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Exploration of Social Studies Teachers' Experiences of Reading Practices: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

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Keywords

Social Studies, Reading Comprehension, Reading Practices, Educational Research, Qualitative Research, Phenomenology

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Exploration of Social Studies Teachers' Experiences of Reading Practices: A Phenomenological Study

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In this phenomenological study, I aimed to describe the perceptions of social studies teachers' lived experiences about their reading practices that may have influence on the development of students' reading comprehension. Data were collected from interviews and handwritten interview notes were analyzed by using qualitative data analysis. Sixteen middle school social studies teachers were recruited in different schools in a city in Turkey for this study. Three themes emerged from the data analysis in the study: reading comprehension skills and strategies, teaching practices and instructional practices. The results of this study yielded two findings: first, the majority of the teachers did not benefit from best practices, reflecting the highly interactive nature of the reading comprehension process; instead they often used the reading tasks or practices in traditional sense in-class. In addition, these teachers found feelings of inadequacy in terms of providing students with instruction in reading comprehension strategies due to their lack of training of content area reading instruction. Second, a few teachers believed that providing instructional scaffolding to support the development of students' reading comprehension was of primary importance in terms of building understandings and skills for social studies reading achievement. Keywords: Social Studies, Reading Comprehension, Reading Practices, Educational Research, Qualitative Research, Phenomenology

Introduction

Students are, in general, expected to read textbooks, answer questions about what they read, identify main ideas, synthesize their ideas, and summarize what they read to show their understanding of new topics. Such practices are often used more in various content area classes such as art, music, science, social studies. Considering the reading requirements and school curriculum in all content areas, reading comprehension is critical for the overall success of students in general education classrooms. Reading is a cognitive process of constructing of knowledge integration of building meanings (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994). Reading comprehension is a much more complex task, requiring purposeful interaction between reader and the text material to construct meanings from context while intentionally thinking about what is being read (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Harris & Hodges, 1995; Yıldız & Akyol, 2011). Research has indicated that learning and comprehension are active processes by which students construct new meanings from the context they read by interacting with the text, using prior knowledge and experience to make logical and sensible connections with new information, generating questions, and making sense of what they read (Doty, Barton, & Cameron, 2010).

Reading comprehension skills and strategies allow individuals to develop different perspectives and help them make sense of real life. Reading comprehension is also a conscious cognitive activity that requires sufficient use of language appropriate for the level of vocabulary, word recognition, and use of metacognitive processes that lead to comprehension

for generative learning (Burke, 2012; Güneş, 2009). According to Stevens, Slavin, and Farnish (1991), the main purpose of reading instruction is to help students understand what they have read and use what they learn in their communication tasks in their daily lives and in the majority of their future academic tasks. However, the main goal of the education system is to develop effective citizens who understand what they read, who are able to determine the reality of knowledge, who can express their feelings and thoughts, who discover their learning strategies, and who can apply what they learn to life outside the classroom.

In the USA National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000), it was reported that students at all grade levels have to build new meanings from text sources encountered in the entire curriculum, to improve their reading skills and comprehension strategies. Furthermore, NRP (2000) and the US National Research Council (1999) identified five elements of effective reading comprehension instruction. These elements are listed by the US Department of Education (2002) as: (a) phonemic awareness; (b) phonics; (c) vocabulary development; (d) reading fluency and oral reading skills and (e) reading comprehension strategies. These components of effective reading intervention are considered essential for the students' reading development and elements of literacy instruction in content areas classes (Hassett, 2008). Review of previous literature has indicated that all teachers are expected to integrate their content area instruction with effective reading comprehension skills intervention so that all students, including students who require additional support, are able to understand and learn new content (Lee et al., 2006).

Reading for Content Understanding in Social Studies

As mentioned before, the aim of reading comprehension instruction is to prepare students to be good readers in terms of being able to read, to construct meanings from context or in relation to a text, and to facilitate the learning of powerful ideas. This is because the goal of teaching vocabulary skills and reading comprehension strategies is so crucial to add to students' existing conceptual knowledge and to improve their reading skills and understanding of what they read (Lapp, Flood, & Farnan, 2005; Rupley, Nichols, Mraz, & Blair, 2012), it is a common expectation with regard to all teachers that their students, regardless of their ability, will be able to read content area texts and build upon existing background knowledge, which may assist in improving student understand of new content (Billmeyer & Barton, 1998; Dieker & Little, 2005; Fisher & Frey, 2010; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Accordingly, a logical place to teach special reading and thinking skills that model learning is in content area classes, such as social studies, where students can learn how to be independent social science learners as they acquire content knowledge and process knowledge (Hedrick, Harmon, & Linerode, 2004).

One of the primary responsibilities of social studies teachers is to help students learn how to use reading comprehension skills successfully as a tool to gain needed information and strategies in content textbooks. The ultimate goal of reading comprehension skills instruction is vital to inspired teaching of social studies. Reading comprehension in today's schools, therefore, remains undoubtedly the most important and, in the long run, the most crucial factor impacting students' overall success in learning social studies content (Parker, 2012, p. 366).

Existing literature has showed that reading comprehension skills instruction is needed to make sense of social studies materials because reading in social studies is different from reading in other content areas (Baer & Nourie, 1993; Hennings, 1993; Massey & Heafner, 2004). Social studies reading requires students' higher level of understanding of main ideas, relationships, and important information through a judicious use of reading and learning strategies than do other content areas (Lapp et al., 2005; Yazıcı, 2006). This is because it embraces diverse materials such as historical fictions, maps, charts, and literature sources (e.g.,

stories, legends, and poems), as well as primary sources. Social studies reading also involves a more in-depth comprehension of complex economic and political relationships, historical interpretations, geographic relationships within places, human interaction with the environment, other cause-effect relationships, and cultural perspectives similar to those found in the discipline of anthropology (Myers & Savage, 2005; Ogle, Klemp, & McBride, 2007; Parker, 2012). All of these content types require students to use, in authentic ways, a number of complex reading comprehension skills and strategies such as understanding causal relationships, connecting reasons and results with solutions, comparing conflicting points of view, and drawing a lesson from a conflict (Lapp et al., 2005).

In social studies classes, students are expected to use high level comprehension strategies and thinking skills in order to develop a historical understanding, to think critically, to employ causal reasoning, or to follow a chain of complex current events, geographical facts and historical issues (Beck, Buehl & Barber, 2015; Graves & Avery, 1997; Parker, 2012). All of these suggest that social studies is a content area that is closely related to comprehension instruction and literacy instruction. Colombo and Fontaine (2009) noted that social studies offers thought provoking and language rich content that has a potential to promote literacy development of students. For this reason, the nature of social studies requires that attention be paid to the teaching of specific reading skills and that metacognitive reading comprehension strategies that lead to better reading ability are emphasized (Massey & Heafner, 2004).

Social studies by its very nature is integrated with many of the disciplines of social sciences such as literature, geography, citizenship, sociology, history, and others, but students encounter many comprehension difficulties in social studies content which require a knowledge of reading comprehension and vocabulary skills to navigate. Social studies requires students to quickly grasp and comprehend more of the content by using a high level of critical thinking skills and incorporating newly presented concepts and vocabulary terms (Gilford, 2016). Considering this requirement, social studies teachers have a crucial responsibility to equip students with those skills and literacy practices which are necessary in the understanding of social studies materials (Martin, 1972; Massey & Heafner, 2004).

Social studies teachers often make use of primary sources and supplementary materials. This is a considerable amount of text for students to negotiate, and those who teach social studies to students or who serve as reading comprehension coaches to social studies teachers should familiarize themselves with the effective literacy strategies students need to use to understand such texts (Lewis, 2009). Martin (1972) noted that if students are to be prepared to function as active citizens, some effort should be made to effectively teach social studies reading comprehension strategies and study skills. Social studies teachers should help their students to acquire effective strategies to increase their understanding of texts in all learning situations (Fagella-Luby, Schumaker, & Deshler, 2007). However, content area teachers generally expect their students to acquire effective reading comprehension skills beforehand and use them effectively in their classrooms rather than explicitly teaching students how to use these skills (Dieker & Little, 2005; Guillaume, 1998). But content area teachers must use their resourcefulness in helping students acquire reading comprehension strategies that are necessary for successful achievement of social studies learning (Martin, 1972).

In this study, I aimed to explore the middle-school social studies teachers' lived experiences of using reading practices that may influence the development of their students' reading comprehension. In accordance with this research purpose, I expected this study to identify the main categories that were related to teachers' experience with regard to their reading practices embedded in their content area instruction based on the extant literature on this topic. The term *reading practices* was used in this study to describe teachers' reading skills and comprehension strategies or using materials, teaching methods, or instructional activities in an effective manner and the activities that were chosen and implemented during the

instruction regarding specific content to encourage students to actively engage in comprehension and learning (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

As social studies is characterized by students achieving diverse learning objectives in terms of promoting democratic values, beliefs, and 21st Century skills (Angell, 1998), I thought that such an investigation was necessary to explore and interpret middle school social studies teachers' beliefs and lived experiences about their reading practices in terms of their understanding of the degree, quality, and current state of instructional practices for reading instruction and discussing these in the light of previous research results. Research has shown that social studies is an important course for students in the school curriculum, but that students have low motivation and negative perceptions of social studies reading and learning (Aktepe & Sargin, 2014; Beck et al., 2015). In general, negative attitudes and perceptions are widely considered to be the result of teaching methods, instructional practices, intensive curriculum content, and difficult textbooks. However, previous educational research has indicated that social studies teachers usually have not taught reading comprehension skills but need to consider these to enhance their students' comprehension and vocabulary development (Barry, 2002; Burke, 2012; Butler, Urrutia, Buenger, & Hunt, 2010; İter, 2018; Kinney-Sedgwick & Yochum, 1996; Kragler, Walker, & Martin, 2005; Ulusoy & Dedeoğlu, 2011).

An investigation of social studies teachers' beliefs and experiences about reading practices might play an important role in understanding their approaches to the teaching of reading comprehension. Wineburg (1991) states those teachers' beliefs about reading might affect students' approaches to essential learning and the reading comprehension process. For instance, teachers who view reading comprehension as a process which involves students and social studies materials may teach reading comprehension in a different way compared to teachers who hold a simple, more unitary view of reading comprehension (Snow, 2002; Taboada & Buehl, 2012). Given the significance of results from previous research (e.g., Hagaman, Casey, & Reid, 2016; NRP, 2000; Vaughn et al., 2013), teacher effectiveness in the use of evidence-based reading strategies and reading coaching seems vital for students' success in learning to read, in literacy development more generally, in school settings, and in the world outside of school (Beck & McKeown, 1991; Graves, 2011; Marzano et al., 2001). Thus, this study examining social studies teachers' reading practices could elucidate teachers' reading comprehension skills and strategies that impact reading achievement of all students in today's classrooms.

By including teachers' experience about reading practices in this investigation, I aimed also to ascertain more fully their experiences about the nature of content area reading comprehension instruction (Maggioni, Fox, & Alexander, 2015). Furthermore, I assumed that the findings of this present study would provide an understanding of reading practices in other content areas. This is because both the nature of reading profiles in students and successful access to texts' meaning across content areas for all learners suggests the need for investigation to support students' efforts to improve reading comprehension by providing encouragement, scaffolding, and feedback as needed (Graves, 2011).

Method

Research Design and Participants

In this study, I utilized a phenomenological research design to identify and describe social studies teachers' lived experiences regarding their reading practices. Phenomenological research seeks to explore and interpret the experiences of study participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Creswell (2013) stated a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals' lived experiences of a phenomenon or concept. In phenomenological

research, the essence of shared experiences is assumed to have one or more features in common in relation to a particular phenomenon or content (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Patton, 2002). By using this design, I aimed to explore social studies teachers' lived experiences with regard to their reading practices that may influence their students' reading comprehension development in different ways to elucidate the meaning of the experiences. Finally, because teachers' lived experiences about their reading practices affect students' approaches to learning to read, a phenomenological design provides participants with the opportunity to speak out, giving them an opportunity to describe some of deeply rooted reading practices they employed in their daily content area instruction. For this purpose, the research questions that guided this current study were as follows:

- a) What are the perceptions of middle school social studies teachers' lived experiences of reading practices they employed within in their daily content area instruction?
- b) How do these teachers describe their reading practices to contribute to the development of students' reading comprehension in their social studies classes?

The participants for this study consisted of purposively selected middle school social studies teachers. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described the basis of a purposeful sample as the assumption that the investigator aims to discover the differences or different perspectives of individuals, to understand and gain insight, and to select a sample from which the most can be learned (p. 77). Some criteria for participation in this study were specific: a) providing social studies instruction in middle schools (i.e., the 5th, 6th, and 7th grades); b) having at least two years of teaching experiences; c) willing to participate in this study. I prepared a personal demographic data form that included specific criteria for this study in order to select likely participants. Afterwards, I interviewed thirty middle school social studies teachers by contacting them face-to-face in a total of fifteen middle-schools located in a city in Turkey, and asked their permission to participate on a volunteer basis for the study. Ultimately, in the eight middle schools sixteen social studies teachers met the inclusion criteria and were recruited for this study. Of the sixteen participants, ten were male and six were female. The participants represented a wide range of ages. The ages of the participants ranged from 23 to 50, with the average age of 35 years. The participants' teaching experiences ranged from 3 to 32 years. The average number of years of teaching experience of the participants was just over eight years. Each participant taught social studies at his or her current school for at least one year. Their education varied from a Bachelor's degree to a Master's in education process.

Investigator

As the investigator in this current study, I had experience in both a teacher education program and K-12 classroom education settings. My experience in K-12 grade included five years working (in settings for students representing different grades, and learning abilities) and being a teacher educator for seven years. My research interests include reading skills instruction, social studies education, strategy instruction, and concept teaching practices.

Data Collection

Data collection process in this study consisted of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and the notes taken throughout the interviews. I scheduled the time and place that the interviews were conducted according to the preferences of the participants. It took two

weeks to recruit the study participants. At the beginning of the initial interviews, I informed the participants of their rights and the voluntary nature of their participation in the research study. Furthermore, during the initial interviews, each participant was assigned a different code (e.g., T1) to protect their identity throughout the data analysis, findings, and conclusion portions of this study (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018). Upon receiving permission to do so, each interview was audio-recorded to ensure all experiences and details of the interview were captured for in-depth data analysis.

Five scripted open-ended questions (see Appendix A) were used to uncover the interactions and perceptions of participants' lived experiences regarding their reading practices in their classrooms. The interview questions were based on previous research in relation to content area reading practices and the existing literature review (e.g., Billmeyer & Barton, 1998; Burke, 2012; Gove et al., 2011), and consisted of thought-provoking, but not leading, questions (Chen & Philips, 2018). During the interview process, each participant was invited to share his or her perceptions and descriptions related to their reading practices used with students in their classroom. They were encouraged to express their perspectives in their own words. While they shared their reading practices based on the interactions and interpretations of the lived experience, I concurrently recorded some notes during the interview processes on a laptop to capture the participants' experiences with as much data as was possible with each participant. The handwritten interview notes simultaneously helped me to create a deeper understanding of the key concepts of the participants' lived experiences and perceptions and provided a main resource for other important information (Chang & Ku, 2014). All data were collected during the participants' free time from office or classroom responsibilities.

Analysis of the Data

After completing all of the interviews, I created the transcripts from the audiotaped interviews and the handwritten notes; these comprised the basis of my data for analysis. The length of the interviews ranged from 18 to 33 minutes. Spencer, Ritchie, Ormston, O'Connor, and Barnard (2013) state that data gathered often seems messy, scattered, voluminous, or long-winded; therefore, the researcher should parse down various statements to their core meanings. To organize the data of the study, I first used line-by-line coding of the transcribed interviews and the handwritten interview notes to highlighted phrases, key ideas, categories, and statements made during each interview process. Line-by-line coding is a meticulous process in which the researcher can pinpoint and identify key components of the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I cross-referenced the handwritten interview notes with the codes that emerged from the line-by-line analysis. This provided me an opportunity to use a technique often used in phenomenological analysis called *thematic synthesis* that consists of combining the major themes and categories derived from the previous line-by-line codes with the interview notes (Spencer et al., 2013).

I utilized a comparative analysis by comparing the codes derived from the handwritten interview notes to the codes that emerged following the line-by-line coding. After the analysis, the major themes within data emerged, allowing me to determine commonalities and similarities within the transcribed codes extracted from the interview transcripts and the handwritten interview notes. The emerged themes guide the conclusion and the findings portion of this study.

I used the criteria of credibility and reliability as trustworthiness measures for this current study. Credibility addresses the extent to which the findings of the study match participants' experience and reliability refers to the extent to which the study can be replicated based on details regarding the study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To increase this current study's trustworthiness, I used following techniques: a) including raw data from study; b)

comparing findings to previous literature review in the discussion; c) going through a peer debriefing process with regard to the data analysis (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The peer debriefing process consisted of two coders going through the data independently and highlighting categories and major themes that emerged in the study. To assess reliability of the codes, inter-rater agreement reliability was calculated by using Miles and Huberman's (1994) reliability formula [(Agreements divided by agreements + Disagreements)] x 100. As a result, a 91% inter-rater reliability was found between the coders. To ensure the findings matched the experience of the participants, the results were explained in light of the participants' quotes.

Results

In the study, three major themes emerged that describe the participants' lived experience regarding their reading practices, and each theme contained multiple categories. The conceptual themes were the following: (a) Reading comprehension skills and strategies; (b) Teaching practices and (c) Instructional practices for reading comprehension.

Theme 1. Reading Comprehension Skills and Strategies

The teachers in this study talked about a range of different reading comprehension skills and strategies that they used within the context of social studies instruction to develop an understanding of what their students have read in their classrooms. Each teacher shared at least two reading skills or strategies he or she used to enhance students' reading comprehension in way that maximized active participation and interest in reading, and in new learning, for all students during daily classroom activities. Among these skills and strategies reported by the teachers in this study, identifying the main idea of the passage to be read, and summarizing the important points and drawing conclusions were the most mentioned reading skills, respectively.

The teachers thought that understanding the main idea of a text was a necessary reading skill for improving comprehension of content. However, the teachers agreed that it was necessary to help students experience significantly greater gains in comprehension of main ideas associated with what they read and learned in social studies materials (Pedrotty-Bryant, Linan-Thompson, Ugel, Hamff, & Hougen, 2001). However, a few teachers mentioned that they used reading skills and strategies including making inferences, making predictions, generating questions, or paraphrasing.

A teacher [T9] shared her experience:

As teachers, we have to use some reading skills to make sense of social studies materials [Probe = What types of skills?] ...Such as hypothesize main idea of the text and drawing conclusions to aid in developing students' comprehension and summarizing skills . . . these are most often required for the comprehension of challenging and supplemental materials in social studies to allow my students to construct new meaning.

Another teacher [T2] commented on the use of strategies for constructing meanings of texts, "Reading comprehension requires students to master a variety of reading skills to understand the content effectively that is being taught. For instance, understand the main idea of a text material or paraphrasing rather than verbatim copying of it."

Theme 2. Teaching Practices

To enhance their students' reading comprehension of social studies content, the teachers spoke of nine different types of teaching practices regarding reading which might have influence on development of their students' reading comprehension. The teachers suggested they intentionally employed these practices in their daily content area instruction. There were several commonalities in the types of activities teachers described. The descriptions showed that assigned textbook reading sections, oral and silent reading passages, teacher-generated questions, providing definitions of assigned words, and teacher-led discussion of textbook passages were found mentioned by the majority of teachers in this study. This means that, based on these teaching practices, the most of teachers in this study tended to choose traditional teaching practices that potentially would result in poorer understanding and less meaningful reading experiences for all learners in their classrooms (Lapp et al., 2005; Shaw, Barry & Mahlios, 2008). One teacher [T16] shared that she assigns her students to read the social studies textbook chapter and asks them to answer comprehension questions and then reviews students' responses in-class.

Similarly, another teacher [T10] stated:

When students begin reading the text, I ask them to find the main idea of the text to be read and then guide them to completing reading worksheets, which include the main idea and supporting details and questions of the text to assess their reading comprehension.

An important finding to highlight in this study was that some teachers stated that they chose certain teaching practices specifically to meet the reading comprehension needs of their students. They spoke of using research-based reading practices and hands-on activities (NRP, 2000) such as graphic, semantic organizers, question-answer relationship (QARs) strategy, jigsaw reading strategy, and reciprocal teaching.

For instance, T5 expressed as follows, "I used question-answer relationship strategy to teach students to become aware of the different types of comprehension questions asked in texts; thus, to build their reading comprehension and vocabulary." T1 described his experience, "Yesterday, I used an advanced story map as students were reading a history story to allow them to write in the story elements; and then I asked my students to retell the stories that they have read."

Similarly, T8 spoke about having explained and modeled K-W-L strategy (i.e., What I Know - What I Want to Know - What I Learned): "I demonstrated and modeled the use of the steps of K-W-L cart to activate background knowledge of students, and to help them understand what they read last week."

T11 found using reciprocal teaching to assist students to think more strategically about reading. He shared:

Reading comprehension is crucially and fundamentally important for developing understanding of the content of what was read. Just reciprocal teaching directs students to use predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing the four skills needed to foster and to monitor their own reading development.

Overall, the findings in this theme indicated that only a few teachers chose effective teaching practices that they thought might be beneficial for all students and are especially helpful for those with poor reading comprehension.

Theme 3. Instructional Practices

When addressing their students' reading comprehension development in social studies, five of the sixteen teachers spoke of employing a variety of instructional approaches which demonstrate reading comprehension skills to help students become more strategic and effective readers in different contexts. They all agreed with previous research that asserts that instructional scaffolding supports improved understanding of the content and increases students' vocabulary (Baumann, Edwards, Boland, Olejnik, & Kame'enui, 2003). According to these teachers, middle school social studies teachers have to have challenge expectations and employ explicit or direct instruction in reading comprehension strategies to support the development for all students. They found focus on direct instruction features to teach students to use specific comprehension strategies helped students to understand and remember what they read.

Each teacher was of the opinion that many students generally struggle to actually comprehend material, interpret textbook information, and use reading comprehension strategies to gain the essential social studies content. These teachers expressed a common view that students often use reading comprehension strategies somewhat inefficiently and ineffectively. They thought that students who were struggling in reading comprehension require modeling, instructional scaffolding, and a great deal of guided practices and feedbacks for the reading comprehension skills and strategies in all of their subject matter classes in order to meet their reading needs. The reading strategies in lesson delivery and instruction shared by these teachers included reciprocal teaching, questioning, strategic note-taking skills, summarization, paraphrasing, and self-monitoring.

An example of an instructional activity for students using direct reading instruction described by one teacher was as follows [T8]:

When students take notes they generally use verbatim copying. Students should learn to determine what is the content in a passage and paraphrase it into a concise statement without changing the text meaning. In order to reduce verbatim copying, I used direct instruction components to teach students strategic note-taking skills by adjusting modeling and practice based on their experience.

Another teacher (T16) described her experience within his content curriculum:

It is necessary to support an essential understanding of social studies content. I sometimes to teach my students explicitly the summarization skill using clear explanations, lots of modeling and practices through authentic texts. I provide students with opportunities to practice the strategies in supported situations before asking them to apply the strategies on their own.

A teacher [T8] mentioned, "I model and practice on how to generate questions for my students. Afterwards, I encourage them to ask comprehension questions about what they read using thinking aloud method."

Another teacher highlighted to teach paraphrasing strategy in the classroom [T5],

To increase all students' comprehension of the texts, it is okay direct reading instruction to promote the acquisition of comprehension skills. Yesterday I taught the students how to use a paraphrasing strategy in order to reduce

verbatim copying of texts through modeling, guided practices and independent practices. I use a think-aloud method following statements: “This passage appears to be about how to... I will read on to find out if this is what it’s really about.”

Two of the teachers who reflected this theme acknowledged the importance of vocabulary instruction for reading comprehension and spoke of using explicit instruction in teaching of vocabulary within the context of social studies instruction. They agreed that students have to grow in independence when it comes to vocabulary learning, to meet the learning needs associated with social studies. When they talked about their practices, they mentioned that they increased the comprehension of the content being taught in the social studies curriculum. These teachers thought that this was an important part of students’ understanding of social studies content. This finding was evidence that some of teachers in this study felt that students need to have a good understanding of the vocabulary within the social studies content.

A teacher explained how she modeled when she was teaching vocabulary that followed an explicit instruction embedded in the context of their social studies lessons [T5]:

I consider using different context clues such definitions, examples, visual illustrations to infer the meanings of new words. I increase students’ proficiency in learning from the context through teaching students explicitly to figure out the unknown words meanings.

In this study, when the teachers talked about their lived experiences regarding reading practices, it was found that many of these were assigned to a category called “Non-comprehension instruction.” These excerpts indicated that many of the teachers were not sufficiently equipped how to teach reading skills or comprehension strategies as a means of helping the students comprehend what they read in their classes. They did not mention use of instructional scaffolding to support the development of students’ reading comprehension within their daily content area instruction. In other words, they did not describe the reading skills or strategies being taught in an explicit way of being modeled and practiced to meet their students’ needs for comprehension and success in in social studies learning.

Participants’ primary reason for not providing this type of instructional guidance and support for students was lack of training in content area reading instruction or in reading methods during their pre-service teacher education programs. As a result, they thought that they could not rely on their ability to provide students with instructional scaffolding the development and use of comprehension strategies.

A teacher commented [T13]:

Of course, it is the one of the responsibilities of the social studies teachers to improve students’ comprehension of content, but we have not received content area reading instruction coursework during our Bachelor’s degree education process. For this reason, I do not feel myself adequate with regard to content area reading comprehension instruction to build on students’ skills related to reading in social studies.

Lastly, T12 described: “I don’t rely on my beliefs and instructional perspectives on how to teach reading skills and how to make in helping students learn to read in my content area due to lack of training of content area reading instruction.”

Discussion

The aim of this study was to develop an understanding of the reading comprehension skills and strategies middle school social studies teachers reported that they employed for their students, and their lived experiences of reading practices within their content area instruction. The majority of the teachers reported that they used reading skills emphasizing comprehension of main ideas, summarizing, and drawing conclusions, for their students in the social studies lessons. On the other hand, some of the least often reading comprehension skills and strategies reported by a few teachers included making inferences, making predictions, generating questioning and paraphrasing, as well as other reading skills mentioned earlier. Based on these findings, it seems that some teachers in this study have a clear understanding of the effective reading skills and strategies within their content area instruction that could impact the development of students' reading comprehension. However, to improve the reading comprehension for all students, researchers have suggested higher level comprehension strategies and questioning skills including setting goals for reading, connecting prior-knowledge to reading, assessing structure and organization of the text, monitoring comprehension, evaluating, synthesizing, considering alternative interpretations, and making judgments (Carnahan, Williamson, & Christman, 2011; Jitendra, Cole, Hoppes, & Wilson, 1998; Klingner, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2015; Pressley, 2006; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). This is because these skills are believed to model and guide independently students' reading improvement. Most of participants in this study did not also describe these or equivalent skills as necessary for the comprehension needs of the student. But if higher level reading comprehension skills are not employed by or taught to students in-class, comprehension of the subject matter might be limited (Burke, 2012). Previous research has suggested that teachers should use metacognitive reading skills that improve comprehension and retention of expository text and instruct students in how to use these skills independently in and out of the classroom (Gove et al., 2011; Klingner et al., 2015; Snow, 2002).

When the teachers shared specific practices regarding reading in their classrooms, those most commonly mentioned were those considered as traditional practices or tasks (Lapp et al., 2005; Shaw et al., 2008). Rather than planning alternatives for a variety of reading experiences based on needs of their students, most of the teachers in this study seemed to rely primarily on traditional reading practices. This finding was contradictory to the notion of participatory learning and collaborative planning that leads to successful and effective comprehension and involves a combination of cognitive and metacognitive processes (Snow, 2002). Shaw et al. (2008) pointed out that in this manner, much of reading experience has forced teacher control of student performance behavior, often with minimal cognitive engagement and active participation on the part of the students through their interactions and experiences with reading materials. Traditional instructional methods provide students with a limited conceptual understanding of the material read (Greenwood, 2010; Wilfong, 2013). Researchers have emphasized that traditional reading practices is not adequately foster learning and successful reading experiences. Instead, these practices merely provide a basic indication of how well students comprehend texts while providing minimal information about how students use cognitive and metacognitive process (Cox, Shanahan, & Sulzby, 1990; Irwin, 1991; Klingner et al., 2015). Espin (2005) and İlter (2018) note that traditional practices generally were used in social studies classes was found lecture and teacher driven. However, review of previous research results confirm that such practices are less efficient for understanding and less effective for improving students' comprehension of the text and engaging students in inferential and evaluative thinking (Carnahan et al., 2011; Gove et al., 2011).

Despite this, an important aspect of this study was that some of the teachers found benefit from the implementing certain teaching practices the development of students' reading

comprehension such as types of graphic organizers, question-answer relationship strategy, and reciprocal teaching, which are generally considered effective and efficient activities for engaging students in comprehension and improving content learning of social studies (Rasinski, & Padak, 2004). However, the practices shared by the teachers are evidence-based and have been used in multiple content areas (Fagella-Luby et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2006; Klingner & Vaughn, 1996; Mastropieri et al., 2006). According to Nichols, Young, and Rickelman (2007), the aforementioned practices are all important for improving the comprehension of content area subject matter and topics. Previous research has suggested these teaching practices are coherent with “best practices” that lead to highly motivated engagement and positive outcomes in reading comprehension (NRP, 2000; Snow, 2002; Vacca et al., 2011). Gove et al., (2011) pointed out the use of effective and efficient reading practices increases the reading comprehension skills of students and stimulates interest, motivation to reading and promoting reading growth. However, with the implementation of new US Common Core Standards, students need to read and comprehend history/social studies texts of greater higher complexity independently and effectively. Consequently, teachers are expected to use their expertise and content area literacy knowledge to help students develop successfully in relation to mastery of specific reading skills and strategies (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2011; Nichols et al., 2007).

As mentioned earlier, the teachers in this study reported that they used a variety of reading comprehension skills for their students, but only a few teachers found benefit from instructional scaffolding to support the reading comprehension by showing their students, through explicit or direct instruction, reading skills and strategies that will lead to independent learning (Gove et al., 2011). They believed that every teacher should be a teacher of reading comprehension, and that every teacher has a responsibility to assist students in “reading to learn” or how-to-study strategies (Lapp et al., 2005) for middle school students. It seems some of teachers in this study were more aware than others that instructional guidance and support in reading for students comprised “best practices” reflecting the interactive nature of the reading comprehension process (Antonioni & Souvignier, 2007; Gove et al., 2011; Whalon, Al Otaiba, & Delano, 2009).

In contrast, the majority of the teachers did not mention any planning and teaching students how to use reading comprehension skills in order to make sense of social studies subject matter in their daily classroom lessons. They did not describe the reading comprehension skills being taught in an explicit or direct way using modeling or guided practices consistent with NRP (2000) suggestion. These teachers did not make the connection that instructional activities and practices on reading increased the development of reading and competence among students. Social studies teachers’ reluctance to teach reading skills is a major problem in the development of students’ reading comprehension at the middle school level (Lapp et al., 2005). When asked why they did not provide students with instruction in reading comprehension skills and strategies, the teachers reported that they had not been trained to implement content area reading instruction during their Bachelor’s degree training. As a result, the most of teachers who participated in this study agreed they lacked training in reading instruction skills in content area.

Given the teacher education programs in social studies content area, this finding was not surprising. In teacher education programs in Turkey, pre-service social studies teachers complete four years of coursework in various social science disciplines such as citizenship, economy, history, and geography, but are not required to take any content area reading instruction course work or content area literacy education course throughout their Bachelor of education program (The Higher Education Council, 2015). But reading in social studies is different from reading in other content areas and requires the active engagement of students in a variety of literacy activities involving materials that increase their comprehension of the texts

(İlter, 2017; Massey & Heafner, 2004; Yazıcı, 2006). This requires students to use high level reading strategies and critical thinking skills (NRP, 2000; Parker, 2012). However, given the metacognitive weaknesses of students who have trouble understanding what they read, teaching students how to use reading skills while reading is the logical “best practice” when it comes to meeting the needs of reading of students who struggle with reading comprehension. This allows students to accomplish reading and other literacy tasks and encourages them to use these skills across content area curriculum (Burke, 2012; Carnahan et al., 2011; Nation, Clarke, Wright & Williams, 2006; Wharton-McDonald, 2006).

Parker (2012, p. 363) emphasizes that if teachers regard the teaching of reading skills as something that is done only during reading instruction and ignore students’ reading needs during the remainder of the school day, they can expect students to have many frustrating experiences reading social studies material. Further, when effective reading practices or reading skills instruction are not provided to students in social studies classes to deepen and expand their understanding of the reading materials, understanding of the social studies content might be compromised. As in this study, previous research has indicated that there is evidence social studies teachers had lacked experience and conceptual knowledge about practices in reading instruction (İlter, 2018; McCulley & Osman, 2015; Menke & Davey, 1994; Ness, 2009; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). However, it was documented that content area teachers are not used to teaching reading skills within their content area instruction and did not feel confident doing so (Barry, 2002; Burke, 2012; Nichols et al., 2007; Ulusoy & Dedeoğlu, 2011). Swanson et al. (2015) undertook a study including a total of 79 social studies observations conducted for a total of 3,925 minutes. They found that strategy instruction in reading skills was observed in 20.3% of the classes, while in 19% of these classes, reading skills instruction consumed one quarter of the class time within their daily instruction. In other research found many students in social studies classrooms did not receive sufficient reading skills instruction to adequately improve their reading comprehension skills (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Duke, 2000).

Recommendations for Practice in Social Studies

In this study, the participants’ lived experiences about their reading practices have some implications pedagogically for teacher education and for fostering the development of students’ comprehension in social studies. This is of particular importance because the majority of the teachers did not benefit from “best practices” that reflect the highly interactive nature of the reading comprehension process; instead they often used the reading tasks or practices in a traditional sense.

Despite this, some of teachers in this study believed that cognitive and metacognitive factors were most important in building understanding and skills for reading achievement and that providing scaffolding and support reading experiences were key components to influence students’ reading development. These participants were clear in their responses and alluded to a number of practices they could adopt to increase students’ ability to read independently by encouraging their active reading comprehension. If students are being taught the impact reading comprehension can have on their classroom experiences, this will positively influence cognitive interactions in reading improvement (Pressley, 2006). Singer, as cited by Lapp et al. (2005), argued every teacher should teach their students to learn from the context—meaning that they all have a responsibility for reading comprehension strategies instruction to develop an understanding of the reading process as thinking with text.

If many or most social studies teachers experience difficulty teaching reading strategies during their daily instruction for students, the inability of middle and high school students to get information from the texts becomes a formidable problem (Ogle et al., 2007). As middle school students are exposed to a variety of text sources and materials as part of the social studies

curriculum (McCulley & Osman, 2015), social studies teachers should be trained in content area reading instruction (i.e., strategy training and teaching reading in content area), or otherwise develop professional competence in necessary components of reading skills that indicate good comprehension in order for middle school level students to acquire literacy knowledge and experience (Gove et al., 2011).

If the primary goal of social studies is to teach students to comprehend and think critically to promote civic efficacy so that they will become engaged and informed active citizens (Ogle et al., 2007; Parker, 2012), then there is a clear need for teachers to have solid knowledge and understanding of the reading skills instruction in social studies classes (Lee et al., 2006; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Otherwise, practices in reading instruction become a series of decontextualized activities that do not promote the goals of the curriculum fully (Lapp et al., 2005). Social studies teachers must achieve balance is to scaffold instruction so that students become aware of and competent in the use of reading skills and strategies effectively that they need to be successful with the overall curricular goals of social studies (Gove et al., 2011).

Furthermore, if pre-service social studies teachers can consciously expand and improve their efficacy for teaching content area reading skills at the middle school level, in turn nurturing students' reading development, this potentially makes students better readers across content areas in future (Parker, 2012; Snow, 2002). However, teacher education programs should help pre-service social studies teachers learn and become confident at teaching content area reading instruction or instructional practices on reading comprehension (Burke, 2012). Teacher educators are intended to provide a resource to assist pre-service social studies teachers in expanding and refining their repertoire of teaching effective reading strategies and skills (Billmeyer & Barton, 1998). In sum, it is increasingly important that social studies teachers need to become good instructors of reading and literacy along with their own content area (Mallette, Henk, Waggoner, & DeLaney, 2005). The practical implications addressed in this study demonstrate the need for the teacher educators to ensure pre-service social studies teachers are afforded the opportunity to receive content area reading instruction to enhance their teaching practices.

Recommendations for Future Research

This phenomenological research study centered on identifying and describing the experiences and perceptions of sixteen middle school social studies teachers related to the use of reading practices in social studies classrooms. The participants each served a role as social studies teacher that shaped their lived experiences and molded their teaching style in relation to reading. The research data was gathered from semi-structured interviews and the notes taken. Future research should expand on the research findings by conducting classroom observations spanning a time period longer than 30 min and more than one observation to validate and better understand teachers' experiences with their reading practices. The interviews could explore participants' perceptions and experiences of reading practices and preferences, but observational data might provide a more detailed account of the participants' experience in classroom settings. Finally, studies about reading practices could be expanded to include more participants who reflect a greater variety of ranges in teacher training and experience.

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Appendix A

Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. How can you define reading comprehension?
2. What reading practices do you currently use with your students that will help them become more effective readers?
3. What can you do to promote the development of your students' reading comprehension in your classrooms?
4. What types of practices and methods do you think stand in the way of assisting your students learn how to use reading skills or comprehension strategies?
5. Which concrete examples of activities do you prefer to use to aid for your students' reading achievement in social studies?

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