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Upper Grade Level Literacy: Instructional Strategies for Struggling Readers

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Department: Teacher Education

Advisor: Treavor Bogard, Ph.D.

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Abstract

Education research has shown that a quarter of eighth-grade students perform below basic reading proficiency. Despite this, reading instruction often ceases after eighth grade while text structure and content area language become more difficult. This research project focuses on studying strategies used for struggling readers in seventh through twelfth grade and includes a case study of a struggling reader in order to identify some of the characteristics and needs of struggling readers. This research synthesizes ideas from previous studies, analyzes teacher interviews for literacy instruction strategies and, in the case study, uses observation, primary source study, and reading assessments.

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Chapter One

Background

Current studies show that over half of adolescent readers are in need of remediation (Whithear, 2011, p. 20). The current state of adolescent readers is far below expectations. In the 2013 NAEP Mathematics and Reading Assessments revealed that only 36 percent of American eighth graders are reading at a proficient level. Forty-two perfect are reading only at the basic level, with 22 percent of students ranked as below basic. ("What level of knowledge and skills have the nation's students achieved", 2013**).** Secondary education teachers expect students to know how to read fluently without assistance once they reach high school. Despite the increased difficulty of content, language, and syntax of academic texts, upper grade level teachers do not consider it their responsibility to include reading instruction in their lesson plans (Pope, 2007, p. 60; Biancarosa, 2012, p. 23).

As students progress through school, their textbooks are boring, have uneven writing, and are conceptually dense, making it difficult to read and comprehend. (Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2006, p. 125). Because of this, students who struggle with reading continue through school with limited reading ability and, if they graduate, end high school with insufficient literacy skills. This problem follows struggling readers through the rest of their lives.

Further compounding the problem is a range of sociocultural influences on literacy acquisition. In particular, students in urban districts have an increased likelihood of lower reading skills because of multiple factors influencing their schooling. Compared to other schools that serve mostly middle class student populations, high poverty schools often serve disadvantaged populations in urban areas. These schools have been historically challenged with several setbacks in relation to literacy such as fewer print-rich environments, lower teacher expectations, decreased access to material, and teach lessons that encourage lower-level skill development rather than higher order thinking (Kennedy, 2010, p.4; Song & Catapano, p. 111).

Another major issue is the misplaced focus of many reading programs. According to Bianacrosa (2012) "most people still believe that the major problem for struggling adolescent readers is their failure to master basic reading skills" (p. 22). In actuality,

struggling readers need more comprehensive reading instruction that covers more than just decoding. Students in urban settings struggle primarily with comprehension and fluency (Hock, et al., 2009, p. 23).

Given the complexity of issues impacting reading ability in the upper grades, more research is needed to help secondary educators improve reading ability in struggling readers. My goal with this report is to synthesize and expand on the work of previous research as well as utilize the results of a case study of a struggling adolescent reader to discover the most effective methods for increasing reading ability. Through this study, educators may be better able to understand how these methods will improve reading ability, resulting in improved motivation and overall school performance of students.

Definition of Terms

Several terms are used in this study require definition.

Secondary education refers to grades seventh through twelve, or approximately ages thirteen through eighteen. This time period is also referred to as middle school and high school. It may also be referred to as upper grade levels.

Adolescents are teenagers between the ages of thirteen and eighteen (Whithear, 2011, p. 18). Adolescents are typically students in secondary education. They may sometimes be referred to as young adults, middle school students, or secondary students.

Literacy is the ability to read, write, comprehend, and explain texts and other forms of communication through different mediums. Although it typically refers to reading and writing, it can also include oral literacy, auditory literacy, visual literacy, computer literacy, mathematical and scientific literacy, and cultural literacy (Tompkins, 2003, p. 3; Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2006, p. 7). Literacy requires that the student be able to input and output information. For the purpose of this study, it will mainly focus on the skills required for proficient reading and comprehension of the academic texts.

Struggling readers are students who read below grade level expectations. Struggling readers have basic reading skills but are unable to utilize more complex and appropriate grade-level texts. They have difficultly "demonstrating age appropriate reading skills, which may manifest as decoding problems, a lack of reading fluency, limited comprehension of written text or a combination of these" (Whithear, 2011, p. 19).

Decoding is the ability to discern the relationship between letters and sounds, including letter patterns within words so that the reader can accurately pronounce a word ("Word decoding and phonics", 2011) It is a fundamental skill when learning to read.

Fluency is how quickly and accurately a student can read (Hawkins, Hale, Sheeley, Ling, 2010, p. 59; Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 102). Good fluency also requires good prosody, which is the rhythm of speech (Wolf, n.d.; Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 103).

Comprehension is the ability to make meaning from a text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 14).

Academic vocabulary is the specialized language "of academic settings that facilitates communication and thinking about disciplinary content" (Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 92). Understanding of vocabulary is essential for comprehension (Hock, et al.). Academic language typically includes more Latin and Greek vocabulary; morphologically complex words; nouns, adjectives, and prepositions; grammatical metaphors; informational density; and abstractness (Nagy & Townsend, 2012, p. 93).

Motivation is when students do recognize the "relationship between their behavior and that behavior's subsequent outcome" (Ford & Roby, 2013, p. 101). Motivation to learn can be either intrinsic—wanting to learn it due to interest for self-fulfillment, enjoyment, and achievement of mastery—or extrinsic—wanting to learn something for the sake of its outcome, for example good grades (Ford & Roby, 2013, p. 102).

Proficiency is high academic performance that demonstrates competency over subject matter ("About the 2013 Assessments," 2013).

Reading strategies is intentional methods and strategies used to scaffold the application of reading skill, specifically related to fluency, decoding, and comprehension.

Evidence based research is published scholarly articles that are supported by scientific studies. In most cases, this type of research is peer reviewed to ensure its legitimacy.

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a service delivery model for students in need of more intensive remediation (Hall & Mahoney, 2013, p. 273). RTI is a tiered approach to intervention that attempts encourages students to remain in regular education classrooms as much as possible.

Summary of the Chapter

Older students struggle to succeed in school because they lack proficient reading skills, struggle with comprehension, and are unmotivated. This research project will comprise of the synthesis of previous research and a case study of a struggling reader. Through this research, the researcher may enable educators in their efforts to improve the reading ability of older students.

Chapter Two

This study focuses on struggling readers in upper level grades and strategies to improve reading ability. Consequently, students in ninth through twelfth grade are non-proficient readers and have a difficult time experiencing success in school. Students in upper level grades are in need of remediation and are risk entering the workforce or higher education with literacy skills insufficient for the challenges they will face (Whithear, 2011, p. 19).

Challenges in Teaching Reading

Many secondary educators are not trained to provide interventions for struggling readers in their content area. Educators assume that students will be able to read by the age of nine (Pope, 2007, p. 59). Because of this, skills-based reading instruction greatly decreases as students grow older. According to Pope (2007), the decrease in reading instruction can also lead to a decline in students' reading abilities (p. 59). Approximately seventy-five percent of students in third grade who struggle with reading will continue to struggle once they are in high school (Diamond, 2006, p. 10).

Statistics such as this highlight the need for continued reading instruction past grade school. Around fourth grade, students transition from "'learning to read' to 'reading to learn,'" and this is a difficult for students are not prepared for the challenges of the higher-grade levels (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009, p. 67). Students who already struggle with reading at that point likely fall into the Matthew Effect; that is, they will read less and develop skills at a slower rate, "which inhibits further growth in reading ability" (Stanovich, 2008, p. 36).

Often, instructional methods fail to address the needs of struggling readers. When reading intervention does occur in secondary education, studies have shown that it focuses on decoding and fluency (Greenleaf & Hichman, 2009, p. 6). Although these skills are imperative for reading, struggling readers in middle grades more often have decoding skills, but have difficulty with vocabulary and comprehension (Allington, 2011, p. 11; Pope, 2007, p. 61; Harmon et al., 2011). Because these skills are oftentimes not the focus of reading intervention, students receive unbalanced intervention and do not develop the full spectrum of reading skills needed to improve their deficits.

The reality is that while most students come in with some basic knowledge, even proficient readers have not "learned the implicit language of academia nor mastered critical concepts of academic literacy" (Faggella-Luby, Ware, & Capozzoli, 2009). The academic language of secondary classrooms is complex, dense, and abstract, making it difficult for students to follow along with the class (Nagy & Townsend, 2009, p. 93). Not only is the content and vocabulary more complicated, but the words and sentence structure become longer and more difficult (Biancarosa, 2012, p. 23). Students do not get instruction on how to read these increasingly difficult texts (Greenleaf & Hichman, 2009, p. 5).

Further compounding the problem, high school teachers may often neglect reading instruction, particularly those who are not language arts educators and do not consider reading instruction their responsibility or their area of expertise. According to Pope (2007), educators believe that "only English and reading teachers can teach students how to read" (p. 60).Many language arts teachers trained primarily in literary analysis and reader response believe they should not be teaching literacy because students should have mastered that skill already.

Students in urban settings face more issues with reading because they are more likely to be struggling readers. They tend to have lower school performance and engagement in academic literacy development due to childhood educational experiences, poverty, social competence, neighborhood socialization, crime rates, employment opportunities, and a sense of danger (Hock, et al., 2009). In a study done by Hock et. al, (2008) 68% of struggling readers received free or reduced lunch while only 31% of

proficient readers received free or reduced lunch, suggesting a relationship between poverty and reading proficiency.

Finally, one of the most hazardous misconceptions of struggling readers is that they are learning disabled. Many assume that if a student does not know how to read, they have a disability or impairment. Because of this, students are inappropriately placed in special education classrooms and do not receive proper instruction (Allington, 20111, p. 14). Although struggling readers are in need of extra instruction, being placed in special education classrooms would detract from their educational experience. While the Response to Intervention (RTI) model attempts to alleviate this issue, it is still a developing process that is not always effective or understood in the upper grades. Studies have shown that teachers are often unprepared to implement RTI on their own. Even in schools with extensive professional development, teachers reported that RTI was not helping them in improving the needs of struggling and learning disabled students (Hall & Mahoney, 2013, p. 274), particularly because such a model relies upon secondary classroom teachers having specialized knowledge of reading processes and instruction.

Characteristics of Struggling Readers

Having provided an overview of the conditions that can forestall the literacy development of struggling readers in the upper grades, I turn now to the characteristics and behaviors that are common among these students. Put simply, struggling readers are students who are unable to perform reading tasks at grade level. When tested, they tend to perform poorly on reading measures, "including word identification, phonemic awareness, comprehension, vocabulary, rate, and expression" (Hock, et al., 2009, p. 22). Struggling readers have difficulty with grade-level comprehension and have limited vocabularies and content knowledge (Lang, Torgesen, Vogel, Chanter, Lefsky, & Petscher, 2009).

Despite the issues with readings, struggling readers often know how to appear as if they understand the reading material; however, they take no actual meaning away. They do not understand the textbooks and readings as a whole, but are able to perform simple tasks like responding to questions at the end of a chapter (Christy, 2010, p. 428). Struggling readers can often be identified because they "vocalize," or whisper, as they

read. It generally supported through research that silent readers are more proficient (Gilliam, Dykes, Gerla, & Wright, 2011).

In addition to struggling with the ability to read, student interest in academic and pleasure reading declines as they get older due to the difficulty they encounter constructing meaning from grade level texts (Lang et al, 2009). This downward spiral exacerbates the stresses associated with learning new content and minimizes motivation to learn. Amotivation and the self-fulfilling prophecy are major issues for struggling readers. "Struggling readers typically view themselves as poor, ineffective readers rather than competent proficient readers" (Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2006, p. 55).

Consequently, these students avoid reading; they lack both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Students with lower motivation "usually exhibit and sustain poor performance in reading activities" (Melekoglu, 2011, p. 249). Even teachers struggle to find motivation; focus groups have shown that while teachers recognize that there is an issue when it comes to struggling readers, they were skeptical that positive changes could be made (Bursuck, Robbins, & Lazaroff, 2010, p. 31). When teachers encounter reluctant readers, they often find it easier to just explain the content instead of scaffolding the student so they can learn the content on their own (Greenleaf & Hichman, 2009, p. 5).

Strategies for Supporting Struggling Readers

Previous research has supported the use of certain strategies and methods when teaching struggling readers. Classrooms need to include the "full spectrum of the language arts" in instruction so that students are prepared to communicate across every medium; utilizing multimedia communication allows students a creative way to practice literacy and instills confidence in students about their communication abilities. (Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2006, p. 11). Exposing students to multiple types of communication prepares them to use these skills in the future.

Just as literacy instruction should not be limited to one type of literacy, it should not be restricted to the language arts classroom. Reading instruction should be incorporated across all content areas. According to Gross (2010), incorporating literacy strategies into non-language arts classrooms creates a "more dynamic, student-centered environment for learning" (p. 136).

Furthermore, as textbooks become more specialized and complex, it becomes more important for teachers to educate students on how to interpret the text (Bianacrosa, 2012, p. 24; Greenleaf & Hichman, 2009, p. 5). Allington (2011), suggests utilizing textbooks that are easier to read, offering students appropriate texts, and increasing the amount of reading done each day so that students have more practice becoming proficient in each content area (p. 13). An appropriate text would be material that is at the student's reading level, is not conceptually dense, and is organized in a way that facilitates reading.

It is important for teachers to offer a balanced approach to literacy instruction. Hock, et al. (2009) suggests that teachers need to teach "reading skills and strategies in each of the reading component areas [word level, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension]" (p. 35). It is imperative that students learn critical reading skills, have a clear defined purpose for reading, and are given appropriate texts (Harmon et al., 2011; Pope, 2007, p. 61; Whithear, 2011, p. 23). A study by Cirino et al (2013), stated the "the majority of students…require interventions that address several components of reading (p. 1081). A more balanced approach is necessary, focusing on all aspects of reading: vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, and decoding.

Students who struggle in these areas of reading often struggle with writing because they are so closely related. Although reading and writing are taught separately, they have identical cognitive processes (Anderson & Briggs, 2011, p. 546). Both actions involve searching and monitoring for meaning, searching and monitoring for structure, searching and monitoring for graphophonic information, and self-correcting (Anderson & Briggs, 2011, p. 547). Therefore, it is important for teachers to teach both reading and writing at the same time because "struggling readers who do not have opportunities to write may struggle even more with literacy" (Anderson & Briggs, 2011, p. 546). Teachers also should be explicit about the connection between reading and writing so that students understand that the same processes translate across both actions. When students recognize the connection, both struggling and proficient students will improve.

Ongoing progress monitoring is one of the best ways for teachers to tailor instruction to support their students. Through use of formative assessments, teachers can plan lessons around the need of their students (Harmon, et al. 2011; Ediger, 2010, p. 109). It is especially important to notice the reading habits of students (Ediger, 2010, p.

109). Listening to students read aloud can help teachers become aware of students who struggle to read (Christy et al. 2010). Through these screening methods, teachers can actively discover what students struggle to read. This method also allows educators to assess student improvement.

Finally, for effective, up to date instruction, teachers need to continually engage in professional development (Biancarosa, 2012, p. 26; Pope, 2007, p. 60; Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2006, p. 6). Teachers should be continually aware of new methods of increasing literacy (Allington, 2010, p. 15). It is also important to stay up to date on current definitions of literacy. Today, it is necessary to incorporate digital communication as it becomes more relevant for "jobs...as well as in the marketplace, higher education, and the political process" (Bianacrosa, 2012, p. 25).

Strategies for Encouraging Struggling Readers

Reading intervention not only improves reading but also leads to higher academic motivation and increased self-esteem (Greenleaf & Hichman, 2009, p. 11). In a study by Melekoglu (2011), students showed significant improvements in self-esteem when their reading improved (p. 256). Reading intervention may lead to increased self-efficacy, feeling more accepted in school, becoming more involved, and improved self-worth (Finnan, 2011, p. 7).

To counteract the Matthew effect, (remind the reader of what the Matthew effect is here-set it off in commas),educators need to find a way for students to want to read more. Pope (2007) argues that engaging and motivating students is one of the most important aspects of improving literacy. To encourage this, teachers should create an environment where the class can discuss the personal connection that students make with the reading (Moskal & Keneman, 2011, p. 76-77; Ford & Roby, 2013, p. 111). When students can discuss their experiences with the book, they will be more likely to contribute to discussions (Moskal & Keneman, 2011, p. 84). This creates an opportunity for students to build a personal connection, creating a sense of ownership that encourages the students to read more.

Choosing high-interest stories that appeal to students will make them more involved in the text and increase motivation (Harmon et al., 2011; Pope, 2007, p. 61;

Allington, 2011, p. 14). Students need to find the text significant to encourage them to read (Richardson, Morgan, & Fleener, 2006, p. 192).When students are interested in a text, they are more likely to want to finish reading it, instead of skimming or giving up without retaining information.

One of the most supported methods to encourage active reading is to allow students to choose their own texts. It is important that students are able to select interesting texts because, when students are interested in the material, "they are more apt to read often; to increase their awareness of content-specific concepts, text structure, and general word knowledge; to improve their fluency, meaning-making, vocabulary, phonics, writing, grammar, and spelling skills and strategies; to become competent and confident in reading more challenging materials; and to continue reading as a lifetime activity" (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2009, p. 68).

Summary

This literature review began with an analysis of recent research on reading intervention and struggling readers. Several issues were explored, including unsuccessful instructional trends, the profile of struggling readers, and the role of motivation on reading

Chapter Three

This study was conducted through the University of Dayton teacher education department and the honors program. I am studying adolescent to young adult education with a language arts concentration and focus in urban education. The goals for this study were to discover methods that would improve reading ability at the secondary level and to identify the characteristics of a specific struggling reader.

This project was conducted in three phases. First, I analyzed interviews conducted by two professors at the University of Dayton. These interviews were with teachers of both Language Arts and other content areas. Second, I conducted a case study of a struggling reader. Finally, my personal reflections were used to comment on the human component of this study.

Phase One – Interviews

The interview portion of this study was conducted through observations of interviews on reading and reading instruction. The educators were identified as "exceptional literacy educators" by their school district and principals based upon their students' tests scores in reading and their work as teacher leaders in the area of upper grades literacy instruction. The interviews took place on a college campus. The three teachers, Ms. Kelley, Mr. Smith, and Ms. Burns were asked questions about their literacy practices in the classroom and focused on strategies they used and how those strategies related to the needs of their students. The instructors included a sixth through eighth grade language arts teacher at a Catholic school (Ms. Kelley), a seventh grade social studies teacher at an inner city charter school (Mr. Smith), and an intervention specialist (Ms. Burns). The interviews were filmed and transcribed for analysis. All names are pseudonyms.

The interviews were analyzed for strategies used to promote literacy and increase reading skill in the classroom. Not every strategy suggested by the three teachers was included in the findings of this study. Strategies were then split into three categories, or themes, based on the similar ideology behind those strategies.

Phase Two – Case Study

The second focus of this project was a case study of a struggling reader at a local middle and high school. The school is in an urban setting with 77.4% of students labeled as economically disadvantaged (2012-2013 report card for Dayton Early College Academy, Inc., 2013). Students considered economically disadvantaged are: eligible to receive free or reduced lunch, the children of people receiving public assistance, or are the children of people who have completed a Title I student income form and meet those income guidelines. The school's main goal is to send students to college. Most students would be the first college students in their families.

My criteria for selecting a focal student was that the student must not have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), must not be an English Language Learner (ELL), and must have a history of reading difficulties. These criteria were selected because I wanted to study a student who did have to be pulled out for specialized instruction, as

they would for special education or ELL services. A student who is an ELL or has an IEP would also require different interventions that may not be applicable to other student groups. After meeting with the superintendent and a seventh grade Language Arts teacher, I spent time observing in two language arts classrooms. I decided to choose a student who would be enrolled over the following summer in a remedial math program. A seventh grade girl was selected. For privacy reasons, she will be referred to as Kayla (pseudonym).

The case study was conducted in several parts. First, I observed a seventh grade language arts classroom, and with assistance from the classroom teacher, I selected Kayla as the focal student. For the last three months of seventh grade, I observed the student with minimal interaction. Over the summer, I acted as a teacher's aide in her remedial math class, which allowed me to offer support and continue my study of her literacy skills, although this time in the content area.

I continued to observe the student over the summer math course. I gave the student several assessments at the beginning of the case study, as well as throughout the following eighth grade year. During the eighth grade year, I met with the student once a week during her study hall period. Our meetings were agreed upon after the student was assured the time would be first used to work on homework before any tutoring and tests were done.

I used four forms of assessment throughout the study. One was created as an intake to learn more about the student (Appendix B); three others were taken from Assessing Reading: Multiple Measures. The San Diego Quick Assessment of Reading Ability is a test that "measures the recognition of words out of context" (Diamond & Thorsnes, 2008, p. 68). It is split into thirteen graded word lists. Students are intended to read the words of increasing difficulty until they reach the "Frustration Level." The "Frustration Level" is three or more errors out of ten words. The CORE Phonics Survey assesses the phonics skills of students and diagnoses which areas a student may need more assistance in. It is made up of lists of letters, words, and pseudo-words. Finally, the CORE Reading Maze Comprehension Test is an assessment that requires students to read a passage with every seventh word missing. Students must select the correct word from a

list of three. This tests whether the students understand the syntax and meanings of the words.

These weekly meetings were intended to be focused on intentional intervention strategies, tutoring, and assessment. Over the course of the year, the sessions became more homework based, leaving less time for assessment. The study became more of an observation.

Phase Three – Personal Reflection

The final phase of this study was the personal reflections of the researcher. I am an undergraduate Adolescent to Young Adult Education and English major. Preliminary research began in the spring semester of my sophomore year. The case study and interviews began the following summer. The case study concluded in spring of my junior year. Senior year was spent reviewing the information, reflecting on the process, and searching for themes that appeared throughout the research, interviews, and case study.

Limitations and Assumptions of the Study

This study has certain limitations due to restrictions placed the time and resources of a lone researcher, and because it only studies one student. Their response to certain types of reading intervention will not be the same for every student. The case study relies on the researcher's attempt to reduce bias by gathering data from multiple resources and perspectives.

Chapter Four

Analysis of the interviews revealed three main ideas, or themes, that encompassed the major strategies discussed: increased enthusiasm, low-stress, and targeted literacy instruction. Increased enthusiasm requires changes in the attitude of the teacher as well as in the reading opportunities provided to students. Low-stress involves creating an environment where students feel comfortable to read and write. Finally, targeted literacy instruction requires ongoing and intentional teaching of skills like vocabulary, grammar, mechanics, and reading strategies.

The first theme was the need for increasing enthusiasm, both on the part of the teacher and the student. To increase enthusiasm for reading, teachers need to share their own excitement reading with their students. Teachers need to reflect the attitude towards reading that they want their students to have in order to increase motivation. In her interview, Ms. Kelley said, "I really try to share my enthusiasm for reading, in particular, with my students…So often they have fallen out of love with it. It's boring. Its school work" [Interview, May 15, 2012] Teachers need to show their students that reading can be fun.

Increasing enthusiasm can also be done by exposing students to a large variety of texts so that students can find books that interest them. Ms. Kelley stated, "One of the most basic things I do is create a classroom that is rich in print." [Interview, May 15, 2012] This gives students both opportunities and options to read that may not be available elsewhere. When students can make their own choices, they feel a sense of autonomy in the classroom and motivation increases (Ford & Roby, 2013, p. 111) Students should also be familiar with the library. In Mr. Smith's class, they have an orientation to the library "to get this scary aspect of the library out." [Interview, May 15, 2012] This way, students are more likely to use the library to access books. In addition, allowing students to choose their own texts gets students excited because they have a say in their assignment; choosing their own books is beneficial for both struggling and advanced readers.

It is important that students are given exposure to texts that they can connect to. Research supports that when activities are relevant to the student's lives, it fosters intrinsic motivation (Ford & Roby, 2013, p. 111). Mr. Smith, the social studies teacher, pointed out that he wanted his students reading books that talked about their culture because that exposed them both to engaging texts and showed them that their cultures were valuable [Interview, May 15, 2012]. Teachers should model how to make connections with texts so that students can learn to do this on their own. When students can identify with a text, they are more excited to read.

The second theme emphasized the need for be low-stress environments for literacy. Teachers need to show students that they should not be worried about their reading and writing skills. Teachers can do this by sharing their own writing with the class or by reading aloud, two actions that many students are nervous to do. Establishing

rules for these activities will make students feel safer and more confident in their reading and writing. In his interview, Mr. Smith stated:

> Most of my struggling readers right now are struggling because reading is something that they never enjoyed because people made fun of them when they giggled. So we have rules like you can't laugh at someone… When I read, I make mistakes and when they see me making mistakes, they realize that no one is perfect and even though I have a college degree, it is okay. [Interview, May 15, 2012]

This way, students feel less stressed in the classroom environment. Mr. Smith suggested using non-intimidating assessments, like journals, so students are not afraid to complete their assignments. In his classroom, they "start off with low stakes where they [the students] write for fun, and then you actually go through and pinpoint what you want or what it needs to change to, its more successful." [Interview, May 15, 2012] When students feel that they belong, they "have a higher degree of intrinsic motivation and academic confidence" (Ford & Roby, 2013, p. 111). The stress of class work decreases and the students are more apt to participate.

The final theme that emerged from the interviews was the need for targeted, ongoing literacy instruction. One of the most essential areas for all content areas to focus on is academic language. It is important to prepare students for the vocabulary needed to understand the content, because it allows them read the text and communicate effectively about the subject. Vocabulary instruction should be integrated into the lessons, rather than forced. Language arts teacher Ms. Kelley stated, "I think it's important that students encounter unfamiliar words in context and build it from there." [Interview, May 15, 2012] Showing vocabulary in context also leads to better retention of the words and better understanding.

Vocabulary instruction should not be limited to textbooks. Using images is an effective way to build on vocabulary knowledge as well. Mr. Smith stated, "attaching visual discoveries to actual vocabulary, it helps them become excited and want to learn more, as opposed to just sticking a textbook n their face and saying, 'Read this.'" [Interview, May 15, 2012] This helps students make real world connections with the vocabulary.

Grammar, mechanics, and reading strategies can also be taught in context. Teachers can use the texts already being used in the classroom to teach reading and

writing skills. "We spend a lot of time looking at sentence structure, vocabulary, context clues, [and] critiquing paragraphs," Mr. Smith said of his targeted approach to reading. [Interview, May 15, 2012] Throughout the year, the classroom materials should become more complex as students build on their reading skills and strategies. When teachers do not explicitly teach these processes and strategies, "many students struggle to navigate the escalating discipline-specific diversity of texts (Biancarosa, 2012, p. 24).

In addition, teachers need to increase the time spent reading and writing in the classroom as the year progresses. Sustained reading and writing needed to be practiced. In order to build reading and writing "muscle," teachers should increase the amount of time spent on these activities over-time so that students can get used to long periods of uninterrupted reading and writing.

One of the most interesting suggestions from these interviews was the idea of a strategic novel. Strategic novels are texts that connect across classrooms and subject areas. They should be culturally relevant, allowing students to make connections, and should be appropriate for the age group. These texts allow students to learn about the world and about their classrooms while practicing reading. Teachers should find a text that connects student interest, skill, and knowledge base. This strategy requires collaboration with other teachers in the same school, but allows for an interesting learning experience for both teachers and students.

Chapter Five

The second phase of this case study involved observing characteristics of a struggling reader and developing an intervention plan using information from the teacher interviews and the review of literature. Although intervention was limited, certain patterns of difficulty emerged that warranted individualized instruction.

Kayla and I first met at the end of her seventh grade year. She was soft-spoken and reserved, especially when interacting with adults. She scored in the twenty-fifth percentile for reading ability in her grade and had received the lowest designation in state standardized test scores. Previously, she had been a member of the READ 180 program for one semester earlier in the year.

Student Profile

Based on observations of her writing and a reading intake I performed, Kayla had a variety of issues. In writing, she struggled with grammar and code switching, typically writing in an informal register. She often did not include verbs in her writing or used the incorrect verb tense.

She also struggled with homophones and words that differ slightly in sound. For example, in writing, she regularly confused the different forms of "there" and "your" and replaced the word "fractor" with "factor." Kayla also had a habit of writing words phonetically, showing that she has phonemic awareness, but is unfamiliar with how to spell. For example, she spelled the word "favorite" as "favrite," which is how she would pronounce it.
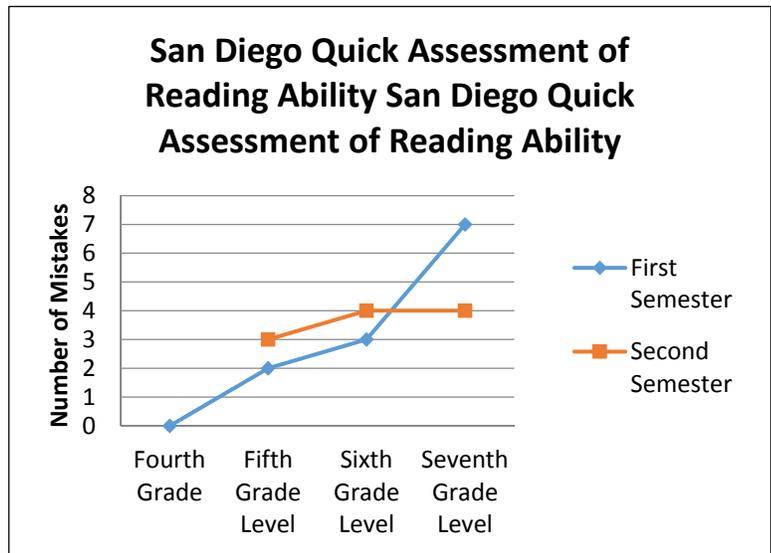
With reading, Kayla's biggest issue was comprehension. When provided simple, below-grade-level texts, Kayla was able to find answers to fill in the blank questions. She struggled with some, but after some prompting, she could answer every question. Kayla was, however, able to use context clues, when prompted, to discover the meanings of more advanced words. She did not practice this habit on her own, but was able to when asked.

As she read, Kayla had a habit of assuming what the word was. After looking at the first few letters, she produced miscues regularly. For example, when given the word "capillary," Kayla pronounced it "caterpillar." When working through slowly and splitting the words into syllables, she was able to pronounce most words. She recognized sound patterns on their own, for example letter combinations like "th-" and "cl-", but struggled when put together. After giving Kayla a CORE Phonics Diagnostic, I determined that she struggled with low frequency vowel and consonant spellings, supporting my observations that she found it difficult to pronounce unfamiliar words.

Through reading tests like the San Diego Quick Assessment of Reading Ability, the CORE Reading Maze Comprehension Test, and my own assessments, I discovered that Kayla read at about a sixth grade level, putting her two years behind grade level expectations [Field notes, Oct. 26, 2012]. Given words at a fourth grade level, Kayla made zero mistakes. At a fifth grade level, she made two mistakes, while at a sixth grade

level, she made three mistakes. When given a word list at a seventh grade level, the number of mistakes jumped up to seven.

Later in the school year, when retested, Kayla made three mistakes at the fifth grade level, four mistakes at the sixth grade level, and four mistakes at the seventh grade level (Figure 1, Appendix A). These results are conflicting in some ways, showing improvement in a more difficult list, but a decrease in fluency in lower grade levels. I believe part of this was due to her nerves when reading. I believe that, at first, she was more focused on the act of reading aloud rather than pronouncing the words correctly. I think that as we continued through the progression of words, she became more comfortable and more focused on the words.

Kayla's lack of motivation to read prevented her from doing almost all reading. She stated that she did not understand reading, and only did it for school. In her summer math program, she avoided word problems because she found them intimidating, sometimes completely skipping these questions on tests. When asked why she does not like reading stories, Kayla said, "I don't understand them. I'm not interested and I just don't understand it." [Field notes, Oct. 19, 2012]. She especially avoided reading aloud. Kayla specifically stated that she did not like testing activities, because she felt they highlighted her failure. This issue in particular affected tutoring sessions because she did not want to take part in any formal test of her reading ability.

Tutoring Sessions

Much of the time spent in our weekly meetings was focused on homework. During this time, I would have her read her assignments aloud to me. At the start of the semester, she was very shy, but seemed to become more confident reading in front of me

by the end of the first semester. After winter break and the start of second semester, Kayla was once again nervous to read aloud.

I believe many of Kayla's issues with reading come from motivation and confidence. She was vocal about her dislike for reading assessments, and I think this became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Her hesitant attitude toward reading made her nervous when asked to read aloud or comprehend a story. Reading aloud shifted her attention from comprehension and fluency to being self-aware of what others might think if she made a mistake.

The Glass Castle

One of our biggest breakthroughs was when assisting her with her school assignment on the memoir, *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls. Before reading the book, Kayla and her classmates were provided with background knowledge on the text. Her language arts teacher provided her with guides that matched up with the chapters she was assigned. This allowed her to follow along and understand specific events and cultural references.

When working through comprehension questions, I saw a major change in Kayla from our original work. She was able to quickly answer questions and give an in depth summary of the text without returning to find more answers in the book. Previous attempts at summarizing short stories had been unsuccessful.

I asked Kayla if she thought of this book differently than others she had read. She stated that because she understood the story. This text was given a 1010L Lexile Measure, placing it at an eighth grade reading level when compared to the Common Core State Standards. Although Kayla was reading a book two years above her reading level, she found it easy to understand. I believe this is because she found the book interesting and was able to connect to it.

Chapter Six

The findings of this research project can be split into two categories: characteristics and strategies. Through the case study, two major characteristics that

hindered reading growth became apparent. Through research and interviews, three main categories of strategies were found that teachers can use when working with struggling readers.

Findings – Characteristics

Through the case study, it seemed that some of the struggles of reading and writing were because of mental blocks. First, there was a lack of self-efficacy. The student often was able to complete tasks in both decoding and comprehension, but needed prompting to use them. The student was not practicing these skills, I believe, because she did not realize she had them. Similarly, shyness became a barrier. It made it difficult to help the student because she was uncomfortable performing reading activities, even in front of just one person.

These characteristics appeared to hinder the growth of this struggling reader. Teachers need to find ways to work through these personal mental blocks if they want the student to take control of their own literacy.

Findings – Strategies

Although specific strategies were mentioned frequently throughout articles and the teacher interviews, it is clear that none of those strategies are appropriate for every student. Instead, it is more appropriate to recognize the major areas of reading instruction that should receive more attention.

First, teachers need to find ways to motivate students. This was one of the most commonly mentioned ideas throughout both the literature review and the interviews. In the case study, when Kayla interested in an above grade level text, her comprehension skills improved. Research supports that when students are more invested in the content of their school work and are able to make connections with the text, they are intrinsically motivated to put more effort into reading.

Second, there needs to be an increase in intentional literacy instruction in all content areas. It cannot be assumed that students will arrive with the skills needed to succeed, nor can it be assumed that they will learn them simply through exposure. When

students are not given explicit instruction, they consistently remain behind their classmates.

Finally, students of all skill levels, but particularly struggling readers, need to be in a comfortable environment. Reading and writing are high-stress activities for many students, and teachers need to ensure that this stress does not impede their literacy growth. If a student is uncomfortable, they avoid tasks and assignments, hindering their learning.

Final Reflection

This research process had a significant impact on my experience as a teacher education student. The review of literature has exposed me to far more up to date research on teaching than I would have without this project. The interviews have had the largest effect on me. At the time the interviews were conducted, I had very few interactions with students beyond observing, so it was very beneficial to hear how real teachers used real strategies in their classrooms. These interviews stuck with me much more than anything I read in a journal article or textbook because I was able to interact with these educators on a personal level. Knowing that these teachers were identified as highly effective literacy educators made their opinion even more valuable to me.

In addition, working with Kayla was an invaluable opportunity for me. It was the first time I had extended one-on-one tutoring with a student, and it was interesting getting to know her beyond the strict classroom setting. This experience was also very difficult. At the start, I expected that Kayla would be an expert reader by the end of my project. Unfortunately, much of my work with her was limited and the project became more of an observation. Both Kayla and I became frustrated at times throughout our sessions. One of the biggest challenges was getting Kayla to open up to me.

As I have stated, Kayla was very shy and this made it difficult for us to connect. I believe her shyness was also what really prevented her from becoming a proficient reader. She was very uncomfortable reading out loud and was afraid of the low scores she would receive. I wish I could have helped Kayla feel more confident about her reading ability, because I think that would have removed many of the mental blocks that prevented her from improving.

That being said, Kayla showed great potential. Her regular language arts teacher was able to expose her to an advanced text that she not only excelled at comprehending, but that she was excited about. Our discussions about *The Glass Castle* were the first time in almost two years that I had seen Kayla very excited about reading.

Overall, this experience gave me a much-needed reality check on improving reading ability. It is not a task that is simple with one or two catch-all strategies, as I had first naively hoped for. It is a process that will require continued effort from both educators and the research community. I will implement the practices I have learned through this research in my classroom and continue to stay up to date on the latest literacy strategies so I can provide the best education for my students.
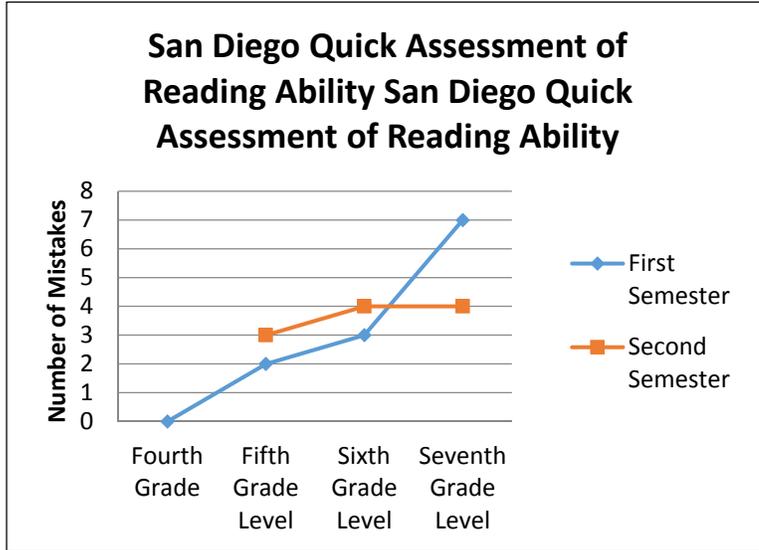
Appendix A: Note Analysis

San Diego Quick Assessment of Reading Ability San Diego Quick Assessment of Reading Ability

Figure 1. Results of CORE Reading Maze Comprehension Test

Appendix B: Intake

About You

1. Who is your favorite author?

   _____

2. What is your favorite book?

   _____

3. How much reading do you do a week?

   _____

4. What do you like to read about? (even if its magazines or websites)

   _____

   _____

5. What is the last book your read? What is the last book you read for fun?

   _____

   _____

Pablo Picasso

1. Where was Pablo Picasso born?

   _____

2. Where did Pablo Picasso first learn about art?
   a. his mother
   b. his father
   c. George Braque
3. What two schools did Picasso study at?

   _____

   _____

4. Who was Picasso's favorite painter?
   a. Diego Velasquez
   b. Francisco Goya
   c. El Greco
   d. Gertrude Stein

Annabel Lee

1. What is the relationship between the poet and Annabel Lee?

   _____

   _____

2. What happens to Annabel Lee?
   a. she runs away
   b. she dies
   c. she marries the poet

The Foolish Friend

1. Summarize the story

    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____
    _____

Vocabulary

Define these words

1. Fidget:_____
    _____

2. Profound:_____
    _____

3. Antagonist:_____
    _____

4. Nausea:_____
    _____

5. Manipulate:_____
    _____

Appendix C: Texts Used in Intake

Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe is one America's most famous writers. He wrote short stories and poems often on very dark themes.

In literature, the theme is the main idea or moral of a story. Typically, the theme of a story conveys a message or lesson about life. The theme is generally not stated outright, but rather represented by the story's characters and their actions, as well as symbols and motifs throughout. Read the poem below and describe its theme on a separate sheet of paper.

Annabel Lee

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of ANNABEL LEE;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea;
But we loved with a love that was more than love-
I and my Annabel Lee;
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Annabel Lee;
So that her highborn kinsman came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in heaven,
Went envying her and me-
Yes!- that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we-
Of many far wiser than we-
And neither the angels in heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling- my darling- my life and my bride,
In the sepulchre there by the sea,
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

vocabulary:

Seraphs - heavenly beings; angels or cherubs
Kinsmen - one's blood relatives
Sepulcher - a tomb
Dissever - divide or sever

Figure 1. Annabel Lee, from education.com

Pablo Picasso

Biography

Pablo Picasso was born in Malaga, Spain on October 25, 1881. He was the first child of Don Jose Ruiz y Blasco, an art teacher, and Maria Picasso y Lopez.

At an early age Picasso showed a passion and a skill for drawing. According to his mother, his first words were "piz, piz", a shortening of lápiz, the Spanish word for 'pencil'.

At the age of 7, Pablo began receiving art instruction from his father. His father was a traditional, academic artist and instructor who believed that proper training required disciplined copying of the masters, and drawing the human body from plaster casts and live models.

In 1895, Pablo's father accepted a position at Barcelona's School of Fine Arts. Ruiz persuaded the officials at the academy to allow his son to take an entrance exam for the advanced class.

This process often took students a month, but Picasso completed it in a week, and the impressed jury admitted him at just 13 years old. As a student he lacked discipline but made friends and continued to grow as an artist.

Picasso

At the age of 16, Pablo's father enrolled him in Spain's most distinguished art school, Madrid's Royal Academy of San Fernando. However, his instruction at the Royal Academy lasted only a short time as he struggled to accept formal instruction.

In spite of these difficulties, his time in Madrid was not wasted. Pablo visited Madrid's museums and saw the paintings of Diego Velasquez and Francisco Goya, though it was the works of El Greco that he admired most.

In 1900, Picasso made his first trip to Paris. By 1905 Picasso became a favorite of the American art collectors Leo and Gertrude Stein, and soon she became Picasso's principal patron, acquiring his drawings and paintings. It was through them that Picasso met French artist Henri Matisse. The two became lifelong friends.

In 1907, Picasso painted one of his most important works - Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,- creating with painter and sculptor Georges Braque the brand new art movement known as "Cubism".

Pablo Picasso died on April 8, 1973 in Mougins, France. He is best remembered as a painter, sculptor, printmaker, ceramicist, and stage designer. One of the greatest and most influential artists of the 20th century, he is widely known for co-founding the Cubist movement.

Figure 2. Pablo Picasso Biography, from education.com

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