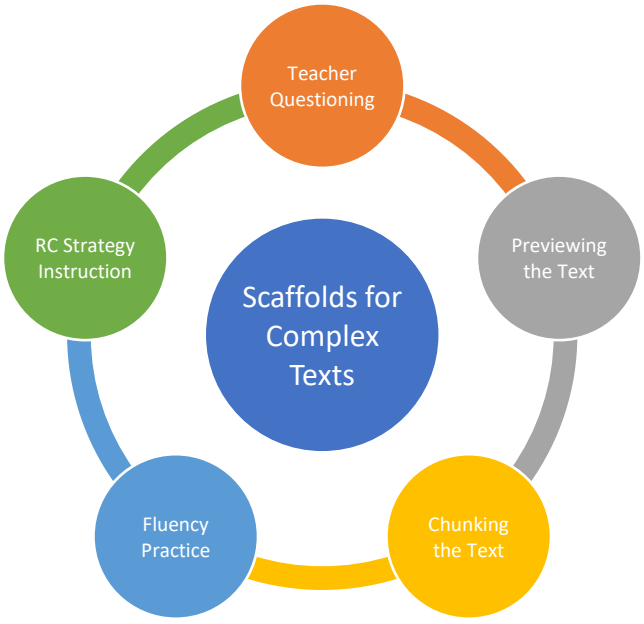
McKeown et al. (2009) examined two different instructional approaches for RC: content instruction and strategy instruction. Content instruction refers to focusing student attention on the content of the text and incorporates open-ended, meaning based questions about the text; whereas strategy-based instruction has students apply specific strategies and procedures they were taught to support their access to text during reading (McKeown et al., 2009). Across all measurements, both treatment groups outperformed the control group; however, students in the content-focused condition had the greatest RC outcomes (McKeown et al., 2009). These findings highlight the importance of building background and content knowledge, adhering to the

meaning of the text, and using multiple RC strategies as a support for comprehending the text (McKeown et al., 2009).

RC is a complex and multifaceted process, yet an explicit and systematic approach to teaching text comprehension strategies is effective for accelerating the growth of readers (Ali & Razali, 2019; Ciullo et al., 2016; Gomaa, 2015). The use of targeted comprehension strategy instruction is shown to significantly improve upon RC skills across both elementary and secondary settings (Duke et al., 2021; Gomaa, 2015; Khaiyali & Tiyb, 2014). RC strategies that are generalizable and can be used simultaneously across a wide variety of texts, including complex texts, are shown to be more impactful in supporting student comprehension of texts (Artzi et al., 2022; Hall et al., 2021; Khaiyali & Tiyb, 2014).

Figure 2.2

Scaffolds for Complex Texts during RC Instruction



Based on Conradi Smith et al. (2022)

Considerations for MLLs

Additional supplementary scaffolds can be especially beneficial for MLLs. Five additional scaffolds (see Figure 2.3) that can better support MLLs' comprehension of complex texts include:

- oral language opportunities
- explicit vocabulary instruction
- fiction and nonfiction paired texts
- home language or dual language texts
- annotating text for clarity

Language Opportunities. MLLs are shown to benefit from additional practice in honing their oral language skills. In the context of RC development, discussing the text aloud with the teacher or peers can help construct meaning-making of what they have read (Rodriguez-Mojica & Briceno, 2018). Furthermore, giving students the opportunity to engage in academic dialogue relating to the text can help them better comprehend the language and what is happening within the text. Sentence frames or talking stems can also support students in organizing their thoughts and practicing specific language structures while developing comprehension of the text (Rodriguez-Mojica & Briceno, 2018).

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction. While all students can benefit from vocabulary instruction, MLLs especially benefit from explicit instruction in content-specific or unfamiliar vocabulary that will appear in the text (Pellicer-Sanchez et al., 2020). Through the use of explicit vocabulary instruction, students can learn the vocabulary in a more structured setting as they learn the meaning of the word in context of the text and practice using new vocabulary in multiple modalities (e.g., reading, writing, listening, speaking).

Fiction and Nonfiction Paired Texts. Since RC of complex texts is often dependent upon students' background knowledge, and the majority of text sets within core reading programs deal with knowledge-building themes or topics, paired texts can support MLLs' RC development (Ward et al., 2019). Rather than relying on a single text to support RC development, particularly with new content or topic areas, MLLs can reinforce new vocabulary, knowledge, themes, or ideas by reading related paired texts. Paired texts include both fiction and nonfiction texts, which provides MLLs with a more comprehensive approach to constructing new content and background knowledge related to a variety of topics, read and utilize high-utility vocabulary words in different contexts, and gain experience reading both narrative and informational texts about related topics (Ward et al., 2019).

Home Language or Dual Language Texts. While it is important for MLLs to acquire RC skills in the English language, students also benefit from reading the text in their home language or in a dual language text, in addition to reading the text in English. This approach provides MLLs with an opportunity to bypass the initial language difficulties, focus first on comprehending the text (e.g., what is happening, plot, story elements), and establish connections between vocabulary in their native language and the English language (Howard, 2022). This also positions the MLLs' native language as an asset, rather than a deficit, in RC development (de Oliveira et al., 2023).

Annotating Text for Clarity. Similar to the idea of chunking the text, annotating the text, whether at the word, sentence, or paragraph level can further support the comprehension of MLLs (de Oliveira et al., 2023). Annotations may include connections between pronouns (e.g., understanding who "he" or "she" is referring to in the sentence or paragraph), pulling-out key vocabulary (e.g., highlight and define key terms based on its given context), finding cognates

between the students' native language and the English language, or pinpointing figurative or literary language (e.g., idioms, similes, metaphors, multiple-meaning words).

Figure 2.3

Additional Scaffolds to Support MLLs' Comprehension of Complex Texts

A Closer Look at the Role of the Teacher

Thinking back to the conceptual framework (see Figure 1.3), the role of the teacher in providing RC instruction and scaffolding of complex texts is based upon teacher knowledge, beliefs, experience, and self-efficacy. Each of these teacher factors work together and directly influence how teachers approach and implement RC instruction for elementary learners, specifically through the use of complex texts. However, teachers tend to lack the necessary knowledge in how to effectively provide RC instruction, starting at the elementary level (Castillo et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2021; Medina et al., 2021). As a result, teachers would benefit from building-up their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in the context of teaching RC for

elementary readers through complex texts, which can in turn influence their beliefs and instructional practice.

Teacher Pedagogical Content Knowledge

As explained in Chapter 1, pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) refers to a teacher's combined knowledge of content and pedagogy, which is defined as the knowledge in how to effectively teach a specific subject and adjust instruction based on student needs, often through differentiated support and the use of scaffolds (Shulman, 1987). Specific to the topic of this study, a teacher's PCK refers to how effectively teachers can use and scaffold complex texts through core RC instruction, in order to maximize student access and comprehension of these complex texts.

While the impact of teachers' PCK is not fully understood in the research to date, some studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between teacher knowledge and students' RC outcomes (Hudson, 2023). More knowledgeable teachers typically have a more comprehensive understanding of effective RC instructional strategies, tend to incorporate a more structured approach and apply a variety of instructional strategies based upon student needs (Rice et al., 2024). In contrast, teachers with low-levels of RC knowledge are less likely to incorporate highly-effective RC instructional strategies, and can actually hinder or limit the RC development of their students (Piasta et al., 2009).

Based on a study conducted by Hudson (2023), students who received instruction from teachers with high knowledge levels outperformed their peers who learned from a teacher with low knowledge levels, even when the quality of instruction was the same. More specifically, Hudson (2023) investigated the relationship between 3rd-5th grade elementary teachers' (n= 103) knowledge of RC and their students' (n= 1,871) RC outcomes. A positive correlation between

teachers' knowledge levels and students' RC was found. These findings emphasize the value of teacher knowledge and its far-reaching impacts on student learning, which further highlights the necessity of building up teacher knowledge in evidence-based practices (Hudson, 2023). Additionally, based on two meta-analyses of RC in the elementary grades (Didion et al., 2019; Rice et al., 2024), ongoing and structured teacher support in RC instruction can lead to large gains in teacher knowledge and small to moderate gains in student RC outcomes. These findings suggest that supporting the development of teacher knowledge in RC is positively correlated with improving students' RC outcomes (Didion et al., 2019; Rice et al., 2024).

In another study, conducted by Hall et al. (2021), 15 third-grade classroom teachers received explicit professional development (PD) in RC through one of two models; teachers received training in either a fully scripted RC intervention approach, or in a partially scripted RC intervention approach paired with teacher-planned instruction. The students who received RC instruction using the partially scripted lessons (n=48) outperformed the students who received RC instruction using the fully scripted lessons (n=53) on RC posttest measurements. These findings suggest that teachers using partially scripted lessons, when paired with planning supports, can build their own PCK while simultaneously increasing students' RC (Hall et al., 2021). Despite these findings, participants showed a preference for the fully scripted lessons, noting the additional time requirements to meet and plan for the partially scripted lessons.

Teacher Beliefs

Teacher beliefs about effective RC instruction directly influences how they teach RC to their students (Rubie-Davies et al., 2012; Richardson et al., 1991). Despite a mounting body of research, however, teachers hold a wide range of beliefs about RC instruction, with limited consensus on best practices (Smith et al., 2023). Naturally, there is a strong relationship between

teachers' beliefs and classroom practices, however, when changes in teacher beliefs occur, it typically takes time for these changes to be reflected in their instruction (Acuna, 2016). Changes in teacher beliefs take time, particularly when teachers have found prior success (e.g., based on anecdotal experiences) with RC practices that are deemed ineffective or limited in their effectiveness long-term. Additionally, teacher beliefs are shown to be shaped by knowledge and experience but can also be changed through PD and other learning opportunities, when given adequate supports and ongoing training over time (Rodgers et al., 2022).

Teacher Experience

In contrast to teacher knowledge and teacher beliefs, teacher experience is not directly related to the effectiveness in which teachers provide RC instruction to elementary students. In fact, there is a slightly weak correlation between teaching experience specific to reading instruction and self-efficacy beliefs, which suggests that more years in teaching does not necessarily increase an individual's confidence in providing high-quality reading instruction (Ciampa & Gallagher, 2018). Therefore, rather than viewing teacher experience solely as a quantitative measurement (e.g., years of experience in teaching), a more comprehensive view of teacher experiences is through a qualitative lens.

This qualitative approach views teacher experience in terms of receiving ongoing professional development (Didion et al., 2019; Rice et al., 2024; Rodgers et al., 2022) grounded in best practices (e.g., trainings that help teachers stay up-to-date with evidence-aligned instructional practices), opportunities to apply this new learning to their instructional practice (e.g., supports put in place to ensure that best practices being utilized during instruction), and opportunities to reflect on their current practice (e.g., identify what is going well, create goals, make changes, collaborate with others to improve and better support student learning). In short,

measuring experience through “rich” learning opportunities will be a more accurate predictor of RC outcomes for students, rather than just accounting for the number of years a teacher has taught reading (Rodgers et al., 2022).

As noted in the conceptual framework (Figure 1.3) and grounded in the self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), teacher knowledge, beliefs, and experience are all interconnected and each play a key role in how teachers provide RC instruction, which directly influences students’ RC development. More specifically, in the context of RC instruction, teachers apply their knowledge, beliefs, and experience to teach comprehension through the use of complex texts, scaffold these complex texts based on student needs (e.g., in order to support student access and comprehension of these complex texts), and provide direct instruction in comprehension strategies to students (e.g., ensure that students can acquire and apply these comprehension strategies independently when reading complex texts).

Considerations for MLLs

MLLs have unique instructional needs compared to their monolingual peers, specifically a greater need for oral language development in English and LC skills (Artzi et al., 2022). These unique needs require specialized knowledge for teachers in both content and pedagogy. In particular, teachers need to understand the reading process for MLLs and the added benefit of LC instruction in the early grades alongside WR instruction. Moreover, teachers need to become adept in strategies that scaffold language and texts for all students, especially MLLs (Ali & Razali, 2019; Babayigit & Shapiro, 2020).

Through targeted support, teachers can become more knowledgeable in the unique characteristics and cultural assets that MLLs bring to the classroom, as well as the instructional strategies that best support their academic growth, particularly for LC (Ali & Razali, 2019; Artzi

et al., 2022). Ultimately, increasing teacher knowledge not only improves student learning outcomes (Hattie, 2015; Medina et al., 2021), but it also empowers teachers to leverage MLLs' multilingualism as a resource for learning. While all students benefit from strong RC instruction, MLLs may particularly benefit when teachers are equipped to scaffold complex texts (Shanahan & Beck, 2006; Silverman et al., 2020).

Chapter Summary

This literature review examined the multifaceted research on teaching RC with complex texts, situated through the lens of the SVR and the sociocultural RAND model, and emphasizing the interplay between the reader, the text, and the activity. It explored RC development in the elementary learners, particularly focused on WR and LC with special attention to MLLs. The review addressed RC instruction while highlighting the importance of selecting and scaffolding complex texts, as well as the role of the reader in RC outcomes. As such, it also delved into the components of text complexity and effective scaffolding techniques. Finally, it underscored the critical role of teachers' PCK, beliefs, and experiences in using complex texts during RC instruction – especially considering differentiated supports for MLLs.

Chapter 3: Methods

If students are exposed to increasingly complex texts throughout their academic careers (with the appropriate supports), then they will gain more experience with texts that incorporate highly complex meanings, purposes and themes, richer vocabulary, real-world experiences, and deeper-level content knowledge, all of which will better support student reading comprehension (RC) development (Amendum et al. 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2015). Rather than increase student engagement with complex texts, however, teachers tend to simplify texts or select less-demanding texts to support students' comprehension – an instructional decision that can limit student growth and engagement with grade-level material (Amendum et al., 2018; Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013; Paige et al., 2019). In fact, teachers tend to perceive complex texts as too difficult or challenging for struggling readers to access, which inherently leads to lower academic expectations and inequitable teaching practices. All students need, and deserve, access to complex texts at grade-level. Rather than avoiding complex texts, teachers can integrate scaffolds to help students access and comprehend these texts (Clark et al., 2005; Gibbons, 2009; Van de Pol et al., 2010).

At Hawks Elementary School (HES), the majority of upper elementary students at HES tend to underperform on standardized RC assessments (i.e., Reading SOLs; see Chapter 1) where students are expected to independently read grade-level texts and demonstrate comprehension. To address this student need and comply with the core reading program requirement established by the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA), HES adopted and implemented *Benchmark Advance*. During the first year of implementation, teachers have reported that using the complex texts in RC lessons is a challenge particularly because of limited guidance from the program on ways to

scaffold these texts for students. In response, this capstone addressed the problem of practice through the following research questions:

- RQ 1: How does *Benchmark Advance* scaffold complex texts for 2nd grade students?
- RQ 2: What are 2nd grade teachers' reflections on using complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* for RC instruction?

Research Design

This capstone study used an exploratory, multiple case research design through a qualitative lens. A multiple case study design is when multiple individuals are studied, providing a deeper and richer understanding of the specific phenomena (Hancock et al., 2021). In this study, the multiple case study approach examined multiple cases (e.g., teachers) within a single context (i.e., 2nd grade at HES). Furthermore, an exploratory design aims to answer "what" questions, explore a specific phenomenon or hypothesis, and/or generate key themes and ideas based on broad insights, rather than establish cause-and-effect relationships (Hancock et al., 2021; Yin, 2018). A qualitative approach is most aligned with the applied research questions, because it deals more directly with people's perceptions, experiences, and insights into the specific problem of practice, rather than quantifiable numbers or results (Hancock et al., 2021).

Local School Context

The study took place at HES, a fully accredited PreK-4th grade, Title I elementary school within the suburbs of the DMV (i.e., D.C., Maryland, Virginia) area. With a population of more than 650 students, 73.4% are Hispanic, 10.6% are White, 7.6% are Black, 5.2% are represented by Multiple Races, and 3.2% are Asian. Furthermore, 64.1% of students are Multilingual Learners (MLLs).

Additionally, HES offers a dual language program option to its K-4th grade students. Students enrolled in the dual language (DL) program (32%) receive half-day instruction in Spanish (i.e., Math, Science, Spanish Language Arts) and half-day instruction in English (i.e., English Language Arts, Social Studies); Non-Dual students (68%) receive all content instruction in English. In Kindergarten, there is only one self-contained DL classroom, in which the teacher provides half-day English and half-day Spanish instruction. For 1st-4th grade, however, there are two DL teachers per grade level, one of whom only provides English instruction, and the other of whom only provides Spanish instruction. In this structure, there are two DL classes per grade (i.e., 1st-4th) so the students switch from one teacher to the other, thereby receiving half-day Spanish immersion and half-day English immersion (with different teachers). Currently, there are 28 K-4th grade general education classroom teachers, including DL teachers (see Table 3.1). To stay in compliance with the suggested state ratio of one ESOL teacher per every fifty MLLs (VDOE, 2024), there are eight ESOL teachers at HES to support the student population of approximately 420 MLLs (64.1%).

Table 3.1

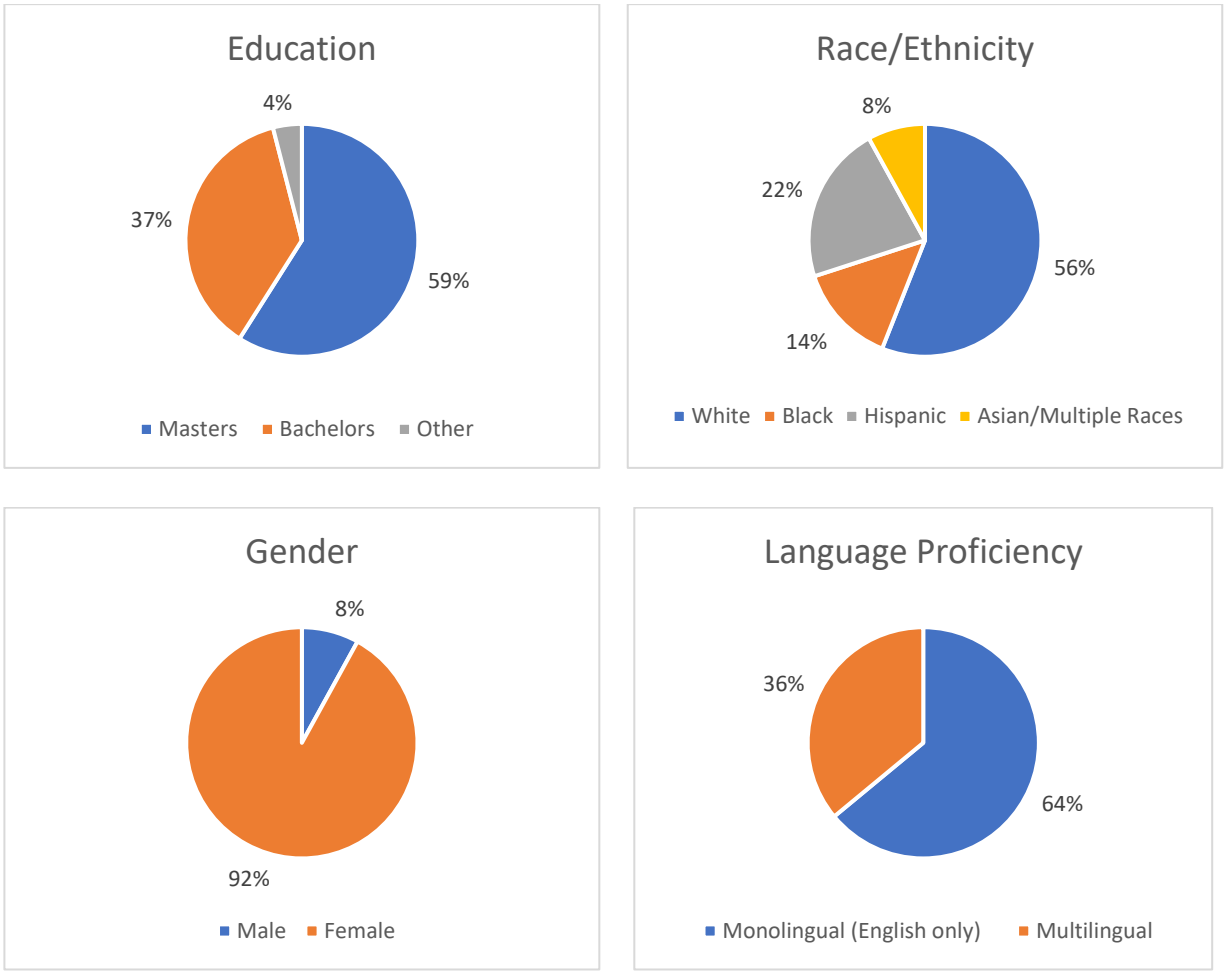
HES Grade-Level Classroom Teachers and ESOL Teachers

Grade-Level	Number of Classroom Teachers	Number of ESOL Teachers
Kindergarten	5 (including 1 DL teacher)	2
First Grade	6 (including 2 DL teachers)	1
Second Grade	6 (including 2 DL teachers)	1
Third Grade	6 (including 2 DL teachers)	2
Fourth Grade	5 (including 2 DL teachers)	2

To fully capture the scope of the K-4th grade instructional staff (including ESOL teachers) at HES, teacher information is broken down by education, race, gender, and language proficiency (see Figure 3.1). While there is no formal data on teacher endorsements, all eight ESOL teachers have their ESOL endorsement, along with four of the Dual Language teachers (three Spanish teachers, one English teacher).

Figure 3.1

Teacher Demographics



Rationale for Selecting 2nd Grade

As part of the Virginia Literacy Act (VLA; VDOE, 2022), HES adopted a new core reading program, *Benchmark Advance*. All K-4th grade English Language Arts classroom

teachers at HES were required to implement the new program with fidelity in the 2024-2025 school year, and all instructional staff members who directly support the planning and/or implementation of *Benchmark Advance* are required to attend weekly grade-level Collaborative Learning Teams (CLTs) to support implementation. Second grade was selected as the specific grade-level of focus for the proposed study for a few key reasons.

First, beginning in grades 3 and 4 when RC becomes the primary skill assessed, standardized scores demonstrate RC challenges for HES students. For example, in Spring 2024, only 54% of 3rd grade and 44% of 4th grade students passed the state standards assessment. These scores demonstrate that comprehension difficulties are present long before students are formally assessed in RC. Therefore, by focusing the study on 2nd grade, I could address the problem of practice of students' RC difficulties, prior to them entering an SOL grade (i.e., 3rd/4th grade). Next, by selecting a single grade level for the scope of my study, I could conduct a focused, in-depth review of multiple data sources (i.e., document analysis, focus group, teacher interviews). Finally, the structure of *Benchmark Advance* shifts its instructional approach for RC beginning in 2nd grade, particularly with its use of complex texts. In Kindergarten and 1st grade, complex texts are integrated through teacher read-alouds. Starting in 2nd grade, complex texts become a part of the student materials during RC instruction. Therefore, it is helpful to capture the beginning of this instructional shift within *Benchmark Advance*.

Researcher Access & Positionality

Researchers must be mindful of their relationship with study participants (Hancock et al, 2021). As a practitioner-researcher, my position as a reading teacher at HES presented both strengths and challenges to this study. My nine years of experience at HES provided me with deep contextual knowledge and strong professional relationships. I anticipated high participant

willingness to engage in different methods of data collection (e.g., interviews, focus group). However, due to my close relationships with colleagues and continued employment at HES, I worried that the participants would be less willing to share honest perceptions or experiences. In particular, I anticipated that participants would share more positive perceptions or experiences related to the problem of practice, and downplay their negative responses, which would limit the extent of my findings. Additionally, I anticipated that it would be an initial challenge switching over to the researcher role and staying unbiased in my interpretations of participant responses.

In order to counter these likelihoods, I ensured that participants understood that their responses were anonymous, digitally protected, and not linked to any identifying factors. I also established a comfortable and confidential environment for the interviews and focus group discussion, all of which took place in a private, quiet setting. Furthermore, I utilized member checking with the participants, to ensure that I accurately captured their responses, intentions, and thoughts regarding their experiences with teaching RC with complex texts, and their overall perceptions of RC through the use of *Benchmark Advance*.

Participants & Sampling

According to Mertler (2020), when selecting participants for a research study, the researcher must identify which individuals would provide the best sources of data in alignment with the applied research questions. Purposeful sampling was used for this case study, because it ensured that the selected participants had the necessary insights directly related to the problem of practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2015). In this way, the participants were selected "precisely because of their special[ized] experience, competence, [and expertise]" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 96).

Since the problem of practice focused on the use of complex texts in RC instruction for 2nd grade, the selected participants were those who are directly involved in both the planning and implementation of *Benchmark Advance* RC lessons for 2nd grade. Six teachers were invited to participate in the study (i.e., five 2nd grade classroom teachers and one 2nd grade ESOL teacher). Five of the six teachers consented to participate in the study; the sixth teacher was unavailable during data collection. Therefore, data was collected from five participants (see Table 3.2). Through the use of qualitative purposeful sampling, this case study generated "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2015, p. 53) as I sought to capture a variety of perspectives and experiences.

Table 3.2

Participant Role and Context

Participants (Pseudonyms)	Years of Teaching (Degree)	Participants' Role at HES	Percentage of MLLs (per classroom)
Anne	12 years (Master's)	2nd grade teacher	68.6% MLLs
Emma	9 years (Master's)	2nd grade teacher	75% MLLs
Kate	3 years (Provisional)	2nd grade teacher	80% MLLs
Naomi	4 years (Master's)	2nd grade teacher	65% MLLs
Talia	4 years (Master's)	2nd grade ESOL	N/A

Data Collection

Three sources of data were collected: 1) document analysis, 2) focus group interview, and 3) one-on-one teacher interviews. Multiple sources of data within a case study lends itself to a more in-depth analysis (Hancock et al., 2021) as multiple sources bolster the validity of findings through a convergence of information and establishes a "more comprehensive understanding of

phenomena" (Carter et al., 2014, p. 545). Both data source triangulation and method triangulation were used. First, "data source triangulation involves the collection of data from different types of people…to gain multiple perspectives" (Carter et al., 2014, p. 545), specifically the 2nd grade teachers and ESOL teacher. Second, "method triangulation involves the use of multiple methods of data collection about the same phenomenon" (Carter et al., 2014, p. 545) and was addressed through various data sources in relation to the research questions (Table 3.3).

Table 3.3

Research Questions, Participants, and Data Collection Methods

		Document Analysis	Focus Group	Teacher Interviews
Participants:	2nd grade classroom teachers (4) 2nd grade ESOL teacher (1)	N/A	All participants	All participants
Research Question 1:	How does *Benchmark Advance* scaffold complex texts for 2nd grade students?	X		X
Research Question 2:	What are 2nd grade teachers' reflections on using complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* for RC instruction?		X	X

Data Collection Sequence

Prior to starting the data collection (see Figure 3.2), I received IRB approval from the University of Virginia's Institutional Review Board (UVA's IRB). Once UVA's IRB approval was received, I submitted the approval form to my school district. For participant recruitment, I emailed the study's information sheet explaining the nature of the study, consent, confidentiality, anticipated risks, and the data collection process (Appendix A).

Figure 3.2

Data Collection Sequence

The first data collection method was the document analysis. By starting my data collection with the document analysis, I built my familiarity with *Benchmark Advance*'s RC lessons and examined how complex texts in 2nd grade were structured, evaluated for complexity, and taught through RC instruction. Following the document analysis, the focus group and interviews were conducted – though not in a particular order since each explored related yet independent topics. The focus group explored: 1) teacher beliefs around the potential benefits and challenges of teaching RC with complex texts, 2) the role that complex texts play in students' RC development, 3) teacher experience and knowledge in teaching with complex texts, and 4) the influence of *Benchmark Advance* on RC instruction for the 2024-2025 school year (e.g., instructional shifts, benefits, challenges). Whereas the teacher interviews focused more on: 1) teacher factors (e.g., knowledge, beliefs, experience) in teaching RC with complex texts (prior to the implementation of *Benchmark Advance*) and 2) teacher reflections on teaching RC with specific complex texts in the context of HES' new core reading program, *Benchmark Advance*.

Document Analysis

The first data collection method, the document analysis, corresponded with three components of the conceptual framework: 1) the overall focus of RC instruction using complex texts, 2) the interconnections between the role of the reader, the text, and the task, and 3) teacher scaffolding of complex texts. Since the document analysis focused on *Benchmark Advance*, data analysis encompassed the program's approach to RC instruction, the selection and

implementation of complex texts, suggestions for teacher scaffolding of complex texts, and the specific focus of RC instruction within these texts. Furthermore, specific instructional considerations within *Benchmark Advance* were noted, depending upon the profile of the reader, individualized student needs, and the focus of different RC lessons across complex texts.

For the first data collection method, I followed the document analysis protocol (Appendix B) while reviewing *Benchmark Advance* to capture relevant information from the selected complex texts and two corresponding RC lessons for each complex text. This led to a completed analysis of four complex texts and eight RC lessons. The document analysis directly addressed RQ 1: How does *Benchmark Advance* scaffold complex texts for 2nd grade students?

Document Selection. When determining which complex texts to select, I chose to pull texts from two *Benchmark Advance* units, Unit 5: Technology and Society and Unit 6: Themes Across Cultures. I selected texts from these two units for a few reasons. First, I wanted to purposefully choose units based on the specific complex texts. One text component I focused on was genre. The complex texts from Unit 5 were all nonfiction (i.e., biography, informational science/social studies) and related to the topics of technology, inventions, and solving problems. In contrast, the complex texts from Unit 6 were all fiction (i.e., folktales, trickster tales) and focused on stories with specific themes, messages, or purposes for the reader to comprehend.

Second, I aimed to select texts and lessons from units that 2nd grade teachers were either currently teaching or had recently taught, so I had a greater understanding of what types of texts and RC lessons 2nd grade students were engaging in at the point of data collection. When narrowing down the texts, I also accounted for selecting one short read and one extended read per unit, as well as one *moderate complexity* and one *substantial complexity* rating per unit text.

As a result of these criteria, the four texts selected for the document analysis were: *A Lucky Accident, Robots go to School, The Huemul Egg,* and *Why the Sky is Far Away*.

Third, when selecting two corresponding lessons per complex text, I made sure to select a representative sample of lessons. When going through the *Benchmark Advance* lessons, I noted three distinct RC lesson types: 1) first read – focus is on the text introduction where key vocabulary is explicitly taught and purpose is established, 2) close read: vocabulary – focus of instruction is on vocabulary within the text and using context clues to determine word meanings, and 3) close read: RC strategy – focus of instruction is on RC strategies (e.g., summarizing, point of view, main idea and details). Table 3.4 details the selected RC lessons and their corresponding complex texts.

Components of the document analysis protocol (Appendix B) included basic information related to the text (e.g., title, genre, type of read, level of complexity), probing questions regarding text complexity and anticipated difficulties, and prompts related to the specific lessons (e.g., type of lesson, RC focus or purpose, lesson structure/outline, anticipated difficulties, built-in supports or scaffolds, considerations for MLLs, missed instructional/learning opportunities). The document analysis aimed to answer RQ 1: How does *Benchmark Advance* scaffold complex texts for 2nd grade students?

In addition to analyzing the four complex texts, by reading through and annotating the complex texts and the text complexity guide provided by *Benchmark Advance,* I identified what specific elements made each text complex. Since there were one or two complex texts used per week in *Benchmark Advance,* there were multiple comprehension lessons centered around each complex text. However, in order to capture a more comprehensive view around RC instruction,

I selected two RC lessons per complex text as part of the document analysis. Two of the three lesson types (i.e., first read, close read: vocabulary, close read: RC strategy) were selected for each complex text, which resulted in three "first read" lessons, two "close read: vocabulary" lessons, and three "close read: RC strategy" lessons, across the four texts.

Table 3.4

Document Analysis: Selected Texts and Corresponding RC Lessons

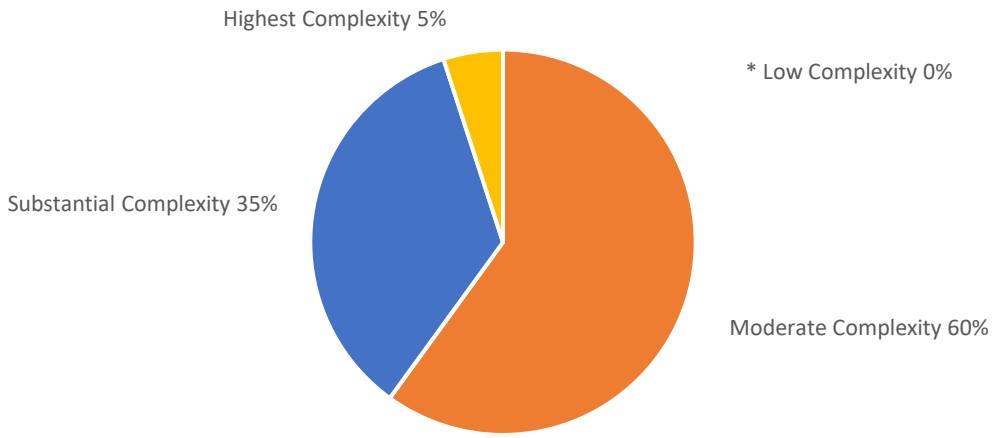
Unit/Topic	Text Title	Genre	Text Complexity	Lesson Type(s)
Unit 5: Technology & Society	A Lucky Accident (Week 1: Short Read)	Biography	Moderate (8/16)	#1: First read #2: Close read: RC
	Robots go to School (Week 3: Extended Read)	Informational Social Studies	Substantial (11/16)	#1: First read #2: Close read: Vocabulary
Unit 6: Themes Across Cultures	The Huemul Egg (Week 1: Short Read)	Trickster tale	Moderate (9/16)	#1: First read #2: Close read: RC
	Why the Sky is Far Away (Week 3: Extended Read)	Pourquoi tale	Substantial (10/16)	#1: Close read: Vocabulary #2: Close read: RC

Complex Texts within *Benchmark Advance*. Each thematic unit in *Benchmark Advance* is broken into three-week sections, with different text(s) introduced each week. The first week of each unit includes two short reads, and the last two weeks feature one extended read each. Therefore, an entire unit includes four texts (i.e., two short reads, two extended reads) across a three-week period. Examining texts across two distinct thematic units gave greater insight into how *Benchmark Advance* recommends supporting student access to and comprehension of a variety of texts.

Additionally, each of these texts fell within either the moderate or substantial complexity text range, which covers two of the four qualitative text complexity categories. Ninety-five percent of the complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* for 2nd grade are labeled either "moderate complexity" (60%) or "substantial complexity" (35%) and are in the middle ranges of complexity (see Figure 3.3). The two missing categories for text complexity within Units 5 and 6 were "low complexity" and "highest complexity." Within *Benchmark Advance*, "low complexity" texts are rarely included. Specifically for 2nd grade, there were zero complex texts with the "low complexity" label. Across the forty complex texts within *Benchmark Advance* for 2nd grade, only two texts were rated as "highest" complexity, one in Unit 8 and one in Unit 10.

Figure 3.3

Text Complexity in 2nd Grade Benchmark Advance



Focus Group

All five 2nd grade teacher participants engaged in the focus group. The focus group was conducted in a single, 55-minute session during the 2nd grade participants' common planning time and took place in one of the participant's classrooms (since there were no students). With participants' consent, I recorded the focus group and followed the semi-structured approach of the focus group protocol (Appendix C). The focus group directly addressed RQ 2: What are 2nd

grade teachers' reflections on using complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* for RC instruction? The focus group addressed all the pieces of the conceptual framework, particularly since the questions encompassed teacher factors (i.e., knowledge, experience, self-efficacy), the approach of effective RC instruction with complex texts, the interactions between the reader, the text, and the task, and ultimately, teacher scaffolding of complex texts.

The intent of the focus group interview was to capture teacher knowledge, perceptions, and experiences around: 1) teaching RC with complex texts, 2) how to scaffold complex texts in order to support students' development of RC, 3) current structures or factors that facilitate or hinder the planning and implementation of core RC instruction with complex texts, and 4) potential benefits and/or barriers for students in accessing and comprehending complex texts. Starting with teacher factors (i.e., knowledge, experience, beliefs), the focus group explored how these factors directly influence teacher perceptions around evidence-aligned teaching with and scaffolding of complex texts. Questions and participant responses centered around the interactions between the reader and the text (i.e., role of the reader) and the role of the teacher during RC instruction (i.e., scaffolding of texts).

To increase trustworthiness of my findings (prior to the focus group), I vetted the focus group protocol with a teacher in another grade level to assess the questions for clarity, potential for redundancy, relevance to the problem of practice, and alignment with the intended research questions. Additionally, participant responses were restated by the researcher during the focus group, when clarification or additional context was needed. Following the focus group, a written summary of main themes and takeaways was shared via email with each participant to ensure the collected information was accurate and representative of participant responses. Each participant

reviewed the summary and responded to endorse this written account of the focus group, offering no additional insights.

Teacher Interviews

Similar to the focus group, the one-on-one interviews also encompassed all aspects of the conceptual framework. More specifically, the interview questions required teachers to reflect upon their own instructional practices of RC instruction, gauge their own professional understanding and comfort in teaching RC through the use of complex texts, and evaluate the current strengths and challenges of implementing *Benchmark Advance* for RC instruction. The individual teacher interviews addressed both RQs:

- RQ 1: How does *Benchmark Advance* scaffold complex texts for 2nd grade students?
- RQ 2: What are 2nd grade teachers' reflections on using complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* for RC instruction?

All five participants were interviewed using the interview protocol (Appendix D). Teacher interviews lasted between 17-27 minutes, with a median of 22 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a quiet area either before school (one participant), during planning time (one participant), or during the school day with a substitute covering their class (three participants). Four of the five participants during the teacher interviews consented to be audio recorded for transcription purposes. The one participant who requested to not be recorded during the teacher interview did consent to typed notes during the interview.

During the interview, teachers were prompted to select two different complex texts from *Benchmark Advance*: 1) text(s) where students were highly successful in comprehending and 2) text(s) where students struggled with comprehending. When considering the chosen complex texts, teachers were prompted to determine factors that led to these discrepancies in student

success, discuss the role that the reader plays in RC, and reflect on how to best support students' RC development of these complex texts. While the focus of the interview questions was more on the teacher aspects (e.g., teacher factors- knowledge, experience, beliefs; teacher scaffolding of complex texts), most of the teacher responses consistently referred to instructional decisions based on the role of the reader (e.g., background knowledge, anticipated difficulties of accessing and comprehending complex texts, targeted instruction based on students' language proficiency).

The semi-structured interview approach enabled me to ask "predetermined yet flexibly worded questions" (Hancock et al., 2021, p. 53) and also to "ask follow-up questions designed to probe more deeply" (p. 53). This added flexibility enabled me to anticipate the need for additional probing questions and include or modify follow-up questions, depending upon the specific responses of each participant. If additional clarification or context was needed after a participant's initial response, I restated the participant's response, asked for confirmation, and probed with additional questioning. After each interview, I wrote a reflexive memo to summarize my key insights or takeaways. These memos were used solely during coding for the data analysis portion, specifically in identifying emergent themes across the different participants' responses. Furthermore, after conducting each interview and analyzing for themes, I shared a summary with the participants via email to garner additional feedback in case any themes or findings were missed or misinterpreted. Each participant confirmed my summary, and no additional responses were provided.

Data Analysis

When analyzing qualitative data, the researcher begins with specific observations from the data collection, finds common patterns across the data, formulates potential hypotheses, and establishes general conclusions or themes (Mertler, 2020). Furthermore, the purpose of analyzing

qualitative data is to understand the problem of practice from a more holistic perspective, factoring in the data, the participants, and the context of the research site (Mertler, 2020; Parsons & Brown, 2002). Since I collected data through three different methods (i.e., document analysis, focus group, teacher interviews), I organized the data in a way that I was able to sort, code, and interpret. Once the data was coded and organized, I identified commonalities and established key themes, ideas, or takeaways both within and across the different sources.

All of the collected data was organized into documents, transcriptions, and researcher notes. Each data source was uploaded into *Delve*, a secure, online codebook intended to code multiple types of qualitative data across different sources and collection methods. Researcher notes and annotations from the document analysis, as well as transcriptions from focus group and interviews were uploaded and coded; based on *a priori* and emergent codes (see Table 3.5). Through Delve, I was able to notate the number of times a code was present within and across data sources, which helped establish common themes, subthemes, and pinpoint relevant excerpts or participant responses from the data. Finally, all data was organized into a final codebook (Appendix E) based on the main codes, supporting subcodes, definitions, and examples (e.g., excerpts) from the different data sources.

Table 3.5

A Priori and Emergent Codes

A priori codes	Emergent codes
- Text factors and accessibility - Vocabulary and oral language - Author's purpose - RC strategies, scaffolds, and supports - Considerations for MLLs	- Missed opportunities for RC support - Instructional shifts - Teacher reflections - Rigor and high expectations (students) - Teacher challenges with complex texts - Student challenges with complex texts - Implementation of new core program - Challenges with *Benchmark Advance* - Strengths of *Benchmark Advance* - Student motivation and engagement

	- Student apathy - Text relevance to students - Teacher knowledge and experience - Teacher confidence and comfortability - Teacher supports

Document Analysis

Documents can serve as a main data source in a qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Four complex texts and eight corresponding RC lesson plans across two units (i.e., Unit 5 and Unit 6) were used as the document analysis samples. The selected texts and RC lessons were available in both a printed format and online. Both versions provided a breakdown of the text complexity for each unit, detailed RC lesson plans for each complex text, and recommended instructional methods that support each focused comprehension lesson of the text.

The document analysis protocol (Appendix B) was used to track coding and ensure organization to streamline the analysis process. The protocol was created based on two key factors: 1) the complex text and 2) RC lessons centered around the complex text. Both of these focus points determined the specific prompts used throughout the document analysis template (Table 3.6), and helped ensure the document analysis process remained structured and in direct alignment with the intended focus of the capstone study.

A two-phase approach was used during the document analysis process. First, I read through each complex text, making annotations and noting its complexity. This process also included a review of the text complexity guide from *Benchmark Advance* that breaks down the complexity for each text across four main qualitative categories: 1) purpose and levels of meaning, 2) structure, 3) language conventionality and clarity, and 4) knowledge demands. Second, I read through the associated RC lessons for each specific complex text with a focus on how the *Benchmark Advance* lessons suggested how to scaffold the complex texts. After reading

and analyzing each complex text and reviewing its corresponding lessons, the documents were coded using both *a priori* and emergent codes.

Table 3.6

Document Analysis Components and Corresponding Prompts

Focus	*Benchmark Advance* Components	Prompts
Complex Texts	- Text (title) - Genre - Type of read (short vs. extended) - Level of complexity - Overall complexity score - Breakdown of complexity	- What makes this text complex? - What are anticipated difficulties within this complex text?
RC Lessons (using complex texts)	- Lesson #__ [Day __, Lesson __] - Type of lesson (e.g., first read, vocabulary, RC) - RC focus/purpose - Anticipated length of lesson	- How is the lesson structured? - What anticipated difficulties does this lesson address or note? - What supports or scaffolds are built into the lesson relative to the complex text? - What specific supports or scaffolds are recommended for diverse student populations? - What missed opportunities are noted from the lesson?

Focus Group

A focus group refers to "simultaneous interviews of people making up a relatively small group" (Mertler, 2020). Focus groups tend to be useful when time is limited, people are more comfortable talking in a small group (as opposed to individually), and the interactions among the participants may be more informative due to the tendency for people to feed off of one another's responses and comments to questions (Mertler, 2020). By developing and implementing a focus group protocol (Appendix C), I ensured that the discussion stayed on track, relevant to the posed research questions, and that participant responses aligned with the focus group questions.

Upon completion of the focus group, the recording was transcribed, then organized and coded based on key themes or trends. During the analysis, the focus group responses were

initially coded using the established *a priori* codes. Any additional codes that arose during the transcription and analysis process were added to the codebook during the coding process. After the focus group, I wrote-up a reflexive memo that summarized key findings, larger themes and takeaways from the participants' discussion, and encapsulated both individual participant perceptions, as well as common trends and themes from the group as a whole.

Teacher Interviews

Similarly, for the one-on-one teacher interviews, I audio recorded (four of the five) teacher interviews, with participant consent, while following the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D), and used Zoom to record and transcribe the interviews. Then, the transcripts were analyzed and organized based on key themes into a codebook via *Delve*. Similar to the focus group analysis process, I started with deductive coding, in which I initially coded the data with my *a priori* codes for my codebook, then looked through the interviews to find excerpts that fit the codes (Saldana, 2021). Any additional themes (e.g., emergent codes) that arose during my data analysis and did not fit into the initial *a priori* codes, were added to the codebook. Therefore, the data analysis for both the focus group and the teacher interviews was a mix of deductive and inductive coding.

Trustworthiness

The goal of qualitative studies is not to generalize findings to other settings, instead it is to have a clear and in-depth understanding of a specific context (Mertler, 2020). In order to enhance the overall trustworthiness of this study, I used two different methods of triangulation, namely data source triangulation and method triangulation. Data source triangulation is built upon gathering data from different sources, such as multiple study participants (i.e., four 2nd grade classroom teachers, one 2nd grade ESOL teacher), and various materials (i.e., complex

texts and corresponding RC lessons from *Benchmark Advance*). Furthermore, method triangulation is based upon the different data methods used to collect data, including document analysis, a focus group, and teacher interviews.

Additionally, member checking was used across the interviews and the focus group, to rephrase what the participants said, or to follow up with questions to clarify understandings of their responses. The use of reflexive memos for each data collection piece also helped establish a more neutral and objective analysis of the different data sources and methods. Finally, I shared my findings with the five participants, in which they looked through my key findings, established themes, and conclusions; from there, they were given the opportunity to offer feedback, ask any clarifying questions, or provide any additional insight and guidance into my proposed outcomes.

Researcher Reflexivity and Role

My role heavily influenced the scope of my study. During my (nearly) decade-long tenure at HES, I have worked with multiple stakeholders at HES in varying capacities and developed strong professional relationships. Therefore, I needed to be mindful of the potential biases that could arise from being a practitioner within the context of the study. As a researcher, I aimed to understand the problem of practice primarily from the participants' perspectives, knowledge, and experiences, rather than my own (Hancock et al., 2021). While my positionality within the school site served as an overall benefit, I remained mindful of the potential implications that my relationships with others could have on the data collection process, and aimed to mitigate any possible biases.

Ethical Considerations

At its core, research ethics "deal with the moral aspects of conducting research, especially research involving human beings" (Mertler, 2020, p. 41). Therefore, researchers must

give special care and consideration to the participants' treatment in the study, and the level of honesty and openness that the researcher will share with the participants (Mertler, 2020). In order to ensure this study was conducted ethically, I followed the established protocols for the data collection and analysis process, and worked within the approved parameters given to me from UVA's IRB. As part of the research site's approval process, I reached out to the district's point of contact for conducting research and included our correspondence with identifying names (e.g., people, places) redacted (Appendix F). Based on the correspondence, I compiled the necessary information for the internal committee review to be conducted and approved at the district level prior to conducting the study. Following these processes helped to minimize participant risk.

Furthermore, I shared the purpose and intent of my study and described my proposed data collection methods with all invited participants. Consent was obtained prior to collecting data, and all participant information was anonymous with data remained confidential and secure. I also communicated to the invited participants that their involvement in any aspect of the study is completely voluntary, and that there were no repercussions if they opted-out of any or all of the data collection methods at any time during the study.

Limitations

When considering the limitations of this study, the first acknowledgement is that the prescribed recommendations are based on context-specific data collection. More specifically, since I gathered data from a single grade-level within HES, other upper grade-level teams (i.e., 3rd and 4th grade) may have different insights, perspectives, and experiences with the implementation year of *Benchmark Advance*. In particular, 3rd and 4th grade teachers at HES have often felt like they have the biggest lift for kids in the upper elementary grades due to the increased complexity of the texts (personal communication, 2024), which may not have been

fully represented in data collection and analysis from 2nd grade. In addition to context-specific data collection, the data was from a single point in time. The focus group and individual participant interviews were all conducted within a 2-week timeframe during the 4th quarter of the school year. This single-point window does not allow for more in-depth analysis of RC lesson implementation and use of complex texts with students over a longer period of time.

Another limitation is recognizing that the data collection focused on certain complex texts and units (i.e., Unit 5 and Unit 6 in *Benchmark Advance*), and occurred at a specific point in time (May 2025). For example, the document analysis looked at four complex texts and eight corresponding RC lessons in *Benchmark Advance*. However, since these texts and lessons were only taken from later units in the program (i.e., Units 5 and 6), the scaffolds may have lessened and teacher modeling of explicit instruction may have decreased in comparison to the earlier units, since RC skills spiral and are repeated across multiple units. Furthermore, the teacher interviews and the focus group all occurred in May 2025. While this enabled teachers to reflect back and consider the overall implementation year of *Benchmark Advance*, it did not capture changes in teacher perceptions and experiences over the course of the implementation year.

The final limitation is recognizing my own positionality as a reading support teacher at HES. Due to my role, I am right in the thicket of data collection and part of the site of study. My own personal biases in the implementation of *Benchmark Advance,* particularly in regards to RC instruction with the use of complex texts, could influence my own analysis and interpretation of the data. Furthermore, my personal relationships with the participants could have inadvertently altered or swayed participant responses.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlines the methodology used for data collection and analysis in this exploratory case study focused on 2nd grade RC instruction with complex texts. Qualitative data were gathered from five participants – four 2nd grade classroom teachers and one ESOL teacher – who were directly involved in implementing RC instruction using *Benchmark Advance*, HES' new core reading program featuring complex, grade-level texts. Data sources included a document analysis of four complex texts and eight RC lessons, a focus group, and one-on-one interviews. The data was transcribed, organized in Delve, and coded using both *a priori* and emergent codes. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout, starting with informed consent and including clear communication and comprehensive information sharing. The study was grounded in a conceptual framework emphasizing RC instruction through the use of complex texts, contributing teacher factors, the role of the reader, and how teachers scaffold complex texts during RC instruction to make it accessible and comprehensible to students.

Chapter 4: Findings

This capstone study took place at Hawks Elementary School (HES) and investigated 2nd grade teachers' perceptions, experiences, and knowledge around how to effectively teach RC to elementary learners, by using and scaffolding complex texts. In this chapter, I address the following four key findings and supporting themes.

- Finding 1: *Benchmark Advance* provides basic supports and scaffolds of complex texts, but teacher knowledge and expertise maximize RC instruction.
    - Theme 1.1: Limitations of a scripted program
    - Theme 1.2: Value of a knowledgeable teacher
- Finding 2: *Benchmark Advance* supports RC through targeted mini-lessons but has limited scaffolding for MLLs and provides inadequate practice opportunities.
    - Theme 2.1: Concise, focused, and structured RC lessons
    - Theme 2.2: Insufficient scaffolding for MLLs
    - Theme 2.3: Limited opportunities for RC application
- Finding 3: Although the initial implementation of *Benchmark Advance* was challenging, teachers acknowledged the benefits of a comprehensive, core reading program for RC.
    - Theme 3.1: Positive teacher perceptions around a structured core reading program
    - Theme 3.2: Increased rigor, student engagement, and accountability
    - Theme 3.3: Instructional shifts in RC
- Finding 4: Teachers reported feeling unprepared and lacking confidence in how to provide effective RC instruction, due to a lack of experience teaching with complex texts.
    - Theme 4.1: Text complexity was not discussed prior to *Benchmark Advance*
    - Theme 4.2: Additional teacher support for RC instruction

- Theme 4.3: Interaction between the text and the reader

Finding 1: *Benchmark Advance* provides basic supports and scaffolds of complex texts, but teacher knowledge and expertise maximize RC instruction.

The first finding emerged from the document analysis of *Benchmark Advance* artifacts and was further bolstered by the focus group and teacher interviews. While *Benchmark Advance* provided helpful starting points for teachers, the recommended supports for students were perceived as limited and lacking. As a result, teacher participants perceived that high-quality core reading programs, while helpful, often required the professional knowledge and expertise of teachers to maximize RC instruction using complex texts. Therefore, the interactions of teacher knowledge, experience, and beliefs of effective RC instruction enabled teachers to more effectively scaffold complex texts for readers.

Theme 1.1: Limitations of a Scripted Program

When completing the document analysis protocol of *Benchmark Advance*, a few common concepts emerged across the four complex texts and eight corresponding RC lessons within the core program. First, when unpacking the text complexity (see Figure 4.1 for an example), *Benchmark Advance* included a Lexile level and a qualitative breakdown of the text across four categories: 1) purpose and levels of meaning, 2) structure, 3) language conventionality and clarity, and 4) knowledge demands. Each of these categories was rated on a scale of 1 (low complexity) to 4 (highest complexity), and the sum score of all four categories resulted in a level of complexity for the text:

- Low complexity (rating of $\leq$5)
- Moderate complexity (rating of 6-9)
- Substantial complexity (rating of 10-13)

- Highest complexity (rating of 14-16)

Alongside the rating for each category, *Benchmark Advance* included reasons and examples from the text on why a component of the text received its particular rating, though the text complexity chart (Figure 4.1) does not include any suggestions for scaffolding complex texts.

Specific to RC lessons, there are three lesson types in *Benchmark Advance*: 1) first read (e.g., when a new complex text is introduced and read for the first time), 2) close read: vocabulary (e.g., a focused mini-lesson relating to explicit vocabulary within the complex text), and 3) close read: RC strategy (e.g., a focused mini-lesson relating to a specific RC strategy or skill that students apply to the complex text). Across all of the "first read" lessons (n=3), scaffolds are built-in for three different groups of students: 1) students who need support with vocabulary and language, 2) students who have strong decoding but weak comprehension skills, and 3) students who need support in reading unfamiliar texts.

Figure 4.1

Benchmark Advance Text Complexity Chart (Unit 5, Week 3) "Robots Go to School" (2nd Grade)

Week 3: Extended Read 2:
"Robots Go to School"

Informational Social Studies/Lexile 510L

Dimension of Complexity	Score	Notes
Purpose and Levels of Meaning	2	• Some analysis is required to determine the author's purpose as there are themes beyond what is stated in the title of text.
Structure	3	• The text is divided into discrete, sequential sections with facts that build upon each other. The italicized introduction and sidebar present additional modes of communication.
Language Conventionality and Clarity	3	• The text shifts reportorial style from a section about one boy's experiences with a robot to a more formal objective presentation of information. • The language is familiar. Academic words, such as **maneuver**, are defined directly in the text.
Knowledge Demands	3	• Robots and technology are high-interest topics, but many readers may not have direct experience with robots in school. Readers will benefit from background knowledge on other uses of robots in industry and other work environments.
TOTAL QM	**11**	**SUBSTANTIAL COMPLEXITY ●●●**

Regardless of the text, the scaffolds during the "first read" lessons remained the same. For students who need vocabulary and language support (e.g., MLLs), *Benchmark Advance* suggests previewing the text with a picture walk, reading the text aloud to the students, and

splitting the text into meaningful chunks to stop and define key vocabulary and paraphrase the text. For students who are able to decode but struggle with comprehension, *Benchmark Advance* suggests students read the text independently but stop after meaningful chunks to respond to within-text questions and monitor their comprehension. Finally, for students who have difficulty reading unfamiliar texts, *Benchmark Advance* suggests having students partner read and answer questions after meaningful chunks. These supports were noted across all "first read" lessons (n=3) with no variations offered based on text complexity ratings, text topic, or genre.

Although some of these supports aligned with evidence-based ways to scaffold complex texts (e.g., chunking the text, teacher questioning), there were missed opportunities for additional scaffolds (e.g., more detailed and explicit RC strategy instruction, building background knowledge, interactive preteaching of key vocabulary). While the "first read" lessons did include either a teacher review of a RC strategy (e.g., self-monitoring, rereading for clarity, using context clues) or practice for fluency, these were typically only allotted a 2-3 sentence script within the lesson, and teachers noted these were insufficient models for their students.

During the close read: vocabulary and close read: RC strategy lesson types (n=5), there were no specific scaffolds mentioned to support students in accessing the complex texts. Similarly, teachers noted certain limitations of *Benchmark Advance*, particularly in relation to the scaffolds or scripted components of RC instruction. For example, Talia noted that "the supports in general, are not developmentally appropriate for the intended students, regardless if they're a language learner or not…the supports given are not effective or enough for our students" and Kate echoed this thought when she wished for "[*Benchmark*] to have more scaffolds."

Another concern teachers had was following the teacher script for RC lessons with 100% fidelity due to (teacher-felt) needed revisions to the script. Anne expressed the importance of

being more selective in reading from the teacher script, noting that sometimes "there was a disconnect in what the [complex] text was saying versus what the teacher script said, and it just didn't align." Moreover, Kate and Emma felt overwhelmed by the teacher script, emphasizing that "it's just too wordy…I wish it was worded differently and the script was more to the point [because]…sometimes I get lost in the lessons" (Kate), and "*Benchmark* is very wordy, and I want to expose them to the words. [But] these are not words that I would use with kids" (Emma). In a similar sentiment, Emma also expressed frustration with certain components of the *Benchmark Advance* script:

> It's almost daily where I'm like, we're not doing it this way. I'm trying to say less things. I'll even show them [the students], this is what it [*Benchmark*] wants me to tell you, but it doesn't make sense. I'm trying to follow the rules and be a good teacher and go by the book. But the book's making me nuts.

In response to these frustrations and limitations, a common theme that emerged from both the focus group and the interviews, is how teachers use their own knowledge and expertise to build in additional supports that go beyond the basic recommendations of *Benchmark Advance*.

Theme 1.2: Value of a Knowledgeable Teacher

Drawing from both the theoretical and conceptual frameworks established in Chapter 1, the role of a teacher is an essential part of effective RC instruction. Grounded in the Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977), teachers with high self-efficacy recognize the value of their own role and influence in student achievement, have confidence in their own capabilities to set and complete a task, and feel competent and confident in providing effective instruction.

This idea of self-efficacy carries over into the conceptual framework; more specifically, how teachers intentionally scaffold complex texts during RC instruction as influenced by teacher knowledge, experience, and beliefs.

Research further highlights how scripted programs for RC are shown to be more effective for students when paired with teacher-planned instruction (Hall et al., 2021). As discussed in Chapter 2, students who received partially scripted lessons paired with teacher planning outperformed students who received fully scripted lessons (without teacher input) on RC posttest measurements (Hall et al., 2021). This study suggests that while scripted lessons can be helpful in supporting RC outcomes for students, teacher knowledge and input leads to higher-quality instruction and better supports students' RC outcomes.

Overall, teacher participants acknowledged their instructional role in the RC process and shared examples of how they support student access and comprehension of complex texts. Though teachers at HES are still building their self-efficacy and confidence in presenting RC through the use and scaffolding of complex texts, participant reflections demonstrated increased self-efficacy and confidence after a year of implementation with *Benchmark Advance*. In fact, during the 2024-2025 school year at HES, teachers utilized both their knowledge and experience to build self-efficacy and demonstrated increased persistence in learning how to effectively teach RC through the use of complex texts within *Benchmark Advance*. The increased teacher self-efficacy is likely due to the new experiences gained with implementing a new core program, and marked a shift in instruction schoolwide.

Participant responses highlighted how teacher knowledge allows for adaptability in instruction, in order to better meet student needs, and how teachers often need to rely on their experience and knowledge to make real-time adjustments to best support student learning. For

example, Naomi stated that when implementing RC lessons from *Benchmark Advance*, "there's been times where I've had to just use my teacher instinct and kind of add in additional things," acknowledging that the scripted program doesn't always include everything that students need.

To further illustrate this point, Anne shared an example of how a specific text, *Yeh-Shen* (a Chinese retelling of Cinderella) was missing relevant context: "There were pieces missing in that version of the retelling and that limited the comprehension…I had an unabridged, paperback of *Yeh-Shen* that I read to them…then they were able to fill in some gaps that were missing from the retelling." She explained that the added read-aloud provided additional context, and she felt this support was a necessary addition to aid her students' comprehension of this complex text. In fact, Anne, the participant with the most years of teaching experience, admitted that for some *Benchmark Advance* lessons, "I skim the text and I do my own thing, because sometimes *Benchmark* doesn't make sense, or I don't agree with it."

Within the focus group interview, Anne shared that "something I've built in that's not in *Benchmark*, is after introducing the vocabulary, we highlight the words in the text. We highlight that sentence, and we talk about it." This strategy ensures that students are first being explicitly taught the vocabulary words, finding the words within the complex text, and then understanding the words more thoroughly by talking about how it is used in the context of the story. Although within the *Benchmark Advance* RC lessons, there is some explicit teaching of a few vocabulary words from the complex texts, teachers often stated that the instruction was not comprehensive enough or neglected to cover all words that were essential to comprehension of the text. Other participants in the focus group also shared that they apply similar strategies, specifically spending more instructional time on explicit vocabulary instruction. In fact, Talia noted that:

> Vocabulary is the biggest struggle and need for RC instruction…we [the ESOL team] also build in picture support which is not included in the program…it [*Benchmark*] typically only includes one or two brief sentences or ideas on how teachers can support students [with vocabulary]. Therefore, the ESOL teachers have to Google to find picture supports, match the definition to the context of the text or story, and expand upon the vocabulary to help students make connections.

Each of these examples highlight how the 2nd grade teacher participants at HES utilize their own knowledge, beliefs, and experience to effectively teach RC by scaffolding complex texts, adapting their instruction to meet the diverse learning needs of their students, and knowing when to supplement or build from the basic lesson structures and supports in a scripted reading program. Previously, the main concern with RC instruction at HES was the lack of structure; however, Emma provided additional insight into the adoption of *Benchmark Advance*, saying "at least now there's some universal consistency, so now it's not the lack of resource, it's the role of the teacher." In other words, now that an evidence-aligned core program has been adopted and implemented to support students' RC, the main focus is on the effectiveness of the teacher and their role in how to best enhance RC instruction within the constraints of a scripted program.

Finding 2: *Benchmark Advance* supports RC through targeted mini-lessons but has limited scaffolding for MLLs and provides inadequate practice opportunities.

The second finding that emerged from the data analysis highlights the focused and targeted approach through concise RC mini-lessons, but also underscores inadequate supports for MLLs and limited practice opportunities for student application of RC. Overall, teachers had positive perceptions of the *Benchmark Advance* RC lessons due to its consistent and clear structures. However, teacher participants acknowledged the suggested scaffolds for MLLs were

often inadequate and non-specific for each complex text, noting this is especially concerning given HES's nearly 70% MLL population. Furthermore, the document analysis highlighted the limited practice opportunities for students to apply RC skills. In order to address these limitations, teachers drew upon their knowledge, experience, and beliefs to supplement or expand upon these initial RC lessons, in order to more effectively scaffold complex texts.

Theme 2.1: Concise, Focused, and Structured RC Lessons

Based on the document analysis, all eight RC lessons were only 15-20 minutes in length (15 minutes for the "close read" lessons, and 20 minutes for the "first read" lessons). Since *Benchmark Advance* uses a spaced learning model, RC skills spiral and reappear in multiple units. Therefore, the program's expectation is that students are developing multiple RC skills over a period of time by interacting with a variety of complex texts, rather than aiming to achieve mastery within a single lesson, week, or even unit. Furthermore, since the analyzed texts (n=4) were considered to be either moderately complex or substantially complex, the targeted RC lessons helped keep both the teachers and students focused on a particular part of the text, rather than trying to comprehend all facets of the text simultaneously. The program also integrates repeated readings of the texts, with a different focus on each reread, thus giving students multiple opportunities to read, access, and build comprehension of the text over time. The "first read" lessons are organized into six parts (2-5 minutes allotted per part):

1) Build vocabulary: explicitly teach key vocabulary words from the text
2) Introduce the text: set a purpose for reading and preview the text
3) Read and annotate: students read a specific section of text and annotate based on the lesson's purpose
4) Share and reflect: students share-out their annotations with peers

5) Review strategy: teacher models a specific strategy to support comprehension or fluency
6) Apply understanding: students independently apply RC skill, often by reading a different section of the complex text

Similarly, for both the "close read: vocabulary" and "close read: RC strategy" lessons, *Benchmark Advance* follows a consistent four-part lesson structure:

1) Set a purpose for reading: the purpose is aligned with the lesson's RC strategy focus
2) Constructive conversations: students work collaboratively to read, annotate, discuss, and apply RC skills within the text
3) Share and reflect: students respond to an oral or written prompt
4) Apply understanding: students complete an independent task, aligned with the RC lesson

Regardless of the specific RC lesson type, the consistent structures became familiar to both the teacher and the students, making it easier to learn the routines over time. In fact, in the focus group, participants highlighted the benefits of the consistent structures and routines, with Anne saying, "they're [the students] familiar with the routine. They know that certain days we focus on message, on certain days we focus on illustrations. They have picked up on the pattern because it all is cyclical." Other participants agreed, noting that the routines and structures have helped them as teachers, but also the consistency for students has helped them learn what to expect each week for RC instruction.

Beyond the routines, participants also discussed the benefits of targeted RC mini-lessons, in helping keep the focus of the lesson clear and supporting students' RC development. For instance, Emma acknowledged that "it helps me understand that sometimes I need to focus in on certain parts or aspects of the story, rather than the whole story." Whereas Naomi pointed out that "with *Benchmark*, it's allowed us to practice many skills in one week and continue to spiral

so that eventually, after several units, our students will have a better grasp of that skill." Each of these teachers highlighted the value *Benchmark Advance* provides, by having students engage with a complex text multiple times through targeted RC lessons, establishing a specific comprehension focus for each text reading, and incrementally building up RC skills.

Theme 2.2: Insufficient Scaffolding for MLLs

Although there were clear benefits within the RC lessons, particularly due to its concise, focused, and well-structured approach, one noted limitation was the insufficient scaffolding embedded in RC lessons specific to MLLs. Starting with the document analysis, all three lesson types recommended the same general supports for MLLs. More specifically, *Benchmark Advance* categorizes the level of support for MLLs by "light support," "moderate support," and "substantial support." Generally, for the "first read" lessons, light support entails the teacher discussing meanings of key vocabulary words before reading, having MLLs partner read and pause after each paragraph, and retell the story and apply the specific lesson skill through the use of sentence stems. For MLLs at the moderate level of support, *Benchmark Advance* recommends that the teacher explains key vocabulary words using visuals and examples prior to reading, and that the students read in pairs and stop every 2-3 sentences to retell and practice the RC skill. Finally, for MLLs at the substantial level of support, teachers were recommended to explain the key vocabulary words using visuals and gestures, say the words with the students, read-aloud specific sections of the text, and ask questions to support student understanding.

While the RC lesson scaffolds for MLLs typically include explicit vocabulary instruction and supports for reading the text (e.g., read-alouds, partner reading, small group), there is not any discussion related to building up student background knowledge, helping students make connections to home languages or with the text prior to reading, or building necessary

prerequisite knowledge about the anticipated topic. Instead, the focus is mainly on vocabulary instruction, and the added scaffolds are generally just increasing explicitness of vocabulary instruction, stopping more often while reading, or reading the text aloud. While these supports are beneficial, they alone are insufficient to fully meet the RC needs of MLLs. Based on research cited in Chapter 2, additional scaffolds can increase accessibility to complex texts, such as increasing oral language response opportunities and incorporating explicit instruction that targets language comprehension skills.

During the focus group, supports regarding MLLs came up in the discussion. Specifically, Naomi reported that "with the population we serve, we're putting in a lot of scaffolds, a lot of rereading, and a lot of trying to work with students who are going to have a harder time understanding what's happening in the text." Furthermore, Talia pointed out that the *Benchmark Advance* program is limited in supporting MLLs, because the few "vocabulary words [selected] in the beginning of the unit doesn't really help students build up the necessary language to read and comprehend the complex texts…the vocabulary isn't built into the lessons to support [MLLs'] comprehension of the text." Although the "first read" lesson for each complex text does touch upon the main vocabulary for the unit, multiple participants pointed out that the handful of words are insufficient and instructional guidance is not explicit enough, particularly when referring to the story or guiding students to the "apply understanding" task, which typically requires more complex vocabulary and word usage, especially for our MLLs.

Theme 2.3: Limited Opportunities for RC Application

While the RC lessons within *Benchmark Advance* typically followed the gradual release model (i.e., I do, we do, you do), there were generally only 1-2 practice opportunities afforded to students per lesson. While the intent is not to achieve mastery within a single RC lesson,

providing students with multiple opportunities to practice applying RC skills, particularly with corrective feedback, would further support students' RC development. However, if students struggle with applying a specific RC skill during a lesson, then *Benchmark Advance* recommends turning the applied practice opportunity into more teacher modeling, with no additional practice opportunities provided.

For example, in the close read: vocabulary lesson (Unit 6, Day 2, Lesson 5) for the text *Why the Sky is Far Away*, there are only two vocabulary words suggested for instruction-*scrumptious* and *wasteful*. While the teacher provides initial modeling to help students get started with *scrumptious*, *Benchmark Advances* suggests that if students are struggling to respond, then the teacher should provide complete modeling of the word *scrumptious* within the text and explain how it means *delicious.* If teachers end up modeling *scrumptious*, then students are only given one more opportunity to determine the meaning of an unfamiliar word using context clues, with the word *wasteful*. This example highlights how limited practice opportunities can hinder the intent of the lesson, particularly if one of the two practice opportunities is used for teacher modeling, and no additional words are provided for further practice or application.

In another (15-min.) lesson of *Why the Sky is Far Away*, readers are tasked with determining the central message of the story by responding to the prompt: "In your own words, explain the central message of *'Why the Sky is Far Away*.' Support your answer with evidence from the text." Teacher modeling is embedded into the lesson (e.g., think-aloud of how to use details in the text and character reactions to help determine the central message). Students are then given time to respond to the prompt and discuss their answers with their group. However, if students struggle to determine the central message of the story, then the teacher is tasked with modeling step-by-step how to determine the central message and ultimately tell students the

answer. While this does support students in the moment if they are struggling with determining the central message, there are no additional prompts, scaffolds, or practice opportunities for students to work in determining the central message of the story. Both of these examples illustrate the limited opportunities students have in applying RC skills within the context of a complex text, particularly if students struggle and additional teacher modeling is required.

Beyond the infrequent student opportunities within core *Benchmark Advance* comprehension lessons, teachers also frequently cited the lack of dedicated small-group instruction as another limiting factor for student application of RC skills. In her interview, Naomi acknowledged that students need "more opportunities to practice applying RC skills," as well as "more practice with vocabulary, [because] the vocabulary for some texts were much more complex." Additionally, Emma voiced concerns that there was limited time for small-group instruction and noted that "there is a need for small-group instruction [in order to] increase opportunities for more guided practice." The lack of time available for small groups frequently came up in the focus group discussion and teacher interviews (see Table 4.1), recognizing the benefits of small group structures and how it provides additional practice opportunities for students with teacher support.

Table 4.1

Participant Responses Regarding the Lack of Small-Group Instruction

Participant (pseudonym)	Selected Quotes	Researcher Takeaway
Anne	"I just wish that we could build in small-group…that's the piece that I think is still missing…As a teacher, personally, I feel like I was most effective in small groups…that has been take away, and it's been very difficult."	Anne feels confident in her capabilities to provide effective small-group instruction, and now that dedicated small-group time has been taken away, it has been a difficult transition.

Emma	"I am sad that I have not done any small-group instruction for reading this year…I need small-group."	Emma shares her feelings in wanting to provide small-group instruction for RC.
Naomi	"Does that mean we need to have an hour of small-group every day? No, but I would like to actually have those 30 minutes with the kids that I know need that extra support."	Naomi recognizes that she doesn't need to go back to having large chunks of daily small-group time but still wants some dedicated time to provide small-group support.
Focus Group (multiple participants)	"Last year I was able to dedicate [consistent] time to small-group instruction." "I have not been able to teach small-group this year at all. I feel that as a teacher, small-group is my strong point." "[Students are struggling] because we don't have the time and opportunity to do daily small-group instruction."	Teachers have struggled with this shift to predominately whole group instruction for core reading and are having difficulties with finding consistent time for small-group instruction, which limits student opportunities for applying RC skills.

These examples across different data sources highlight a significant gap in practice opportunities that could further benefit students' RC development, especially when engaging with complex texts in both whole group and small group contexts.

Finding 3: Although the initial implementation of *Benchmark Advance* was challenging, teachers acknowledged the benefits of a comprehensive, core reading program for RC.

During the beginning months of *Benchmark Advance* implementation, teacher participants shared initial challenges in following a new program with fidelity and shifting their understandings and beliefs of effective core reading instruction. Particularly because the integration of *Benchmark Advance* directly opposed participants' prior experience around teaching RC. During the focus group, multiple participants discussed how overwhelming the program was initially, and that it was challenging students and teachers alike. Naomi

acknowledged that, “in the beginning, it’s hard, but once you stay in the trenches and get used to it, now we can see the benefits.” Anne concurred and stated that, “the first unit [especially] was rough, but I think we made it rough, and that was our fault.” Another common barrier that kept surfacing during data analysis was the pacing of instruction with participants having to shift their mindset from lesson mastery to spiraled instruction across lessons and units. According to Emma, pacing was difficult “because we kept getting caught up in the weeds.” Anne agreed, noting that “we’ve been teaching to mastery,” and Naomi echoed this sentiment, sharing that:

> In the past we’re teaching this skill, this one time and either we’re never going to touch it again, or we’re going to do it seven months from now. It never was this ongoing thing. But we’ve learned to trust the process, don’t teach to mastery, everything spirals. Which, I’m glad we were able to have that experience for ourselves.

Ultimately, the teacher participants acknowledged that the initial implementation of *Benchmark Advance* was difficult. However, as both the teachers and the students got used to the structures and using complex texts, students’ ability to access and comprehend what they were reading improved since the beginning of the year; participants reported these gains were “significant.” Finally, in a thoughtful reflection, Naomi encapsulated the need for instructional change at HES:

> In reality, what we were doing hasn’t been working. If what we were doing [previously] was working, our students would be performing better, and they’re not. We’re getting kids from other grade-levels that are not performing well, and we’re sending kids off to 3rd grade who are not performing well.

Theme 3.1: Positive Teacher Perceptions Around a Structured Core Reading Program

Despite these initial challenges with implementing *Benchmark*, participants shared overall positive perceptions regarding the use of complex texts during RC instruction within the

Benchmark Advance program. In addition to multiple targeted lessons centered around each complex text, teachers also reflected on how implementing a high-quality core reading program helped support the RC development of students throughout the year. For example, Talia noted how *Benchmark Advance* facilitates students' RC with its structure, by stating, "I like how *Benchmark* is broken down and asks specific questions to students." Additionally, Anne highlighted the benefits of students having access to the complex texts, noting that "it's helped, because the kids have the texts in front of them, and because there are more repeated reads [of the text] for them, it's definitely helped their comprehension."

In fact, each of the teacher participants were thoughtful and honest in their reflections of *Benchmark Advance,* recognizing the value that a structured, high-quality core reading program brings to HES, highlighting the importance of students working within complex texts, and acknowledging the increase in student engagement in RC instruction (see Table 4.2). These excerpts from participants collectively illustrate that teachers perceive *Benchmark Advance* as an effective core program for enhancing students' RC of complex texts, primarily through structured engagement, targeted mini-lessons, and rigorous, high-quality instruction.

Table 4.2

Participant Reflections on the Benefits of Benchmark Advance

Participants (pseudonym)	Comments About *Benchmark Advance*	Researcher Takeaway
Anne	Even some of the texts that I found really boring, they [the students] enjoyed…**I haven't found a text that the kids haven't liked**… they still talk about [texts] from the beginning of the year… **they've pretty much liked all the stories.**	The complex texts are high-interest stories and topics that keep the students engaged in the learning.
Emma	I like how [*Benchmark*] is **rigorous** and it really **asks some thoughtful**	*Benchmark Advance* is accessible to students, and fosters deeper

	questions…it's **engaging** because the text is right there at their hands.	thinking, which is essential for comprehending complex texts.
Kate	I do think [*Benchmark*] has helped, because my **students have grown** a lot in their **reading comprehension.**	Kate recognizes the direct impact that a core reading program has on students' RC development.
Naomi	I'm able to have my students **engage more with the texts**, because we're **breaking it down in so many different ways**.	The complex texts are engaging for the students and lends itself to multiple, targeted RC mini-lessons.
Talia	The **cultural connections of the texts** connected with our **own diverse student populations.**	*Benchmark Advance* supports RC by providing relatable contexts and engaging texts for students.

Theme 3.2: Increased Rigor, Student Engagement, and Accountability

Participants' responses indicated that *Benchmark Advance* increased rigor by establishing high expectations for students and holding them accountable for their learning. Previously, students would only engage in one or two RC activities or prompts based on teacher read-alouds. Now with *Benchmark Advance,* Naomi pointed out that:

> Because the texts are so complex, we have to chunk it and give them several experiences with it to make sure that they're completely comprehending what they're reading. I feel like we're spending a lot more time in one text. And while that seems redundant, it's actually been really beneficial for myself as a teacher, but especially for my students.

Participants also noted that the implementation of *Benchmark Advance* increased overall rigor and established high expectations for all learners, regardless of language status or reading ability. This, in effect, unintentionally addressed historically inequitable practices that commonly occurred during reading instruction (e.g., grouping students by reading levels, limiting student access to complex texts based on their decoding capabilities). Naomi reflected that since implementing *Benchmark*, "I have never once thought that something would be too hard for

them or that they weren't going to attempt it or do…because you never know what your kids are going to be capable of until you let them try." Similarly, during the focus group, Naomi shared:

> In the past, we just haven't had enough rigor, we haven't been pushing our kids enough. And I feel like this year is the first year where I've actually challenged my kids, even my higher students, who already know how to read, and made them think harder.

Another common shift noted during data analysis is how *Benchmark Advance* provided a more structured approach to rigorous instruction. For example, Anne highlighted that *Benchmark Advance* "very clearly laid out text complexity, the vocabulary, and all of the different components of reading comprehension," which established a structured approach to effective RC instruction and helped teachers present complex texts to their students. Naomi also remarked that the *Benchmark Advance* program has "definitely helped structure my classroom in a way where my students are able to access complex text."

Finally, participants noted that the use of complex texts embedded with rich vocabulary increased the rigor for students. Naomi, mentioned *Benchmark Advance* helped students engage with "texts that are more rigorous, have richer [and] more complex vocabulary, complex sentences…and students have to do a little bit more critical thinking to understand what they're reading." This exposure to rich vocabulary is essential for language development. Additionally, Anne acknowledged that the complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* are "texts that make you think beyond the surface level…[they] have rich vocabulary and…kind of leave the reader having to infer some of the text elements."

In addition to spending more time within a single complex text, students had more opportunities and increased expectations to directly interact with and comprehend these complex texts. For example, Emma noted that the accessibility of the complex texts increased student

engagement during RC instruction. In her interview, Emma stated, “it’s engaging, because the text is in their hands. Would they be so engaged without teaching the lesson? Probably not. You can check out the pictures, but to actually read, the comprehension lessons help make the text more engaging.” While participants noted in their one-on-one interviews that the specific complex texts also directly influenced student engagement during RC lessons, the pairing of RC lessons with the complex texts increased student engagement overall. Similarly, Kate shared that the students enjoyed having their own copy of the texts, “[the students like] that it has colorful illustrations. I love that they are able to engage with the text and annotate.”

Teachers also noted that the implementation of *Benchmark Advance* has helped curb student apathy and disengagement. During the focus group discussion, Anne shared, “I think there are less kids [this year] who are apathetic [about reading], because the other students are engaged in learning, reading, and discussing the text. It makes them want to be a part of that too.” Additionally, Naomi brought up the use of Kagan structures (i.e., cooperative learning structures intended to hold all students accountable for participating in academic discussions) in her RC instruction. While the integration of Kagan structures is a district-wide initiative, it is not a part of *Benchmark Advance*; therefore, Naomi used her own teacher knowledge to embed Kagan into her instruction. She noted that students were more engaged in the conversations when Kagan structures were utilized within *Benchmark Advance*, saying “without Kagan structures, *Benchmark* wouldn’t be as effective, at least for reading comprehension.” Naomi’s experience with using Kagan structures to facilitate academic conversations among students, demonstrated a way to enhance student engagement and comprehension during RC instruction.

Theme 3.3: Instructional Shifts in RC

Teachers reflected upon their RC instructional practices prior to the implementation of *Benchmark Advance* and identified shifts in their RC instruction this year. For example, Anne acknowledged that "*Benchmark* is the first curriculum I've had where it has very clearly laid out text complexity [and] all the different components of reading comprehension…it's given me a different lens in which to view how I present instruction to students."

Teachers consistently noted the benefits of students grappling with complex texts for a variety of purposes over multiple readings, in terms of supporting RC development. In her teacher interview, Emma pointed out that due to repeated readings of each complex text:

> It's definitely helped the comprehension, because while they may not get it the first time or the second time, we read [the text] throughout the week, and we read it for multiple lessons, so they [the students] may get something on a reread that they may not have gotten the first time.

In a related comment made during the focus group, Anne stated that, "I've always told the kids, good readers read something more than once, but now, we actually get to practice that, because the kids always have their own text in front of them." These teacher insights recognize that repeated readings of complex texts paired with intentional RC instruction is critical for deepening comprehension.

Another big change in RC instruction was the shift from teacher read-alouds of complex texts towards student reading of complex texts. Historically at HES, teachers read aloud complex texts to students, using them as mentor texts for comprehension instruction. In Kate's interview, she pointed out that "last year, we had read-alouds and we were able to teach [RC] with that." With the implementation of *Benchmark Advance*, however, 2nd grade students were now

expected to independently access and comprehend complex texts, rather than having the teacher read the texts. Moreover, the previous teacher read-alouds were not intentionally chosen with long-term RC goals in mind. Multiple participants during the focus group and the teacher interviews talked about their previous practice, sharing how the team selected mentor texts to read aloud during RC instruction. Participants explained that these mentor texts for RC instruction were typically selected based on availability, convenience, and anticipated student interest, and text complexity was not taken into account.

During the focus group, Anne acknowledged that, "we made team decisions about the text we picked for our read-aloud, but I don't know if they were always the most complex [texts] compared to the ones we are reading now [in *Benchmark Advance*]." Naomi chimed in, and stated, "we still pulled *Scholastic* read-alouds, but then we also pulled other whole-group texts based on if every team member had a physical copy of the book." Emma concluded that, "[text selection] was essentially a free-for-all, and [was often] a thematic read-aloud." During teacher interviews, participants also noted the previous limitations of how texts for RC instruction were selected. For example, Naomi stated:

> I don't know if the texts were the most complex [compared to] the ones we are reading now. I don't know if we were on purpose thinking that, but a lot of times [we picked] a story that the kids can relate to, or it's a story that they'll easily be able to grasp. It was more so trying to give them something that we know they could easily access in order to do a skill. But sometimes that might not have always been the best thing for them, because, for vocabulary [for example], we probably missed out on a lot of opportunities to find books that were richer in vocabulary.

Anne commented on the shift from read alouds for RC instruction to the complex texts that students read in *Benchmark Advance*:

> With other curriculums that I've used in the past, it was always me reading the text to the kids. Now it's the kids reading the text to themselves. And a lot of the lift is off of me, and the lift is now on the kids.

This change indicates a shift towards a more student-centered approach in RC instruction, where students are more actively engaged in their reading and held to higher expectations of accessing and comprehending complex, grade-levels texts. Naomi suggested that this new approach of allowing students to have their own experiences with complex texts fostered deeper engagement and comprehension of what they read. In her interview, Naomi shared, "I feel like a lot of times when we read things for our kids, especially those who already know how to read, they're not always absorbing everything in the same way that they would if they read it themselves." This statement suggests that students gain a deeper understanding of the text when they read it themselves (multiple times). Overall, these comments highlighted a shift in teacher knowledge, beliefs, and experiences regarding the value and importance of complex texts in RC instruction.

Finding 4: Teachers reported feeling unprepared and lacking confidence in how to provide effective RC instruction, due to a lack of experience teaching with complex texts.

At least in the past decade, *Benchmark Advance* is the first core reading program at HES that centered 2nd grade RC instruction around the use of complex texts. Therefore, all of the teacher participants shared their initial lack of comfort, confidence, and knowledge with implementing *Benchmark Advance*. In particular, the 2nd grade teachers lacked prior experience with using complex texts and thinking about text complexity in their core instruction. In recent years, even though weekly, grade-level collaborative learning teams (CLTs) took place at HES

for planning RC instruction, text complexity was not discussed, which led to further gaps in teacher knowledge and skewed perceptions about effective RC instruction.

Theme 4.1: Text Complexity Was Not Discussed Prior to Benchmark Advance

When asked about their prior experience and knowledge about teaching with complex texts, the majority of participants acknowledged that *Benchmark Advance* was the first time they had ever considered the importance of text complexity. Anne acknowledged that "it's not a confidence thing. I think it's just that I've never really thought about text complexity before." Likewise, Talia shared, "I didn't really have a lot of experience teaching with complex texts before this year." Even teachers who have been within the district for nearly a decade shared that *Benchmark Advance* was their first experience in thinking about and discussing the role of complex texts in RC instruction. Emma mentioned, "I haven't had an actual resource [before]. So [in terms of experience] none, it was up to me to choose the books and the reading passages for the students, [often] based on their abilities."

Even Kate, a participant who had prior teaching experience with a different core reading program (i.e., *Houghton Mifflin Harcourt*) felt that she was lacking the necessary experience, noting "I have a little experience [one year] …still, I would not say I'm an experienced person with [complex texts]." Similarly, Naomi noted:

> I don't really have much [experience] just because when we were using [texts from] *Scholastic*…we weren't really considering the complexity. We were just like, "hey this is probably going to be a good book to fit the needs of the standard that we need to teach." And we never really considered, you know, if it was complex.

The lack of teacher experience in teaching RC with complex texts became evident from an analysis of multiple quotes and excerpts from the collected data. In fact, these common

participant responses indicated that many teachers were navigating the challenges of teaching RC with complex texts without prior experience or the requisite knowledge of how to scaffold these complex texts to make them accessible and comprehensible to their students.

Theme 4.2: Additional Teacher Support for RC Instruction

Participants shared that additional supports and structures need to be put into place to increase their confidence in providing high-quality core RC instruction using of complex texts. Many specifically noted instructional planning time (e.g., CLTs). While teachers acknowledged the benefits of *Benchmark Advance*, after adjusting to the program's structure and use of complex texts, participants still shared the need for additional supports to improve their instructional practice.

The first noted area of teacher support was in the integration of RC lessons from *Benchmark Advance*. According to Emma, the 2nd grade team "needs to have conversations around the learning targets and the standards and also be more selective in [following] what the teacher script says." Additionally, Anne described how there were sometimes disconnects between the complex text and what the teacher script provided, and she felt the misalignment made lessons difficult for herself and her students. For example, she noted that sometimes "it was hard to teach this [text or lesson] to kids…because it didn't make sense to me, so I was struggling to make it make sense to the kids." Similarly, Naomi pointed out that for certain texts, "the texts were complex for the students, but then the reading comprehension lessons were also difficult for students to grasp…I wasn't always sure of how to get them to [understand]." Furthermore, Kate acknowledged, "sometimes I don't feel too confident with what is being asked or what I have to do with the lesson… [I need] more support in instruction of these texts." These discussions around specific RC lessons would likely occur through CLTs.

Beyond CLT discussions, however, some teachers preferred more explicit teacher support and development regarding professional knowledge. For example, Emma wants "more workshops [and] being provided with more information about the [complex] texts in advance." Additionally, rather than just a CLT discussion talking about the levels of complexity, Emma prefers to "study [complex] texts together" with her team in order to feel more prepared. Similarly, Talia commented, "I need additional professional development and supports in understanding my students and English Language Learners' needs, and how to better support their needs…I want to know how to breakdown [the texts] and scaffold the learning."

Another common support brought up was in learning how to more effectively differentiate core instruction based on diverse student needs. Emma acknowledged that "whole group is tough when [the kids] have so many different abilities…[and] I want to know what I can say or do to make [the lesson] click. I want to be better prepared." The challenges with effectively differentiating instruction for diverse student populations was discussed in the focus group. Talia said, "In the beginning it was a lot…you feel that you're not adequate as a teacher. The kids aren't learning, so you're trying to figure out what you need to do to fix it." Ultimately, teachers want to become more knowledgeable with the specific complex texts themselves, as well as how to teach with these complex texts and more intentionally incorporate specific teaching strategies or scaffolds that best meet their students' needs.

Theme 4.3: Interaction between the Text and the Reader

While the structures of teaching RC with complex texts remained consistent across the analyzed *Benchmark Advance* lessons, teachers reflected upon specific complex texts that were either: 1) highly engaging and comprehensible to their students or 2) difficult for their students to connect with and comprehend. Thinking back to the RAND model (Chapter 1), RC is based on

the interactions between the reader, the text, and the activity (Snow, 2002). When probed, teachers noted that the role of the reader (e.g., background knowledge, experiences, personal interest and engagement, language proficiency, reading skills) and the specific complex texts (e.g., knowledge demands, genre/topic, text structure, vocabulary) heavily influenced students' RC of these texts and their level of success with the related comprehension task.

When teachers selected complex texts from *Benchmark Advance* that students fully comprehended, common themes emerged: 1) personal connections, 2) high interest and engagement with the text, 3) relevance to the real-world, 4) strong alignment between the text and corresponding RC skill, and 5) relevant background knowledge and vocabulary. During the individual teacher interviews, participants were given a list of all 2nd grade complex texts from *Benchmark Advance*. By this point of data collection, teachers were either wrapping up Unit 6 or had started teaching Unit 7, which meant that each teacher had taught RC with about 20 complex texts at this time (since 3 complex texts are taught within each unit).

Despite the long list of options, all five participants consistently identified four complex texts as most engaging and comprehensible to their students (see Table 4.3): *The Foolish Milkmaid, Yeh-Shen, A Foxy Garden,* and *Smoke Jumpers*, particularly noting the connections students made to the texts, the high levels of interest and engagement students demonstrated, and how successful students were in accessing and comprehending these texts. Furthermore, Naomi noted that success with teaching RC through these specific complex texts also increased her confidence in her teaching capabilities:

> I feel that [central message] has always been difficult for me to teach, but I think these two stories [*The Foolish Milkmaid* and *A Foxy Garden*] have made me feel better about that, because they have been much easier to help students understand central message.

This response from Naomi highlights the importance of teaching with complex texts that are in direct alignment and support of the intended RC skills. In other words, appropriate selection and integration of complex texts can increase student accessibility and comprehension as well as lead to positive teacher experiences of RC instruction.

Table 4.3

Participant Responses to Complex Texts with High Levels of Student Comprehension

Complex Texts	Participant Responses
The Foolish Milkmaid	Anne: "The folktale was still **relevant**, like the daydreaming and doing foolish things, it's **something they related to**. Also, the **vocabulary** was still very relevant, and the **illustrations** paired really well with the text and the events in the story." Emma: "They **thought it was funny** that we were talking about how she's kind of silly and making bad choices. They **could connect** to that, because they do silly things too, and they learn to pay attention, and know what happens when you don't." Naomi: "It was **easy for the kids [to comprehend]** and they were able to **connect with Molly**, when Molly was being foolish and they had to **think about the message**. That was one of our first times talking about **central message**, and I **thought that was going to be a difficult skill for them**. But actually, that one ended up being kind of the **easiest and most straightforward** [skill], because they were **able to make a lot of connections** to when they weren't paying attention, and as a result had some kind of natural consequence."
Yeh-Shen	Emma: "The students **understood the theme and the message**, *if you're mean bad things will happen to you*. The text was **less abstract**, students had **background knowledge**, and they could **connect** with the story." Talia: "Students were able to **easily make connection** with the genre. Since it was a retelling of *Cinderella*, **students had more of a personal connection** with it…students were **engaged** and had a really **good understanding** of it and could retell the story thoroughly. The text also **seemed easier** for students to comprehend, including the **vocabulary**, and because students had the necessary **background knowledge**…the **cultural connections** of the text helped **make connections** with our own **diverse student populations**."

A Foxy Garden	Kate: "They **liked how it was make-believe,** but they could also make a **connection** with it." Naomi: "I felt [it] was really easy for them, because they were able to make so **many connections** with people being selfish. They were able to **quickly pick up on what the purpose** of the story was and what **lesson they were trying to teach**. I feel like when they're able to **make more connections**, then they're able to **understand the text better**."
Smoke Jumpers	Emma: "Because it's an occupation. We learned about [different] occupations and they **thought it was really cool** dropping from an airplane. The students were **engaged** because it was about **real-life experiences.**" Kate: "It was **interesting for them**, because they never thought firefighters did that [jumping out of airplanes], and **students got really excited** about that."

In contrast, when identifying complex texts from *Benchmark Advance* that students struggled to comprehend, teachers pointed out factors related to: 1) text complexity (e.g., too abstract, confusing text structure), 2) student disengagement (e.g., lack of interest or connection with texts), 3) vocabulary difficulties, 4) limited background knowledge, and 5) misalignment between complex text and intended RC skill. Unlike the more comprehensible complex texts, in which multiple participants shared the same response, six different texts were identified as challenging, with only one text, *Two Famous Inventors*, mentioned twice. Regardless of the specific text, however, common themes emerged for why these texts were difficult for students.

Starting with text complexity, Emma pointed out that *Village of the Moon Rain* "was a challenging one because it was too abstract," and the students couldn't grasp the author's message, whereas Anne noted that although *Yeh-Shen* was a retelling, "there were pieces missing, and that limited the comprehension." Both responses acknowledged that comprehension was compromised when certain texts were too complex for students to access.

Another common factor was student disengagement; Emma shared that for *Village of the Moon Rain* "the kids weren't really into that one…it was just too abstract." Similarly, for *Two Famous Inventors,* Kate said:

> The students just weren't into them. They were asking, why do we need to know about these two people [Thomas Edison and George Washington Carver]? I think they would rather have had two people that were similar to them, and then they would have stayed more engaged in the text.

For vocabulary difficulties, Talia pointed out that for *Emperor Penguin* students "only had basic knowledge of a penguin, and the vocabulary made [comprehension] most difficult. Vocabulary was the biggest struggle and need for instruction." Furthermore, when discussing the importance of background knowledge, Talia also pointed out that "students had difficulties in making personal connections with the text because they had limited background knowledge and experience in relation to these topics." Naomi shared similar concerns with *Getting a Message to General Washington*, sharing that "it was tough because they didn't really have a lot of background knowledge. They didn't know about the Revolutionary War, or what Ben Franklin and George Washington's relationship was, so that made it harder."

The participants also noted that some complex text did not pair well with the intended purpose or specific RC skill. For example, Kate noted that for *Our Governor's Laws*, "I had to redirect them, and explain that the focus was about [the process of making] laws. It was very hard for them to stay on track...I felt like they were missing the point." Similarly, in both of Naomi's identified texts (*Getting a Message to General Washington* and *Two Famous Inventors*), she explained that neither of these texts lent themselves well to the intended RC skills. For *Getting a Message to General Washington*, Naomi shared that the lesson "focused on

perspective and point of view. That was a hard skill for them to think about. They were already having a hard time with following what was going on and getting a lot of the characters confused." Since the text was already confusing for students to access and comprehend on its own, the added complexity of thinking about different perspectives and points of view made the lesson extremely difficult for Naomi's class. For *Two Famous Inventors* Naomi shared that "it was a difficult text to do a lot of drawing conclusions and making inferences…some of these lessons I wasn't always sure of how to get them there."

Based on the participants' responses, these complex texts were difficult for students to comprehend due to limited relevance, interest, and engagement, a lack of cohesion between the complex texts and the intended RC focus, and gaps within student knowledge (e.g., background knowledge, vocabulary, personal connections). Similarly, texts were more comprehensible when interest and relatability were high, background knowledge and vocabulary were familiar, and the RC focus aligned with the complex text. In the future, teachers' experience using these texts combined with their growing knowledge about text complexity can support how they plan to scaffold these texts – increasing or decreasing text scaffolds relative to student need.

Chapter Summary

Overall, the implementation of *Benchmark Advance* revealed that while the program offers supports and structures for accessing and comprehending complex texts, its effectiveness heavily depends on teacher knowledge, beliefs, and experience, as well as interactions between the reader, the text, and the activity. Teachers found value in the program's concise and focused RC lessons across the spiraling curriculum yet noted insufficient scaffolding of complex texts, especially when differentiating for MLLs. They also reported limited opportunities for students to apply comprehension strategies in both whole group and small group contexts. Furthermore,

teachers noted difficulties in teaching specific RC lessons with complex texts that were either disengaging, challenging, or irrelevant to the students, and were unsure of how to overcome these instructional challenges since they were unable to change the texts.

Despite initial challenges, teachers noted increased student engagement and accountability since the implementation of the *Benchmark Advance* program. As they finished their first year of implementation, however, teachers also reported a continued need for professional development and support using complex texts during RC instruction. While there are still improvements to be made, as teachers at HES think ahead to year two of implementation, Anne reflects back on year one of teaching with *Benchmark Advance*:

> Now that we've got the first year under our belts, we know what to expect, because this year was just a lot of trial and error…because we were teaching to mastery, and that's a hard shift to get away from. So, I think next year I'm a little bit more optimistic.

This final quote from Anne encapsulates the need for additional teacher support as they continue to grow their professional knowledge and instructional practice for teaching RC through complex texts; however, it also recognizes the positive implications of a high-quality core reading program on student learning.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

The recommendations set forth in this chapter help address gaps identified by the findings, particularly in how to best support teachers' use and scaffolding of complex texts during core RC instruction. Additionally, the recommendations are intended to increase teacher confidence and knowledge in using *Benchmark Advance*'s complex texts during RC lessons. Table 5.1 connects the guiding research questions to the study findings and, ultimately, to the following recommendations:

- Recommendation 1: Consider schoolwide shifts in RC planning through targeted Collaborative Learning Teams (CLTs)
    - Shift 1: Prioritize CLT discussions around student supports and scaffolds for complex texts
    - Shift 2: Plan out small group instruction for core RC skills
- Recommendation 2: Build teacher capacity in providing core RC instruction (with complex texts) through targeted professional development (PD) and coaching support
    - Shift 1: Provide targeted PD connected to *Benchmark Advance* lessons and texts
    - Shift 2: Embed lesson modeling, co-teaching, and coaching

Table 5.1

Interactions between the Research Questions, Recommendations, and Findings

Research Questions	Related Findings	Recommendations
RQ 1: How does *Benchmark Advance* scaffold complex texts for 2nd grade students?	Finding 1: *Benchmark Advance* provides basic supports and scaffolds of complex texts, but teacher knowledge and expertise maximize RC instruction. Finding 2: *Benchmark Advance* supports RC through targeted mini-lessons but has limited	Recommendation 1: Consider schoolwide shifts in RC planning through targeted CLTs

	scaffolding for MLLs and provides inadequate practice opportunities.	
RQ 2: What are 2nd grade teachers' reflections on using complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* for RC instruction?	Finding 3: Although the initial implementation of *Benchmark Advance* was challenging, teachers acknowledged the benefits of a comprehensive, core reading program for RC. Finding 4: Teachers reported feeling unprepared and lacking confidence in how to provide effective RC instruction, due to a lack of experience teaching with complex texts.	Recommendation 2: Build teacher capacity in providing core RC instruction (with complex texts) through targeted PD and coaching support

Recommendation 1: Consider schoolwide shifts in RC planning through targeted CLTs

The first recommendation is to consider the way RC planning is structured through school-based CLTs. This recommendation addresses the findings acknowledging the limitations of *Benchmark Advance*. While scripted reading programs are widely used to standardize instruction, strict adherence to scripts can limit teachers' abilities to adapt lessons to student needs (Chapman & Elbaum, 2021). In the Hall et al. (2021) study (referenced in Chapter 2), students who received RC instruction from a partially scripted program consistently outperformed their peers who received RC instruction from a fully scripted program. The defining factor was the role of the teacher. More specifically, the input of teacher knowledge in how to scaffold and adjust the RC instruction based on the anticipated needs of their students led to increased RC outcomes, compared to the teachers who followed the scripted program with fidelity and without making any instructional changes (Hall et al., 2021).

Specific to the capstone study, findings showed that *Benchmark Advance* provides basic supports and scaffolds within the RC lessons, but the recommended scaffolds are often inadequate for the diverse needs of HES students, particularly multilingual learners (MLLs). In response, this recommendation leverages the already integrated CLTs at HES. Since HES just

finished its third consecutive year of implementing CLTs for core RC instruction, considering CLT shifts in how to maximize planning time of RC instruction is a realistic and feasible focus.

Shift 1*: *Prioritize CLT discussions around student supports and scaffolds for complex texts

CLTs refer to a collaborative planning approach for instruction, in which the participants (often a group of educators) meet to discuss and develop effective instructional lessons through a structured and collaborative process (Castillo et al., 2024; Shenoy et al., 2024; Stoll et al., 2006). Structured CLTs typically result in more purposeful planning of RC instruction and implementation that aligns with evidence-based practices (Castillo et al., 2024; Shenoy et al., 2024). Furthermore, when implemented consistently and with clear structures in place, CLTs can support effective RC instruction, particularly if students are held to high expectations for learning outcomes (Castillo et al., 2024; D'Ardenne et al., 2013; Riggins & Knowles, 2020; Shenoy et al., 2024). In general, CLTs provide teachers with consistent, structured opportunities to create instructional plans, differentiate Tier 1 instruction, and plan out specific scaffolds and supports for students (Castillo et al., 2024; Shenoy et al., 2024). Ultimately, CLTs are intended to build teacher knowledge and instructional capacity with the goal of improving student outcomes (D'Ardenne et al., 2013; Riggins & Knowles, 2020).

Currently, CLT discussions at HES centered around RC primarily focus on complex texts and the specific factors that make a text complex, rather than how to make them more accessible and comprehensible to the students. Furthermore, the occasional discussions regarding RC lessons within *Benchmark Advance* focus more on the intent or purpose of the lesson, and there is little to no discussion time dedicated to planning for student supports or scaffolds, based on anticipated difficulties within these RC lessons. In the Hall et al. (2021) study, CLTs were integrated to support teacher planning around how to best scaffold and support students within

the RC lessons, particularly in comprehending texts. While this first year of implementation was a big lift for teachers, and considering differentiated supports and scaffolds in RC lessons was likely beyond the capacity of teachers this year, this shift could help strengthen CLT meetings for the 2025-2026 school year. In fact, high-impact CLTs dedicate time to examining and improving teaching practices and discussing how to best implement effective instructional strategies (Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017; Wasta, 2017).

Multiple data sources (i.e., document analysis, focus group, interviews) highlighted the limitations of *Benchmark Advance*'s scaffolds for complex texts and recommended student supports. One participant, Emma, noted that she needed more support in planning out how to teach RC with complex texts:

> [I want] not just a discussion over CLT, but actually…[to] study some texts together. I think I need more than just the levels of [text] complexity, so that I'm prepared for the story. I read it ahead of time. But then when you're with kids, it's different versus when you're with adults…I want to know what I can say or do to make it click…I want to be better prepared.

Therefore, moving forward at HES, CLT discussions should go beyond the factors of complex texts and the basic premise of the RC lessons; instead, CLTs should focus more on identifying specific scaffolds students need in order to best access and comprehend complex texts, as well as how these scaffolds can be implemented during core instruction.

Shift 2: Plan out small-group instruction for core RC skills

Another consistent concern that surfaced during the focus group and teacher interviews was the emphasis on whole group instruction in *Benchmark Advance*, limiting opportunities for small-group instruction. One intent of HES for the 2024-2025 school year was to shift away from

this small-group heavy model. Adjusting to the comprehensive nature of *Benchmark Advance* and its multiple lessons taught per day, participants noted that small-group instruction has become virtually nonexistent during the core ELA block. While strong core instruction serves as the essential foundation of strong reading development (Harlacher et al., 2015), small-group instruction has been shown to significantly enhance RC outcomes due to a more targeted and interactive approach that can reinforce concepts from core instruction (Hall & Burns, 2017; Sporer et al., 2009; Vaughn et al., 2003).

This second shift, small-group planning and implementation of core RC skills within complex texts, pairs well with the first shift of prioritizing supports and scaffolds for complex texts during CLTs. If CLTs are used to anticipate student needs during specific RC lessons and to plan appropriate scaffolds for each complex text, then teachers can apply these differentiated supports for students during small-group instruction. It is important to note that small-group instruction in this recommendation refers to core, grade-level skills in which students are working to access and comprehend complex, grade-level texts.

Through the restructuring of CLTs, teachers can establish instructional scaffolds and supports in helping students to better access and comprehend complex texts. Furthermore, anticipating student needs within specific RC lessons and planning small-group time can provide additional practice opportunities. While the purpose is not to revert back to excessive amounts of time spent in small groups, the intentional planning and integration of small-group instruction within *Benchmark Advance* lessons can better support core RC skills based on student needs. As a result, HES school administrators and relevant instructional leaders should consider how to best enhance or restructure CLTs for the 2025-2026 school year.

Recommendation 2: Build teacher capacity in providing core RC instruction (with complex texts) through targeted PD and coaching support

While the first recommendation focused more on how to support teacher planning and integration of RC lessons with complex texts, the second recommendation looks more holistically at developing teachers' professional knowledge and pedagogical growth within the context of RC instruction. Investing in teacher knowledge and professional growth is correlated with increased student comprehension and achievement; furthermore, increasing teacher supports through professional development (PD) is also shown to increase self-efficacy beliefs and positive attitudes towards teaching (Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004; Rice et al., 2024). While CLTs can directly mitigate concerns regarding inadequate scaffolds and supports of complex texts and RC lessons specific to *Benchmark Advance*, targeted PD and coaching can best address the need for building teachers' capacity for pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in RC, long-term.

Building teacher capacity is essential for improving instructional quality and student learning outcomes. PD and coaching are both widely recognized as key strategies for supporting teachers' professional growth (Desimone & Pak, 2017; Kraft et al., 2018; Putra et al., 2024). When PD and coaching supports are aligned, teacher knowledge, pedagogical skills, and practical application of skills are enhanced (Putra et al., 2024; Templeton et al., 2020). According to research, PD and coaching is most effective for teachers when it is:

- Grounded in evidence-based practices (Kennedy, 2016; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2020)
- Sustained and ongoing (e.g., chunked across multiple sessions; Desmione & Pak, 2017; Gore et al., 2017; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2020)
- Based on collaborative efforts and integrates active learning (Desmione & Pak, 2017)

- Contextualized within a specific subject (Desmione & Pak, 2017; Sancar et al., 2021; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2020)
- Aligned with school goals and supported by leadership (Desmione & Pak, 2017; Fairman et al., 2020; Postholm, 2012)

This second recommendation aligns with HES's Literacy Liaison Team starting in the 2025-2026 school year. As part of this district initiative, each elementary school will establish a team of five members including: the instructional facilitator, one reading support teacher, one ESOL teacher, one primary teacher (K-2nd), and one upper elementary teacher (3rd-4th). The purpose of this school-based literacy team is to build teachers' capacity for instructional learning, provide in-house PD sessions, and differentiate supports based on school-specific needs. As part of the Literacy Liaison Team's charge, two key shifts are recommended for the 2025-2026 school year: 1) provide targeted PD connected to *Benchmark Advance* lessons and texts and 2) embed lesson modeling, co-teaching, and coaching.

Shift 1: Provide targeted PD connected to Benchmark Advance lessons and texts

The first action step in building teacher capacity in core RC instruction is the integration of targeted PD sessions. PD is widely recognized as essential for improving teachers' professional capacity and thereby increasing student outcomes (Avalos, 2011; Gore et al., 2017). Based on teacher responses from the focus group and interviews, and researcher findings from the document analysis, PD centered around implementing RC lessons, scaffolding complex texts, and incorporating small-group instruction would be most relevant. These needs can best be addressed by the Literacy Liaison Team. The district has already scheduled three "Train the Trainer" sessions for all literacy liaison members in Fall 2025. In these sessions, members of their school-based literacy team will attend trainings in the following three areas: 1) RC mini-

lessons, 2) writing mini-lessons, and 3) small-group lesson instruction. Importantly, these trainings are all grounded within *Benchmark Advance*.

After each of these training sessions, the Literacy Liaison cohort will then prepare and present the trainings to their own staff, chunked across 60-minute CLT sessions. Chunking information through shorter, targeted PD sessions increases participant engagement, knowledge retention, and overall learning outcomes (Murphy, 2007). The RC mini-lessons and the small-group lesson instruction PDs align most with this study's identified needs of teacher support with complex texts, though the writing mini-lessons will also supplement these areas, since complex texts are also embedded within the writing lessons of *Benchmark Advance*.

Beginning in February 2026, HES will be given more autonomy in what specific topics related to school-level training would best address teacher-specific needs. At that point, HES will be able to more fully focus on scaffolding complex texts during RC instruction. CLTs will connect with PDs in the local context, because they enable the Literacy Liaison Team to share-out relevant training to teachers through targeted, small-group PD sessions. Furthermore, since CLTs are conducted by grade-level teams, then the PDs can also be differentiated to best address the anticipated needs of each team, based on each teacher's professional knowledge, prior experiences, and comfortability in teaching RC with complex texts through *Benchmark Advance*.

Shift 2: Embed lesson modeling, co-teaching, and coaching

While the CLTs and PDs address anticipated needs at the grade-level, differentiating teacher supports based on individual needs and goals can best be met through the combined efforts of lesson modeling, co-teaching, and coaching. Therefore, the second shift for this recommendation is to provide intentional teacher support of teaching RC with complex texts, using the aforementioned strategies of lesson modeling, co-teaching, and instructional coaching. This three-tier teacher support follows the gradual release model, in which the person(s)

providing literacy support to teachers (e.g., instructional facilitator, reading support teacher, Literacy Liaison Team): 1) models lessons for classroom teachers (highest level of support, based on teacher need and confidence level with *Benchmark Advance*), 2) engages in co-teaching with teachers (moderate level of support, with shared responsibility in student learning), or 3) provides instructional coaching (lowest level of support), in which teachers are actively providing instruction, and the literacy support member observes, offers feedback, and provides coaching and/or engages in reflective discussions after the lesson observation.

First, lesson modeling (in this context) refers to a classroom teacher observing modeling of either an entire lesson, a component of a lesson, or a specific instructional strategy in the context of complex texts. Lesson modeling is shown to: 1) increase exposure to high-quality instruction (Saclarides, 2021; 2023), 2) enhance teacher learning by helping teachers make sense of what they observe, and apply it to their own practice (Saclarides, 2021; 2023), and 3) make the teaching processes explicit and clear (Mok & Staub, 2021).

Next, co-teaching refers specifically to another educator (e.g., reading support teacher, ESOL teacher) pushing into classrooms, planning out core RC instruction with teachers prior to implementation, and working with teachers to collaboratively plan and teach specific RC lessons with complex texts. When considering the instructional benefits of co-teaching, teachers are able to expand their teaching practices and gain deeper insights, based on the process of collaboratively planning, delivering, and reflecting upon student comprehension of complex texts during RC instruction (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2016; Guise et al., 2021). Furthermore, co-teaching experiences lend themselves to expanded professional roles and partnerships between educators (Gallo-Fox & Scantlebury, 2016). Mutual learning can occur between both educators,

since the co-teachers can work together, share their individual knowledge and expertise, and learn from the observations of one another through this process (Guise et al., 2021).

Finally, instructional coaching refers to a subject-specific expert (e.g., reading specialist) engaging in coaching sessions with teachers through one-on-one settings. The components of effective coaching include: 1) targeted feedback paired with teacher reflections (Hayes, 2011; Matsumura et al., 2010), 2) collaborative efforts tailored to individual teacher needs (Green, 2024; Hayes, 2011), and 3) a supportive school environment that establishes strong coaching structures and supports for teachers (Carlisle & Berebitsky, 2011; Matsumura et al., 2010). When implemented effectively, instructional coaching is shown to improve teacher practice, student achievement, and collective learning and inquiry (Kraft et al., 2018). More specifically, coaching helps teachers learn, cultivate, and apply evidence-aligned literacy strategies, improve lesson planning, and reflect on their teaching – ultimately leading to more effective instruction (Biancarosa et al., 2010; Kraft et al., 2018; McCollum et al., 2013). Teachers report greater confidence in teaching when engaging in effective coaching models, particularly when coaching relationships are built on trust and collaboration (Green, 2024; Hayes, 2011).

As a reading support teacher at HES, I will be one of the five members on the Literacy Liaison Team. Our current timeline for teacher support for the 2025-2026 school year spans across the shifts of Recommendation 2 (see Figure 5.1). Drawing from the first recommendation, integrating structured CLTs and targeted PD sessions serve as the foundation for building-up teacher knowledge, shifting instructional beliefs, and increasing teachers' self-efficacy in their abilities to effectively teach RC through complex texts. Expanding upon the intentional pairing of CLTs and PD, the integration of lesson modeling, co-teaching, and coaching provides an even more individualized approach to supporting teachers in their professional practice.

Figure 5.1

Anticipated Timeline for Literacy Liaison Team at HES for 2025-2026 SY

Implementation Challenges and Considerations

When considering potential challenges with implementing these recommendations at HES, two key barriers are identified: 1) the extensive time needed for CLTs and 2) teacher capacity for new initiatives and core RC instruction. First, when thinking about the large amount of dedicated time needed for implementing the recommendations, both the planning of RC instruction (including scaffolding of complex texts and differentiated small groups) and the implementation of PD sessions will occur during grade-level CLTs. While CLTs are widely recognized for their potential to improve teaching and student learning outcomes, one of the most commonly cited barriers is the extensive time required for meaningful collaboration (Khasawneh et al., 2023; McConnell et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2017).

Currently, HES dedicates three days a week to hour-long grade-level CLTs (two days for English Language Arts/data, and one day for Math). While CLTs are already built into grade-level schedules, if the intent is to change current CLT structures and approaches to focus on the recommendations (e.g., specific RC lessons and complex text scaffolds), then the initial learning curve may require more CLT time, as teams adapt to the new RC planning structure. Additionally, if the school-based Literacy Liaison Team is expected to also use CLT time to

provide targeted PD sessions, then additional time will be required from teams (e.g., incorporate PDs on Wednesday CLT days or add an additional day of CLTs for trainings).

The second possible challenge in the implementation plan is acknowledging teachers' capacity for new learning. All learners, regardless of age, have a finite capacity for new learning based on their cognitive load, which refers to the mental effort required to process and acquire new information (Sweller, 1988). In fact, high cognitive load can hinder new learning and acquisition of information (Sweller, 1988), while well-designed PD can reduce necessary cognitive loads and improve learning outcomes (Konde et al., 2023). Furthermore, chunking new learning into manageable parts helps reduce overall cognitive load and makes it easier for teachers to process, retain, and apply new information gained from PD (Thalmann et al., 2019). These PDs will be taking place during 60-minute CLT sessions; therefore, the structure will naturally establish chunked PD sessions into hour-long increments.

While supporting teacher use and scaffolding of complex texts in RC instruction is a primary focus of this capstone, in the context of HES, it is one of many anticipated initiatives for HES teachers next year. For example, there are new elementary Social Studies standards being released from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), HES is implementing a new social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, teachers are exploring potential resources for math adoption, and there is a district-wide expectation of schools adopting Kagan coaching structures. While the school-based Literacy Liaison Team is intended to support teachers and mitigate stress from the continued implementation of *Benchmark Advance*, it is important to recognize that adding on "one more thing" to teachers' plates can add more stress, particularly if teachers are already at their mental capacity for new trainings and initiatives.

Therefore, in order to maximize teacher engagement in the PD sessions and CLT discussions around scaffolding complex texts and planning purposeful small group instruction, it is important that the Literacy Liaison Team plans, creates, and implements PD sessions on topics that are meaningful, relevant, and timely. Furthermore, the PDs should be presented in bite-sized chunks (Sweller, 1988), so that the teachers are not overwhelmed and are still able to learn and implement new strategies, scaffolds, or instructional approaches (Gore et al., 2017; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2020). Another important consideration is teacher autonomy, which relates back to the concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). While certain expectations (e.g., implementation of PD sessions) will be set forth by the district, there will be some flexibility in school-based implementations. Therefore, providing teachers with opportunities to share feedback, select session dates/times for PDs, and give input into specific topics of RC planning and instruction they'd prefer to focus on can increase teacher engagement and positive perceptions of PD.

Furthermore, the types of (optional) supports provided to teachers (e.g., modeling, co-teaching, coaching) can be selected by each teacher depending upon their professional knowledge, comfortability and familiarity with *Benchmark Advance* and their teaching of RC through complex texts. It is also important to consider the established relationship between the Literacy Liaison Team members and the teachers they will be supporting. Since the implementation of these recommendations will be part of a schoolwide effort, primarily through the use of CLTs and during core instruction, it is essential that strong, trusting, and positive professional relationships are established between the literacy team and their HES colleagues.

Chapter Summary

The recommendations presented in this chapter are intended to address student performance concerns related to RC outcomes, enhance current instructional practices related to

RC lessons using complex texts, and support teachers in building confidence and competence in providing evidence-aligned RC instruction with complex texts through *Benchmark Advance*. The recommendations will be carried out (primarily) through grade-level CLTs and include collaboration between school administrators, the instructional facilitator, the reading support teacher, and HES' Literacy Liaison Team. Both recommendations were established in alignment with the case study's findings and are intended to support the district's literacy plan for the 2025-2026 school year. While the implementation of *Benchmark Advance* has been a key step in building teacher knowledge and confidence in teaching RC with complex texts, these recommendations for the following school year will continue to build-upon and enhance HES teachers' professional knowledge and instructional practice, through more targeted and differentiated support.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email & Information Sheet

Note: The information below was sent by email

Subject line: Savas' Ed. D. Research Study: 2nd Grade Teacher Participant Request

Dear 2nd grade team,

As part of my culminating capstone project for the Ed. D. program in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Virginia, I am conducting a study on the topic of core reading comprehension (RC) through the use of complex texts within our new literacy program- *Benchmark Advance*.

For the scope of my study, I am focusing specifically on core RC instruction with complex texts for 2nd grade students, and the role of teacher knowledge, experiences, and beliefs.

Study Key Information:

- Participate in a **50-60 min. focus group**
- Participate in a **30-45 min. teacher interview** (will be conducted 1-on-1)
- No information collected will connect identity with responses
- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants

Please **review the attached information sheet** for more detailed information about the nature of the study, consent, confidentiality, anticipated risks, and the data collection process.

If you are willing and able to participate in the study, please contact me by phone (571-377-6218) or email, and we can then confirm for a date and time for the 1-on-1 teacher interview, and specify which date(s) and time(s) you are available to participate in the focus group interview.

A calendar invite for the **1-on-1 teacher interview** will be sent to you individually, once you sign-up for a specific date and time. A calendar invite for the **focus group** will be sent out at a later date, once a common date and time has been chosen based on participant responses.

If you have any questions about participating in the study, please feel free to contact me by phone or email. My contact information, as well as the contact information for my advisor, Dr. Tisha Hayes, is below my signature.

Your thoughts and experiences as a teacher are very important! Thank you for being willing to share them with me.

Sincerely,
Tori Savas

Contact Information:

Tori Savas, Ed. D. candidate
Telephone: (703) 895-5704
vas6px@virginia.edu

Dr. Tisha Hayes, Professor of Education
Telephone: (434) 982-2021
Llh6e@virginia.edu

IRB-SBS protocol # 7523

Participant Study Information Sheet

Note: The Participant Information Sheet was an attached in the recruitment email (see above)

Please read this information sheet carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

Study Information Sheet Key Information:

- Participate in a 50-60 min. focus group
- Participate in a 30-45 min. teacher interview (will be conducted 1-on-1)
- No information collected will connect identity with responses
- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of the study is to understand the complexities behind reading comprehension and development for 2nd grade students, examine how *Benchmark Advance* supports student access to complex texts through targeted scaffolding and comprehension lessons, and understand 2nd grade teacher perceptions and knowledge about how to best support students' comprehension of complex texts.

What you will do in the study: This study involves two study activities, a focus group and a 1-1 interview. You can choose to participate in both activities or just one.

Focus Group: You will participate in one in-person focus group with 3-6 2nd grade teachers. The focus group discussion will involve topics such as teacher beliefs, knowledge, and experiences around teaching comprehension with complex texts, instructional strengths and challenges of using complex texts, and teacher perceptions of using a new core program, *Benchmark Advance*.

1-on-1 teacher interview: You will participate in an in-person interview that will ask questions about your own experiences and beliefs around teaching reading with complex texts, as well as both successes and challenges with using a new core program, *Benchmark Advance*.

Both the focus group and the 1-on-1 interview will be audio recorded. During both the focus group interview and the 1-on-1 interview, you are allowed to skip any questions.

Time required: The study will require up to 80-100 minutes of your time. Approximately 50-60 minutes will be dedicated to the focus group, and 30-45 minutes will be dedicated to the 1-on-1 interview.

Risks: Due to the small sample size of participants for the study, it is possible that others will know that you are participating in the study. No other risks are anticipated in this study.

Benefits: There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us better understand: 1) factors that facilitate or hinder reading comprehension instruction using complex texts, 2) the benefits and limitations of comprehension instruction and student supports through *Benchmark Advance*, and 3) teacher perceptions about evidence-based practices that best support students' reading comprehension development and comprehension of complex texts.

Confidentiality: The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially, whenever possible. Your information will be assigned under a pseudonym. The list connecting your name to this pseudonym will be kept digitally secure. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report. Audio recordings will be transcribed. Pseudonyms will be assigned only for the 1-on-1 interviews. Responses during the focus group will not be assigned to individual participants. After transcribing, the recordings will be deleted.

Because of the nature of the focus group I cannot guarantee your data will be confidential, other participants will know what you have reported.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your job.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, any audio recordings or notes directly related to your participation in the 1-on-1 interviews will be destroyed. Due to the nature of the focus group, I am unable to withdraw your individual contributions after the focus group has concluded.

How to withdraw from the study: If you want to withdraw from the study during the 1-on-1 interview, ask the researcher to stop the interview. If you want to withdraw from the study during the focus group, you should stop participating in the discussion. There is no penalty for withdrawing. If you would like to withdraw after an interview has been completed, please contact Tori Savas at vas6px@virginia.edu.

Payment: You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Using data beyond this study: The data you provide in this study will be retained in a secure manner by the researcher five years after the study is completed, after which time the data will then be destroyed.

Please contact the researchers on the study team listed below to:

- **Obtain more information or ask a question about the study.**
- **Report an illness, injury, or other problem.**
- **Leave the study before it is finished.**

Victoriana Savas
School of Education and Human Development
405 Emmet Street South
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903.
Telephone: (703) 895-5704
vas6px@virginia.edu

Dr. Tisha Hayes
School of Education and Human Development
405 Emmet Street South
University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903
Telephone: (434) 982-2021
Llh6e@virginia.edu

You may also report a concern about a study or ask questions about your rights as a research subject by contacting the Institutional Review Board listed below.

Tonya R. Moon, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences

University of Virginia, P.O. Box 800392
Charlottesville, VA 22908-0392
Telephone: (434) 924-5999
Email: irbsbshelp@virginia.edu
Website: https://research.virginia.edu/irb-sbs
Website for Research Participants: https://research.virginia.edu/research-participants

UVA IRB-SBS # 7523

You may keep this copy for your records.

Appendix B

Document Analysis Protocol

Research Question:

- RQ 1: How does *Benchmark Advance* scaffold complex texts for 2nd grade students?

Overview: Analyze four complex texts (two short reads, two extended reads) from *Benchmark Advance* (2nd grade) to further understand the complexity behind these texts, and how the core program recommends teachers provide RC instruction and build-in instructional supports to help students access and comprehend these texts. The four texts will be selected across two units (Units 5 and 6) in *Benchmark Advance* to encompass both fiction and nonfiction genres, and to compare and contrast text complexity and lesson structure findings across different genres of text. One document analysis will be completed per complex text, and will include an analysis of the text's complexity alongside two pre-selected corresponding core RC lessons from *Benchmark Advance* that coincide with the selected text.

Document Sample: Second grade (two texts from Unit 5 and two texts from Unit 6) from *Benchmark Advance*, including eight-unit lessons (two lessons per text) and all related materials (e.g., complex texts).

Analysis Protocol: Each document analysis (one per complex text) will consist of three parts:

- Part 1: Read through the complex texts and the text complexity guide (i.e., breakdown of the complexity for that specific text)
- Part 2: Read through the two selected RC lessons for each complex text
- Part 3: Complete the document analysis template for each complex text and the two corresponding RC lessons

Document Analysis Template

Resource: *Benchmark Advance*

Grade: 2nd
Unit: ___, Week ___
Researcher: Tori Savas

Title of Text:

Genre:

Type of read: Short Read ☐ Extended Read ☐

Level of complexity: Low (<5)☐ Moderate (6-9)☐ Substantial (10-13)☐ Highest (14-16)☐

Total score: ___/16

Breakdown of complexity:
Purpose and Levels of Meaning: __/4
[notes]
Structure: __/4
[notes]
Language Conventionality and Clarity: __/4
[notes]
Knowledge Demands: __/4
[notes]

What makes this text complex? [document notes shared from *Benchmark Advance,* examples or excerpts from the text, and my own annotations or observations from reading the text].

What are anticipated difficulties within this complex text? [document notes shared from *Benchmark Advance*, examples or excerpts from the text, and my own annotations or observations from reading the text].

Lesson #1 for document analysis: Day __, Lesson __

Type of lesson: first read☐ close read☐ vocabulary☐ RC strategy lesson☐

RC focus/purpose:

Anticipated length of lesson:

Guiding questions (support document analysis notetaking):
How is the lesson structured?
What anticipated difficulties does this lesson address or note?

What supports or scaffolds are built-into the lesson relative to the complex text?
What specific supports or scaffolds are recommended for MLLs?
What missed opportunities are noted from the lesson?

Direct/Literal Observations	Bracketing/Analysis/codes

Lesson #2 for document analysis: Day __, Lesson __

Type of lesson: first read☐ close read☐ vocabulary☐ RC strategy lesson☐

RC focus/purpose:

Anticipated length of lesson:

Guiding questions (support document analysis notetaking):
How is the lesson structured?
What anticipated difficulties does this lesson address or note?
What supports or scaffolds are built-into the lesson relative to the complex text?
What specific supports or scaffolds are recommended for MLLs?
What missed opportunities are noted from the lesson?

Direct/Literal Observations	Bracketing/Analysis/codes

Reflective Summary

[Reflexive memo, big takeaways or larger themes from the complex text's document analysis]

Appendix C

Focus Group Protocol

Research Question:

- RQ 2: What are 2nd grade teachers' reflections on using complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* for RC instruction?

Environment: The focus group will be scheduled for all 2nd grade participants, and will take place in the CLT room or another neutral location during a mutually agreed upon date and time between the participants and the researcher.

Prior to Focus Group interview:

- Gain permission from all participants using the approved participant consent form
- Select agreed-upon date to conduct the focus group

During the Focus Group:

- Facilitate the discussion using the focus group protocol (i.e., questions)
- Utilize member-checking (if needed) to confirm the intention of what the participants said in response to the questions
- Use follow-up questions (e.g., probing questions) to gain deeper answers and responses from participants

After the Observation:

- Utilize additional member-checking to confirm the intention of what the participants said in response to the questions
- Go through and code/organize the notes based on categories and topics discussed, using *a priori* codes and emergent codes.

Semi-Structured Focus Group Questions

Opening Script: "Thank you for all for agreeing to participate in my study. The purpose of this focus group is to better understand how 2nd grade teachers at HES support students' RC development, understand teacher experiences with a new core reading program, and identify factors that either help or hinder the efforts of core RC instruction for students at HES, particularly through the use of complex texts."

Teacher Beliefs: Complex Texts & Student Experiences

1. What are your thoughts about using complex texts during RC instruction?
    a. Can you share a positive experience or outcome?
    b. Can you share a negative experience or outcome?
2. What do you believe students gain from engaging with complex texts?
3. How well do you think students in your classrooms access complex texts?
    a. Why do they or don't they?
4. How do your students experience (or react to) complex texts?
5. Do you think complex texts impact student engagement? If so, how?
6. What challenges do you face when using complex texts during RC instruction?

Teacher Experience & Knowledge with Complex Texts and *Benchmark Advance*

7. How do you prepare your students to engage with complex texts?
8. What scaffold strategies do you find the most useful/helpful/effective?
9. Prior to implementing *Benchmark Advance*, how have complex texts been integrated in your previous instruction, if at all?
10. How has *Benchmark Advance* helped or hindered your experience with teaching RC this year?

11. One change with *Benchmark Advance* is the shift from teacher read-alouds of complex texts to independent student reading of these complex texts. What have been the benefits and/or challenges of this instructional shift?
12. What advice would you give other teachers incorporating complex texts during RC instruction?
13. Why do you think students at HES, in general, tend to struggle with reading comprehension? [e.g., 3rd-4th SOLs, unit assessments]

Closing Script: "Thank you all so much for your time today. That's all the questions I have. Do you have any questions for me?"

Appendix D

Teacher Interview Protocol

Research Questions:

- RQ 1: How does *Benchmark Advance* scaffold complex texts for 2nd grade students?
- RQ 2: What are 2nd grade teachers' reflections on using complex texts in *Benchmark Advance* for RC instruction?

Environment: Teacher interviews will take place in a quiet, private space at the participant's discretion. Potential environments include the participant's classroom/office, my office, or another agreed upon space within the school [e.g., conference room, intervention room].

Prior to the Interview: I will explain the purpose of the study and then invite the all participants to be part of a one-on-one interview. Additionally, I will gain permission from all participants using the approved participant consent form. The purpose of the study and the teacher interview will be shared with the invited participants, and participants will be able to sign-up for a selected day/time of their choosing [based upon mutual availability].

During the Interview: Utilize a semi-structured interview approach, I will start-off with the interview protocol script [below] including the introduction and the purpose of the study and the interview. I will also ask permission to record the interview and take notes from our discussion. I will ask the interview questions in order, but also use member-checking and follow-up questioning for clarifications, if needed. I will also take notes to jot down key takeaways, themes, or pull-out big ideas from participant responses.

Opening Script: "Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. The purpose of this interview is to better understand teacher knowledge, perceptions, and experiences regarding RC planning, instruction, and supports for our 2nd grade students at HES, especially for our multilingual learners, through the use of complex texts."

Verbal permission: "Do I have your permission to audio record the interview?"

- If the participant agrees- audio record using Zoom
- If the participant is unsure, elaborate and explain "The purpose of the audio recording is so that I can transcribe the interview, in order to identify common themes and takeaways from our conversation. The recording will be deleted once the transcriptions are complete, and you will not be identifiable by name or description from the transcription. Do I have your permission to audio record the interview?"
- If the participant does not agree to the audio recording, ask: "Do I have your permission to take notes during our interview? This will help me identify key points and themes from our conversation."
    - If the participant does not agree to notes being taken during the interview, then explain, "At this time, the interview will not be conducted, since I will be unable to accurately capture your responses to the interview questions. However, you will still be invited to participate in other parts of the study (e.g., focus group). Thank you for your time and willingness to participate."

After the Interview: Read the closing script to the participant. Complete a reflexive memo afterwards to pull-out big ideas, themes, or key takeaways. Transcribe the interview [using Zoom], and organize the transcriptions by codes and themes.

Closing Script: "[Participant's name], thank you so much for your time today. That's all the questions I have. Do you have any questions for me?"

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Part I: ***Teacher Factors (knowledge, beliefs/self-efficacy, experience)***

1. How many years have you taught elementary ELA/RC, and in which grades?
2. How would you define reading comprehension?
3. How would you define complex texts?
4. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being the least effective and 5 being the most effective, how would you rate your effectiveness in providing RC instruction using complex texts?
    a. **If rated 1-3:** What would make you feel more confident in providing effective RC instruction using complex texts?
    b. **If rated 4-5:** How do you provide effective RC instruction using complex texts?
5. What experience did you have with teaching complex texts prior to *Benchmark Advance*?
    a. **If none or limited experience:** How has the use of complex texts this year helped or hindered your instruction of RC?
    b. **With adequate experience:** How has your experience with teaching RC with complex texts changed, if at all, since using *Benchmark Advance*?

Part II: ***RC Instruction through Complex Texts***

Explanation for Part II: "For the second portion of the interview, we are going to discuss specific complex texts from *Benchmark Advance* you've taught with this year. I have provided a list of all the complex texts for each unit you have taught this year. I'm going to give you a few minutes to review the list of complex texts. I would like you to select one complex text that was particularly difficult for your students to access and comprehend, and one complex text that your students were highly successful in accessing and comprehending. Do you have any questions? Please let me know the name of the two complex texts you have selected, when you are ready."

Give the participant 2-3 minutes to read the list of complex texts and select two complex texts (one text that was challenging for students to comprehend, one text that students were highly successful in comprehending) Then, begin the interview questions for Part II.

6. Let's start with the complex text that was significantly challenging for your students to comprehend. What text did you select?
    a. What challenges did you face in teaching RC with this text?
    b. Why do you think students struggled with comprehending this text?
    c. How might you shift your approach of RC instruction with this specific text, if you were to redo the lesson(s)?
        i. Probing question (if needed): What supports or scaffolds would you build-in or provide to your students?
    d. What did you learn from teaching with this complex text?
7. What was the complex text that your students were highly successful in comprehending?
    a. What successes did you find when teaching RC with this text?
    b. What made the text easier for students to comprehend?
    c. What did you learn from teaching with this complex text?
    d. Why do you think students were successful in comprehending this text, but struggled with comprehending the other selected text?
        i. Probing question (if needed): what was difference between the two texts and/or instructional approach across these two complex texts?
8. Based on your own with *Benchmark Advance* this year, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being the least effective and 5 being the most effective, how would you rate the effectiveness of *Benchmark Advance* in making complex texts accessible and comprehensible to students?

a. **If rated 1-3:** What additional scaffolds or supports could *Benchmark Advance* provide to increase student access and comprehension of complex texts?
b. **If rated 4-5:** What specific scaffolds and supports does *Benchmark Advance* provide that are highly effective and helpful for students' RC of complex texts?

Appendix E

Qualitative Codebook (Excerpts)

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3"><u>Main code 1: RC Strategies, Scaffolds, & Supports</u></th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Definition:
Evidence of specific RC strategies, scaffolds, or supports relating to the teaching of RC with the use of complex texts.</td><td>Excerpts/Examples:
Lessons tend to focus on a specific paragraph or section of a text, and students work on applying a particular RC skill or strategy (Document Analysis)

There is essentially a one-size-fits-all approach for suggested supports and scaffolds for complex texts (regardless of genre or specific text; Document Analysis)

“Because [the texts] are so complex, we have to chunk it and give them several experiences with it to make sure that they’re completely comprehending what they’re reading” (Interview, Naomi, May 9, 2025)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Supporting Subcodes</td><td>Definition</td><td>Excerpts/Examples</td></tr>
<tr><td>Missed Opportunities for RC Support</td><td>Insufficient, inadequate, or the absence of RC support for accessing and comprehending complex texts</td><td>“I don’t see how these scaffolds are really helping our MLL to comprehend the text” (Interview, Talia, May 2, 2025)

“I would have added-in more scaffolds, more than Benchmark did” (Interview, Kate, May 9, 2025)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Vocabulary & Oral Language</td><td>Specific supports and scaffolds that target vocabulary and oral language development in context of RC</td><td>“Although the introductory lessons for vocabulary hits the main things, it’s not sufficient or explicit enough for our MLLs” (Interview, Talia, May 2, 2025)

Specific vocabulary words from the unit and for each complex text are previewed and explicitly taught prior to reading the text (Document Analysis)</td></tr>
</table>

		"Once we do the lesson for vocabulary, we go and we find that sentence [in the text] and that vocabulary word in context. We highlight that sentence, [and] we talked about it" (Focus Group, Anne, May 7, 2025) "Vocabulary was the biggest struggle and need for instruction" (Interview, Talia, May 2, 2025) "For example, in the story *Why the Sky is Far Away*, it has the word scrumptious, now students are using that word to describe foods that they like, whereas before they might have just said 'it tastes good'" (Focus Group, Naomi, May 7, 2025)
Considerations for MLLs	Specific supports, scaffolds, or considerations noted (or lacking) for MLLs in context of RC and complex texts	Supports for MLLs are general: reading of text, vocabulary instruction, but nothing further. It doesn't focus on building background knowledge or helping students make connections (Document Analysis) "The multilingual glossary has helped our MLLs comprehend the new vocabulary words" (Interview, Kate, May 9, 2025) "The use of Kagan structures gives our MLLs opportunities to hear other ones sharing and talking about the story and using the vocabulary, so that they're able to formulate their

		own response" (Interview, Naomi, May 9, 2025)
Main Code 2: Instructional Shifts		
Definition: Changes or shifts in instructional practices for RC that teachers have made (either by choice or due to implementing a new core program)		Excerpts/Examples: "Despite how frustrating it was, especially in the beginning, we've been able to see how helpful it has been to have [students] access these complex texts" (Focus Group, Naomi, May 7, 2025) "Last year, we would just pick books from Epic! And all these random places, and we weren't really considering the complexity of them…we never considered if it was the most complex or the most appropriate for what we were doing" (Interview, Naomi, May 9, 2025)
Supporting Subcodes	***Definition***	***Excerpts/Examples***
Teacher Reflections	Teacher acknowledgement on how their RC instruction has shifted (positive or negative)	"[Previously] I would use different [simpler] texts with my students who still couldn't read simple sentences, and only use complex texts with my higher, more able readers" (Focus Group, Emma, May 7, 2025) "In reality, what we were doing hasn't been working. If what we were doing was working, our students would be performing better, and they're not" (Focus Group, Naomi, May 7, 2025)
Rigor & High Expectations	Increased rigor in RC instruction (e.g., using complex texts) and holding all students to high expectations	"In the past, we haven't had enough rigor…we've never challenged our students in this way, and in the past of us not doing that it hasn't helped our kids" (Focus Group, Naomi, May 7, 2025) "Not underestimating our kids. I feel like it's very easy for us as educators to look at our students and look at

		everything that is stacked against them. They are ESOL, they have a disability, they are not going to be able to do this…[but] you never know what your kids are capable of until you let them try" (Focus Group, Naomi, May 7, 2025)
Main Code 3: Text Factors & Accessibility		
Definition: Components and factors that make a text complex, and specific considerations for supporting student comprehension and accessibility of complex texts		Excerpts/Examples: According to *Benchmark Advance*, texts are complex because of a variety of factors, including: unfamiliar vocabulary, text features, cause-and-effect relationships, prerequisite background knowledge needed prior to reading, text structure and organization, multiple purposes noted within a text, abstract meanings, requires readers to make inferences or draw conclusions (Document Analysis) Text complexity measured in 4 ways: 1) Purpose and levels of meaning, 2) Structure, 3) Language conventionality and clarity, and Knowledge demands (Document Analysis)
Supporting Subcodes	***Definition***	***Excerpts/Examples***
Author's Purpose	Specific intent or purpose of RC lessons centered around a complex text	Purpose and levels of meaning refers to author's purpose, level of analysis required for readers to derive meaning from text, and introduces readers to conventions of specific genre and text (Document Analysis) Different sections of the text have different purposes or structures…there are multiple purposes within a text (Document Analysis) "They were able to quickly pick up on what the purpose of the story was and what lesson the author was trying

		to teach" (Interview, Naomi, May 9, 2025)
Teacher Challenges with Complex Texts	Teacher difficulties in teaching RC with complex texts	"I skim [the text] and I do my own thing, because sometimes [Benchmark] doesn't make sense" (Focus Group, Anne, May 7, 2025) "I [sometimes] had to read the text again and again and again [to understand]" (Focus Group, Emma, May 7, 2025)
Student Challenges with Complex Texts	Student difficulties in accessing and comprehending complex texts	Teachers need to be aware of knowledge demands that complex texts place on students. Students may need to think beyond the surface level to fully comprehend a text's purpose. (Document Analysis) Anticipated difficulties in comprehending complex texts include a lack of personal connections, background knowledge, or relevance to the text, potential vocabulary difficulties, and struggling with determining the author's purpose or message (Document Analysis) "The language usage and expected explicit understanding of the story was really heavy for the students" (Interview, Talia, May 2, 2025) "Students had difficulties in making personal connections with the text because they had limited background knowledge and experience in relation to these topics"

		(Interview, Talia, May 2, 2025)
Main Code 4: Implementation of New Core Program		
Definition: Implementation of a core reading program, *Benchmark Advance*, and its direct influence on teaching RC through complex texts		Excerpts/Examples: "I've never done a deep dive into what makes a text complex before, *Benchmark* is the first curriculum I've had where it has very clearly laid out text complexity, vocabulary, and all the different components of RC, so it's given me a different lens in which to view how I am presenting RC instruction" (Interview, Anne, May 9, 2025) "At first, it was a challenge to kind of get used to it, but now with *Benchmark*, having everything laid out the way that it does. It's made me feel better. So I feel less ineffective in comparison to the beginning of the year, when the students just weren't getting it" (Interview, Naomi, May 9, 2025)
Supporting Subcodes	***Definition***	***Excerpts/Examples***
Challenges with *Benchmark Advance*	Noted difficulties in the implementation of *Benchmark Advance*	"*Benchmark* is too wordy, if the lessons and the script was more to the point, but it's just too wordy for me" (Interview, Kate, May 9, 2025) "There was a disconnect in between what the text was saying versus what the teacher script said, and it just didn't align" (Interview, Anne, May 9, 2025) "*Benchmark Advance* program is limited because the few four to five vocabulary words in the beginning of the unit doesn't really help students build up the necessary language and vocabulary and read and comprehend complex texts within the unit" (Interview, Talia, May 2, 2025)

		"I have not been able to teach small group this year at all. I feel that was a teacher, small group is my strong point" (Interview, Anne, May 9, 2025)
Strengths of *Benchmark Advance*	Noted benefits in the implementation of *Benchmark Advance*	"The kids have their own text in front of them…that they can mark up. That's something we've never had before, and I have seen the benefits of that" (Focus Group, Emma, May 7, 2025) "Students are expanding their vocabulary and learning new ways to talk about things or explain things" (Focus Group, Naomi, May 7, 2025)
Main Code 5: Student Motivation & Engagement		
Definition: Student motivation and engagement with complex texts		Excerpts/Examples: "It's like they're super motivated. When they know we're starting a new story, they've got their highlighters already ready." (Focus Group, Naomi, May 7, 2025) "I do like teaching them to annotate, underline, or circle the details. It's engaging because the text is right there at their hands. Would they be so engaged without teaching of the lessons? Probably not. You check out the pictures, but to actually read, the comprehension lessons help make the text more engaging" (Interview, Emma, May 7, 2025) "Surprisingly this year, there haven't been complaints or students saying it's too hard, because a lot of the texts they've enjoyed it" (Interview, Anne, May 9, 2025)
Supporting Subcodes	***Definition***	***Excerpts/Examples***
Student Apathy	Factors that contribute to student apathy and disengagement with complex texts	"You have that smaller population of students who, for some reason, they just don't care. The student apathy. No matter how many

		scaffolds you try, no matter how many supports you send home" (Focus Group, Anne, May 7, 2025) "I think there are less kids who are apathetic [this year] and not really interested in their education, because the others are engaged in chatting and having a good conversation. It makes them be like, 'oh, I want to be a part of this too'" (Focus Group, Naomi, May 7, 2025)
Text Relevance to Students	Factors of complex texts that are relevant and engaging to students	"Students were able to easily make connections with the genre…students had more of a personal connection and experiences with [the text]" (Interview, Talia, May 2, 2025) "They're enjoying the stories, like the folktales, or when we did technology, they loved learning about technology. When we did the government [unit], they liked talking about police officers and firefighters. So it's things that hold their interest…because the information is always relevant" (Focus Group, Anne, May 7, 2025) "For *Smoke Jumpers*, it was interesting for them because they never thought firefighters did that, and that was a extensions of their job, and students got really excited about that. I feel like it caught their attention more" (Interview, Kate, May 9, 2025)

Main Code 6: Teacher Knowledge, Beliefs, and Experience		
Definition: The role of a teacher's knowledge, beliefs, and experiences on how they approach RC instruction with complex texts	Excerpts/Examples: Teachers need to be aware of key and essential vocabulary that directly relates to comprehension of complex texts, be aware of knowledge demands placed on students (Document Analysis) "At least now [with *Benchmark*], there's some universal consistency, so it's not the lack of resource, it's the role of the teacher" (Focus Group, Emma, May 7, 2025) "I definitely feel like there's been times where I've had to just use my teacher instinct and add in things" (Interview, Naomi, May 9, 2025)	
Supporting Subcodes	***Definition***	***Excerpts/Examples***
Teacher Confidence & Comfortability	The level of confidence and comfortability teachers have teaching with complex texts	"When they're not getting it, you feel that you're not adequate as a teacher. The kids aren't learning, so you're always trying to figure out what you need to do to fix it" (Focus Group, Naomi, May 7, 2025) "I'm trying to say less. I'll even show them, this is what [*Benchmark*] wants me to tell you, but it doesn't make sense. I'm trying to follow the rules and be a good teacher and go by the book, but the book's making me nuts" (Interview, Emma, May 7, 2025) "Once I feel confident, then I feel more confident educating them about it" (Interview, Emma, May 7, 2025) "I don't think it's necessarily, like a confidence thing. It's just that I've never really

		thought about complex texts before" (Interview, Anne, May 9, 2025)
Teacher Supports	Supports that are either lacking, provided, or wanted by teachers in further developing their knowledge in effectively teaching RC with complex texts	"I would like [2nd grade] to have a conversation around the learning targets and the standards, and also be more selective in what the teacher script says" (Interview, Anne, May 9, 2025) "Learning about the different genres would be helpful. Sometimes in the blueprint it would ask, what type of text is this? I was actually going and printing the answers, I felt like I was not knowledgeable" (Interview, Emma, May 7, 2025) "I want to know how to break [complex texts] down and scaffold the learning for each learner. I need different modeling for every student, and focus a little bit more [on teaching] with these complex texts (Interview, Talia, May 2, 2025) "I could have more workshops, being able to provide me with more information about the texts in advance" (Interview, Emma, May 7, 2025) "I think I need additional professional development and supports in understanding the different needs of my students and MLLs needs, and how to better support their needs" (Interview, Talia, May 2, 2025)

Appendix F

Research Site's Approval

Note: All identifying information about the research site and participants have been redacted

April 8, 2025

Ms. Victoriana Savas

[redacted]

Ms. Savas:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that has approved your request to conduct your research study related to complex texts in core instruction and the development of reading comprehension as part of your graduate research, pending final approval by the University of Virginia Institutional Review Board. You are granted permission to do document analyses as well as conduct focus group and individual interviews with teachers at with the support of . You can coordinate the details of the focus groups and interviews with . Participation of individual teachers is of course, completely voluntary. Please feel free to reach out to me if I can be of further assistance.

also requests a copy of your research report once it is complete.

Thank you for your work to understand the complex relationship between reading comprehension development and effective instructional practices. We wish you the best of luck in your research endeavor.

Sincerely,

[redacted]