Introduction

In the United States, two thirds of all students are not proficient readers and one third of students do not read at even a basic or rudimentary level (Hurford, 2020). In 2012, Colorado passed the Colorado Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act (READ Act) with the goal of ensuring that all students are reading on grade level by third grade (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], n.d.-b). Since the READ Act was passed, the percentage of students, kindergarten through third grade, who qualify with a significant reading deficiency (SRD) has fluctuated over the years, but overall there has not been a significant change (CDE, n.d.-d). In the first year of data, 2012-2013, 16.5% of Colorado students were identified SRD and in the most recent year, 2017-2018, 15.5% of students were SRD (CDE, n.d.-d).

Rationale (literature review)

In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) released a report of their findings about reading instruction and described the five components of reading, which are: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (CDE, 2019a; National Reading Panel [NRP], 2000). Although many think of reading as a natural task, it is not natural or easy (Moats, 1999; Shaywitz, 2003). Also, being a good or even expert reader does not mean that one is equipped to teach others to read (Seidenberg, 2017). Teacher preparation is a key factor at the heart of student success (Tolman, 2005). Recent studies have demonstrated that teacher knowledge has the potential to impact student learning (Park et al., 2019; Puliatte & Ehri, 2018).

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) states that, after six years under the READ Act, schools have not seen a significant decrease in the number of students with SRDs and in response, the state board of education and the legislature created several updates to the READ Act through Senate Bill 19-199 (SB19-199) (CDE, n.d.-c). One of the main changes to the READ Act is additional requirements for teacher training based on the identified need for improving teacher knowledge of evidence based instructional practices in reading (CDE, n.d.-c).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate the Colorado READ Act and to answer the following questions:

1. How prepared are elementary teachers to teach reading?
2. What are teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the Colorado READ Act, including the changes to the READ Act?

Data

- 72% of classroom teachers and 88% of other teachers feel “very confident” in their skills related to reading instruction.
- 60% of all teachers feel they need more training about reading instruction or that they did not feel prepared to teach reading when they began their career. One teacher stated, “I think colleges need to better prepare future teachers”.
- When asked what instructional strategies they use to teach reading, 64% of teachers responded with what components or skills they include in their instruction, rather than the specific strategies they use. Only one teacher mentioned reading research.
- 67% of teachers feel that the READ Act has not been effective or that it needs to be changed in order to be more effective, and 21% felt that the READ Act was mostly just paperwork and “red tape”. One teacher stated that, while the READ Act “is a good plan… not all underachieving readers benefit from it”.
- 57% of teachers had a mostly negative opinion of the READ Act and 21% had a mostly positive opinion of the READ Act.
- 35% of teachers had a positive opinion of the changes to the READ Act and 57% stated that teachers do need more training.

Discussion

Research indicates that teacher training and skill level are important for student success in reading (Park et al., 2019; Puliatte & Ehri, 2018). Teachers in this study feel that they are skilled in teaching reading, but the majority of teachers in this study did not mention research-based reading instruction in their responses, and their description of reading instruction did not always match with current reading research. The data on SRD rates indicates that Colorado students are not successfully learning to read (CDE, n.d.-d).

Teachers in Colorado feel that the READ Act has not been successful and call for changes including training for teachers. However, the teachers expressed concerns that the training requirement would not be sufficient to improve student success rates. The CDE also found that the READ Act has not successfully improved student reading scores (CDE, n.d.-d).