Who’s Really Struggling?: Middle School Teachers’ Perceptions of Struggling Readers

by

Leah Moreau
B.Ed., University of Victoria, 2007
BPR, Mount Saint Vincent University, 1999

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Supervisory Committee

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Dr. Deborah Begoray, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Supervisor

Dr. Sylvia Pantaleo, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Departmental Member
Abstract

Dr. Deborah Begoray, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Supervisor

Dr. Sylvia Pantaleo, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Departmental Member

Students who struggle with reading are common in today’s middle school classrooms. This research used a socioecological framework to explore middle school teachers’ perceptions of struggling readers. As the notion of perception encompasses many influences, the research sought out teacher understandings of components and factors relating to reading difficulties, both intrinsic and extrinsic. As well, the study examined teacher views of struggling readers’ behaviours, affect, and the classroom implications of their difficulties. Finally, the study explored feelings of both competency and responsibility in the teaching of struggling readers.

The research was carried out in three school districts in the Vancouver Island/Gulf Islands, BC area. Using a phenomenological case study approach, survey data from 35 respondents, and interview data from 10 participants were analyzed using both a within-case and cross-case analysis method. Identified common themes included teachers’ difficulty defining and assessing students who struggle with reading, and tending to attribute the difficulties to factors beyond their control. The teachers realized the correlation between reading difficulties and motivation but were unsure how to mitigate the ensuing behaviours in their classrooms. The participants believed that middle school students should be competent grade level readers and did not believe it their job to teach specific reading skills in content area classes. Although the teachers in
this study wanted to do more to help their students who struggle with reading, they
were constrained by a perceived lack of knowledge and time.

The findings suggest that teachers, both pre-service and in-service, need more
education about reading difficulties, classroom strategies and practice. The research
indicates a need for more optimal use of specialist teacher time, literacy coaching,
levelled resources, and a focus on the British Columbia Performance Standards.
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Dedication

My thesis is dedicated to my students who struggle with reading: past, present and future. It is your story that has inspired me and kept me motivated throughout this work and beyond.

A thank you to my family and husband for their support and unwavering belief in me. As well, I appreciated my friends and colleagues whose constant, “How’s the thesis coming?” kept me on track.
Chapter One

Introduction

“The kid just can’t read. I don’t know what to do with him. When does the resource room open so he can come to you?” As a middle school resource teacher, responsible for teaching struggling readers with and without official designations, I frequently hear this type of statement from classroom teachers who are frustrated, confused and surprised by pre-teen and teenage students arriving in their classes with reading skills well below what might be expected. However, as I also teach mainstream Grade 8 English, and team with colleagues on a regular basis, I know that the problem goes well beyond students who simply cannot read a textbook. A teacher’s relationship with struggling readers has many complicating factors, not the least of which is their inability to work from a textbook. Along with discussions of practice and strategies, the complexity of this relationship evokes issues of teacher and student identity, roles and responsibilities, and attitudes and beliefs. The desire to understand this multifaceted relationship and its associated value-laden issues led me to my research.

Statement of Purpose

Whether officially designated or not, the fact is that students who struggle with any or many aspects of reading are commonplace in today’s middle school classroom (Grades 6 to 8 or 9 in some schools). Although most people would assume that by middle school, students would be capable readers, the face of middle school classrooms is changing. In classrooms across British Columbia, there has been a 13% increase in the number of students with designated learning disabilities (LD) since 2001 (British
Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006). However, current classification systems used for LD do not identify all children who are falling well below grade level standards in reading, as up to 30% of students in any given classroom require more focused intervention to meet grade level standards (Vaughn, Wanzek, Woodruff, & Linan-Thompson, 2007 as cited in Richards, Pavri, Golez, & Canges, 2007, p. 57). As such, general education middle school teachers must be adequately prepared for the realities of struggling readers (whether designated or not) in their classrooms.

Historically, the educational needs of struggling readers may have been met (or not met, as the case may be) by special education teachers. However, with a disproportionate increase in the prevalence of children with learning disabilities (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2007), the necessity of informed teaching and reflective pedagogy by middle years’ teachers, and, realistically, all teachers, gains great currency.

As there are still vast differences between formal and operational definitions of reading disabilities, part of this informed teaching may be to re-examine our understanding of reading difficulties, not only as individual professionals, but also on a larger scale, as members of the educational community. Perhaps introspection and clarification will help eradicate misconceptions (Phillips, Hayward, & Norris, 2011; Wren, 2002), particularly those that breed the attitude that students with reading disabilities are someone else’s problem (Jobling & Moni, 2004; Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009) and cannot effectively be helped, managed and supported in a regular classroom environment.
As inclusion becomes the norm, a paradigm shift is imminent, requiring teachers to look more closely at how they design instruction in consideration of diverse learners in their classrooms and individual learning needs. With advances in understanding of the cognitive bases of reading ability and disability, teachers should be not only able, but willing, to provide skillful, high-quality instruction for students with diverse literacy needs.

**Research Questions**

A focus on the teachers and their realities is significant as Cook (2002), Silverman (2007), and Rohl and Greaves (2005) suggest that beliefs are predictors of behaviours, specifically mentioning attitude as a factor in adapting classroom strategies and persistence. Sharma, Forlin and Loreman (2008) concur, stating “teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusion more readily change and adapt the ways they work in order to benefit students with a range of learning needs” (p. 773). As perceptions play a key role in practice and can be difficult to alter once formed (Briscoe, 1991), the primary goal of this research was to investigate: *What are the perceptions of struggling readers held by middle school teachers?*

In terms of motivating changes in practice, teacher perceptions of struggling readers not only include ideas about the students, but also views of themselves as practitioners and teachers of struggling readers, and their professional role in the reading development of middle school students. Thus, as derivatives of my main research question, the following sub-questions were explored through my research:
• How do middle school teachers define struggling readers? What do middle school teachers perceive as the difficulties of struggling readers?

• What are their perceptions of the effects of these difficulties in a middle school setting?

• How do they see their instructional role and responsibilities in relation to these students? How do their perceptions drive their practice?

The issue of teacher perception is key to defining practice, as the ways in which teachers perceive struggling readers, and the lenses through which they view them, can impact both their transactions with, and requirements of, the students themselves (Hall, 2009). As the notion of “perception” encompasses many factors, my research questions were necessarily multi-faceted, growing in scope as the research progressed. Part of my inquiry was to elicit teacher understandings of components and factors relating to reading difficulties, both intrinsic and extrinsic. As well, I assessed teacher views of struggling readers – their thoughts on what it means to struggle with reading in middle school, and the implications of the difficulties. What are teachers’ perceptions on why readers struggle at a middle school level? What behaviour and character traits did teachers attribute to struggling readers?

Finally, I discussed feelings not only of competency surrounding the teaching of struggling readers, but responsibility. If the teachers believed it their job to support and develop the skills of readers well below grade level, did they believe they had the knowledge, tools and support necessary in order to do so effectively? If they did not think it was their responsibility, whose role did they perceive it to be? Did they think the
students could be helped at all with their difficulties? Did they think students could be successful despite their struggles with reading?

**Study Significance**

A number of studies exist surrounding elementary teacher perceptions, attitudes and knowledge in terms of early literacy and students who are struggling to learn to read (see for example Barnsley-Fielding & Purdie, 2005; Bos et al., 2001; Cook, 2002; Elik, Weiner, & Corkum, 2010). However, studies with a specific middle school focus are sparse. This paucity is unfortunate, as although some of the basic premises remain the same, reading takes on a different meaning and focus at the middle school level (Allington, 2002; Ivey & Broaddus, 2000). Further, the advanced age of the students, amplified influence of factors such as motivation and self-efficacy, increased curricular content demands and course segregation certainly may serve to affect both teacher perceptions and practices.

Although there are multiple studies concerning effective teaching techniques for struggling readers, the research on its own is useless if middle school teachers do not have a solid understanding of the issues faced by these students, or if they do not believe it is within their purview to teach basic literacy skills.

In conducting my research, and because I feel perception is a starting place for practice, it was my goal to add to the body of knowledge surrounding struggling readers, particularly at the middle school level. With conflicting understandings and practice even among literacy and special education professionals about struggling readers (Phillips, Hayward, & Norris, 2011; Wren, 2002), I believe insight into teacher
perceptions of, and beliefs about, these students might provide guidance in terms of pedagogical implications and professional development.

**Conceptual and Theoretical Underpinnings**

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, it is essential to elaborate on guiding paradigms, which have both practical effects on methods and data analysis, and implications for more theoretical ontological and epistemological assumptions.

A paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs, a worldview that defines the nature of the world and the researcher’s place in it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The paradigms informing my research are based on constructivism, and in particular, social constructivism, as, by its very nature, the teaching of struggling readers is both social and constructive. Creswell (2007) describes how social constructivism allows subjective meanings to be “formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (p. 21). Thus, themes and patterns of meaning are inductively generated. As well, a constructivist framework allows access to participants’ beliefs and knowledge, which are socially and experientially-based (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Social constructivist perspectives “focus on the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge” (Sullivan Palincsar, 1998, p. 345). Founding father of social constructivism, Lev Vygotsky, believed social interaction and the specific structures and processes involved with it, leads to higher levels of reasoning and learning. His advocacy for scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1962) was based on his theory that children learn more effectively when they are properly supported by others.
Powell and Kalina (2009) suggest that in order for teachers to employ a social constructivist model in their teaching, they have to know each student’s given learning point, and the current stage of their knowledge of a subject so that “students can create personal meaning when new information is given to them” (p. 241).

With that notion in mind, when selecting an interpretive and analytic lens, which drove the perspective and process of my research, I looked to Gee’s (2000) notion of identity theory and the contextually specific ways in which people act out and recognize identities, not only as a way to interpret how the teachers view themselves, but how they view the struggling readers in their classrooms. In light of the fact that language and learning are socially constructed, it is crucial to look at how experience, relationships and networks shape ways of knowing – what Gee (1996) called ‘big D Discourse’:

Discourses are ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. A Discourse is a sort of identity kit, which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize. (p. 127)

In looking at perception, the notion of Discourse and identity (both teacher and student) are significant to explore. Gee’s (2000) notion of institutional perspective identities (whereby a given identity may or may not be supported by an institution) may come into play in looking at perceived teacher roles and responsibilities, especially
considering these identities “can be put on a continuum in terms of how actively or passively the occupant of a position fills or fulfills his or her role or duties” (p. 103). In terms of student identity, Hall, Johnson, Juswik, Wortham and Mosley (2010) explain how teachers and schools often assign narrow literacy-related identities to students, who are expected to take up literacy practices valued within the classroom, because identities held by the teachers are given prominence in the classrooms (dominant models of identity).

Although I believe identity plays a large part in teacher perception, I also looked to a socioecological approach to round out my research. Oishi and Graham (2010) describe the approach as:

A perspective focused on delineating how physical, societal, and interpersonal environments (e.g., climate, democracy, social networks) affect the emotions, cognitions, and actions of groups and individuals and how those emotions, cognitions, and actions in turn create physical, societal, and interpersonal environments. (p. 356)

They go on to say that a researcher using this perspective “investigates how mind and behaviour are shaped in part by their natural and social habitats and how natural and social habitats are in turn shaped partly by mind and behaviour” (Oishi & Graham, 2010, p. 356). Thus, I employed this perspective to explore elements of a middle school teacher’s environment and interpersonal relationships which may affect perception of struggling readers.
In positioning myself in the study (see “researcher’s stance” in Chapter Three), I necessarily became a subjective part of the research, acknowledging my background, and how any interpretations may be based on my personal experiences (Creswell, 2007). My methodology was by nature hermeneutical, as I attempted to interpret and inductively develop theory.

In order to fully explore my research questions, I also found it necessary to adopt a pragmatic worldview, described by Patton (1990 cited in Creswell, 2007) as a concern with “what works,” evident in the fact that I have combined elements of different qualitative research methodologies (described in Chapter Three) in order to thoroughly investigate my research questions. As well, as Creswell (2007) mentions in his description of pragmatism, I have focused on the practical implications of the research (Chapter Six).

**Language Use**

Throughout the thesis, particularly in Chapter Two, the word “deficit” is used to describe weakness in a particular skill or specific cognitive area. Many people within the reading field may find the term unsuitable or inappropriate, deeming it “at-risk discourse” that sees students as lacking literacy or deficient in some way (Iannaci & Graham, 2010). Hall et al. (2010) describe how teachers who examined their use of language and its effect on positioning were able to understand their students from a broader perspective, shifting out of a “deficit view of thinking” (p. 242). While I understand and appreciate the concern, the term is a very common descriptor amongst leading learning disability researchers, used (in the instances in my thesis) to be more
I believe it is clear in my review of the literature, and the overall focus of my study itself, that I am an advocate for students who struggle with reading, and believe in teaching from their current strengths while addressing their specific areas of difficulty. Looking at Moffatt’s (2006) analysis of the term “reading disabilities” in peer reviewed journals shows that the term has not often been challenged from a critical perspective. Iannacci and Graham (2010) state, “this lack of a sociocultural understanding of literacy and dis/ability suggests that both concepts continue to be viewed as phenomena that reside within individuals, rather than as situated social practices” (p. 55). It is my hope that both the literature review in Chapter Two, and the study itself helps challenge the notion of learning disabilities amongst middle school teachers and beyond.

**Overview of the Thesis**

In Chapter One, I have provided an introduction to my research, including my purpose in conducting the research, and what I believe is the significance of my study and its position amongst the current body of knowledge. I presented the research questions I explored and interpreted, and the theoretical stance I employed as a researcher in undertaking the study.

Chapter Two presents a literature review on issues relating to struggling readers and classroom implications, including identification, diagnosis, and causes of reading disabilities, content area literacy, and motivation, engagement and self-efficacy.
Chapter Three details the methodology including research design, sampling, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, validity and limitations and delimitations of the study.

Chapters Four and Five present the results of the research. Chapter Four discusses the findings of a within-case analysis, including brief case summaries, while Chapter Five presents a cross-case analysis and discussion of central themes found through data interpretation.

Finally, in Chapter Six, I discuss the implications of the findings in Chapters Four and Five with respect to the literature presented in Chapter Two. I offer recommendations both for schools, teachers, and future research, and present my final reflections.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter discusses historical and current understanding and practices surrounding definitions, diagnoses, causes and appropriate interventions for learning disabilities, specifically focusing on reading disabilities (RD), the largest group of identified disability (Lyon et al., 2001; Wharton-McDonald, 2011).

Mentioning the term “learning disabilities” to researchers or teachers alike will elicit definitions as varied as the students themselves. Pedagogical differences are the norm in education, and to be expected when dealing with the complexities of learning and the human brain. However, the differing opinions in the field of learning disabilities are rooted in debate about fundamentals and ground rules for diagnosis, definition and intervention. This incongruity and inconsistency often results in teacher uncertainty, which trickles down into the classroom to affect unintended targets: struggling students. With a relatively large percentage of the student population affected, it stands to reason that not only special education teachers, but regular classroom teachers as well, should have a clear understanding and pedagogy for working with students with learning disabilities.

However, instead of focusing solely on students with designated reading disabilities, my research encompassed all “struggling readers,” as the specific difficulties of students formally designated with an RD are little different than those students in the lower 25th percentile (Lyon et al., 2001). Therefore, it is important to understand the
identification criteria, although ambiguous and unclear even among scholars, in order to clarify possible differing perceptions of students with and without designations.

Because my research explored teachers’ perceived behaviours of, and relationship with, struggling readers in the classroom, the chapter also addresses research and concerns around content area literacy in a middle school setting, and factors affecting the motivation and engagement of struggling students. While discussing the current research, I elucidate areas where my study may fill a gap, or expands on the existing knowledge.

**Defined by Definition**

“Learning disabilities” (LD) now account for the largest category of special education (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Lyon et al., 2001), with a diagnosis rate of almost 5% in school-aged Canadian children (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2007). Since being coined by Dr. Samuel Kirk and introduced at a conference in Chicago in 1962 (Kirk & Bateman, 1962), the term “learning disabilities” has undergone considerable academic scrutiny, debate and questioning. At the heart of the issue is a lack of congruency and agreement on its definition and diagnosis.

The British Columbia Ministry of Education (2010) adopted its definition from the Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, as follows:

Learning disabilities refers to a number of disorders that may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise
demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning. As such, learning disabilities are distinct from global intellectual disabilities. (n.p.)

The definition implies “unexpected underachievement,” a common facet of many definitions, referring to unanticipated difficulties with learning in an otherwise capable child. Many scholars have criticized the fact that LD definitions are heavily weighted by exclusionary criteria, focusing more so on what LD is not, rather than on what it is (Kavale, 2002; Kibby, 2009). Attempting to distinguish LD from other cognitive disorders has created a muddied vision and understanding of the concept, relegating it to what Kavale and Forness (2000) describe as a “residual disorder;” a term used to describe a problem only when other possibilities have been excluded. Taking it one step further, educational psychologist Gerald Senf (1986) described LD as a “sociological sponge that attempts to wipe up general education’s spills and cleanse its ills” (in Lyon et al., 2001, p. 268). Certainly, indistinct definition and criteria do little to clarify understanding and support.

The notion of “specificity” has also been historically linked with the definition of LD, suggesting that cognitive deficiencies are such that they affect only the area of deficit (decoding, for example). However, although some continue to adhere to the idea of deficit specificity, this notion has been negated through much research showing the areas of deficit present in students with specific LD are often pervasive in other areas of learning due to the obvious interactions between skill domains (e.g., vocabulary development, and speech, language and auditory processing) (Catts & Kamhi, 2005a; Stanovich, 1986).
Suggesting that “tinkering” with existing definitions would be ineffectual, Kavale and Forness (2000) present six stipulations which they argue must be included in any imminent definitions of LD. They suggest LD is: a) a veritable phenomenon; b) a legitimate special education classification; c) a form of academic underachievement; d) not equivalent to low achievement; e) a special type of learning problem; and e) associated with particular deficits.

However, although these principles may be offered as a theoretical standard, they are unfortunately not as evident in practice. Struggles with definitions, specifically in the area of reading disabilities (which is confounded by often-misunderstood labels such as “dyslexia” and “developmental dyslexia”), seem to signify an issue with clarity of diagnosis. Kavale and Forness (2000) reason that a definition does not provide unequivocal identification criteria; rather it relegates us to dealing in value judgments and not scientific fact. Fletcher, Denton and Francis (2005) agree, stating that the field must move away from historical concepts, adopted under limited research, in order for the construct of LD to remain credible. Although this need for further construct validity has driven much of the change and review in the world of learning disabilities in the past 50 years, it has also led to a “hopeless morass of confusion” (Fletcher, Francis, Morris, & Lyon, 2005, p. 506).

**What’s the Diagnosis?**

One of the difficulties with the concept of a learning disability is the often-found difference between formal and operational definitions. Much of this variance has to do with differences in diagnostic beliefs and practices.
In looking at the rationale behind diagnosis, one of the main reasons for designating a student with LD is eligibility for special education services (Kibby, 2009; Lyon et al., 2001). Reading disability is most easily defined as a basic deficit in learning to decode print (Vellutino, Fletcher, Snowling, & Scanlon, 2004). However, as mentioned earlier, when looking specifically at reading disability, there is little difference in the types of deficit occurring in designated students versus those in the lower 25th percentile (Lyon et al., 2001). Thus, although many researchers criticize the exponential increase in the number of designated students as excessive (Kavale, 2002; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Lyon et al., 2001; Phillips, Hayward, & Norris, 2011; Vellutino et al., 2004), current classification systems used for LD do not identify all children who would benefit from special education services.

The key component of the diagnostic procedure, as well as the most hotly contested, is the idea of “unexpected underachievement.” Currently, many students are identified as reading disabled using a “discrepancy” model, which examines the difference between performance on a basic IQ test and a reading-specific measure. Discrepancy, and in particular, the IQ component of the discrepancy model, is widely criticized for psychometric, statistical and conceptual limitations. Most notably, many mention issues with latent single-time assessments, measurement errors, arbitrary measures of reading ability, and causal relations between reading and IQ (Fletcher et al., 2005; Kavale, 2002).

Fuchs, Mock, Morgan and Young (2003) point out that the current situation is very much a “rock and a hard place,” stating “on one hand, a consensus grows that IQ-
achievement discrepancy should be abandoned as a marker of the disability. On the other hand, [...] there is an absence of a validated replacement” (p. 168).

A valid classification system should reliably distinguish students with LD from typically achieving individuals, those with other developmental disorders, and low achievers. The latter category tends to be identified as being confounded by use of the discrepancy model, with studies showing negligible differences between non-discrepant low achievers and discrepant LD students (Fletcher et al., 2005; Lyon et al., 2001). Fletcher et al. (2005) also mention a lack of differentiation between students whose poor achievement is due to LD (in its formal definition), and those whose poor achievement is due to environmental disadvantage or inadequate instruction.

Using the stage model of cancer (based on degree of spread and implications surrounding prognosis and treatment) as a guide, Kavale and Forness (2000) propose a model which includes sub-categories or stages of underachievement, based on a causal continuum. For example, Stage I might be mild, non-persistent deficits caused by environmental factors; Stage II or III might be reserved for low achievers; and the final stage would be reserved for those with the most severe, and chronic learning difficulties, mainly caused by intrinsic factors. This model may have some merit, as, along with unexpected underachievement, LD carries with it the assumption of intractability (Fletcher, Denton, & Francis, 2005; Lyon et al., 2001), theoretically making students with LD chronically difficult to teach. Keeping the notion of intractability reserved for only the most chronic “Stage IV” students may help teachers to feel
empowered to teach, and expect progress from, students designated in the lower stages.

Reliance on an IQ achievement criterion means that rather than identifying risk factors for reading failure, we are often forced to employ a “wait to fail” model, as students must reach a certain level of discrepancy before being formally identified for special education services, although they may have been informally recognized much earlier as struggling readers (Clay, 1972; Lyon et al., 2001). This waiting period occupies precious time which might have been used for early intervention at the first sign of risk, too often leading to students entering middle school with more severe difficulties.

While Kavale (2002) agrees with many of the above-noted issues, he remains convinced of the importance of the discrepancy model, as long as it is not used as the sole criterion for identification. He believes discrepancy is solely an indicator for underachievement, rather than an indicator of a learning disability, and should be used only as the initial step in diagnosis. Many researchers would agree with his multi-criterion approach and his argument for a more comprehensive identification process. Though many alternatives have been proposed, they too are not without their inherent flaws.

Fletcher et al. (2005) discuss an “intra-individual” model, which requires an examination of measures of cognitive function (behaviours not directly related to instruction, such as processing skills), and identifies a student as LD based on uneven cognitive profiles. However, along with the fact that this model would possibly exclude the most severely impaired, Fletcher et al.’s issues with the model mesh well with the
view of Kibby (2009) and Vellutino et al. (2004), that cognitive tests do not easily translate into individualized instruction, and may not be particularly helpful in identifying specific areas of instructional need.

Propelled by concerns about historical diagnosis models, proponents of a “response to intervention” (RTI) model believe that the process allows for an LD designation to be reserved for only those students who are most severely disabled. Gaining widespread support and usage in the United States (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), the model involves intense, quality instruction in the core area identified as a weakness, such that improved outcomes could be expected from most students. The model’s benefits include not using extrinsic deficits as exclusionary criteria in identifying unexpected underachievers (thus identifying based on risk and performance), reducing bias in the identification process, and allowing for early identification and instruction (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003; Vellutino et al., 2004).

Torgesen (2009) implemented and studied a Reading First program based on a response to intervention model in 318 elementary schools in Florida, with the aim of reducing the number of students with serious reading difficulties by Grade 3 through consistently high-quality instruction, reliable screening and progress monitoring and consistent interventions. Over a period of three years, the percent of students identified as learning disabled at the end of kindergarten dropped 81%, with Grades 1 through 3 coming in with 67%, 53% and 42% drops respectively. Torgesen explained that these impressive results could stem either from an actual reduction in LD numbers, or the fact
that fewer students were identified because teachers and schools had increased confidence in their abilities to meet their needs.

Allington (2011) believes that although the idea of response to intervention has merit, and most children can be taught to read, the rush to implement a sparsely researched idea may eventually lead to its downfall, leaving students potentially undesignated and unsupported. In the study mentioned above, Torgesen (2009) agrees with this view, stating that:

If schools spend significant amounts of time experimenting with interventions that are not sufficiently powerful before they refer students for potentially more powerful special education services, then the RTI instructional model could actually delay the identification of students for needed instructional services. (p. 5)

Many other scholars support this view, drawing attention to issues such as lack of critical knowledge, vague and inconsistent implementation, and unanswered questions about the operational definitions of “intervention” and “response” (Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeir, & LeFever, 2008; Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Fuchs et al. (2003) agree with these concerns, and conclude that “proponents of RTI as an alternative means of LD identification must still prove that their problem-solving approach is worthy of the descriptor ‘scientifically based’” (p. 167).

As another alternative to IQ-criterion based diagnosis procedures, although they make no claims as to its validity, Kavale and Forness (2000) propose an interesting hierarchical model of diagnosis, involving four operational requisites (discrepancy,
pervasive deficits in basic skill areas, learning efficiency, and psychological process
deficits) with the use of the current exclusionary clauses as the final step in
identification. Although this model would better elucidate the nature of LD, and
highlight very specific cognitive and skill deficits, the use of exclusionary criteria would
need to be carefully considered so as to not negate the effect of extrinsic risk factors in
neural and cognitive development (Lyons, 2003).

**Just Causes**

There is little more highly debated in the field of learning disabilities than the
discussion of the causes of reading failure. Particularly in the field of learning disabilities,
it is important to differentiate between the notions of cause and correlation, as it is easy
for the differences to become cloudy. Although much effort has been put into
researching the “medical model” of diagnosis, and many defined correlates uncovered,
there has thus far been no delineation of a specific biological cause in the search for
pathology (Kibby, 2009; Vellutino et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, the formal definition of LD is still grounded in the assumption of
mitigating neurobiological factors, and supported by many who argue for primary
intrinsic causes. Long-term and genetically-based studies seem to point to at least
somewhat of a biological origin for many difficulties with reading (Olson & Byrne, 2005;
Stein, 2008; Vellutino et al., 2004). For example, RD tends to run in the family, and there
is a much higher risk in the offspring of a parent with RD than the general population
(Catts & Kamhi, 2005a; Lyon et al., 2001), although that correlation may also tend to
point toward environmental factors. As such, it is important to recognize biological data
as factors along a gradation of risk, depending on the particular assortment of cognitive
deficits, coupled with experiences which may either capitalize on an individual’s
strengths, or aggravate weaknesses (Vellutino et al., 2004).

The presence of brain anomalies in people who have dyslexia and considerable
neurobiological evidence indicating that poor readers have disruption primarily in the
left hemisphere (Catts & Kamhi, 2005a, 2005b; Gilger, 2008; Lyon et al., 2001) may be
deemed by some to be neurobiological evidence, although consideration must be given
to the notions of cause and consequence and whether brain differences are
developmental effects of years of poor reading.

At the top of the risk factors for cognitive abilities is phonological processing –
difficulties in linguistic operations that make use of information involving the sounds of
speech (Catts & Kamhi, 2005a, 2005b; Stanovich, 1986). Because reading is linguistically-
based, it is not surprising that much evidence can be found linking RD to deficits in
phonological retrieval, awareness, memory and production (Catts & Kamhi, 2005a).

However, again it could be easily debated whether the phonological deficits are the
source of the reading difficulties, or the result. Whether cause or consequence,
language issues are a major factor in almost all cases of RD and deserve much
consideration in both diagnosis and intervention (Catts & Kamhi, 2005a, 2005b; Gilger,
2008).

Although all current definitions of LD exclude those struggling with reading due
to extrinsic factors, it is nevertheless crucial to examine them. Not only are more
researchers pointing to heavier contribution from external causes (Catts & Kamhi,
2005a; Lyon et al., 2001), but many intrinsic risk factors are in jeopardy of amplification as a result of environment, literacy history and instruction.

McCray, Vaughn and Neal (2001) used a systematic interview format to study 20 middle school students’ perceptions of their reading disability and past, current and future relationships with reading. The students, Grades 6 to 8, were selected based on being designated with a reading disability, scoring in the lowest 25% percentile on standardized assessments, and receiving special education services. Along with evidence that the students had a clear understanding of the nature of their weaknesses, the authors intriguingly found compelling evidence that many of the students in the study had undergone some sort of disturbance to their reading instruction (such as school absence, transience, or non-English speaking parents). This finding tends to point towards environmental or cultural foundations for low achievement in reading, although these students were formally designated in a model which theoretically excludes these external factors.

A child’s home environment can play a large part in diminishing or strengthening possible risk factors for RD. Leseman and van Tuijl (2006 cited in Paratore & Dougherty, 2011) identify three categories of early literacy experience which can shape a child’s development (p. 94):

*Daily Interactions* – routine literacy-based tasks that occur in the every day, such as advertising, mail, coupons, and shared story time.
Informal or Incidental Instruction – experiences which develop phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge, such as rhymes and songs that play with words and sounds.

Affective – development of a favourable attitude toward literacy-based experiences.

This emphasis on vast possible differences in experience, and therefore skill and affect toward literacy is supported by Heath (1986) who states that “learning of language takes place within the political, economic, social, ideological, religious and aesthetic web of relationships of each community whose members see themselves as belonging to a particular culture” (p. 146), and indicates that children are more likely to succeed in school if they bring the language of the cultural norm, or are able to quickly intuit its rules.

Although excluded as causes in most current definitions, risk factors such as environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage place children at significant risk for weaker neural and cognitive development (Catts & Kamhi, 2005a; Lyon et al., 2001). Early growth and development of the brain is heavily dependent on environmental experience (Levine, 1999 cited in Lyons, 2003), and thus supportive early literacy opportunities are crucial in enabling children to fully benefit from later classroom instruction.

Another crucial element of reading looked at in terms of reading disability cause and correlation is volume, often a key lacking component for struggling readers. Allington (2000, 2009) is a strong advocate for volume of reading, asserting that the
more time a child spends practicing reading, the more innately reading strategies are imbedded, and the more vocabulary is developed, and used to facilitate the induction of new word meanings, as well as comprehension strategies. “Wide reading” has been well-touted in its role and importance for increasing vocabulary knowledge, particularly in older students (Allington, 2007; Harmon, Hedrick & Wood 2005). In completing research on vocabulary development, Guthrie (2004) surmised that poor readers in the middle years might spend 500% less time engaged in reading, and suggests that the relationship between reading volume and proficiency is not coincidental.

Considering the fact that most students who struggle with reading have a deficit in vocabulary (Allington, 2000; Torgesen, 2002), and taking into account the types of lexicon-heavy content reading a typical middle school student might have to undergo, issues with vocabulary ought to be essential when dealing with struggling readers.

**Mind the Gap**

Unfortunately, as struggling readers end up reading less, students tend to fall farther and farther behind. In fact, much research shows that if a child struggles with reading by as early as Grade 2, he or she will continue to have reading problems into adulthood (Lyons, 2003; Lyon et al., 2001; Torgesen et al., 2006). Indeed, the gap between a struggling reader and an average reader will begin to grow as they age (Clay, 1972). Stanovich (1986) refers to this “cumulative disadvantage” phenomenon as “The Matthew Effect,” stating that struggling readers both shape their environment (e.g., choosing to read less), and are shaped by their environment’s response (e.g., learning
less vocabulary, making comprehension strategies more difficult), thus creating a self-
fulfilling or self-reinforcing process.

Some of the reinforcement in the “Matthew Effect” might also be due to teaching, as there is increasing support for the view that many students designated “reading disabled” are actually “teaching disabled” (Allington, 2011; Lyon et al., 2001; Lyons, 2003). This concern is perhaps best stated by Vellutino et al. (2004):

Virtually all reading disability research has been compromised by the failure to control for the child’s educational history, given that adverse effects of inadequate pre-reading experience and/or inadequate instruction can often lead to reading skills deficiencies that mimic the effects of basic cognitive deficits. (p. 25)

“Adequate instruction” is used as exclusionary criteria for an official designation, though the term often infers only that a child is at an age-appropriate grade, which leaves a high degree of variability in both quality and quantity (Catts & Kamhi, 2005a; Scanlon, 2011). Often, instruction is still represented more in whole-class applications, although evidence points towards the need for multilevel, flexible, small-group instruction (Allington, 2000; Riddle Buly & Valencia, 2002). Although there are many critics of its appropriateness as a diagnostic tool, response to intervention may be beneficial in this regard as an instructional approach. Using RTI in a “standard protocol” approach (moving those who do not succeed with whole-class instruction to a specific, dictated ‘tier 2’ intervention) can facilitate greater quality control (Fuchs et al., 2003). A tiered approach can help ensure students who do not flourish under whole-class
instruction receive instruction more tailored to individual needs (although there would need to be adequate flexibility and responsiveness in each tier).

Though studies point to instructional interventions as being effective for those at risk for reading disability (Brown & Felton, 1990), Allington (2004) and Olson and Byrne (2005) suggest early interventions should not be thought of as a vaccine, and that many students may continue to need intensive instruction throughout their schooling in order to prevent further difficulties. This concept is crucial when looking at the perceptions of middle school teachers, and whether they believe continued reading instruction to be under their purview.

At a school level, it is perhaps easier, and less controversial to identify possible environmental extrinsic causes (McCray, Vaughn, & Neal, 2001) than to pinpoint periods of ineffective or inappropriate instruction as a factor of reading failure. However, as more is learned about the process of reading, the effects of instruction, and the types of specialized, explicit and knowledgeable teaching needed for those at risk of developing reading failure (Clay, 1972; Lyons, 2003), we would be remiss not to consider the role of pedagogy in the development of reading disabilities.

**Intervention and Instruction**

In the face of scientific research, it is clear that appropriate instruction is crucial not only for student success, but also to reduce the ever-growing population of students designated RD. As well, due to obvious ambiguity in designation practices, instruction needs to focus on all struggling readers, designated or not. Unfortunately, what is appropriate and necessary is not always what is possible. Allington (2004) points to
several intervention studies, and in breaking down costs, he suggests that the type of high-level interventions needed to potentially remediate the majority of readers are out of reach in terms of finances and resources for most schools. However, it is clear from a plethora of instructional studies completed during the past 10 years, that although we may not be able to realistically reach all students, we can certainly improve practice, both in terms of prevention and remediation.

An initial look at assessment data and how it drives instruction reveals an often monolithic view of struggling readers (Allington, 2000; Clay, 1972; Dennis, 2008; Riddle Buly & Valencia, 2002). Although reading issues are specific and multifaceted, rather than determining individual deficits and targeting instruction towards them, it is evident that “struggling readers” (both designated and not) are often grouped under the same umbrella, and provided with the same interventions.

Dennis (2008) began her study with several open-ended questions surrounding the use of assessment data in curriculum planning, focussing specifically on how standardized tests and other reading assessments are used to provide an instructional focus for struggling readers. Using a case study of one middle school in central Florida, focusing in particular on struggling reader Jennifer, Dennis’s research showed: a lack of integration between reading assessment and instructional practices; a lack of consideration for individual strengths and weaknesses in the reading programs of struggling students; and a lack of teacher knowledge and understanding of assessment results and their implications for students.
As Allington (2000) states “[we] have learned an enormous amount about the characteristics of more effective reading instruction. We have to move beyond the current fixation on methods, materials and programs” (p. 33). Dennis (2008) and Riddle Buly and Valencia (2002) provide evidence that assessment data are too often used to provide a very general, overly simplified picture of reading performance, rather than to identify specific areas of deficit and instructional need, and lump struggling readers together, despite vast individual differences. However, without a thorough understanding of diagnosis criteria, or the possible elements at play in a reading disability, how can teachers be expected to effectively assess and intervene for struggling readers?

In terms of information about those designated with reading disabilities, Kibby (2009) believes that part of the problem lies in our diagnosis procedures, which often involve a school psychologist who is more concerned with cognitive deficits and unprepared to provide a reading diagnosis, much less concrete teaching information. This systemic lack in what Kibby (2009) calls “diagnostic teaching,” provides support for Lyons’s (2003) assertion that “the reason that certain children can’t learn to read is because teachers don’t know how to teach them” (p. 137). With her theory heavily influenced by the seminal work of Marie Clay (1972), Lyons stresses that learning to read is not solely a cognitive process, and that skilled teachers must also be able to address and build on the emotional, social and motivational strengths of student performance. Allington (2000) believes there is little evidence of these needs being addressed in current classroom situations. McCray et al. (2001) illuminate some of these
needs, as they specifically apply to designated middle school students, uncovering themes of shame and embarrassment about their struggles with reading, mixed in with strong desire to improve (so long as it does not bring about any further embarrassment).

Edmonds et al. (2007) completed a meta-analysis of intervention studies on middle and secondary students with reading difficulties, completed between 1994 and 2004. The 29 studies included interventions addressing decoding, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. The authors commented that although the synthesis showed targeted reading intervention improved comprehension levels, the findings were significant in that they revealed that many struggling readers in Grades 6 to 12 were not provided effective instruction in reading comprehension. The authors also examined the effects of early reading instructional strategies and concluded that teachers should not assume that effective instructional practices at the elementary level will be equally effective at the middle school level.

Thus, many middle school students with reading disabilities want to improve if teachers are willing and able to help them. Recent evidence indicates that although interventions are often targeted at younger grades, great gains can be made by middle school students, particularly in terms of decoding and vocabulary skills (Calhoon, Sandow, & Hunter, 2010; Scammaca et al., 2007; Phillips, Hayward, & Norris, 2011). The missing piece, however, is the effectiveness of interventions for this age group, which, despite mounting research, seems to be lacking in quality and intensity (Allington, 2004;
Lyon, Fletcher, Torgesen, Shaywitz, & Chhabra, 2004; Lyons, 2003; McCray et al., 2001; Riddle Buly & Valencia, 2002).

Instead of the current focus on “silver bullet” programs and packages, there is much support for professional development in terms of diagnostic, tailored teaching at the middle school level (Allington, 2005, 2007; Lyons, 2003; Lyon et al., 2001; Riddle Buly & Valencia, 2002; Scammacca et al., 2007). Advocating “multi-sourced, multi-level” curriculum plans, Allington (2007) decries the situation in many schools, pointing out that although struggling readers may be given supplemental reading instruction for a small portion of the day, they then return to classrooms to spend the remaining time with texts they cannot read. Wharton-McDonald (2011) agrees, stating that “despite a current emphasis on programs, materials, and assessment tools, it is the teacher – and the instruction she or he provides in the classroom – that matters most to the development of successful readers” (p. 265). Both Wharton-McDonald and Allington emphasize the importance of explicit instruction at appropriate levels and advocate for increased instructional time for literacy activities.

The Middle School Struggling Reader and Content Area Literacy

Both students with designated reading disabilities and without (who may not be receiving any special education support due to missing an often arbitrary cut-off for designation), are of specific concern in a middle school environment, where content area reading becomes of more importance, and specific reading instruction is still necessary in many cases. However, a fairly substantial shift in perception may be necessary, as so many middle school teachers are unaware of, and unprepared for, the
large numbers of adolescents who have difficulty reading grade level materials (Beers, 2003; Benner, Bell, & Broemmel, 2011).

Although the focus has often been on elementary school classrooms, increasingly, issues involving struggling readers in middle school are coming to the forefront. This increased focus is vital as research suggests that 20-30% of students need additional support beyond the core classroom in order to meet grade level standards (Vaughn, Wanzek, Woodruff, & Linan-Thompson, 2007 as cited in Richards, Pavri, Golez, & Canges, 2007, p. 57), and will benefit from the use of reading strategies reserved for those with learning disabilities (Lyons et al., 2001). Vacca (2005) discusses this phenomenon, saying

Despite the potential of content area reading to make a difference in the school lives of adolescents, the public discourse over literacy has focused primarily on the literacy learning of young children. One of the assumptions underlying early literacy policy is that once children learn to read, they will be able to use reading to learn for the rest of their lives. (p. 184)

Despite this assertion, many middle school teachers, particularly subject-specific teachers, may not see reading instruction as a focus of their teaching. Further, many middle school teachers often incorrectly assume that by the middle years, most students will be proficient readers, capable of the demands placed on them by content-area textbooks, research methods and other classroom activities; or, believe that the teaching of reading and content area material can be separated (Hall, 2005). Additionally, even if teachers acknowledge the importance of teaching reading in
content-area classes, they may be unprepared and unequipped to do so (Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz, 2003). Further, most of the research in this area is completed with students of average reading ability in mind (those who may need to learn more advanced vocabulary and comprehension strategies), overlooking readers who may be struggling simply with decoding the text, or literal level comprehension.

Defined by Vacca (2005) as “the ability to use reading, writing, talking, listening and viewing to learn subject matter in a given discipline” (p. 7), content area literacy has been the focus of much recent research. So much so, in fact, that the research has given rise to a shift in terminology from content area literacy to adolescent literacy, denoting a broader generative view of literacy and multi-literacies (Patel Stevens, 2002). A literate adult in today’s technology-driven society needs a much broader view of literacy than ever before, as described in Loranger (1999):

Our students will grow up in an age where all the information that they need will be easily accessible to them. The advent of the information superhighway has made traditional methods of memorizing a series of facts obsolete. Students of today are much better served by gaining the skills needed to access information and to comprehend the knowledge that they have read in media from books to cyberspace. (p. 240)

Others argue however, that the alternate term is unnecessary, since infusing content instruction with literacy instruction should be a focus for students of all ages, and thus the term adolescent literacy is somewhat exclusionary (Draper, 2008).
Patel Stevens (2002) believes it important to adjust instructional practices to “assist us in pushing against narrow definitions of literacy that remain at basic levels of decoding and factual comprehension” (p. 273). This narrow definition of literacy led Shanahan and Shanahan (2008, p. 44) to decry the heavy focus on “highly generalizable” reading skills such as decoding, fluency and basic comprehension strategies, and use the following pyramid (Figure 1) to represent the levels of literacy required for adolescent students:

![Pyramid of Literacy](image)

**Figure 1: Pyramid of Literacy**

**Basic Literacy:** Literacy skills such as decoding and knowledge of high-frequency words that underlie virtually all reading tasks.
**Intermediate Literacy:** Literacy skills common to many tasks, including generic comprehension strategies, common word meanings, and basic fluency.

**Disciplinary Literacy:** Literacy skills specialized to history, science, mathematics, literature, or other subject matter.

While much focus has been put on foundational early literacy skills in recent years, early reading skills do not automatically develop into the more complex and specialized reading necessary in middle school and beyond (Perle, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005). This “vaccination model” and the idea that a focus on early literacy skills would mean consequent literacy growth have not borne out (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

As such, many middle school teachers are now faced with teaching a wide definition of “adolescent literacy” – from the content area literacy necessary in Shanahan and Shanahan’s (2008) disciplinary and intermediate levels, to those students who continue to struggle with basic decoding and comprehension skills. Draper (2008) suggests that reluctance surrounding the teaching of content area literacy stems from educators who do not believe it to be effective, who do not believe they have the ability to effectively teach it in their classes, and who believe that teaching literacy will take away from time spent on content material.

Although the axiom “every teacher is a teacher of reading” is common in academic circles, Fisher and Ivey (2005) believe that this notion is not taking hold as perhaps it should, or could, as it does not effectively address the concerns of content area teachers. These authors suggest that rather than focusing on the notion of
teaching reading and writing, teachers learn to capitalize on reading and writing in their specific content area. Fisher and Ivey identify five concepts to facilitate this shift in focus: expecting students to read and write in every class; modeling strategies to read increasingly difficult text; using texts that span a wide range of difficulties; focusing on the “big idea” conceptual knowledge; and providing instructional time for self-directed reading.

Although exemplary content area literacy infusion is perhaps not widespread, there are examples of it being done well. Loranger (1999) completed a case study on a first-year Massachusetts middle school science teacher, John, whose goal was to integrate reading, writing and study skills into his science curriculum. Suggesting that his value orientations and educational beliefs guided his practice, Loranger provided descriptions of John’s strategies for content area literacy, including a reading and studying system entitled HEART, Venn diagrams, compare and contrast activities, sequencing activities, and a higher-order thinking strategy called RAFT. Loranger explained she felt John successfully bridged the gap between theory and practice through using an integrated approach to reading. She believed that he was able to accomplish this task both through extensive university course work and inservice education, as well as a collaborative approach with his teaching team members.

Noticeably absent from much of the research on content area literacy is specific discussion about struggling readers. While the goal of content area literacy specialists may be for teachers to adjust their approaches in order to incorporate the disciplinary literacy at the top of Shanahan and Shanahan’s (2008) pyramid, how does that reconcile
with the students in their classes still struggling with the basic literacy elements of the bottom tier? What might that reconciliation look like for an average middle school teacher who may still be having difficulties incorporating basic literacy elements in his or her teaching?

**Motivated to Motivate**

Most teachers, particularly in a middle school setting, have experience with students who have low self-efficacy beliefs about reading. Self-efficacy is defined as an inquiry of “can I do this task in this situation?” and has emerged as a highly effective predictor of student motivation and learning (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003).

Psychologist Albert Bandura’s (1997) work in social cognitive theory, and in particular self-efficacy was a landmark in education and influenced much further research in the field. With as much as is known about cognitive variables, the work means little without an understanding of student motivation and its relation to cognition. Understanding the factors of internal motivation and their interaction, not only amongst themselves, but with other personal engagement constructs, can provide educators with a deeper understanding of learners, and the implications for classroom practice.

Studies have shown a strong relationship between motivational and cognitive variables in relation to reading comprehension (Guthrie et al., 2006). Incorporating principles that support aspects of internal motivation for reading enables students to better use reading strategies and thus increase comprehension, which is an overarching goal of not just a language arts classroom, but across the curriculum. Taboada, Tonks, Wigfield, and Guthrie (2009) identified five related constructs of internal motivation:
perceived control, interest, involvement, social collaboration and self-efficacy. All aspects of engagement, as well as learning and achievement are reciprocally related in the reality of the classroom, and both cognitive variables and internal motivation each make significant, yet independent contributions to reading performance.

Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, and Wigfield (2002) found that particularly in middle school settings, there was a clear correlation in perceived value of a task and self-perceptions of competence. Their 10-year longitudinal study employed cross-sequential cognitive and survey data from three cohorts of 761 elementary students, to look at changes in competence beliefs and values over time. Students were asked to assess their abilities in domains such as mathematics, language arts and sports, while subjective task value items asked children to assess their perception on the fun, usefulness and importance of competence in each activity. Results showed a clear decline in self-perceptions of competence and subjective task values as children got older, with perceptions of ability accounting for over 40% of the value changes over time. Thus, as students who struggle with reading in middle school become less proficient, and the gap between them and their more able peers grows, they place less value on its undertaking.

In terms of other factors present in a middle school setting, Schunk and Meece (2006) assert that while self-efficacy promotes more eager participation and effort, transitional difficulties, possible peer group changes, and a shift of instructional focus to content area curriculum contribute to a decline in the self-efficacy beliefs of middle school students.
In terms of reading ability, much emphasis can be placed on the home environment and surrounding reading culture (Paratore & Dougherty, 2011). A deeper understanding of cultural constructs and expectations might contribute to the contextualization of the development of self-efficacy beliefs in both in-school and out-of-school circumstances. For instance, what is the effect on self-efficacy when perceived value of a task or domain is culturally diminished? What are the implications of opposing value judgments on a student’s self-efficacy and motivational engagement?

Although many teachers may have preconceived notions about struggling readers (Beers, 2003), Hall (2007) found that struggling readers may place a higher priority on preserving their identity (as capable within their peer group) than on reading instruction, and thus labeling students as uncaring, unmotivated, or unwilling was not only incorrect, but unfair to the student. Using a descriptive case study approach, Hall collected data from multiple interviews and classroom observations, documenting and discussing behaviours for three female middle school students identified as struggling readers. Using a discursive identity theory, Hall attempted to uncover the learner identities the subjects were trying to present in particular contexts, often through the use of silence or failure to participate. Analysis of the findings indicated that the participants engaged in silence when asked to read or talk about text for three main reasons: protecting themselves from being thought of as poor readers, preserving the idea that they were good readers, or trying to stay silent to learn some of the content through listening.
But how then, do low self-efficacy beliefs and accompanying lack of motivation and interest affect teacher perception of students? The ways in which teachers transact with their struggling readers depends on their perceived strengths and weaknesses, and their apparent level of effort, leading to frustration if a teacher believes a student isn’t trying hard enough, or is being “lazy” (Hall, 2006).

An incongruity in the student’s discursive identity and the teacher’s perceived identity for that student may also lead to weakened academic performance. In another year-long descriptive case study of a sixth grade student and her social studies teacher, Hall (2009) again used identity theory to explore how both the teacher and student (chosen for the fact she was several grade levels below and not officially identified as learning disabled) engaged in relation to classroom reading tasks. Employing bi-weekly field observations, questionnaires, interviews, assessments and assignments, Hall explored how the student was identified, by herself and her teacher, as a reader. She found the teacher’s cognitive, print-centric view of reading (assuming that becoming a good reader entails learning and applying a discrete set of skills) clashed with the student’s discursive identity goals of being a good reader, yet trying to hide her lack of skills from her peers. Hall suggested that teachers may be unaware of the misinterpretations they make about their students, further marginalizing them in the classroom.

In a qualitative study of secondary science teachers and their practices, Scruggs and Mastropieri (2003) found that while teachers blamed poor student performance on low motivation and lack of interest, and were frustrated by inappropriate behavior, and
weak academic outcomes, the teachers rarely reflected on their own teaching as a factor. Barkley (2006) suggests that teachers must explore their own feelings of effectiveness and their expectations for their students in order to effect significant improvement in both self-efficacy and skills for their struggling students. This notion was key in my research as the teachers discussed their feelings surrounding their own abilities and understandings of reading difficulties.

**Conclusion**

In dealing with struggling readers, many factors are at play – intrinsic and extrinsic influences on reading and correlates of reading failure, appropriate diagnoses, necessities for intervention and literacy skills, both inside the classroom and out, and motivation and engagement levels. Hall (2006) states poignantly:

> It becomes critical to reconsider how we conceptualize the ways teachers might think about reading instruction, struggling readers and the multitude of influences that can affect student learning and growth. Developing such understanding requires considering more than what to teach and how to teach it. (p. 425)

Hence, it was my hope that my research question “*What are the perceptions of struggling readers held by middle school teachers?*” and its inherent derivatives would both amalgamate and illuminate how these factors and teacher understandings interact and manifest themselves in a middle school classroom setting.

In the following chapter I detail the methodology used in pursuit of this understanding, including discussions on data collection and analysis procedures.
Chapter Three

Methodology

For qualitative data analysis to be considered meaningful, useful, and valid, it is crucial to be transparent and methodical with analysis procedures (Attride-Sterling, 2001). Interspersed with theoretical perspectives and foundations, this chapter on methodology includes discussions and decisions surrounding research design, participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, analysis methods, validity of the research, limitations and delimitations, and strengths of the study.

Qualitative Research

I chose to employ qualitative research methods in order to explore my research question (What are the perceptions of struggling readers held by middle school teachers?) and the following derivatives of that question:

- What do middle school teachers perceive as the difficulties of struggling readers?
- What are their perceptions of the effects of these difficulties in a middle school setting?
- How do they see their instructional role and responsibilities in relation to these students? How do their perceptions drive their practice?

Patton (2002) believes “the task for the qualitative researcher is to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view about the world, or that part of the world about which they are talking” (p. 21). The qualitative research movement encompasses multiple forms of interpretive and critical paradigms which have allowed it to gain much
momentum since the early 1990s (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The aforementioned researchers define the research as follows:

The word qualitative implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on processes and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency. Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. (p. 10)

Flick, von Kardogg and Steinke (2004, p. 8) state that the following six principles are common to all qualitative research:

1. No single method, but a spectrum of methods belonging to different approaches that may be selected.

2. The object of investigation and those questions that are brought to bear represent a point of reference for the selection and evaluation of methods.

3. A strong orientation to everyday events and/or the everyday knowledge of those under investigation.

4. Data collection, analytical and interpretive procedures are bound, by a considerable extent, to the notion of contextuality.

5. Attention is paid to the diversity of perspectives of participants.
6. Understanding of complex relationships rather than explanation of causal relationships.

Adhering to both the definition and common principles above, I chose qualitative research methods, and in particular a phenomenological approach to collective case study not only for the suitability of its interpretive frameworks for the exploration of my research questions, but also due to its appropriateness for inquiry into a social experience.

Research Design

Case study.

In order to uncover the underlying perceptions, insights and attitudes of middle school teachers toward struggling readers, I opted to use a qualitative case study method. Yin (2003) describes how case study research is an all-encompassing method which drives the design, data collection techniques and approaches to data analysis. He advises using a case study method when questions require an extensive and in depth description of some phenomenon, and explanation of a present circumstance within its real-life context. While case study research has been in the past thought of as the “weak sibling among social science methods” (Yin, 1994, p. xiii) due to misconceptions about its lack of rigour, it has gained great respect and widespread use in literacy learning over the last 30 years (Barone, 2004). Merriam (1988) defines case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit” (p. 16), and details the four principles of case study research:
1) Particularistic (the study focuses on a particular situation, program, phenomenon, event, or person).

2) Descriptive – the researcher employs rich description of the subject in question.

3) Heuristic – the study enriches a reader’s understanding.

4) Inductive – the data drive the understandings and theories that emerge from the study.

Due to the nature of my research questions, and the fact that I believed an exploration of multiple cases would “lead to a better understanding and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases” (Stake, 2005, p. 443), I based my research design on Stake’s (1995) “collective case study model,” which compiles several cases in order to examine a “phenomenon, population, or general condition” (p. 437). Consequently, the researcher chooses multiple representative cases to illustrate a particular issue (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995). The emphasis is on selecting more than one case in order to attempt to achieve a representation of a population, with the realization that a strict “sampling” process is unattainable due to the fact that participants must be amenable to involvement (Cousin, 2005).

A case study is described as “instrumental” when a particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue, with the case itself having less of a focus, since it “plays a supportive role and facilitates our understanding of something else” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). In dealing with more than one case, a collective instrumental case study extends beyond the cases themselves to a greater understanding of the issue across cases.
Collective case studies also deal with a replication logic within the data, whereby when each case is analyzed individually, it is expected to produce similar results (literal replication), or contrary results for predictable reasons (theoretical replication) (Yin, 2003).

The hallmarks of case study research (both singular and collective) include using triangulating multiple sources of evidence, thick descriptions of the case and context, and within-case as well as cross-case analysis of themes (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003). With these guidelines in mind, I assessed my research question and focus, and chose the instrumental collective case study approach based on my stated goals, my desire to provide an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon, and the issues relating to sample selection of my population.

**Phenomenology.**

As well, my research employed some elements of phenomenology, which is both a method and philosophy, popularized in Germany before World War I. Using the motto of “Zu den Sachen,” which means both “to the things themselves” and “let’s get down to what matters,” van Manen (1984) defines phenomenology as “the study of lived experience” (p. 1). Phenomenology “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon [with a focus on] describing what all participants have in common as they experience [it]” (Creswell, 2007, p. 57).

Often thought of as the father of phenomenology, the views of German mathematician Edmund Husserl are foundational to its philosophical underpinnings. For Husserl, intentionality is the essential feature of consciousness, meaning that
consciousness is always directed to an object, giving a more precise meaning to the word “experience” (Giorgi, 1997). Phenomenology searches for the very nature of a phenomenon as experienced by the individual, for that which makes a “‘thing’ what it is” (van Manen, 1984, p. 7).

While case study methodology was the foundation of my research, phenomenological elements were present in my data analysis. As is described later in this chapter, particularly while completing cross-case analysis, I focused less on individual ideas and meanings, and more on interpreting the collective understanding and experience. As van Manen (1984) describes:

As we study the lived-experience descriptions and discern the themes that begin to emerge, we note that certain experiential themes recur as commonality, or possible commonalities in the various descriptions we have gathered. We hold on to these themes by lifting appropriate phrases or by capturing in single statements the main thrust of the meaning of the themes. (p. 21)

While Husserl and phenomenological psychologist Clark Moustakas place an emphasis on “epoche” or bracketing out the investigator’s experience (Creswell, 2007), van Manen (1984) believes that attempting to ignore what we know is ineffective, and “it is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories” (p. 9). Accordingly, my researcher stance section, found later in this chapter, attempts to do just that.
Sample selection.

Creswell (2007) describes possibilities for “purposeful sampling,” suggesting that selecting cases with different perspectives on the phenomenon may be preferable. Thus, the participants for my study were recruited from generalist teachers (those with no specialty) from 16 middle schools across three different districts in the Victoria/Gulf Islands area.

- The first district is a public urban K-12 district, the sixth largest in British Columbia, encompassing 45 schools, 10 of which are middle schools (each with an average of approximately 340 students).
- Serving a mix of five small urban and rural municipalities, the second district has 8,500 students, and 26 schools, four of which are middle schools.
- The third is a very small rural district made up of 11 schools (two middle) on five separate island communities.

Participant selection was voluntary, and based on three criteria: (1) the participant was primarily a middle school (Grades 6 to 9) teacher; (2) the participant had no experience in a special education or learning support capacity; and (3) the participant had not completed graduate work in special education or literacy.

Stake (2005) states that “achieving the greatest understanding of the critical phenomena depends on choosing the case well” (p. 450). My choice of the sampling criteria was in order to focus on the middle school generalist teacher (all middle school generalists are required and expected to be able to teach all subjects, whether or not they do), who has no exceptional training in literacy or special education. My rationale
was that although for some students who struggle with reading extra support is available (whether or not they receive that outside support), the majority of a struggling reader’s day is spent in a general classroom (Allington, 2007), with a generalist classroom teacher who often has little supplementary education in reading difficulties. Therefore, it was their perceptions, and their relationships with the students that constituted the focus of this study.

**Recruitment.**

A request letter was sent to superintendents (See Appendix A) and, in some cases (as required by district policy), principals in the three different districts, requesting permission to conduct the study within the district’s middle schools. Once permission was received, the survey was sent via email to possible participants (either through the use of their publically available school emails, or by asking the principals to disseminate the information to appropriate staff). An attached implied consent form (which states that by completing the survey respondents were agreeing to participate in the study) indicated how the survey data would be used, and assured anonymity and confidentiality. The email was distributed initially in late April 2011, with a reminder email going out approximately two weeks later.

**Instrumentation and data collection.**

As is customary in a collective case study approach, and in order to ensure triangulation, data were collected from multiple sources (Creswell, 2007), including individual survey data, transcribed interview data, field notes taken during these interviews, and other documents such as the BC Performance Standards (British
Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009), and various reports from the British Columbia Ministry of Education, including those detailing class size and composition for British Columbia teachers. The use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

**Survey.**

Fink (2006) defines surveys as “information collection methods used to describe, compare, or explain individual and societal knowledge, feelings, values, preferences and behavior” (p. 1). To begin data collection, I designed a web-based survey (Appendix B) using the online program Fluid Surveys (www.fluidsurveys.com). Although surveys may take many forms (Fink, 2006), my choice of an online survey was based on the hope that it would facilitate not only survey dissemination for me as the researcher, but also increase the number of willing participants, due to being slightly less onerous and more expedient than a paper version. Although particularly effective in terms of time and anonymity, the use of a survey also is inherently inflexible, and does not allow researchers to adapt its focus based on response. As well, Umbach (2004) points out an inherent non response bias, defined as “the bias introduced when respondents to a survey are different from those who did not respond in terms of demographics or attitude” (p. 26).

The survey consisted of non-identifying demographic questions (such as number of years of teaching, current and previous positions) and four open-ended survey questions. The choice of an open-ended survey helped ensure participants had the
ability to explore their thoughts in a personally relevant manner, and reveal aspects of the inquiry question the researcher may not have thought of (Robins, Fraley, & Krueger, 2007). The four open-ended questions were as follows:

(1) Why might some middle school students struggle with reading?

(2) How would you define a struggling reader? What might “struggling readers” in middle school have difficulty with?

(3) What can be done to help struggling readers in middle school?

(4) Whose responsibility is helping struggling readers?

Derived from my stated research focus, to explore teacher perceptions of struggling readers, the questions were written to elicit understandings and practices surrounding struggling readers, while providing insight into the respondents’ attitudes, knowledge and beliefs. The questions were modeled after a survey that was administered to elementary school pre-service teachers in the United States by Nierstheimer, Hopkins, and Schmitt (1996). While Nierstheimer et al. study’s purpose was similar to mine, in that the researchers wanted to explore perceptions about literacy and how it affected practice, their focus was on elementary students having difficulty learning how to read, which, while similar, is still inherently different from middle school students who are still having difficulty with reading.

The first question was meant to elicit understanding and ideas from teachers about the origin of reading difficulties, and possible contributing factors, both external and internal, past and present. Thus, it partially addressed the research question, which dealt with definitions and difficulties. The second survey question’s purpose was to
explore teacher ideas about the meaning of “struggling” at a middle school level, the
definition of a struggling reader, and the associated implications of those struggles,
downloading the research questions by discussing the effects of struggling with reading at
a middle school level. The third question’s aim was to provide a prompt for discussion of
current and potential strategies, resources and support, whether within the classroom
or outside the classroom. This question aimed to explore my inquiry into current
practice and instructional role. Finally, the fourth question was a very direct question
meant to explore teacher feelings on their responsibilities surrounding struggling
readers, and the responsibilities of others.

At the end of the survey, participants were given the option to be contacted to
participate in further interviews. Thirty-four surveys were completed between April and
May of 2011, one of which that had to be disqualified, because the respondent
answered affirmatively to demographic questions about experience in special education
and graduate work in literacy. Twenty-one of the survey respondents responded
affirmatively to the survey question asking if they were willing to be interviewed.

Interviews.

Although qualitative interviews have been used throughout the 20th century as a
way to obtain data, systematic literature on interviewing for research purposes has
grown substantially in the last few decades (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, there
is still no one method or a series of rules for interviewing for qualitative research, and
interviewing still relies mainly on interviewer skills and judgment in the posing of
questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This skill and judgment is necessary, as interview
data is not neutral, but a text created and negotiated by the interviewer and interviewee (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 642).

As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) further state, “in an interview conversation, the researcher asks about, and listens to, what people themselves tell about their lived world. The interviewer listens to their dreams, fears and hopes; hears their opinions and views in their own words” (p. xvii). In choosing a semi-structured interview format, whereby the interviewer has a list of predetermined questions, but is free to delve and explore within these areas (Patton, 1990), I made use of an interview guide (see Table 1) and protocol. This pre-determined list of questions ensured that much the same information was obtained from each participant, that good use was made of limited time, and that interviews were systematic and comprehensive (Hoepfl, 1997). The interview questions were refined through pilot testing (Creswell, 2007) in a small group interview format, which allowed for more question clarity, and relevant follow-up questions. After the initial interview, participants in the pilot testing discussed the clarity of the questions with me, offering some slight changes for precision’s sake, and suggested some further follow-up questions. Further, as a researcher, the pilot interview allowed me the opportunity to practice my skills as an interview and refine the questions on the interview guide as necessary to best address my research questions.
## Table 1: Interview Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Interview Questions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Demographic Questions (e.g., years of teaching, current and past subjects taught)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How is literacy important in the subjects you teach?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• If you have struggling readers in your classroom, with what might they have difficulties?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you assume that students at a middle school level should be able to read?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Why do you think there are students in middle school who struggle with reading?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• As a middle school teacher, do you feel you have the skills or knowledge to help students with reading?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Many people in the survey mentioned dedicating more in-class time to specific reading skills and skill development as a way to help improve reading. How realistic do you think this is?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you believe struggling readers make progress in middle school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If you had unlimited resources at your disposal, what could be done to help struggling readers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do you think is the general perception of middle school teachers toward struggling readers?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
After contacting those who had agreed to be interviewed and setting up a mutually convenient time, interviews were conducted in late May and early June of 2011. Before each interview, I reviewed and asked each participant to sign a consent form (Appendix C), reminding them of the purpose of the study, and that participation was completely voluntary and anonymous. Participants were met at their place of work and asked a series of questions, some stemming from issues and themes that arose in the survey data. Each interview was recorded and fully transcribed, along with the notes I took while conducting the interview. Hycner (1985) recommends not only including notes of literal statements, but significant non-verbal and para-linguistic communications as well. I took note of various non-verbal communications, such as longer pauses, shifts in chairs, throat clearing, uncomfortable expressions, and so on. These notes were key, as Poland and Pederson (1998) describe how “what is not said may be as revealing as what is said [and] silences are profoundly meaningful” (p. 294).

The majority of the questions in the interview were open ended, and discussed the participants’ previous and current experience with struggling readers, practice towards them, as well as feelings and perceptions. Interviews began with very neutral questions (including number of years teaching, current position) and then included questions such as those in Table 1.

Again, the use of the semi-structured interview format allowed some flexibility with the questions, to include follow-ups or requests for further clarification on topics. As such, the interview guide evolved throughout the process, though still remaining true
to the core questions. Each of these questions were intended to elicit information and themes relating to one or more of my research questions.

In total, 10 individual interviews were completed in May and June of 2011, with participants selected based on availability, and a representative mix of teaching experience including grade levels and subjects. In order to employ investigator triangulation (Patton, 1999), and to insure clarity and accuracy, interview transcripts and notes were then given to all participants for their review and comments. Described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314), member checking allowed me to confirm the integrity of my interpretations and provided an opportunity for any further follow-up. Although none of the participants desired to make changes in the transcripts, two of the participants asked to be recorded again with some further comments.

**Other sources of data.**

Along with data directly from participants, other documents (mainly from the British Columbia Ministry of Education website) were examined in order to provide a more thorough understanding of the context of the respondents. For instance, reports from the British Columbia Ministry of Education were examined to identify statistics such as average class sizes, numbers of designated students, numbers of educational assistants, numbers of specialist teachers, and other statistics I believed to be contextually relevant.
Qualitative Data Analysis

The language of themes emerging can be misinterpreted to mean that themes ‘reside’ in the data, and if we just look hard enough they will ‘emerge’ like Venus on the half shell. If themes ‘reside’ anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them. (Ely et al., 1997, in Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84)

As Ely et al. suggest above, qualitative data analysis requires a systematic and structured approach, as although there are few formulas or “cookbook approaches” a rigorous study will employ sufficient presentation of evidence and careful consideration of alternative interpretations (Yin, 2003).

Qualitative data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection process, as, writes Stake (1995) it is “a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations” (p. 71). Thus, coding and analysis were completed both during and after data collection, as they allow the researcher to “move back and forth between the data they have gathered and their strategies to collect new (and often better) data” (Liamputtong, 2009, p. 133). I used an inductive approach, whereby the themes that were identified were strongly linked to the data (Patton, 1990), and did not fit into a pre-existing frame or preconceptions. Using this “constant comparative” method of data analysis (Creswell, 2007) allows for the comparison of new data to emerging categories.

Due to the nature of my data and my research questions, I also used a thematic analysis approach (Sivensend, 1999). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as “searching across a data set, be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a
range of texts, to find repeated patterns of meaning” (p. 86). In order to avoid the criticism that the method is not explicit enough in its procedures, Braun and Clarke offer the following six-step analysis process to researchers: familiarize yourself with the data, generate initial codes, search for themes, review themes, define and name themes, and produce the report. While breaking down the analysis in steps was helpful to elucidate my process, it is important to note that much of the data collection and analysis relied on my abilities as a responsive and receptive researcher (Hycner, 1985).

Following the above-mentioned methods, I began by transcribing all interview tapes, then reading, and re-reading all my data. During transcription, I also engaged in some initial interpretation of non-verbal communications, such as pauses, laughs, or facial expressions (using my field notes from the interview as a secondary source of information). As I immersed myself in the data (Green et al., 2007), I jotted notes of my initial impressions and ideas of possible patterns or responses of note, asking questions of myself to be aware of during future analysis (for example, I noticed a heavy reliance on the term “grade level” and jotted a note to be aware of that in future data).

**Within-case analysis.**

After completely familiarizing myself with the data, I began within-case analysis procedures (Nierstheimer, Hopkins, & Schmitt, 1996; Patton, 2002), looking at each interview and survey vertically, and further memoing initial impressions and key ideas. Yin (2003) emphasizes that a collective case study must investigate each case as an individual entity before conducting cross-case analysis. As I was employing a phenomenological approach to the data analysis, whereby I was searching for what
respondents had in common as they experience a phenomenon, I considered my cross-case analysis (and, what some might consider a “cross-case synthesis”) the most crucial part of my research. However, in order to generate initial themes and experiences, and to stay true to collective case study methodology, I completed an initial vertical analysis of each case.

Because the interview cases were inherently more thorough than a vertical analysis of the surveys, I focused on each of the interview participants as a separate case. I analyzed each of the 10 interviews (and their corresponding survey responses) as a single entity, assigning codes to all relevant data bits, and summarizing their cases and the themes identified within them. These summaries and case descriptions are found in Chapter Four. After summarizing the themes from each of the interview cases, I returned to the vertical analysis of the survey data, to search for any other themes that had not been identified from the interview cases. Data saturation is described by Bogdan and Biklen (2007) as “the point of data collection where the information you get becomes redundant” (p. 69). Upon identifying no new themes in the survey information, I continued on to cross-case analysis.

**Cross-case analysis.**

I then engaged in the second step in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) process, and began generating initial codes. Starting with the survey data, I completed initial cross-case analysis of each question as a separate entity. Table 2 shows an example of the horizontal approach, using four select respondents’ answers to survey question #1
(these respondents were chosen simply as they provided a concrete example for two separate codes).

Table 2: Horizontal Approach to Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question #1: Why might a middle school student struggle with reading?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respondent #</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
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</table>
not have been properly identified or supported early in their learning. They may have had little interest in reading, or have become discouraged due to previous difficulties and not have been encouraged to build their skills by reading level-appropriate reading materials at home and at school. It's possible that a part of it may be due to a lack of modelling for reading at home, or parents who did not read to their preschoolers or encourage them to develop a love/appreciation for reading at an early age.

I began my initial coding using in vivo codes, which are often used in grounded theory applications in order to stay true to respondents’ language (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This type of coding was not only appropriate but practical at this phase of the analysis, as many of the same phrases and ideas appeared throughout the entire survey. For example, as presented in Table 2, I used a code for “learning disability” for respondents one, two and four, and a code for “home/parents” for respondents two, three and four. It is important to note that the same text bits or sentences can be coded multiple ways, which is one of the hallmarks that differentiate qualitative data analysis
from quantitative (Trochim, 2006). All initial coding work was done using Weft QDA, a free, basic qualitative analysis software application (http://www.pressure.to/qda/), based on a code-retrieve system, which also enabled me to review the coded text in context when necessary.

Once all data were initially coded, I had 80 different codes with which to begin the next phase of analysis. I collated all data identified with each code and printed out each of these code collations separately. Braun and Clarke (2006) then advise an initial hierarchically-based search for categories and “thinking about the relationship between codes, between themes and between different levels of themes (e.g. main overarching themes and sub-themes within them)” (p. 89). With these relationships in mind, I grouped related ideas into 11 initial categories. I visually displayed these categories and their subcategories, using a thematic network – a “web-like map depicting the salient themes [...] and illustrating the relationships between them” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 388).

Moving on to Braun and Clarke’s (2006) fourth phase, I reviewed my initial categories, re-reading all the collated extracts encompassed in each, first on an individual level, and then in relation to the other categories. This review resulted in some regrouping and reforming my categories, before finally settling on six major categories of data, for which the thematic network can be seen in Appendix D.

The next phase of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model is perhaps the most difficult – defining and naming themes. For each identified theme the researcher writes a detailed analysis. However, “as well as identifying the story that each theme tells, it is important
to consider how it fits into the broader overall ‘story’ that you are telling about data” (Braun & Clarke, p. 92).

As Sivesend (1999) contends, when the emphasis is on text content the “search for relationships in the data-material takes place through assembling information about a theme and through interpreting the content. The coupling of theoretical assumptions and data-material takes place in the head of the researcher” (p. 369). This identification of themes, coupled with theoretical assumptions, interpretations and implications is discussed in the following chapters. In order to complete my analysis, and fulfill Braun and Clarke’s (2006) sixth and final phase of thematic analysis, I asked myself the questions, “What does this theme mean? What are the assumptions underpinning it? What are the implications of this theme? What conditions are likely to have given rise to it? Why do people talk about this thing in this particular way? What is the overall story the different themes reveal about the topic?” (p. 94). The analysis of themes that were prominent in each major category is discussed in Chapter Five.

Validation Strategies

Anfara, Brown and Mangione (2002) state that “many educational researchers, in their eagerness to embrace qualitative methods, did not provide adequate and clear justifications for their methods, findings, or conclusions,” thus being criticized for being “soft” or “fiction” (p. 28). To support the validity of my research and findings, ensure transparency and rigor, and avoid the trap of “responding indiscriminately to the loudest bangs or brightest lights” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 289), I followed validity principles elaborated by Yin (2003).
In assuring construct validity, I followed traditional case study triangulation methods of collecting data from multiple sources (Creswell, 2007), with my survey data used to form questions for my interviews. My process is clearly laid out, with the raw data separate from any analysis, and each step clearly labeled and identified, leaving an “audit trail” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), such that my steps could be easily followed. This “chain of evidence” also helps ensure dependability as my study and procedures allows for an external reader to “follow the derivation of any evidence, ranging from initial research question to ultimate case study conclusions” (Yin, 2003, p. 105).

Creswell and Miller (in Creswell, 2007) lay out eight validation strategies frequently employed by qualitative researchers, using the term “validation” to emphasize a process, rather than verification. Creswell asserts that validation strategies depend on the type of research study used, and recommends that researchers partake in at least two. As is evident in Table 3 I focused on four of his strategies.

Table 3: Validation Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creswell &amp; Miller (2000)’s validation strategies</th>
<th>Evidence from my research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triangulation – make use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence.</td>
<td>My study included data from multiple respondents, across schools and districts, and multiple sources (survey data, interview data, field notes, other documents and reports).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member checking – the researcher solicits participants views of the credibility of the</td>
<td>Participants were given the chance to examine and comment on transcribed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
findings and interpretations | data, as well as summaries, analysis and interpretations.

Peer review or debriefing – an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations | I participated in review sessions with both several fellow graduate students and my thesis supervisor in order to provide an external check of my methods and research.

Clarifying researcher bias – the reader understands the researcher’s position and any biases or assumptions that impact the inquiry. | The upcoming section entitled “Researcher’s Stance” details past experiences and possible biases.

Limitations, Delimitations and Strengths

My study included purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) of middle school general education teachers employed in three BC School Districts who have no experience in special education, or graduate work in literacy, as I expected those types of excluded teachers to have a broader and more experienced perspective on literacy issues. As well, rather than focusing on specialists, I wanted to capture the experience and perspective of the general middle school teacher when faced with struggling readers.

While my study contained relatively small sample sizes, I believe that the data are at least representative of the middle school teacher population in this area, as I had participants from three different districts and several schools, ranging from recent
graduates to teachers with 26 years of experiences. Yin (1989) mentions that “case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions” (p. 21). Thus, I believe that the information gained from this smaller population is of value to the population itself, and acts as a starting point for the education community in general.

As well, this research relied heavily on data from surveys and interviews. Both these methods rely on participants to be verbose, articulate and able to clearly convey their opinions and feelings. By not following explicitly-defined steps, interviewing is a practiced art which emphasizes the craftsmanship of the researcher, practical skills and personal judgment (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Consequently, the data are limited by both my skill as an interviewer, and the respondents’ skill in articulating their perceptions.

Another possible consideration when looking at data gathered from interviews is a reflection on the inherent relationship between the interviewer and interviewee (Creswell, 2007). As the interviews were being conducted in person, by a fellow teacher (albeit acting in the role of a researcher), some of the participants may have felt ill at ease being completely honest and forthcoming about their thoughts and practices. However, assurances were made that my goal was not to judge them as a teacher, but to uncover the reality of working with struggling readers, and based on many of the answers that could be considered “controversial” I believe that, particularly in the interviews, participants were quite candid.
Researcher’s Stance

LeCompte (2000) equates data analysis to a puzzle, and states that “puzzles cannot be completed if pieces are missing, warped or broken. Similarly, if pieces of data are incomplete or biased, research results cannot provide a complete picture of a program […]. A good first step in analysis, then, is identifying sources of bias” (p. 146).

The qualitative nature of this research brought with it a participatory researcher stance, as I acted as a key instrument of the research (Creswell, 2007). As it was necessary to position myself in the study, several personal factors bear noting as possible potential for bias and subjective interpretations.

As a child, I began to read at the age of three, and was designated gifted during elementary school. Throughout my schooling, I achieved top marks, enjoyed school and displayed a natural affinity for it. As such, I have never had to struggle with reading, or any other academic subjects, and although I can empathize with struggling readers, I can never have a true, first-hand understanding of their plight.

My current position as both a resource and English teacher in an inner city middle school (with a large caseload of designated and non-designated struggling readers) gives me both insight into the realities of the learning needs that are currently presented, and an affinity for the students behind those needs, who I believe deserve every opportunity to succeed. As such, along with the pragmatic, I take somewhat of an advocacy-based approach, as I strive to be not only the voice of the teachers, but, in some respects, the voice of their struggling students, present and future.
However, as a practicing teacher, I am aware of both practical and theoretical issues surrounding the incongruity between what could be done and what is being done. I am a member of my school district’s action research team to support at-risk students, and the head of my school’s literacy team, which focuses on bringing literacy issues to the forefront in all classes. As well, I have implemented a school-wide guided reading program for our lowest readers, and hope to continue to increase the magnitude and scope of that program in coming years.

However, it is of course these experiences which have driven my interest and desire to explore this topic further, not only to have an increased understanding of the issues, but to possibly begin to make a difference, not only for the students, but for the teachers as well, with whom I easily identify. Many times during the interviews, I found myself slipping into “colleague” mode, rather than impartial researcher. I had to stifle personal expressions of understanding, or commiseration, as well as, at times, some negative reactions and a need to counter opinions with which I did not necessarily agree, or which might frustrate me in my role as a learning support teacher.

Incorporating all methodological aspects and considerations detailed in the current chapter, the following chapters include my findings and discussions of both within-case (Chapter Four) and cross-case analysis and synthesis (Chapter Five).
Chapter Four

Within Case Analysis: Findings and Discussion

In order to explore perceptions of middle school teachers toward struggling readers, I employed a phenomenological approach to collective case study, aiming to uncover a collective experience, focusing on the commonalities of all participants (Creswell, 2007). Although cross case analysis of my data was potentially more imperative to my goals, I completed a within case analysis of each of the interviewees in order to provide both a contextual base and the descriptions foundational to case study research (Yin, 2003). As well, the case summaries and analysis of evident themes within them allowed for a framework with which to begin positioning my cross case analysis and discussion of common themes, which is presented in the following chapter.

The 10 case summaries that follow include a demographic summary of each individual, a description of the main points in the interview (supported by direct quotes from the transcripts), and a listing of the main themes identified in each interview. In order to protect anonymity, each participant was given a pseudonym. Although slight modifications were made for clarity and ease of reading (which are evident in the text), the quotations are taken directly from interview transcripts.

Case #1 – Max

Max is a 37 year-old Grade 8 teacher, who transferred to a new school at the beginning of the 2010 school year. He has had teaching contracts for six years, and was a substitute teacher for two years prior to that. Although he has previously engaged in substitute teaching at the high school level, all of his contracts have been in a middle
school setting. At the time of the interview, he was teaching three classes of science, one class of math, and one class of physical education. He estimated that there were three to five struggling readers in each of the science and math classes, though he was unsure of exact numbers.

Through analyzing Max’s survey and interview data, it was clear that although Max felt confident teaching the content of the subjects he taught, he was less confident in his ability to teach literacy. His idea of reading within his content area (science) mainly focused on having the students read sections of the textbook out loud. Although he mentioned comprehension difficulties, he tended to define struggling readers as those students who have fluency difficulties when they read aloud in class. Max stated,

_This year I’ve only actually had one kid who doesn’t read at all, but everyone else tries, even the kids who don’t do well, they give it a try. Usually they’re ok. They might not understand what they’re reading, but they can usually read it well enough that we all understand._

He lamented the lack of time he had to help struggling readers, and stated that he had a hard enough time simply getting through the science curriculum, without having to focus on reading as well. However, he admitted that, even if given the time, he would need someone to help him with content literacy instruction, because although he believed that he had basic reading strategies, he was unsure of how to support his lowest readers: “_But I definitely, personally would need someone to say, “Hey, this would be a good thing to do with your kids.”_” Although Max was open to suggestions, he
realized that on his own, he did not have the knowledge to effectively engage and support his lowest students.

He felt sorry for the struggling readers, but seemed impressed that the other students in his classes did not overtly mock these students when they read aloud. According to Max, the struggling readers in his class lack motivation, and their lack of reading often contributed to lessened participation overall, which was more difficult for him to deal with as a teacher. He described his frustration in trying to support unengaged students saying that, “But, I think the flipside is too sometimes, some of those kids who can’t read don’t even want to listen or pay attention, so, it’s a hard tightwire [for the teacher] to walk.”

Although Max believed that struggling readers could make progress in his class, he conveyed that progress was made not by improving the students’ reading skills, but by getting around the poor skills and focusing on learning content in some other way. He described how he circumvented reading skills, “even through the use of video, and you know, just talking in class, [...] we always try to discuss it as well,” and he described how many of the students who struggle can “get the idea across.”

Max believed that it might be easier for teachers who teach all subjects to incorporate reading, because “then you could just blend it all together,” but went on to explain how, in none of the schools that he worked in, particularly in Grades 7 and 8, did the teachers teach all the subjects anymore. However, Max stated that with proper school support, and with enough time and resources, that teachers, including himself,
are capable of improving reading levels: “I think you can, I think you can definitely work on it.”

Case summary.

Although Max was willing to learn more about helping struggling readers (as he believed that he did not currently have adequate skills in this area), he still thought that time was a major barrier in that regard, and thus he communicated how he had shifted his focus on finding ways to get around students’ reading problems in order to teach the content. However, he found this strategy difficult as well, due to what he described as low engagement and motivation of many of his struggling readers.

Case #2 – Jennifer

Jennifer is a teacher on call with two years of experience. She graduated from a middle school specific education program and has taught primarily middle school. At the time of the research Jennifer had not had a long-term contract although she had had several short-term contracts (up to four months in duration).

Although a novice teacher, she was already well aware of the problem of struggling readers at a middle school level. Jennifer’s definitions of struggling readers had a strong focus on the students’ interest or lack thereof in reading and she wished she knew how to increase the appeal for those students: “[I’d like] a way to get into their heads and know what would make it more enjoyable or something, [...] more appealing to them, so it’s something that they enjoy doing, rather than something that they resent doing.”
She felt that as a young teacher, she did not have the necessary experience to deal with struggling readers, but was hopeful that some of the more experienced teachers did have the appropriate skills, or at least had a desire to gain the appropriate skills. Jennifer discussed her views on teachers having appropriate experience and training, saying, “*Some more than others. *laugh* I think some just coast through, and some really want to better their practice and better the skills that they have to provide to their students, so it really is an individual basis.” However, Jennifer believed time to be a key factor for many middle school teachers in their practice surrounding struggling readers, stating that most teachers thought: “*There’s not a lot of time, so just...get them through.*”

Although she mentioned “chunking the instructions,” taking the time to go over things with her struggling students, and having strong students act as coaches, Jennifer believed that her impermanence impeded her from truly helping struggling readers in the classrooms in which she taught. She believed that with more time and consistency in the classroom, she would be able to help her students “*better their skills so that they can succeed in the future and not have these same problems.*” However, although optimistic, Jennifer’s ideas of how she might help the struggling readers if she had more time were vague, including developing a “*plan of action with the parents*” and “*really try[ing] to provide support,*” particularly by “*key[ing] in on any support available to them.*” Jennifer seemed aware of her lack of knowledge though, stating that she wished she knew more, and had more experience, because then she would know more about what she wanted in her own classroom someday.
Case summary.

In looking at the case of novice teacher Jennifer, it was clear that although she thought she did not have the necessary knowledge to assist struggling readers at the present time, it was something to which she aspired. However, even as a novice teacher she realizes the many barriers to working with struggling readers, including low student motivation and lack of time, and therefore she had already developed some strategies to get these students through the content material.

Case #3 – Marco

Marco is a teacher in his 40s with 14 years of experience, all at the middle school level. He has taught in several schools around his district, and was currently teaching all academic subjects at the Grade 7 level (doing some teaming with the other Grade 7 teachers to lighten the planning load). At the time of the research, Marco had approximately five students who struggle with reading in his homeroom class of 18, though he stated that none of them were “low enough” to receive outside support.

While Marco stated that his true goal was to see improvement in reading over time, and not just get through the curriculum, he offered many constraints which he believed impeded his goal, including time, resources, and students with low motivation. He described himself as “fairly proficient” in any of the other subjects, but noted that he needed to continue his professional development in reading and writing, stating, “I think those are the ones where it requires real expertise to do it well, as opposed to in other subjects where you don’t necessarily have to be subject specific. But yeah...it’s...it’s ongoing, I’m still learning.”
Marco placed a lot of responsibility for struggling readers on a lack of literacy practices at home, and a “culture of illiteracy.” He discussed the role home life played for struggling readers, and the ways he believed that this factor should be moderated:

*My impression is that, you know, again, my struggling readers come from families where there’s not a lot of literacy. [...] I think probably, we need more than just elementary, middle and high school to work on reading; we need the government to set up more reading programs for adults so these parents can become more literate. [...] Because an illiterate adult is not a very functional human being in society. It would be worthwhile spending the money here before they get out into the workforce.*

Marco pointed to what he thought was a lack of support from the home, describing how

*You send them homework, half an hour of reading, and the kids that really need it don’t even bring their agendas home, never get them signed. I know a couple cases with, for me, even getting a hold of the parents is a challenge, because the phone numbers keep changing, or they’re screening calls.*

He lamented that, in his estimation, because a high enough priority isn’t placed on struggling readers, the proper resources were not available to the students, as problems with reading are perhaps not given as much priorities as other issues:

*So it’d be nice actually if we could designate them as a struggling reader and the government would put some money behind it. They need as much help as an IBI [intensive behaviour intervention designation] or a kid with profound learning disability.*
Marco thought that the key to really helping struggling readers was school-wide one-on-one or small group time with a specialist teacher, but continued to say “and, I mean that’s, you know, not gonna’ happen,” accompanied by a knowing smirk.

Case summary.

Although Marco communicated that he did his best to incorporate literacy into his classroom, he admitted that he was still learning, and felt that struggling readers are best helped through small group instruction with a specialist teacher. He placed a lot of emphasis on support from home as one of the reasons students in his class struggled with reading, suggesting that more needed to be done on a larger level to combat what he called a culture of illiteracy. Marco suggested reform at the classroom, school, and government level to support his ideas.

Case #4 – Brandy

Although trained at a secondary level, Brandy completed a practicum in a middle school and has since taught in a middle school for three years. At the time of the research, she was teaching Grade 7 language arts, math, social studies, physical education and art. She stated that she had a “very low” Grade 7 class, estimating that 25% to 30% of her 19 students struggled with reading.

Because Brandy had such a high number of struggling readers in her 2010-2011 class, but yet a relatively small class, she thought that she had become better at adapting the assignments for these students and working on their reading skills. However, she believed that not to be the case for the average middle school teacher:
I would say that the average middle school teacher doesn’t have the training to diagnose the lagging skills in the struggling reader, or the time to work with the individual students to address the lagging skills, even if they could identify them. I think they have too many students in their class and too wide a variation in abilities, so most of their time is just spent on getting students through as much of the curriculum as they can.

Brandy also mentioned that although she was willing to work on reading skills, and thought it should be a goal, she believed that she had to make decisions concerning the time it takes to teach those skills as well as teaching content knowledge. Further, she did not believe that she had sufficient knowledge of literacy to properly support her struggling students, and decried the lack of education provided by her university program, saying:

I don’t feel that my university education provided me the skills to teach reading in any way. But I was trained as a secondary teacher, so I had no literacy training in the university. In my fifth year of my program, I had one course called “literacy across the curriculum” I believe. And, it didn’t deal with the issue of struggling readers at all. In my recollection, it was never discussed. Struggling readers at the middle school level or beyond were not discussed whatsoever.

She believed that this lack of education was likely because of teacher assumption that middle school students should be able to read, and that the reality is underreported and under recognized. Although Brandy believed there were resources available (though she
wished there were more, particularly appropriately leveled curriculum materials), she cited lack of time as a large barrier to providing sufficient support:

_Time. Absolutely. And the Special Ed teacher’s time as well. Because outside of their teaching schedule, they need to have time to meet with me and provide me with the resources and teach me how to use them for my struggling readers._

Brandy stated that although her struggling readers made progress, they were most successful when they were pulled out of the classroom to receive more intensive support. Although she communicated that she would like to develop more partnerships with the learning support teacher and use a team approach, she offered the following comment on what she believed to be a common theme among other teachers: “The general perception is probably that it’s the Special Ed department’s responsibility to [pause] deal with these kids, and hopefully raise their reading level, not the classroom teacher’s responsibility.”

Brandy believed that aside from support for reading skills, teachers needed help in supporting students who have low motivation and low interest due to years of poor reading:

_I think by the time that we get struggling readers, their motivation is low, their engagement is low, and unless we can address that, we’re not going to make much progress with them. But again, that comes down to having time and resources to provide them with the extra support that they need, if they arrive here as struggling readers._
Case summary.

Brandy thought that she was different from other middle school teachers, in that she accepted some responsibility for teaching her struggling readers, even though she felt she was not adequately trained to do so. She admitted that although she tried her best, she still struggled with issues of time, and student motivation, and believed that her students made more progress outside the classroom. Brandy welcomed the opportunity to partner more with the resource teacher in order to better meet her students’ needs.

Case #5 – Andrea

At the time of the research Andrea was in her first year of teaching Grade 6 early French immersion. Although her struggling readers had more difficulty with reading in French, she taught English language arts as well, and noticed readers who struggle with reading in that area.

Andrea believed the assumption that middle school students should be able to read was prevalent among middle school teachers, which is why she thought some teachers were reticent to “teach reading”:

*Having talked to some other colleagues, or friends of mine teaching the same grade, I think at the middle school level, a lot of people assume that the kids should be able to read at a significant level, that that shouldn’t be a problem anymore. That, maybe they should be struggling with math, or maybe they don’t quite understand the science topic, but that it’s not our ‘job’ to help them learn how to read.*
Although Andrea was loathe to admit it, she favoured getting through curricular content instead of focusing on specific reading skills, saying: “I would say that my goal as a teacher is to get them through the content, rather than getting them to a higher reading level, unfortunately [nervous laughter].” She thought that she did not have the required skills or knowledge to help with struggling readers, though said she could “probably figure it out if [she] had the time.” Andrea said she would definitely be interested in more professional development specifically geared to a middle school level, saying that any sessions she had attended on reading instruction were aimed at an elementary audience. She also mentioned wanting more time to work with the learning support teacher to develop strategies for her students.

Andrea said she, like other teachers, struggled with the aspect of time, but that reading instruction was a possibility if it was a priority in the classroom:

I think if you as a classroom teacher put it into practice in your class, if it was part of the classroom routine, if you made it a priority, that it could, it’s doable. It’s all about where your priorities are. If you put a priority on teaching reading skills, if you put a priority on working and making that time out for helping your struggling readers, then, yeah, I do think it’s a realistic possibility.

Andrea acknowledged that her struggling readers often suffered from disengagement and avoidance, that even when she taught specific strategy lessons, she felt her students who struggle may “do what they usually do, and that’s avoid any task that involves [reading]. ‘Oh reading text? No. Done. Not even going to listen to the
lesson on this specific skill.” She admitted that this type of attitude was a source of frustration for her.

Andrea described how reading instruction is not a priority for many middle school teachers who “believe that either they [students who struggle with reading] don’t exist at our level, or it’s not their problem, that somehow the elementary schools are doing something wrong and sending us these kids that can’t read.” She communicated that she found the latter opinion unfortunate, yet prevalent.

Case summary.

Andrea thought that many teachers at a middle school level did not make it their responsibility to teach struggling readers, and she admitted that she herself has experienced difficulties with time and student motivation. Although she did incorporate whole-class reading strategies into her lessons, she admitted that many times she wanted to focus on the content, rather than on specific reading instruction. Although Andrea felt confident that she would be able to implement appropriate strategies for students who struggled with reading, she conveyed that she did not yet have the knowledge she required, since it was not a focus in her university education, and the instruction that she had taken in professional development opportunities was focused towards an elementary level.

Case #6 – Laura

Trained as a high school home economics teacher, Laura taught seven of her nine years at a middle school level. At the time of the research, she taught home
economics, gifted education and English at a large middle school in an upper middle class area.

Although Laura taught English, she stated that she is not a “trained” English teacher, and therefore did not know how to “teach reading” because she had received no education in that area. She believed that most students should at least have a basic level of reading when they reach a middle school level, and that her students’ lack of reading ability was not a large concern for her at present: “I haven’t talked to too many about the struggling readers. [...] Right now, it doesn’t seem to be, at least in my circle, not a high priority.”

Laura believed struggling readers could make progress, but that the progress was usually made outside the classroom. As such, she wished there were more money for specialists and educational assistants. Laura stated that she was so busy in her classroom and that she had to focus solely on curricular content and not on reading. However, she also believed that it was unrealistic to expect a classroom teacher to help struggling readers by teaching reading skills: “With the current classroom situation? Not very realistic. No, we have too many designations in our class, not enough assistants. They’re trying to make us push through a curriculum that’s very heavy.”

Laura believed that parents need to take some of the responsibility for literacy at home, and not put the entire onus on the classroom teacher(s):

I hope they’re working on it at home. I hope the parents are involved, not just the student. I’m tired of the parents putting all the responsibility on us. I hope that they’re trying, even with a level one or level two reading program, to start slowly
building their way up. I mean, we’ve got too many kids here in the classroom, we can’t sit down with them one-on-one for numerous hours a week, so I would hope that parents are sitting down with the students and making an effort at home to start to build up, and then teachers can facilitate the advancement if they see it, or guide kids where they need to.

In terms of in-class interventions, Laura believed that one-on-one time with educational assistants or the teacher would be beneficial to students who struggle with reading, but again pointed to the lack of time to implement such strategies.

Case summary.

Students who struggle with reading were not a huge emphasis in Laura’s current teaching, though even if they were, she did not believe she had the appropriate skills to teach them effectively, as she was not “trained” as an English teacher. She thought that not enough emphasis was placed on the home environment, and that teachers were too overloaded with other demands in order to provide students who struggle with reading the attention that they need. However, Laura believed that when given that time, the students would make progress.

Case #7 – Jonah

Jonah has been teaching at the middle and secondary level for 20 years. At the time of the data collection, he divided his time between teaching Grades 6 to 8 wood and metal shop, and Grade 6 core academics. While he said he notices weak reading skills more in his classroom, there were also implications in his woodshop environment.
Jonah was very direct and staunch in his beliefs that it was not his job as a classroom teacher to deal with students who struggle with reading, stating it’s “not the classroom teacher [‘s responsibility], as their time must be spent dealing with what will benefit the majority. Special needs require special time with a specialist.”

He believed that although he could learn how to deal with reading difficulties given the proper training, it was too much to ask of a teacher with the demands of today’s classroom:

*Oh yeah, not trying to say that you can slip that [training] in to the classroom teacher. But you could take probably, any one of us and say you know, here is what we want to do, this is how we think it’s done best, do you think you could do it? Probably most of us would say, “Yeah, we could do that, but not in our classroom right now.”*

Jonah believed that in order to make true progress, students needed to be removed from the classroom and be provided with intensive services, though he expressed doubts about the efficacy and regularity of outside the classroom support as well: “Well, uh...it doesn’t seem that that happens very often. So if a kid can not read, can’t read and they’re in Grade 6, I don’t think it’s happening very much.”

Although Jonah believed that most students aim to do their best, he stated that struggling with reading was a huge factor in students’ motivation, remarking, “I think most kids want to do what’s right. And so motivation is there in some form most of the time. But as what’s expected of them gets farther and farther from their abilities, motivation drops pretty fast.”
Although Jonah reasoned that placing sole responsibility on the classroom teacher is inappropriate, he believed that similar expectations of the parents were just as fruitless, stating, “it’s really beyond a lot of parents’ abilities to do very much specifically to help kids.”

Jonah believed there was a foundational flaw in the system for dealing with struggling readers, and that too much time was spent trying to teach students curriculum they cannot handle, and trying to have them reach the same standards, describing how “we work really hard to make everybody the same, and these kids are exceptional kids, and they need some exceptions.”

Jonah lamented the fact that more is not being done for struggling readers, but asserted that although most teachers may not want to admit it, it was not only too difficult a job for them to undertake, but inappropriate for a classroom teacher as well:

Well, I think you’re starting to say, “We don’t teach this stuff,” we don’t teach the stuff that someone who is reading at Grade 2 or 3 level... we don’t do that here.

And so, I think most of us kinda wash our hands from it. You missed out somewhere along the line. I’m sorry but I can’t help you. We don’t want to say that to too many people and we don’t want to probably want to admit it to ourselves very often, but I bet that’s how we survive, otherwise we would go crazy.

Jonah also believed that because he and other teachers do not have the time to teach struggling students properly, that they fall farther and farther behind.
Case summary.

Jonah was adamant that although if properly trained, he would be able to effectively teach students who struggle with their reading, that it was not the classroom teacher’s responsibility. He believed that at the middle school level teachers should be teaching middle school level curriculum, which means that students who struggle with reading fall farther behind. Therefore, he believed students who struggle with reading should be removed from the classroom and taught at their level by a specialist teacher.

Case #8 – Peter

Peter is in his 50s and has been teaching for 20 years. Originating from France, he had worked as a French immersion teacher, both in British Columbia and Alberta, but at the time of the research taught Grade 8 in the English stream, teaching math, English, and physical education.

Peter was concerned about his lack of skills for teaching reading, saying that while he could identify struggling readers, he did not really know how to help them from there. Although he was willing to learn (e.g., through workshops), Peter thought that there were more experienced people within his school who were better suited to help struggling readers. He believed that the situation at his current school was different than his previous schools, where he was not as aware of problems with reading, assuming that the students should be able to read by middle school:

When I was in Calgary, I was not aware of this stuff. I knew there were some kids with problems, but I did not have them in my class. The other schools that I’ve
been at, I don’t think there was any attempt to correct the problem. It was basically that this kid was not at the level, too bad.

While Peter very much believed that struggling readers could make progress, he thought that this assistance required a lot of time, and involved working at a lower level. He admitted that he did not find it a possibility for a middle school classroom teacher to take on the difficulties of struggling readers, describing:

No! We don’t have time. You have 25 kids, and there are two, three, four, five whatever that have problems. There’s no time for them. You need the help – EAs or resource teacher to come and do that. If I look after those kids, then I cannot look after the others. If I had a class of ... maybe 15, maybe I could spend some more time with the kids who had issues. But not in the current state of affairs.

He believed that although they may not be experts in reading either, that parents needed to take responsibility for following advice given to them by the experts in order to help support their child. For example, “if they say ‘ok, you should read with your kid every day for 10 minutes,’ you should do it.”

He believed an increase in technology, an associated lack of interest in reading, and lack of support and resources at the elementary level all contributed to students who cannot read in middle school. Finally, Peter communicated that he finds struggling readers both frustrating and stressful for teachers. He believes teachers have a harder time helping these students, and seeing success, as they require more time and resources.
Case summary.

Peter found it important for teachers to do whatever they could for each of the students in a class. However, he identified a lack of time and knowledge as the reasons he felt he did not effectively support the struggling readers in his class. In Peter’s opinion, the needs of students who struggle with reading were better met by the specialists in his school, or by the educational assistants who worked one-on-one to support the students. He believed that everyone should do what is in his/her power to help students who struggle with reading, and therefore, he has a desire to learn more on how best to support them.

Case #9 – Patty

Patty, a novice teacher, had been teaching Grade 6/7 late French Immersion for the past three years at the time of the interview. Although she was a graduate of the Secondary Education program, she has always taught at a middle school level. Though students entering her program were also learning a second language, she still found she has several students who struggled with reading (both in English and French) every year.

Patty believed that her Secondary Education focus did not specifically address “literacy,” and consequently she did not have the skills to meet the needs of her struggling readers. However, she expressed interest in developing more skills in literacy, as she believed these skills were important not only for English, but French as well. She believed that other teachers who teach in the English stream should have those skills already, though she also admitted to assuming that middle school students should be able to read by the time they get to this level: “But it’s definitely an assumption of mine
that they do come in with it, with some literacy skills at least, cause they, you know, have five years of education.”

Although Patty stated that her goal was to help students with their reading throughout the year, she also conveyed that at times she tried to find ways around poor reading skills, stating “with all the changes that we make for struggling readers, it’s not really working on their skills, it’s doing things more at their level.”

She believed her job would be easier if she could get both resources and knowledge from others to help support her struggling readers, preferably instructional level texts to provide proper practice. She mentioned a lack of time to spend specifically on reading skills. Patty found struggling readers frustrating, and at times she felt that their apparent lack of motivation masqueraded as laziness. She stated that at times she lowered her expectations for struggling readers, though she believed that sometimes the lessened expectations worked in their favour, remarking, “When they’re expected to do everything the same as the others, it’s.... What is your real goal here, to get from them?”

In Patty’s opinion, the school system did not do an adequate job, and passed on the problem to others. Specifically she mentioned a frustration with elementary schools: “Kids that we get that are weak, you know, there’s been no flag of them being weak, and you’re wondering what’s going on on that end...are they passing through?”

In discussing how she worked with readers who struggled in her class, Patty mentioned, “I think there’s always the trying to get a bit more attention to them, to get them going, and that’s, you know, when the EAs [Educational Assistants] come in and
stuff like that, that’s like ‘make sure you check in with these guys’.” She also expressed a desire for more Educational Assistant time.

**Case summary.**

As a novice teacher, and in particular a Secondary-trained French Immersion teacher, Patty did not believe that she had the necessary knowledge and experience to effectively deal with reading struggles, though she was hopeful that other generalist teachers did. She mentioned having to monitor her feelings on struggling readers, as she admitted to sometimes feeling that they were lazy, or automatically lowering classroom expectations for them. Patty questioned the efficacy of the school system in terms of struggles with reading and wondered if more should be done at an elementary level.

**Case #10 – Charlotte**

In her mid 30s, Charlotte had been teaching for 11 years, mostly at a middle school level, though she had taught at an elementary level as well. Although at the time of the research, she currently taught Grade 8 math, English and French at an upper middle class school, she had also spent several years teaching at an inner city middle school.

Charlotte conveyed that she did not know how to work with her struggling readers, and suggested that perhaps a classroom teacher would not be able to intervene at this age, when it is expected they should have the skills:

*I don’t think it’s too late, I just don’t know that a classroom teacher has the ability to fix it at this age. I think it needs maybe more specialized, one-on-one support.*
It’s almost a feeling of, ‘well they should have learned that already. They should have learned that in Grade 1, Grade 2.’

Charlotte looked to outside help for support with her struggling readers, as she described how most of them are “designated” and thus qualify to receive support from a learning support teacher. However, she admitted to preferring to a pull-out model of support, as she felt some anxiety with receiving help as from a specialist:

*I think in the long run it would be more beneficial to help me help the student, because then I could help multiple students, but I think people would take that on as ‘You’re telling me I’m a bad teacher and don’t know how to do my job’, so I think people would take it personally.*

Charlotte admitted to sometimes assuming that students who struggle with reading were lazy, due to low motivation and interest. Her goals were to have students enjoy reading, and to become a little bit more confident and a little bit stronger. However, she mentioned that when she was teaching curriculum heavy content, she was more concerned with imparting curriculum knowledge rather than literacy skills, stating, “I’m MORE concerned with getting the curriculum to them, than ‘here’s how you read these five sentences’.”

In Charlotte’s opinion, the number of struggling readers in middle schools existed partly due to lack of knowledge of teachers, not enough time and resources, and a focus on preserving self-esteem:

*Because everyone passes the buck on to someone else. [...] I don’t know that there is a system that we can say anymore…’I’m sorry mom. [Your child] can’t read at a
Grade 2 level, so we’re going to hold her back for Grade 2 until she can read at a Grade 2 level, and then we’ll pass her on to Grade 3’. [...] That would then hurt your feelings and you would never grow up to be a proud individual because we told you [that] you weren’t good at reading. So, umm, lot of things. Too many kids, not enough knowledge by teachers, and I think the not being able to say ‘your child is struggling’, I think that has been a detriment to kids, that we kind of say ‘oh, they’re trying really hard.’

Charlotte believed that both working with the parents and lessening expectations/workload for struggling students would be beneficial. She discussed the difference between students who were designated and non-designated, and the difference in support between different schools:

I think students get better service and support in a school like this, whereas in an inner city middle school you have your massive extremes, your super low kids get service and help, and you have so many middle kids, that if you transferred schools, we’d be red-flagging you all over the place and that breaks my heart. That where you were born sort of shows how much help you’re going to get from the district.

Charlotte struggled with her role and responsibilities surrounding struggling readers. Although she indicated that she wanted to provide more support, she felt that it was unrealistic, and perhaps an unnecessary use of time and resources. The following three comments communicate her beliefs:
I don’t know what I think about that [whether it’s the classroom teacher’s responsibility]. I kinda feel like I should say yes, but then if I think about it, it’s like ‘well, maybe not.’

To be callous, and this isn’t necessarily my personal opinion, but I’ve heard this said before -- somebody has to work at the gas stations, somebody has to do the jobs, and hey, I appreciate the guy who pumps my gas, or sells me my sweater at the GAP, umm….or has a really good job cleaning up on the ferries and gets [paid] more than I do. So, we could be all dramatic and say, ‘Oh, the future for them is this, that and the other,’ or we could say, ‘Yeah, you know what? We don’t all have to be smart. We don’t all have to be good at academics, and you’re going to be just fine.’

There’s a part of me that says, ‘Ooh, it’s so unjust and unfair and no child left behind!’ and a part of me that goes, ‘Well, yeah, I wish we could fix and save and help absolutely every kid,’ but I don’t know if that’s reasonable.

Case summary.

It seemed that Charlotte struggled with her role and responsibilities surrounding struggling readers. On one hand, she wanted to do the best she could for every student, but on the other, she wondered if it was within the purview of a generalist middle school teacher to address the needs of those who struggle with reading. She believed both time and knowledge impeded her from being more effective with readers who struggle, but admitted she might feel uncomfortable about receiving guidance from specialist teachers. Charlotte believed the school system is flawed in that it continues to
pass on responsibility for these students until they get to a point and an age where not much can be done for them.

**Discussion**

Table 4, found at the end of the chapter, is a representation of the different concepts apparent in each of the particular cases. In looking for literal replication (Yin, 2003), several ideas were apparent in each of the interviews (e.g., lack of skills/knowledge, lack of time, discussions of low motivation of struggling students). These ideas were pervasive and dominant throughout each of the interviews and as central themes within the phenomenological cross-case analysis presented in the next chapter.

Although all cases had several themes in common, rather than looking to theoretical replication (Yin, 2003) as explanation, I conceptualized the cases on a continuum, as I believe the model to be a more accurate representation of the differences. Although separate continuums might be proposed based on any number of variants, the most striking evidence in support of a continuum model was the notion of teacher role and responsibility in regards to students who struggle with reading. The idea of a continuum of teacher identity meshes with Gee’s (2000) concept of “institutional identity,” whereby an identity may be created and supported by an institution, and may be seen either as a calling or an imposition.

Figure 2 depicts the notion of teacher role on a continuum, and whether these generalist teachers believed it to be their responsibility to teach students who struggle with reading.
Figure 2: Continuum of Teacher Responsibility

Nearer to the left of the continuum might be Jonah (Case #7), who discussed his lack of time and knowledge in dealing with struggling readers, but was fairly adamant in his assertions that those same elements are evidence that readers who are not at grade level cannot and should not be his responsibility. Closer to his end of the continuum might be Charlotte (Case #10) who, although she felt sorry for the struggling readers in her class, and stated that she did the best she could in supporting them, preferred that they receive intervention from a specialist teacher; she wondered about the fairness of expecting a Grade 8 teacher to teach someone at a Grade 2 level.

At the right end of the continuum we might find Brandy and Andrea (Cases #4 and #5), who, although they too did not feel sufficiently prepared, or that they had the necessary time to work with struggling readers, were receptive to the idea of learning more about how to support their struggling readers, and partnering with specialist teachers.

With the other teachers scattered throughout the continuum, we might expect to find others like Max (Case #1) more in the middle. Max, too, believed that he suffered
from a lack of knowledge and time. However, although he stated that he tried his best with his struggling readers, and communicated that he would be open to suggestions and support if they were provided to him, felt a need to concentrate on the curricular content of the subjects he taught. Interestingly, in placing the teachers interviewed on the continuum, it could be suggested that less experienced teachers expressed more responsibility for the success of their struggling readers than their more experienced colleagues.

The individual case data provided some support for both of the Hall (2007, 2009) studies mentioned in Chapter Two, where teacher identity was studied in relation to student identity. Many teachers mentioned students presenting as lazy, unmotivated, or unengaged, while Hall (2007) posited these behaviors may be students’ ways of preserving their identity as a reader. These perceptions may lead to the frustrations mentioned by many interviewees.

Much of the individual case study data also supported Draper’s (2008) assertion that teachers may be concerned about the teaching of literacy taking away from time spent on content material, as many of the case studies mentioned discussed a need to focus on curriculum-heavy content.

When proceeding on to the next chapter and the cross case synthesis of common themes, it is important to keep these differences in individual cases in mind. As might be expected, although there were certainly some commonalities, differences in context, years of experience, the school setting, colleagues, and, most importantly, experiences with students, all contributed to variations in perception and practice.
However, based on the individual case analysis presented in this chapter, I argue that these variations exist on a continuum of themes.

Table 4: Case Breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case #</th>
<th>Lack of skills/knowledge</th>
<th>Desire for knowledge</th>
<th>Lack of time</th>
<th>Low motivation</th>
<th>Reading level assumption</th>
<th>Focus on curriculum</th>
<th>Not the responsibility</th>
<th>Lack of resources</th>
<th>Partnership</th>
<th>Specialist teacher</th>
<th>Elementary school</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Progress outside</th>
<th>Designated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Chapter Five

Cross-Case Analysis: Findings and Discussion

In aiming to uncover the perception and attitudes that underlie thoughts, behaviours and practices of middle school teachers dealing with struggling readers, the previous chapter focused on specific cases in order to provide individual examples and insight into teacher perception.

However, struggling readers (both identified and not) are a reality for most, if not all, middle school generalist teachers. Teacher perceptions of students who struggle with reading are socially constructed, and influenced by many other factors. A socioecological model, presented later in the chapter, was used to explore internal and external forces, influences and pressures on teacher perception.

This chapter employs the phenomenology-based methodology detailed in Chapter Three to complete a cross-case analysis/synthesis. In searching for the collective experience of middle school teachers, I identified six central categories which I believe comprise the overall perception of middle school teachers towards struggling readers. (The categories and their associated codes are visually represented in the thematic network in Appendix D):

a) Definitions and implications of being a struggling reader;
b) Perceived reasons why a middle school student may struggle;
c) Perceived behaviours and affect of struggling readers;
d) Teacher attitudes toward struggling readers;
e) Perceived intervention and support needs;
f) Perceived barriers and surrounding issues.

In the analysis that follows, I first discuss and analyze responses within each of these categories. This analysis is accompanied by quotations from both the interviews and the survey data which I believe are reflective of the general tendencies and themes. As I focused on the collective experience, I deliberately did not identify the specific source of each quote, as I believe it is secondary in its contribution to the synthesis of experience. At the end of each category section, I use Braun and Clark’s (2006) framework, mentioned in Chapter Three to identify the major theme(s) uncovered in that category. Finally, at the end of the chapter I discuss how each of the major themes present in each category combine to form the overall perception, by contextualizing the themes in terms of the socioecological framework mentioned above.

Category 1 - Definitions and Implications of Being a Struggling Reader

In order to understand and represent a concept, we must first have defining characteristics in mind. During my entire research process, I deliberately did not provide a definition of the term “struggling reader,” as one of my objectives was to discover what generalist middle school teachers thought of when they heard the term, and how they might define it for themselves in terms of students and student abilities.

Grade level.

A common phrase used by respondents when discussing definitions or implications of struggling readers was the notion of “grade level,” with references to students not being at grade level, being several grade levels below, or needing a great deal of support in order to read at grade level. The following response is fairly
representative of a number of the definitional responses: “A struggling reader is a student who reads below grade level – say, one or more grades below his/her current grade level.”

Although no respondent defined what was meant by grade level, teachers in British Columbia can look to the BC Performance Standards (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009), a non-mandatory performance scale, which reflects the mandatory prescribed learning outcomes and provides a comprehensive assessment tool meant to be used in March-April of any given year in each grade level. Tables 5 and Table 6 below, taken directly from the BC Performance Standards, show the general characteristics of literature and informational materials generally considered suitable for Grade 7 students.

**Table 5: Grade 7 Literature Materials**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• generally straightforward, conversational vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• novels and stories may feature dialect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• may include some challenging or unusual vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• frequently includes descriptive language to create an effect or mood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• stories and novels may include a great deal of narration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• poetry includes figurative language such as similes,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metaphors, and personification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• poems take many forms, including free verse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• variety in sentence structure and length, simple to complex</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideas and Organization</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• plots tend to focus on relationships, although these are often</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developed through fairly fast-paced action</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• often deal with themes of friendship, identity, growing up;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>often have young adult protagonists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• characters show some complexity and may change during the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
course of a novel; increasingly, characters are revealed through their words, thoughts, and actions, rather than described

- in stories and novels, the problem is usually solved; the solution may be unexpected
- in many novels, each chapter presents a new problem or a new attempt at solving the central problem
- novels often feature suspense
- short stories come from a range of genres, including science fiction, mystery, adventure, and humour
- plots are generally straightforward, but may include some flashbacks; often feature foreshadowing, twists, and surprises
- stories and novels feature an increasing amount of description—setting, mood, and atmosphere are often important
- paragraphs are a variety of lengths
- poetry increasingly deals with abstract concepts and messages

| Graphics and Format | • illustrations of stories and poems are intended to enhance the text—they do not provide basic information
|                     | • most novels have few or no illustrations
|                     | • novels usually range from 120 to 220 pages |

Note: Taken from the British Columbia Performance Standards (2009, p. 208)

Table 6: Grade 7 Informational Materials

| Language           | • includes specific scientific or technical terms that may be highlighted or in boldface type
|                    | • presents technical vocabulary in context as a footnote, or in a glossary
|                    | • some repetition of key words and phrases when new concepts are introduced
|                    | • variety in sentence structure and length, simple to complex |

| Ideas and Organization | • information ranges from specific and concrete to some |
complex ideas

- “signal words” make explicit the relationships among ideas (e.g., sequence, cause-effect, main idea-details)
- variety of paragraph lengths
- titles, headings, and subheadings signal changes in topic
- some reference texts present concept spreads with an array of related illustrations and text—there is no intended sequence to the ideas

| Graphics and Format | • some information is presented in feature boxes and sidebars—not part of the flow of the text
|                     | • illustrations and other graphics support and provide content
|                     | • clear relationships between text and illustrations, often supported with captions or labels
|                     | • processes are often represented graphically and in words
|                     | • includes charts, graphs, maps (with legends), or diagrams
|                     | • book sections tend to have specific functions (e.g., table of contents, glossary, unit summaries)
|                     | • books are usually 50 to 150 pages in length

Note: Taken from the British Columbia Performance Standards (2009, p. 224)

Appendix E shows the rubric of Performance Standards for a Grade 7 level for reading literature and reading information, on a four point scale, including: not yet meeting expectations, minimally meeting expectations, fully meeting expectations, and exceeding expectations. Each category details specific skills, or lack thereof, that a reader under that heading might have (e.g., The “not yet meeting expectations” category includes descriptions such as: “makes simple, obvious connections to self,” and “predictions and inferences may be illogical or unsupported”).

Assuming a struggling reader who is “below grade level” would be under the heading of “not yet meeting expectations,” I assigned codes in that category of the BC
Performance Standards (for both literature and informational reading standards), using the same method as when I coded my survey and interview data. From there, I searched for instances of each of those codes (or similar codes) in the aggregate responses to survey question 2 – “How would you define a struggling reader? What might “struggling readers” in middle school have difficulty with?”, as well as all the interview data (results are compiled in Tables 7 and 8)

Table 7: Instances of Grade 7 Literature Codes in the Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Instances of these codes (or similar) found in the data</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents mentioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unable to identify problems</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tries to sound out new words</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaware of the features of various genres</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with figurative or abstract language</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifies some main characters and events</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictions and inferences may be illogical or unsupported</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May offer inaccurate or irrelevant details</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does not interpret themes logically</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response and Analysis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple, obvious connections</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactions tend to be vague and unsupported</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 8: Instances of Grade 7 Informational Codes Found in the Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Instances of these codes (or similar) found in the data</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents mentioning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unable to monitor own reading; needs help to check for understanding</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often “stuck” on new words</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has difficulty making predictions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t use text features</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comprehension**

| Work is inaccurate, vague, or incomplete | 0 | 0% |
| May confuse main and supporting information | 4 | 9% |
| Locates some details if asked, omits a great deal | 0 | 0% |
| Needs help to make notes | 1 | 2% |
| Often unable to make inferences | 5 | 11% |

**Analysis**

| Difficulty making connections to prior knowledge | 5 | 11% |
| Reactions or judgments tend to be vague or unsupported | 2 | 5% |
Without putting too much emphasis on numbers and percentages in a qualitative study, none of the 21 terms coded in the performance standards were particularly popular responses among participants (all were mentioned from 0-18% of the time, with the average being approximately 5%). The most frequently mentioned phrases were “sounding out new words,” “connections,” and “checking for understanding.” This comparison indicates a tendency in the data for mentions of “decoding” and “comprehension,” often without much explanation or elaboration. One respondent mentioned, “being below grade level” as the main definitional criteria in his survey answer. In his interview, he discussed his ability to assess the weaknesses of a struggling reader as follows: “I can probably recognize when I get the kids, but I cannot say what level they are. [...] just that they struggle.”

Without a specific assessment tool such as a running record or educational achievement tests (normally administered by a trained specialist teacher), classroom teachers can do little more than estimate the reading levels of their students. In this study, participants seemed to be driven by a focus on decoding/reading words correctly and “understanding what they read.” Thus, perhaps although the term “grade level” was mentioned in many of the responses and definitions, this term may be often used as a vague “catchall” description for someone who doesn’t read as well as might be expected. What teachers fail to realize perhaps, as Allington (2002) posits, is that given that grade level is determined psychometrically to be the average, it is a mathematical impossibility to have every child at “grade level.” Accordingly, perhaps a greater focus on the very specific facets of reading detailed on the performance standards is in order.
The many faces of reading struggles.

Only two of the respondents made reference to the fact that different readers struggle with different aspects of reading. The rest of the respondents attributed a certain homogeneity to the picture of a struggling reader, as evident in the following response:

* A reader who is two grade levels below their grade in ability. They have difficulties decoding text, establishing fluency and a good reading pace, have trouble remembering what they have read, do not predict outcomes or make inferences, have a small knowledge due to lack of reading and cannot make connections to self, other texts or the world. They think concretely and cannot ‘see’ imagery or theme.

While the above definition is relatively thorough in comparison to some of the other respondents’ answers in this study in its listing of possible weaknesses of struggling readers, Dennis (2008) warns of the dangers of grouping struggling readers in a single category without regard for the actual skills they possess, and those that they still need to develop. Riddle Buly and Valencia (2002) discovered that labels that dictate solely when a child is not at grade level “mask distinctive and multifaceted patterns of students’ reading abilities that require dramatically different instructional emphasis” (p. 219). While having an understanding of a variety of factors that could influence struggling readers is important, it is essential to treat students as individuals and look at their individual skill levels. Even for those students who don’t struggle, “can read at grade level” is seemingly as inadequate an assessment as “cannot read at grade level,” if
that assessment does not include specific skills and abilities. For these reasons, in my opinion, the BC Performance Standards are quite explicit and thorough in their description of reading ability.

**Implications of reading difficulties.**

Whether teachers can identify specific areas of need or not, there are still often far-reaching classroom implications for a student who has difficulty with reading. Most respondents identified in some form that struggling readers would have difficulty throughout the curriculum, even in mathematics, an area in which several respondents mentioned “a trend toward problem-solving and word problems.” Many participants elaborated on that idea by discussing both an increased need for reading in higher grade levels, and increased difficulty of the texts. However, despite that awareness, respondents focused more on curricular content than on teaching content area reading:

> When it’s curriculum heavy, like when I’ve done socials or science, yeah, I really need them to get that lightning is caused by blah blah blah, or the Romans did such and such. I’m MORE concerned with getting the curriculum to them, than ‘here’s how you read these five sentences.’

Or, from another respondent:

> I find the biggest thing I’m looking at is ‘Do they actually know anything about the science?’ You know, because I feel if I’m evaluating the science AND the language art part, then, I’ll be failing so many kids who actually know the science part, but they can’t communicate it very well necessarily. [...] I think if I was
teaching ALL subjects, it might be different, cause then you could blend it all together.

There was an overall lack of teacher acceptance towards the importance of teaching specific reading skills in subjects other than Language Arts (one respondent even said she was “not a trained English teacher”), and a lack of sentiment that “every teacher is a teacher of reading” (Fisher & Ivey, 2005, p. 3). As in the last quotation above, there were other indications that these teachers found it difficult to incorporate “language arts”/literacy skills if teachers did not teach all subjects. However, there were acknowledgements that collaborative teaching may be in order: “We need to coordinate teacher efforts in order to emphasize literacy across the curriculum.”

The one teacher who did discuss a literacy focus in her science class in some detail (using chunking, and vocabulary strategies, which, as she described, “is good for everyone, because it benefits the rest of the kids in the class”), was also the Language Arts teacher for her team. Those who did not teach any of the Language Arts curriculum were less likely to mention cross-curricular literacy approaches they used in their classes.

Implications for writing.

As the natural companion of reading, writing difficulties were often mentioned as strongly correlated with reading difficulties. The respondents seemed to employ much the same dichotomous approach to the levels of correlation as they did with definitions of struggling readers, with some teachers indicating that problems with writing basics were common:
It reflects in their writing, they struggle with writing in complete sentences, keeping a complete thought in a sentence, building paragraphs, organizing their paragraphs, but I really think it’s the reading is the key to that. If they had read more and seen more language, they would be a lot better with their writing.

Some commented that students’ writing indicated weak comprehension:

When I look at the expected responses I’m assuming a student is going to say, and their responses are very flat or one-level or really don’t sound smart, I’m concerned that they’re not understanding what they’re reading, and sometimes, I’m looking at their writing and making the assumption that they’re also having trouble with their reading.

Also discussed in relation to written output were students with underdeveloped vocabularies, cited as both a side effect and indicator of reading difficulties.

**Prominent themes within category 1.**

After careful analysis and comparisons of the data, overall, within this category of responses, two major themes were evident:

- Teachers have difficulty assessing and defining what it means to struggle with reading.
- Much less emphasis was placed on literacy skills in academic subjects other than Language Arts.
Category 2 - Perceived Reasons Why Readers Struggle

Understanding the reasons teachers believe readers come to middle school without the necessary skills in reading may shed light on their further assumptions about struggling readers, and how those assumptions might guide their practice.

Disability.

Most of the survey respondents made some mention of “possible learning disability” in their response to the question, “Why might a middle school student struggle with reading?” Interestingly, any attempt to elaborate on the term learning disability was made by adding mention of either dyslexia, or decoding problems, possibly indicating a lack of realization that learning disabilities can affect reading comprehension either on its own, or in combination with decoding issues (Riddle Buly & Valencia, 2002).

In follow up interviews, several respondents asked me to clarify my use of the term “struggling reader” or to differentiate between designated and non-designated (or “grey area”) students. Although this distinction was sometimes made in reference to whether or not a student received support (“well [my struggling readers] aren’t low enough on the spectrum to get learning support”), it could also possibly indicate erroneous thinking that the struggles of those with designated learning disabilities were somehow different than those not designated (Lyon et al., 2001).

Parents and home life.

Within both the survey and interview data, there was much discussion of the role of parents and the home in the development and support of reading, as possible explanation of why students may struggle at a middle school level. Responses identified
three different issues within the home: lack of reading; a home environment where reading was not valued; or parents who struggle with reading. Respondents attributed struggles to one, or some combination of all three issues. Describing a lack of reading in the home, one respondent mentioned:

*I asked one of my kids this year what he reads at home and he thought that was funny. And I said, ‘Well, what do your parents read? Do they have magazines? Do they have newspapers? Do they have books?’ and he said ‘No, we have TV.’*

Another respondent discussed the idea of parent as role model: “I strongly believe that parents are the primary role models when it comes to reading and should both model and encourage as much reading in the home as possible and include reading in daily routines.”

Respondents who discussed a lack of value placed on reading in the homes described, “Parents who did not read to their preschoolers or encourage them to develop a love/appreciation for reading at an early age,” or, from another respondent, “if their home environment is not conducive to reading, or does not place a high value on education.” Finally, some respondents discussed how some of their students’ parents were not themselves good readers, were illiterate, or spoke a second language: “Family members may struggle with reading themselves.”

As much as respondents identified parent responsibility in the development of the problem, the teachers also felt that the parents should assume some responsibility in dealing with the issue once it appears. However, there is an interesting juxtaposition in this area, in thinking that a home that does not place a high value on early literacy, or
does not practice or have the tools to support it, should be engaged in working to support later reading difficulties. There was some mention of this imbalance of thought:

“I think the parents’ responsibility is pretty general in presenting the kids to school with an attitude to learn, but it’s really beyond a lot of parents’ abilities to do very much specifically to help kids.” Or, from another respondent: “I’d like to say parents [should take some responsibility], but I’m not sure how realistic that is.” A third respondent discussed how although parents may not have expertise, they still had a responsibility, saying:

The parents may not be as qualified as the teachers to know, but [...] you ask the expert or medical doctor what to do, take a pill or whatever, and then you follow the advice of the expert. So if they say, ‘Ok you should read with your kid every day for 10 minutes,’ you should do it.

To add to the ambiguous role of parents in the reading development of their children, many respondents indicated that “working with the parents more” might be a way to help the problem, with little explanation of what that might mean, or what that might look like, with the exception of one respondent who advocated for more government support for adult literacy programs in order to create more literate homes:

“We need the government to set up more reading programs for adult so these parents can become more literate.”

**Previous schooling.**

While respondents were somewhat critical of parents and their role in literacy issues, they seemed slightly less critical of previous teachers and teaching efforts. While
there was some mention of pushing students who did not have the necessary skills through a system, the respondents focused more on the lack of proper identification of and support for struggling readers, as elaborated by the following four different respondents:

Even kids that we get that are weak, there’s been no flag of them being weak, and you’re wondering what’s going on on that end...how are they passing through?

They have ‘fallen through the cracks’ in their educational past – they haven’t received the tools that they need in order to be successful.

The system is set up so children just get pushed from grade to grade regardless of abilities.

Because everyone passes the buck on to someone else. [...] In some schools you have a large number of struggling students and the teachers can sometimes only deal with the most extreme and so the middle crowd gets lost.

While some definite frustrations were expressed with “the system,” or previous schooling, respondents seemed to have more empathy for elementary school teachers, often mentioning that they might struggle with the same barriers and issues that middle school teachers do (see below for further discussion). Notably absent in the responses (with few possible exceptions – “inadequate literacy training at elementary level” or more explicitly “poorly taught in lower grades”) were mentions of how a student may not have been properly taught, or taught in the way he or she needed in order to succeed. While there were many mentions of not learning various specific skills, the
language used by respondents seemed to focus on the student not mastering the skills, rather than the teacher not teaching him or her, such as “student did not master the basics in earlier grades” or “they have yet to master the word attack skills and vocabulary needed to decode and make sense of text in their environment.”

Prominent themes within category 2.

Exploration and analysis of responses in this category uncovered the following general theme:

- Teachers attribute struggles with reading to many aspects, tending to shy away from assertions of ineffective teaching in favour of internal issues (such as a vague notion of ‘learning disability’) and other external factors (such as parents, or “the system”).

Category 3 - Perceived Behaviours and Affect of Struggling Readers

As Beers (2003) remarks:

Not all struggling readers sit at the back of the room, head down, sweatshirt hood pulled low, notebook crammed with papers that are filled with half-completed assignments, a bored expression, though that often is the image that springs to mind when we hear the term struggling reader. (p. 14)

Data relating to this category of response were grouped and analyzed for themes of how teachers perceive the behavior, nature, and disposition of struggling readers in their classroom.
Coping.

Many of the teachers realized, that for students who struggle with reading, in the face of perceived difficulty keeping up with classroom requirements across the curriculum, many adopt coping skills to survive (everything from “fake” reading, good memories, plagiarism, copying off friends, and developing personas such as “the quiet one” or “the class clown” were mentioned as adaptive strategies on the part of the students). While many of these strategies may be used by the students in an effort to support their own academic success (limited as it may be), the data also suggested problems related to social difficulty and embarrassment, which is also a strong motivation for many of the mentioned coping skills (McCray, Vaughn, & Neal, 2001). While acknowledgement of the stigma of reading difficulty was common, there also seemed to be a juxtaposition of teaching/support strategies that may serve to highlight reading difficulties in individual students. Some teachers employed a peer coaching strategy: “Sometimes it’s finding stronger students in the class that are able to help those kids along.” Some teachers have students read aloud: “I like to get the kids to take turns reading from the textbook, because I think it’s good for them to read out loud.” And some teachers explained that they have other staff members work with the student and read material aloud to them:

I have an EA in my classroom as well, and she often helps with the struggling readers by reading it aloud to them. But they still become quite avoidant of the task, or defiant to her while she’s helping them, because they feel singled out I think?
While the data contained many references to students feeling inadequate, self-conscious, ashamed, embarrassed, discouraged or dumb, and acknowledgement of the side effects and coping skills manifested by those feelings, teaching styles, or even necessary support mechanisms mentioned may be unintentionally detrimental to the self-efficacy of the students. Although middle school students understand the importance of reading, and want to become better, they want to do it in a way that does not embarrass them in front of their peers, and single out the very thing they may have been trying to hide or avoid (Hall, 2006; McCray, Vaughn, & Neal, 2001). Brozo (1990) argues that “teachers who focus on effective instruction from only their perspectives fail to appreciate the needs of unsuccessful readers and may inadvertently reinforce students’ reading failures” (p. 324).

**Motivation.**

One of the main ideas addressed by the respondents was that of interest and enjoyment, both in definitions of struggling readers (“they might not enjoy reading”), and as a reason why they struggle (“some don’t enjoy reading, which means that they don’t read enough and so fall behind”). While there was much focus by the respondents on reasons why interest may be low, and therefore result in a lack of skill, such as “not being introduced to the right novel,” “they have not been ‘turned on’ by books,” “boring, irrelevant reading resources in the classroom,” or “no connection to text – lack of experience that allows them to make connections,” less emphasis was placed on the fact that a lack of skills starts to cause lack of interest. This association was well described using the following analogy by one of the participants:
You don’t like to do something and the process of something is not enjoyable, and there’s no reward at the end. Let me relate that to running, which I’m currently learning. I strongly dislike the process of it – while I do it, I hate it, and I will say that out loud as I’m doing it. I’m not very good at it. I’m slow. I know this because I run with other people, I see my times compared to theirs. But, when I’m done, I have a reward. I feel good. I’m proud of myself. If you think about a reader who does not enjoy the process, then they have to write something about it, for which they get no reward, because the teacher’s saying “This isn’t very good sweetheart” [...] they’re not going to be motivated to do it again, because there IS no reward and, so I think it’s one of those big cycles, over, over, over. We need to break the cycle.

Struggling readers, with accompanying low motivation or low engagement evoked descriptions from the respondents ranging in severity from words like “reluctant,” “frustrated,” “resistant,” or “non-responsive” to more judgment-filled terms such as “lazy” and “passive aggressive.” What may start out as a coping mechanism for a student, might soon determine behavior patterns which start to impact the student more profoundly. Depending on the coping strategy chosen by the student, the behavior may evoke either sympathy and compassion, or frustration, as demonstrated by the following two quotations from the same respondent: “I might be a bit more lenient on them [...] I feel sorry for them in the class.” And “Some of those kids who can’t read don’t even want to listen or pay attention, so it’s a hard tight wire [for me] to walk.”
Much like in the all-encompassing descriptions and attributions of reading weaknesses described above when discussing the definition of a struggling reader, there seemed to be an overall view of students who struggle with reading as having low engagement and motivation, with no mention at all of any students who struggle with reading, but put forth a lot of effort in class, or are particularly successful in other areas. This definition fits with the notion of Beers (2003) of the stereotypical struggling or reluctant reader, slouched in a chair with a hoodie pulled up, which is unfortunate, as these types of assumptions may actually help mask reading problems of students who do not fit the stereotypical unmotivated image, yet have adopted some of the other coping skills mentioned, such as getting help from friends, remaining quiet, or relying on listening skills.

Prominent themes within category 3.

Looking at teacher perceptions of behaviour and affect of the struggling reader, the following themes were identified:

- Teachers have a strong awareness of various coping skills used by struggling readers, but less understanding of how to mitigate and manage these behaviours in the classroom.

- The correlation between reading difficulties and motivation can often yield a stereotypical portrait and negative associations by teachers towards students who struggle with reading.
Category 4 - Teacher Attitude Towards Struggling Readers

Assumptions.

Possibly the most important factor uncovered in this research concerning teacher attitude toward struggling readers was the overwhelming pervasive opinion that students should be able to read by the time they get to middle school. Although the teachers were also quick to point out that that was not the reality, this assumption may affect all of their interactions with the student. As one teacher said:

*I think at the middle school level, a lot of people assume that the kids should be able to read at a significant level, that that shouldn’t be a problem anymore.

That, you know, maybe they should be struggling with math, or maybe they don’t quite understand the science topic, but that it’s not our ‘job’ to help them learn how to read.*

This sentiment was echoed by several others:

*Well, I think you’re starting to say ‘we don’t teach this stuff,’ we don’t teach the stuff that someone who is reading at Grade 2 or 3 level, we don’t do that here. And so, I think most of us... kinda wash our hands from it. ‘You missed out somewhere along the line, I’m sorry but I can’t help you.’ We don’t want to say that to too many people and we don’t want to probably admit it to ourselves very often, but I bet that’s how we survive, otherwise we would go crazy.

It’s almost a feeling of ‘Well they should have learned that already. They should have learned that in Grade 1, Grade 2.’ What am I supposed to do with*
This sentiment, expressed in some interviews, seemed to be at odds with an overwhelming majority of survey respondents who mentioned that struggling readers were partly the classroom teacher’s responsibility. When pressed for further information during the interviews, the notion of “responsibility” became more defined—the teachers saw their responsibility as finding ways to teach the students the curriculum, not necessarily helping to improve their reading skills. While on the surface these opinions may seem somewhat callous, whenever this sentiment was mentioned by these teachers, it was coupled with a sense of regret and helplessness, exemplified by these three responses:

“I think for most people, I think it’s that ‘I’m sorry’ kinda feeling.”

“For the teacher, it’s very stressful. [...] Because the kid is not at level, so he’s going to be set aside from the rest of the class.”

“Frustrating for the teacher, because of course you want to see all your kids succeed, and this one who is behind probably won’t succeed at the same rate as the other ones.”

Expectations.

On the whole, teachers were very positive about the idea of struggling readers making progress, though more so in understanding and mastering specific curriculum goals than in improving their reading skills. Just as the students find ways to get around reading, many of the specific strategies teachers mentioned to “help” struggling readers
fell under the category of “getting them through” the curriculum, and finding ways
around their lack of reading ability, such as:

“I just have to manage what they can and assist them where I can.”

“There’s not a lot of time, so just … get them through.”

“I would say more…well, maybe finding ways around. With all the changes that
we make for struggling readers, it’s not really working on their skills, it’s doing
things more at their level.”

“Most of their time is just spent on getting students through as much of the
curriculum as they can.”

Interestingly, although the vast majority of respondents admitted to their goal
being finding ways around low reading skills, it was again often expressed with regret, or
embarrassment, as in the case of these two respondents:

“For me, because I’m so busy, I hate to say it, [my goal] is to get around [their
reading struggles] and to help them do what they can with me, at that time.”

“But I would say that my goal as a teacher is to get them through the content,
[...] unfortunately. *nervous laugh*”

One of the strategies often mentioned or implied for “getting them through”
was the lowering of expectations for students who struggled with reading. Although
some of the mentions of lowered expectations were presented in a positive manner, as
a way to reduce stress and workload for the student (“these kids are exceptional kids
and need some exceptions”), the alternate reference to lowered expectations was one
of resignation:
“I think for our non-designated grey area students, we also lower our
expectations, but it’s kind of begrudgingly.”

“Maybe I have low expectations of them too, of how much they’re going to grow,
because I’ve seen pretty quick that they’re lower than the rest.”

When mention was made of students making progress in their reading, such
comments were often associated with transactions that happened outside of the
classroom (such as pull-out programs, resource room, and remedial reading outside of
the school), or with someone else other than the classroom teacher (educational
assistants, learning support teacher). While most responses were not quite as explicit as
the one following, the general association seemed to be the same: [discussing whether
struggling readers make progress throughout the year] “Left on their own devices to the
general class? Probably very little. Taken out with some intervention? For sure.”

Also of note when discussing learning assistance and support was the fact that
several respondents mentioned students who struggled, but who did not qualify for
outside assistance. This notion is alarming when juxtaposed with the above sentiment
that many teachers feel struggling students make very little progress in the general
class.

**Prominent themes within category 4.**

In looking at teacher attitude toward struggling readers, the following theme
was apparent:
• Middle school teachers believe that their students should be competent grade level readers, and while it is their job to adapt the curriculum for their needs, it is not their job to improve reading skills.

**Category 5 - Perceived Intervention and Support Needs**

When looking at the needs of struggling readers, as one respondent said, it is important to “key in on any support available to them, so we’re strengthening them, not just giving them coping skills.”

**Specialists.**

Many respondents mentioned a need for more “support” for struggling readers, which seemingly was another catchall term for “someone else other than me needs to do something for this child.” While saying that they did not agree with the assumption themselves, several interview respondents mentioned a perception amongst middle school teachers that: “It’s the Special Ed department’s responsibility to deal with these kids and hopefully raise their reading level, not the classroom teacher’s responsibility.” Some respondents were more explicit in their own views: “[It’s] not the classroom teacher[’s responsibility], as their time must be spent dealing with what will benefit the majority. Special needs require special time with a specialist.”

In the survey responses, although many teachers listed themselves as “responsible” for the struggling reader in the first section of the survey, ideas about specialist support focused more on taking the student out of the room for some sort of intervention, as opposed to providing tools and resources for the classroom teacher.
One respondent candidly relayed possible issues with getting help from the resource teacher:

*I think in the long run it would be more beneficial to help me help the student, because then I could help multiple students. But, I think people would take that on as ‘You’re telling me I’m a bad teacher and don’t know how to do my job,’ so I think people would take it personally. And even I, like, wanting to have those skills and be able to help 10 kids would feel like ‘Oh God, I’m a bad teacher because this other teacher is having to teach me.’*

When asked what can be done to help struggling readers, many respondents mentioned both small group instruction and one-on-one support, with a strong undertone that those types of support systems needed to be handled by EAs or specialist teachers:

“I wish there was more one-on-one. I wish there were more assistants to sit down, help the kids.”

“It requires real expertise to do it well. [...] I definitely think the key is small groups and a teacher who is an expert in the field to do the work.”

“Dedicated learning support specialists with training to work with small groups of at-risk learners in and out of the classroom.”

The data revealed a trend and a frustration that often only students with designated disabilities received this targeted support, coupled with an empathy (similar to that shown to elementary school teachers) for the task of specialist support teachers: “*With a non-designated student at this age level, I don’t think it [specialized, one-on-one*
support] happens in the schools.” And “Our Special Ed and resource room teachers do fantastic work when they have the time to dedicate to those kids. [...] Unfortunately, we’ve got so many designated kids these days.”

Making reading a priority.

Guided reading sessions (small group, at-level instruction on key reading strategies) were mentioned, both as in-class and separate pull-out programs as a good way to allow readers to read at their individual level and not only work on necessary skills, but feel successful and engaged. However, many respondents noted that even when they use materials that are at a lower reading level, there is a problem with incongruence in subject matter, both in guided reading and subject-specific material:

“It’s different, the texts [for guided reading]... the content level isn’t interesting to them. They don’t want to read about the dog that went and fetched the ball. How boring is that when you’re 12 years old?” And “And that’s kinda where stuff falls down, because if we do have these supplementary texts that are at a different level. They don’t contain that vocabulary that you’re trying to get them to learn.”

References to “practice” were brought up both in the context that a lack of it would compound reading difficulties, and also that more practice time would help strengthen skills in class. Several teachers mentioned that it would be beneficial to have dedicated reading practice time in class. However, with the earlier acknowledgement of struggling students not being interested or motivated to read, and having coping skills such as “fake reading,” simply providing the time may not be as effective as believed. Although Allington (2009) remarks that reading volume most definitely affects
proficiency, he places more emphasis on reading engagement and “deliberate reading” than time on task in “coerced reading” (p. 36). Further, a dedicated reading time strategy could be viewed as conflicting with those teachers who do not teach all subjects and admit to a focus on getting through the curriculum.

Prominent themes within category 5.
Consideration and analysis of responses in this category uncovered the following general theme:

• While generalist teachers have some idea of teaching strategies to provide in-class support for struggling readers, intervention is often seen as the job of a specialist teacher.

Category 6 - Perceived Barriers and Issues
Common throughout both the survey and interview data were indications of insufficiencies, either personal or situational, which prevented or impeded teachers from fully meeting the needs of all their students.

Time.
Perhaps one of the reasons for the trend towards assigning responsibility for struggling readers to specialists is the aspect of time, indicated by almost every single respondent. Although many stated that they would like to be able to do one-on-one instruction with every student, they found it unrealistic, such as the following two respondents: “It’s just unfortunately with class sizes of 28 and 30, it’s hard to dedicate one-on-one time to those kids.”
You have 25 kids, and there are two, three, four, five, whatever that have problems; there’s no time for them. You need the help – EAs or a resource teacher to come and do that. If I look after those kids, then I cannot look after the other 25.

One survey respondent mentioned being “lucky” to not have any struggling readers in her class that year. While a teacher may not specifically say they were “unlucky” and to have students in their class who struggle with reading, it could be inferred that those who do not have struggling readers are “lucky” to not be dealing with as many classroom issues:

I have many struggling readers and many who are above grade level and with so little support they are not getting their needs met. However, I am only one person and can’t teach a range of seven to eight grade levels at once very often. The amount of planning necessary to do this would mean I would be working 22 hours a day.

The above statement also underlies the belief evident in the data of a rise in the numbers of designated students who require extra support. In fact, since 2001, the number of students with designated learning disabilities has increased 13% (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006). While this statistic does not necessarily mean that the actual number of students with classroom difficulties has increased, it does mean that there are more students with legally required adaptations in their IEP (Individualized Education Plan) to be fulfilled for each teacher. One teacher discussed this increase, saying: “I think the percent of struggling readers that we’re dealing with at
the middle school level is vastly under-recognized. I don’t think it’s recognized that in some of the classrooms, 25-30% of our students are struggling with reading.”

The respondents also mentioned not only needing in-class time, but also extra time to find resources and collaborate with colleagues:

If I put in the time and effort to go looking for resources that are leveled, I’m often surprised at how much we do have in the school. However, if I don’t have a Special Ed teacher available to help me find them and teach me how to use them, then I wouldn’t even know they were there. It’s the Special Ed teacher’s time as well. Because outside of their teaching schedule, they need to have time to meet with me and provide me with the resources and teach me how to use them for my struggling readers.

When asked what they would do if they had unlimited resources at their disposal, many teachers expressed a desire for dedicated time (their time, an EA’s time, or a specialist’s time) for each and every struggling reader. One teacher mentioned the need for more funding (thereby providing more time and resources) for struggling readers:

They need as much help as a kid with an IBI (intensive behavior intervention designation), or a kid with profound learning disability. Because an illiterate adult is not a very functional human being in society, it would be worthwhile spending the money here before they get out into the workforce.
Teacher education.

When teachers were asked during the interviews what they might do with a fictional situation of unlimited time and resources, noticeably, respondents felt unsure about their qualifications and knowledge base when it came to struggling readers:

“Unlimited resources? Awesome. [...] But I guess for me personally I would need someone to say ‘Hey, this would be a good thing to do with your kids.’” Although many of the teachers agreed that they would be able to identify a struggling reader, every teacher interview admitted that they did not have the knowledge to diagnose such a reader, or felt otherwise qualified to help with basic reading skills, described by these three respondents: “I think I can identify when a student is having struggles, but I don’t know what to do from there.”

I would say that the average middle school teacher doesn’t have the training to diagnose the lagging skills in the struggling reader, or the time to work with the individual students to address the lagging skills, even if they could identify them.

“I’m fairly proficient in the other subjects, but those two [reading and writing] are the ones where it requires real expertise to do it well. I’m still learning.”

Of the teachers who admitted they felt a lack of skills in the area, all said they would be very interested in further professional development: “Whether that’s going to a couple workshops or watching what someone else is doing, or going to the learning resource teacher. And then obviously you get better and there’s more room to grow.”

Several teachers (particularly the teachers with less than five years of experience) also
mentioned a need for more instruction at the pre-service level: “In my recollection, it was never discussed. Struggling readers at the middle school level or beyond were not discussed whatsoever.”

**Prominent themes within category 6.**

Exploration and analysis of responses in the category of barriers and issues uncovered the following general themes:

- The major constraint for teachers in terms of adequately meeting the needs of their struggling readers is time.
- Teachers have a desire to know more about helping their struggling readers, as they believe they do not have adequate knowledge and understanding of appropriate strategies.

**Conclusion**

After analyzing evidence in each of the six prominent categories represented in the data, the following major themes were identified:

- Teachers have difficulty clearly assessing and defining what it means to struggle with reading.
- Much less emphasis was placed on literacy skills in academic subjects other than Language Arts.
- Teachers attribute struggles with reading to many aspects, tending to shy away from assertions of ineffective teaching in favour of internal issues (such as learning disability) and other external factors (such as parents, or “the system”).
• Teachers have a strong awareness of various coping skills used by struggling readers, but less of an understanding of how to mitigate and manage these behaviours in the classroom.

• The correlation between reading difficulties and motivation can often yield a stereotypical portrait and negative associations towards students who struggle with reading.

• Middle school teachers believe that their students should be competent grade level readers, and while it is their job to adapt the curriculum for their needs, it is not their job to improve reading skills.

• While generalist teachers have some idea of teaching strategies to provide in-class support for struggling readers, intervention is often seen as the job of a specialist teacher.

• The major constraint for teachers in terms of adequately meeting the needs of their struggling readers is time.

• Teachers have a desire to know more about helping their struggling readers, as they feel they do not have adequate knowledge and understanding of appropriate strategies.

In the following section I discuss the themes above in relation to my research questions and theoretical perspectives.

Discussion
Considered by many as the founder of the movement, Bronfenbrenner (1979), offers four separate systems in the socioecological model, layers of environment which are interconnected and interdependent in their impact (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Socioecological model**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that each person is significantly affected by interactions among these overlapping systems. He describes microsystems as individual beliefs, attitudes and identities, while mesosystems represent the norm-forming interaction between different individual microsystems (for instance, between teacher and student). The exosystem includes all external networks, communities and institutional structures, while the macrosystem comprises all cultural values and political philosophies.
Sleegers and Kelcherman (1999 cited in Day, 2011) state that teacher identities are constructed not only from the technical and emotional aspects of teaching and their personal lives, but also “as the result of an interaction between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural and institutional environment in which they function on a daily basis” (p. 579).

Day (2011) pinpoints what he calls “clusters of influence” (p. 63) which create professional identity: socio-cultural/policy influences (such as teacher ambition, increased workload, or external policies on assessment); workplace influences (such as teamwork with colleagues, parental support, in-school communication, support from leadership, and pupil relationships); and personal influences (major events in a teacher’s personal life). Considering the data and its identified themes in relation to these influences, Bronfenbrenner’s socioecological systems provides a theoretical framework to develop a more thorough understanding of middle school teachers’ perceptions of struggling readers, and the various influential factors, both internal and external.

**Microsystems.**

Microsystemic influences on teachers’ perceptions of struggling readers were evident in the data, particularly with respect to the teachers’ understanding of and ability to define what it means to struggle with reading. As revealed in the study, a lack of understanding of reading disability, and an inability to define specific reading skills and characteristics may lead to a misconstruction of a student’s perceived needs, and the resulting behaviours. Teachers in the study tended to attribute difficulties with reading to other exosystem influences, including “the system” or “the parents,” rather
than looking at their own teaching abilities. This lack of introspection led the teachers to a diminished feeling of responsibility for students who struggle with reading, in terms of both correlation and intervention. Without a feeling of responsibility for these students, teachers are unlikely to change their practice to support the students’ learning needs, particularly in the area of content area literacy, defined as “the level of reading and writing skill necessary to read, comprehend and react to appropriate instructional materials in a given subject area” (Readance, Bean, & Baldwin, 1998, p. 4 in Bean, Bean, & Bean, 1999).

Draper (2008) describes how some teachers think that content-area literacy should be a goal of instruction, while others suggest it should be a tool to enhance or enable learning. The teachers in this study mentioned a lack of time to get through the content. These beliefs might be abated if literacy skills were more integrated in teaching necessary content.

**Mesosystems.**

Many teacher beliefs and practices come about due to socialization, “an information seeking process that relies heavily on [teachers] taking a proactive role in acquiring the information they need to resolve uncertainties and master the technical and interpersonal skills required for their positions” (Reio & Wiswell, 2000, p. 9). Reio (2011) states that socialization involves “learning the ropes,” (p. 107) and proactively gaining understanding about the norms, values and procedures of the school or work group one is entering. Lohman (2000) argues that although socialization occurs through both formal and informal learning processes, most new job-related information and
knowledge tends to be acquired through informal means. Thus, a teacher’s microsystem beliefs are affected by the attitudes and practices of colleagues, the underlying philosophies and principles of his or her current school environment, and any relationships and associations, including those with parents and students.

The interaction between the microsystem of the teacher and the student becomes a mesosystem, which further influences not only the individual microsystems, but also the next layer of exosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1976) coined this interdependence bi-directional influence and asserts that such a relationship exists on all levels of environment. Much like in Hall’s (2006) research, the teachers in my study had a tendency to not identify themselves as skilled teachers for those struggling with reading, and as such, forced students to either assume alternate reading identities or coping skills. Hall et al. (2010) suggest “the teachers’ identification of students as ‘good readers,’ ‘poor readers,’ or those who were ‘becoming good readers’ had significant consequences for the kinds of instruction and support students received” (p. 239). Teachers in my study mentioned issues of student motivation, engagement and laziness, when as Hall (2006) suggests, these behaviours could be due to incompatible identities as a reader and as a teacher.

This phenomenon meshes well and can be illuminated with positioning theory, a model based on social constructivism which requires careful analysis of sociolinguistic cues and narratives that participants use to position themselves and others (McVee, Baldassarre, & Bailey, 2004; Barnes, 2004). Davis and Harré (1990) explain:

Once having taken up a particular position as one’s own, a person inevitably
sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. (p. 46)

Within a school, both teachers and students assume roles “interlaced with the expectations and history of the community, the sense of ‘oughtness’” (Linehan & McCarthy, 2000, p. 442). In the context of this study, the teachers position themselves as “middle school teachers,” with all the role’s assumed responsibilities and expectations, and conversely position their students in roles, whether it be “middle school student” or “struggling middle school student.” Equally, through sociolinguistic narratives and behaviours, the students position themselves in relation to the classroom and the teacher.

Another mesosystem influence might be the relationship between the classroom teacher and a specialist teacher. Many respondents in the survey mentioned that small group, one-on-one, or other types of interventions led by a specialist, such as a learning support teacher, would be helpful for their struggling readers. Unfortunately however, although the number of designated students in BC is rising, the number of learning support teachers has decreased significantly (White, 2011), leaving fewer specialist teachers to try to meet the needs of more students and teachers. Vaughn and Linan-Thompson (2003) state that students with LD should have access to the same curriculum, though with more explicit and systematic instruction, though they admit
that the key issue is the extent to which Special Education programs can be implemented and sustained.

What then should or could the role of learning support teachers be, particularly since many respondents bemoaned the fact that many of their struggling students did not qualify for, or did not receive, support outside of the classroom from a specialist teacher?

Allington and Baker (1999 cited in Bean et al., 2002) wrote about the two major demands for specialists: partnering with classroom teachers to improve instruction, and providing more intensive, personalized instruction for the neediest students. In the course of conducting this research, I discovered that the role of middle school learning support teachers is quite different from the role of those at an elementary level. Vaughn and Linan-Thompson (2003) mention a possible three-to-five grade level spread in reading in any given middle school classroom, which is actually a very conservative estimate according to my survey results, with spreads as far as eight or nine grade levels mentioned. Accordingly, middle school specialist and generalist teachers must strike a fine balance in order to best meet student needs both in and outside of the classroom.

Bean et al. (2002) discuss this challenging proposition:

Reading specialists need to understand that they are expected to work successfully with students and adults in a collaborative venture. They must have a solid understanding of the classroom curriculum and know how to modify instruction so that students can be successful with tasks and activities that during initial teaching may be too difficult for them. They must also know how to plan
their time so that they can help children meet the demands of the classroom curriculum and develop essential reading strategies and skills. (p. 743)

Accordingly, the mesosystemic relationship between the generalist classroom teacher and the specialist, or learning support teacher must be further explored.

**Exosystems.**

Looking at external factors contributing to middle school teachers’ perceptions of struggling readers, one of the most prominent was the notion of time. Reio (2011) suggests

Reform efforts created amplified societal and professional expectations for student and teacher performance improvement, accountability, and nonteaching duties that tend to lack clear direction as to how teachers are supposed to accomplish such feats without time accommodations. Rare is the occasion that teachers are being asked to do less; indeed, education reform increases teacher workloads. (p. 105)

It was evident that all of the teachers who completed the survey felt the pressures of increased workload, increased job demands, and increased time constraints. It is perhaps then not surprising that many of the teachers thought that they did not have the time to deal with yet another obligation, another demand on their already overextended time.

In an effort to address the workload of teachers including lack of time, Bill 33 was passed by the British Columbia provincial legislature on May 12, 2006. The bill deals with class size and composition and theoretically limits the number of designated
students (whether a learning or behavior designation) in a class at three, due to the increased time required by these students. The British Columbia College of Teachers Federation (2006) reports that the limitations on designated students are frequently not followed. However even when this legislation is adhered to, it applies to only those students who have official designations. The designation process is in and of itself costly and time-consuming, and, as discussed in the literature review in Chapter Two, may not appropriately identify all students who could benefit from increased intervention (Lyons et al., 2001).

Even if time were not a factor, teachers in this study did not believe that they themselves had adequate skills to appropriately support struggling readers, designated or not, meaning both pre-service and in-service professional development exosystems were influential. Reio (2011) addresses how:

Lacking sufficient time and direction or feeling overwhelmed in meeting reform demands increases the likelihood that teachers will not learn the information needed to successfully participate in and adapt to the change effort. Ambiguous reform efforts can lead to a wide range of emotional reactions, both positive (e.g., joy, optimism) and negative (e.g., anxiety, sadness). (p. 110)

According to Riddle Buly et al. (2006), fewer than 10% of teachers actually implement instructional innovations following workshops or inservice experiences. Lasky (2005) also discusses how teachers’ professional self-perceptions can become less favorable in an environment where professional development demands seem incongruous with present notions of best teaching practice and content knowledge.
Through studying professional development programs for general education teachers targeted for struggling students, Pedrotty Bryant et al. (2000, p. 239) indicated the following as components of more effective professional development practices: a) specific, useable instructional practices rather than a list of approaches; b) shared decision making between researchers and teachers about how to address issues; c) peer coaching that provides support for implementation of instructional practices; d) genuine dialogue around classroom-based issues and dilemmas; e) intensive, ongoing opportunities for collaborative professional development; and f) easy to implement and address the immediate needs of teachers. Thus, redefining this particular exosystem influence may prove to have an impact on a teacher’s microsystem beliefs and practice.

However, although ongoing professional development is key, refining teacher education programs is possibly even more so. As mentioned in Chapter Two, many pre-service teachers have unrealistic or overly idealistic ideas of what their classrooms might look like (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Cook, 2002; Elik, Weiner, & Corkum, 2010; Jobling & Moni, 2004; Nierstheimer, Hopkins, & Schmitt, 1996). A clear theme of this research was the pervasive assumption that reading instruction was not a necessity at a middle school level, and many of the respondents discussed a lack of acknowledgement in their university programs. Many of the interviewees discussed that although they were able to recognize a struggling reader, they were unsure of their intervention skills, as the issue had not been addressed in their university courses. Hargreaves (2005) warned that although educational change could not be sustainable at a school without a mixture of teacher age groups and experience, pre-service and early service education
and professional development was crucial, because younger teachers were more enthusiastic, optimistic and ready to adapt to any change initiative. Conversely, he found that older teachers were often more ambivalent, which he (and the mid-career teachers he studied) attributed to being more set in their ways. Hargreaves’s theme was evident in my research as well, as described in Chapter Four, where the younger teachers thought they lacked experience, but felt more responsible for the students who struggled with reading.

The teachers in my study also attributed reading difficulties to another exosystem influence – “the system.” In that respect, it is intriguing to think of bi-directional influences, and how the teachers’ beliefs and practices are both influenced by “the system,” and in turn influence and become the system.

**Macrosystems.**

In the largest layer of systemic influences on a teacher’s beliefs lies cultural understandings and expectations. Moje and Lewis (2007) argue that sociocultural influences play a large part in literacy learning, particularly in the role of power in learning opportunities. Because learning is a socially constructed activity, it is necessarily situated within various discourse communities, with shared ways of knowing, thinking, believing, acting and communicating (Gee, 1996). Moje and Lewis (2007) describe how learning is mired in access to, and control of Discourses, and thereby power relations:

Moreover, because material resources are always limited, discourse communities produce and struggle over cultural tools, resources and identities (both within and across communities) that provide them access to Discourses and thus, to the
material goods. Some participants in discourse communities may have better access to, or control of tools, resources, and identities necessary for full participation and control of Discourses and material goods. (p. 17)

Thus, in order to participate in a given dominant Discourse community, students must adopt the expected behaviours and attitudes, or risk marginalization. Hall et al. (2010) describe how “the social functions of language are then central to literacy research, because becoming a reader or writer means changing one’s social identity, particularly for those whose literacy practices are not valued in schools” (p. 235).

To identify and explore discourse interactions, Rogers (2004) suggests critical discourse analysis, a theory and method used to describe, interpret and explain the relationship between language and society, particularly discursive power relationships. In describing how teacher actions are often constrained by the dominant cultural model and larger goals of the system, Moje and Lewis (2007) state

Discourse analysis can help to tease out how these different systems work together by examining how the cultural models and Discourses that operate in different activity systems get brought into a given activity through language and other means of representation. (p. 23)

Evidence of discursive power relationships were evident in this study when the teachers discussed the role of the parent and the home environment as lacking a culture of reading. Gee (1996) discusses how primary discourses are acquired in the home, stating it happens subconsciously “by exposure to models, a process of trial and error, and practice within social groups, without formal teaching” (p. 138). For some students,
this primary discourse may contrast sharply with the secondary discourse expected in the classroom. Moje and Lewis (2007) discuss how when students and their families relinquish the power to control the development of their literate identities to schools, they may compromise who they become as individuals. Hall et al. (2010) agree, stating “indeed, literacy learning leads to changes in identity, but not always in empowering or transformative ways” (p. 234).

Although only one teacher specifically mentioned the differences in practice and acknowledgement of struggling readers between her current middle class school and an inner city school, another middle class school teacher described how struggling readers were less of a topic of conversation amongst her colleagues. Perhaps the issue of students who struggle with reading is more at the forefront in schools with a population of students where the primary and secondary discourses are more at odds.

In using a socioecological framework as a backdrop for the themes identified in the data, it is evident that many factors, both internal and external, influence middle school teacher perception towards struggling readers. To better serve readers who struggle at a middle school level, many of these influences need to be addressed. In consideration of these findings and discussion, Chapter Six presents implications, possible future research opportunities and concluding remarks.
Chapter Six

Implications and Recommendations

Previous chapters discussed my research focus, the current literature, methodology, data analysis, and presented and discussed my research findings. This chapter provides responses to each of the research sub-questions, a summarized answer to my main research focus, and then proceeds with implications of the study’s findings, for the teacher, the classroom, the school, and perhaps most importantly, the student. Finally, I present recommendations for future research and a conclusion of the study.

The Research Questions

Considering my main research question, “What is the perception of middle school teachers toward struggling readers?” it is important to first examine the findings in relation to the sub-questions, as follows:

1. How do middle school teachers define struggling readers? What do middle school teachers perceive as the difficulties of struggling readers?
   
   - Teachers have difficulty clearly assessing and defining what it means to struggle with reading.
   - Teachers attribute students’ struggles with reading to many aspects, tending to shy away from assertions of ineffective teaching in favour of internal issues (such as learning disability) and other external factors (such as parents, or “the system”).
2. What are their perceptions of the effects of these difficulties in a middle school setting?

- Teachers have a strong awareness of various coping skills used by struggling readers, but less of an understanding of how to mitigate and manage these behaviours in the classroom.
- The correlation between reading difficulties and motivation can often yield a stereotypical portrait and negative associations towards students who struggle with reading.

3. How do teachers see their instructional role and responsibilities in relation to these students? How do their perceptions drive their practice?

- Teachers placed much less emphasis on literacy skills in academic subjects other than Language Arts.
- Middle school teachers believe that their students should be competent grade level readers, and while it is their job to adapt the curriculum for their needs, it is not their job to improve reading skills.
- While generalist teachers have some idea of teaching strategies to provide in-class support for struggling readers, intervention is often seen as the job of a specialist teacher.
- The major constraint for teachers in terms of adequately meeting the needs of their struggling readers is time.
• Teachers have a desire to know more about helping their struggling readers, as they feel they do not have adequate knowledge and understanding of appropriate strategies.

Compiling these findings in respect to my main research question, I offer the following summary of the perception of middle school teachers toward struggling readers:

British Columbia middle school teachers in this study are at a cross-road when it comes to students who struggle with reading. Feelings of role and responsibility vary, with some teachers taking full responsibility for teaching these students, and others believing it to be more the purview of a specialist teacher. However, despite differing notions of responsibility, most of the teachers perceived themselves as ill-equipped to properly support struggling readers in their classroom, bogged down by issues of time, lack of resources, and perhaps most significantly, lack of knowledge. The teachers were unsure not only how to accurately assess and define reading difficulties, but also how to deal with the implications, both in terms of skill level, and motivation and engagement.

Implications

In light of the above perceptions, I offer the following implications for teachers, schools and school districts, and teacher preparation programs.

Teacher identity.

Prevalent throughout this study was the notion of teacher identity, role, and responsibility. Hall et al. (2010) argued that “a critical component of identity development in literacy is helping teachers understand and analyze their views of literacy and how they use language to promote their views in their instruction” (p. 242).
They continued to describe how regular reflection on practice enabled the teachers in their research to examine their use of language and identity to recognize the ways their instruction was both helpful and limiting.

Although a shift in the feelings of responsibility may be difficult, seeing that most of the teachers in this study acknowledged feeling ill-equipped to properly support struggling readers, I argue that a first step in that shift is to empower teachers in their practice toward that end (see below for suggestions). Reio (2011) cautions that although teachers are the cornerstone to reform, “unless the time is taken to allow teachers ample opportunity for meaning making related to a change effort, its successful implementation is far less likely” (p. 108). Gusky (2003) agrees, suggesting that in order to avoid negative emotions and the ensuing reduced motivation for teaching, teachers need reasonable time to increase their knowledge and ultimately improve instruction.

**Content area literacy.**

Fisher and Ivey (2005) suggest both pre-service and in-service teachers need to come to value the role of language and literacy in learning, through expert modeling of specific strategies and opportunities to explore alternatives to grade-level textbooks. Patel Stevens (2002) notes “what is required here is a transformation, not only on the part of teachers as they consider what counts as literacy practices and processes, but also on the part of the teacher educators and policy makers” (p. 274). She references Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, and Waff (1998) in explaining how broader themes of adolescent literacy research and practice might include multiliteracies, multi-
mediated text, the role of literacies in identity development and the need to sanction such literacy in school settings.

Draper (2008) also believes that content-area literacy is more valuable to teachers when it focuses on discipline-appropriate literacy, including non-traditional notions of “text.” Using Gee’s (2000) notion of Discourse, Draper (2008) states teachers should focus on content-area Discourses (“a way of belonging and being recognized as belonging to a particular group”, p. 71), teaching students to think and interact with the appropriate content area texts, successfully appropriating the identity of a mathematician, a scientist, a musician, and so on. Such an emphasis promotes mastery of the intellectual discourse within a particular discipline and “requires literacy educators to consider how the community of practice itself determines the appropriate texts and the appropriate uses of those texts” (Draper, 2008, p. 72). Using this approach, teachers might also feel less marginalized in their content area role (in feeling that their content area is secondary to reading instruction), and more confident in their capacity to teach reading.

**Literacy coaching.**

While it may be a truism that generalist teachers need more opportunities to see specific strategies in use, or to explore different teaching methods, the implementation of this kind of professional development in the average middle school is often difficult, as discussed in Chapter Five. Reio (2011) states “teachers’ professional development is one key means of implementing reform where teachers are provided time to make sense of a dizzying array of discrepant information from administrators and colleagues.
for the purpose of learning” (p. 113). Thus, I would recommend an increased focus on literacy coaching, defined as a form of highly targeted, intensive professional development, collaboratively grounded in inquiry and reflection (IRA, 2006).

Although literacy coaching does not necessarily need to come from a specialist reading teacher, I would suggest that the role of coach meshes well with the job description of a specialist reading teacher discussed in Chapter Five. In describing the teaching of reading as “rocket science,” Moats (1999) details a list of skills and abilities an expert teacher of reading should have, including an understanding and knowledge of reading psychology and development, language structure, best practices in all aspects of reading instruction, and validated assessment tools. While I agree with her list, I would argue that one of the most important skills a specialist teacher can have is the ability to effectively support other teachers as well as students. Riddle Buly et al. (2006) state that effective literacy coaches must not simply be redefined reading teachers, or specialist learning support teachers, and instead must work to shift understandings in a collegial relationship with common goals.

Blachowicz (2005) states the coach’s major role is to provide professional development and support to teachers to improve classroom instruction. The latter typically involves organizing school wide professional development and then structuring in-class training, which includes demonstrations, modeling, support of teacher trials of new instruction, and coach feedback.

In order to avoid the feelings of generalist teacher defensiveness mentioned in this study, the literacy coach and generalist classroom teacher must collaborate based
on the mutual goal of student achievement, and focus on judgment-free reflection on practice. Riddle Buly et al. (2006) suggest supporting a teacher in thoughtful practice and instructional dialogue, with a goal for the classroom teacher to be able to state “this is what I am doing, why I am doing it, and how I can change my practice to make instruction more effective” (p. 26). This type of statement goes beyond prescribed instructional strategies and encourages teachers to become reflective of their practice and goals. This collaborative approach to implementing best practice instructional strategies is beneficial to not only struggling readers, but the entire class, as effective practices geared to individual learning needs are beneficial to all students (Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009).

**Reading resources.**

Students will not be motivated to read or, therefore, learn much from books that are too difficult for them to read (Allington, 2000). All the strategies or specialist support in the world cannot help students read material well beyond their abilities. Riddle Buly et al. (2006) describe how middle and secondary classrooms are often filled with students both several years behind grade-level standards, as well as those who are ready for more of a challenge. Thus a monolithic approach to instruction will be ineffective.

As mentioned by the teachers in this study, reading resources need to be both at-level and curriculum-appropriate in order for struggling readers to experience success. The assumption among generalist teachers in this study that students should be able to read at a middle school level is apparently also rampant among educational
publishers (which, if considering the socioecological model presented in Chapter Five, is bi-directionally affected by both teacher and cultural influence).

Mastropieri, Scruggs, and Graetz (2003) discuss how content area textbooks are often vocabulary heavy, dense, not reader friendly, and are often read at a pace too fast for students who struggle with reading. Though adapted texts are beginning to make appearances within the classroom, particularly in English (mentioned by respondents were texts such as the Nelson Literacy Series) and mathematics (such as McGraw Hill’s Mathlinks 7-9), respondents still thought that supporting students would be easier with an increased supply of levelled resources which still addressed the necessary curricular content.

However, as Draper (2008) notes, teachers would also benefit from considering non-traditional literacy texts as well, including both print and non-print sources:

Embracing these broad notions necessitates an expanded definition of literacy, moving away from simply reading and writing print material and including a wide variety of activities—viewing, designing, listening, producing, performing, critiquing, evaluating, and improvising— with a variety of texts. (p. 70)

In order for educational publishers to meet the needs of a wider variety of readers, demand must exist at the school and school district level. This demand will only arise with an acknowledgement and acceptance of a wide variation in literacy skills within the middle school classroom.
An enhanced focus on the British Columbia Performance Standards.

The British Columbia Performance Standards describe levels of achievement in key areas of learning (reading, writing, numeracy, social responsibility and information and communications technology) relevant to all subject areas (BC Ministry of Education, 2009). However, middle school teachers in this study had difficulty in defining and assessing specific reading skills and weaknesses. Although the use of the Performance Standards is not mandatory, I recommend that a more widespread focus and application would be beneficial. A stricter adherence to the Performance Standards would ensure consistency and continuity amongst teachers and provide a medium through which to engage professional and collegial conversations about expectations and assessment.

From an instructional standpoint, teachers would benefit by having a more explicit understanding of a particular student’s reading strengths and weaknesses.

Implications for Research

In looking at how best to support readers who struggle in a middle school classroom, further research needs to be conducted on best practice, in consideration of limited time and resources. Although many studies have shown excellent outcomes and progress for students with disabilities in reading with focused individual or small group instruction (Elbaum et al., 1999), we would be remiss to rely on “best case scenario” research, when, as evident in the research presented here, the reality is often quite different in terms of time and resources. Additional research into middle-school specific partnerships between classroom teachers and specialist learning support teachers would help reveal best practice strategies in the face of limited resources.
Further, research into administrative decisions concerning allocation of time and resources towards supporting both struggling readers and their classroom teachers would expose both areas of surplus, and areas of need.

Finally, although studies exist exploring pre-service teacher beliefs around content area literacy and supporting readers who struggle, further research is needed to address how best to incorporate a more comprehensive view of adolescent literacy into pre-service content courses. Although there continue to be debates about what it means to have a reading disability, pre-service teachers at all levels should be provided with at least a general understanding of the various components of reading, and possible implications of reading disabilities, or non-designated struggles with reading.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from my study that we still have much work to do in this area. Although reading research has made great strides over the last several decades, there still exists much uncertainty in the classroom, which is translating into substantial numbers of adolescents with literacy difficulties (Allington, 2000). In an age where the notion of literacy is rapidly expanding, it is crucial to provide generalist classroom teachers with the knowledge, time, support and resources in order to effectively implement literacy in its many forms throughout the curriculum. It is also important to examine perceptions, beliefs and attitudes and how they shape and inform instructional practices, both positive and negative. Jordan, Schwartz and McGhie-Richmond (2009) effectively sum up the importance as follows:
The difference between effective and ineffective inclusion may lie in teachers’ beliefs about who has primary responsibility for students with special education needs. Beliefs in the locus of responsibility as belonging to the classroom teacher may be prerequisite to teachers’ development of effective instructional techniques for all their students. (p. 541)

Accordingly, it is only through this examination and the illumination of potential concerns that we will be able to move forward to create and implement guidelines and practices for effectively providing our struggling middle school readers the support they so richly deserve.
References


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Appendix A: Request Letter to Superintendent

REQUEST TO USE PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS OR STAFF IN RESEARCH

Date of Request January 25, 2011

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Name of Researcher: Leah Moreau

Address: 492 Foster Street, Victoria, BC Postal Code: V9A 6R7

Phone: (250) 388-3836 Fax: ______________________ Email: LMoreau@sd61.bc.ca

EDUCATIONAL INFORMATION

Faculty or Department: Education – Curriculum and Instruction

Name of Supervisor (or sponsoring body): Dr. Deborah Begoray

Status of Applicant (undergraduate, faculty member, etc.): Graduate student

*If student, what year?______________________________

Reason for Project (e.g. thesis requirement): ________ thesis requirement

PROJECT INFORMATION -Summary

Title of Project: Middle School Teacher Perceptions of Struggling Readers

Brief summary of the project’s nature, objectives, educational application, etc. in non-technical terms: There are multiple studies concerning effective teaching techniques for struggling middle school readers. However, we know far less about the perceptions of teachers towards these learners. It is the objective of this research to explore the perceptions of these teachers. Thus, my research question is: What are the perceptions of struggling readers held by middle school teachers? It is my hope to add to the body of knowledge surrounding teachers who work with struggling readers, particularly at the middle school level. With conflicting understandings and practice even among literacy and special education professionals about struggling readers, I believe insight into teacher perceptions of, and beliefs about, these students might provide guidance in terms of pedagogical implications and professional development. I believe my research will not only stand on its own merit as a contribution to the research surrounding struggling readers, but also expose further areas for exploration.
PROJECT INFORMATION – Student(s), teacher(s), administrator(s), parent(s)

**Student(s)**

Grade level of students preferred: N/A

Number of students requested: Male________ Female________ Not relevant__

Other characteristics (social class, race, geography, etc.): 

Length of time needed:

Do you need access to students individually? in groups? both? 

In school settings? If outside the classroom, state needs (size of room, furnishings, etc.):

Restrictions of day: a.m. only p.m. only either other lunch time or out of school hours

How do you plan to get the student(s) to and from the classroom?

**Teacher(s)**

Number of staff requested: Any volunteer middle school generalists who have no experience in special education or graduate work in literacy

Length of time needed: The initial survey will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. If teachers are willing, they will take part in either an interview or focus group, which will take approximately another 30-60 minutes. They will also be asked to review the transcript of the interview or focus group.

Restrictions of day: a.m. only p.m. only either other lunch time or out of school hours

**Administrator(s)**

Number of staff requested: The researcher may request that the principal forward the email containing the study information and survey to the appropriate staff members in his/her school.

Length of time needed: 2 minutes

Restrictions of day: a.m. only p.m. only either other
**Parent(s)**
Number of parent(s) requested: n/a

Length of time needed:

Restrictions of day: a.m. only p.m. only either
other

---

**PROJECT INFORMATION – School(s) specific**

Preferred School(s):

If preliminary contact already has been made with a school or schools, please state which one(s):

Note: Please provide a completed “Principal Form for Research” (see attached) from the Principal of each school you wish to conduct research. The completed “Principal Form for Research” must accompany your application. (This will not automatically guarantee approval of your project.)

---

**STIMULUS MATERIALS AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS**

Please specify the general nature and intent of the materials and instruments to be used and attach a copy of the items to be presented.

Please comment on the CONFIDENTIALITY of the information you will gather.

If you plan to present a learning, problem-solving or related task situation, specify the general nature and intent of the procedure and attach an exact copy of your instructions including the type of feedback the student will receive.

If any form of deception is to be used, please justify its extent and rationale, as well as the details of the debriefing procedure. BE VERY SPECIFIC.

Please see attached information form.

Other comments:

---

**ALL QUESTIONNAIRES, SURVEYS, CONSENT FORMS ETC. TO BE USED IN THIS STUDY MUST ACCOMPANY THIS APPLICATION.**
GENERAL

Expected starting date: March 2011

Expected date of completion in school(s): June 2011

Expected date of final report: August 2011

(A formal written report of the outcome is to be forwarded to the Greater Victoria School District. This is mandatory.)

 AGREEMENT

I/We certify the above information to be correct and agree to the conditions set by the Greater Victoria School District #61.

Signature of Researcher(s):

Signature of Supervisor: (if different from above)

Quick Checklist

- Completed “Principal Form for Research” for each school to be attached
- Ethics approval from educational establishment to be attached
- Researcher and Supervisor signatures
- Questionnaires, surveys, consent forms, etc. to be attached

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

DECISION: _____________

DATE: ________________

PRINCIPAL FORM FOR RESEARCH
This form is to be filled out by the Principal and is to be submitted as part of the research application.

Principal’s Name: ________________________________

School: ________________________________

Researcher’s Name: Leah Moreau ________________________________

Project Topic: Middle School Teacher Perceptions of Struggling Readers ________________________________

Principal - please circle your answer

1. Yes/No The researcher has provided me with a copy of all materials to be used in this project. (surveys, consent forms, questions and/or methods)

2. Yes/No The researcher has provided me with a copy of the ethics approval document from the post secondary university/college.

3. Yes/No I am comfortable with the content of the materials. (If No, please comment below)

4. Yes/No I support the timeline that the researcher would like to conduct research. (If No, please comment below)

5. Yes/No/NA I have spoken to all staff who will be involved in this research and have the staff member(s) support.

6. Yes/No I have personally spoken with the researcher.

7. Yes/No I support this project in my school.

Comments:

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

Principal Signature: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________
Middle School Teacher Perceptions of Struggling Readers

Your school district is being invited to participate in a study entitled **Middle School Teacher Perceptions of Struggling Readers**, being conducted by Leah Moreau, a middle school teacher in the Victoria School District and graduate student in the department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Victoria ((250) 721-7808)).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a master’s degree in Middle Years Language and Literacy. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Deborah Begoray. You may contact my supervisor at (250) 721-7847.

**Purpose and Objectives**
The purpose of this research project is to add to the body of knowledge surrounding the teaching of struggling readers, particularly at the middle school level. Insight into teacher perceptions of, and beliefs about, these students may have pedagogical implications and insights into better approaches for professional development of middle years’ teachers.

**Importance of this Research**
Research of this type is important as there is a lack of research surrounding perceptions and beliefs of the teachers of struggling readers at the middle school level.

**Participant Selection**
Generalist middle school teachers in your district with no prior experience in special education, or graduate work in literacy will be asked to participate in the research.

**What is involved**
If a teacher agrees to voluntarily participate in this research, participation will include completion of an approximately 20 minute long online survey. Select participants may also be asked to take part in a 30-60 minute focus group or interview at a place convenient to them, where we will discuss perceptions and beliefs surrounding struggling readers at the middle school level. This discussion will be audio-taped for later transcription, and I will take notes during the session. In addition, participants will be asked to review a transcript of the interview for accuracy.

**Inconvenience**
Participation in this study may cause some minor inconvenience to participants in regards to time spent participating in the research (though no instructional time will be compromised).

**Benefits**
The potential benefits of participation in this research include increased knowledge about pedagogical implications surrounding struggling readers, particularly at a middle school level. In addition, participants will have the opportunity to reflect on their own perceptions and to possibly hear the opinions of others.

**Voluntary Participation**
Participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If participants do decide to participate, they may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If they do withdraw from the study their data will be used in summarized form with no identifying information.

**Anonymity**
In terms of protecting your anonymity, data will be mainly used in summarized form. However, in the case of direct quotations used, all participants will be given a pseudonym for their name and school.

**Confidentiality**
Confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by a locked storage cabinet for all hard-copy data, and password-protected file for all computer-based data and writing.

**Dissemination of Results**
It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others by means of a thesis, and possible presentations at scholarly meetings, and a published article.

**Disposal of Data**
Data from this study will be disposed of using a shredder for paper copies, and erasing and scrubbing electronic data immediately upon the researcher’s graduation, or five years, whichever comes first

**Contacts**
My graduate supervisor (Dr Deborah Begoray -- dbegoray@uvic.ca) may be contacted for further information regarding this study.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

---

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix B: Web-based Survey Questions

Demographic Information

Are you currently primarily a middle school (gr 6-8) teacher?  
☐ Yes  ☐ No

Do you have experience working in a special education/learning resource capacity?  
☐ Yes  ☐ No

Have you completed any graduate work in literacy or special education?  
☐ Yes  ☐ No

Years of Teaching Experience:

Grades/Subjects Currently Taught:

Previous Grades/Subjects Taught:

District #:

Survey Questions

a) Why might some middle school students struggle with reading?

b) How would you define a struggling reader? What might "struggling readers" in middle school have difficulties with?

c) What can be done to help struggling readers in middle school?

d) Whose responsibility is helping the struggling reader?

Name (Optional):

Email Address (Optional):

This information will removed and kept separately from your responses.

Are you willing to be contacted to participate in a follow-up interview or focus group?
Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

Middle School Teacher Perceptions of Struggling Readers

You are invited to participate in a study entitled **Middle School Teacher Perceptions of Struggling Readers** that is being conducted by Leah Moreau, a middle school teacher in the Victoria School District.

I am a graduate student in the department of Curriculum & Instruction at the University of Victoria and you may contact them if you have further questions by calling the department office at (250) 721-7808.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Middle Years Language and Literacy. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Deborah Begoray. You may contact my supervisor at (250) 721-7847.

**Purpose and Objectives**
The purpose of this research project is to add to the body of knowledge surrounding the teaching of struggling readers, particularly at the middle school level. Insight into teacher perceptions of, and beliefs about, these students may have pedagogical implications and insights into better approaches for professional development of middle years’ teachers.

**Importance of this Research**
Research of this type is important as there is a lack of research surrounding perceptions and beliefs of the teachers of struggling readers at the middle school level.

**Participants Selection**
You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a middle school teacher in school district 61, 62, 63, or 64. (Please do not volunteer if you have prior experience in special education, or graduate work in literacy or special education).

**What is involved**
If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an approximately 30-minute focus group or interview at your place of work, where we will discuss perceptions and beliefs surrounding struggling readers at the middle school level. This discussion will be audio-taped for later transcription, and I will take notes during the session. In addition, you will be asked to review a transcript of the interview for accuracy.

**Inconvenience**
Participation in this study may cause some minor inconvenience to you in regards to time spent participating in the research.

**Benefits**
The potential benefits of your participation in this research include increased knowledge about pedagogical implications surrounding struggling readers, particularly at a middle school level. In addition, you will have the opportunity to reflect on your own perceptions and to hear the opinions of others.

**Voluntary Participation**
Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be used in summarized form with no identifying information.

**Anonymity**
In terms of protecting your anonymity, your data will be mainly used in summarized form. However, in the case of direct quotations used, all participants will be given a pseudonym for their name and school.

**Confidentiality**
Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by a locked storage cabinet for all hard-copy data, and password-protected file for all computer-based data and writing.

**Dissemination of Results**
It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others by means of a thesis, and possible presentations at scholarly meetings, and a published article.

**Disposal of Data**
Data from this study will be disposed of using a shredder for paper copies, and erasing and scrubbing electronic data immediately upon the researcher’s graduation, or five years, whichever comes first.

**Contacts**
My graduate supervisor (Dr Deborah Begoray -- dbegoray@uvic.ca) may be contacted for further information regarding this study.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

__________________________  __________________________  ____________
Name of Participant  Signature  Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix D: Thematic Network
Appendix E: Grade 7 BC Performance Standards for Literature and Reading

for Information

Quick Scale: Grade 7 Reading Literature

This Quick Scale is a summary of the Rating Scale that follows. Both describe student achievement in March-April of the school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Not Yet Within Expectations</th>
<th>Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)</th>
<th>Fully Meets Expectations</th>
<th>Exceeds Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SNAPSHOT</strong></td>
<td>With support, the student is able to read simple, direct, and short fiction and poetry, but may be unable to finish all parts of an assigned task.</td>
<td>The student is able to read generally straightforward fiction and poetry, but may have difficulty completing longer selections and tasks. Work may lack detail.</td>
<td>The student is able to read generally straightforward fiction and poetry, and complete assigned tasks. Work is accurate and complete.</td>
<td>The student is able to read fiction and poetry that feature complex ideas and language. The student’s work is precise, thorough, and insightful, and often exceeds requirements.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STRATEGIES**
- check understanding
- word skills
- knowledge of genres
- figurative language

- unable to identify problems
- tries to sound-out new words
- unaware of the features of various genres
- has difficulty with figurative or abstract language

- may need prompting to check understanding or adjust strategies
- relies on sounding-out and context for new words
- with prompting, uses knowledge of familiar genres to predict or confirm meaning
- may not recognize figurative language

- checks for understanding: adjusts strategies
- uses a variety of strategies for new words
- uses knowledge of familiar genres to predict or confirm meaning
- recognizes and tries to interpret figurative language

- evaluates own understanding; chooses strategies effectively
- uses a variety of strategies for new words; efficient
- uses knowledge of a variety of genres to predict, confirm, or interpret meaning
- interprets figurative language

**COMPREHENSION**
- story elements
- predictions
- inferences
- details
- theme

- identifies some main characters and events
- predictions and inferences may be illogical or unsupported
- may offer inaccurate or irrelevant details in responses
- does not interpret themes logically

- describes setting, main characters, and events
- makes some simple predictions and inferences; gives evidence when asked
- identifies relevant details in responses; may omit some
- interprets simple themes

- describes story elements in own words; explains some relationships
- makes logical predictions and inferences; when asked, can provide specific evidence
- identifies relevant details in responses
- interprets obvious themes

- describes story elements in detail; explains relationships
- makes insightful predictions and inferences, supported by specific evidence
- identifies precise details in responses
- interprets complex or subtle themes

**RESPONSE AND ANALYSIS**
- connections to experiences and other selections
- reactions

- makes simple, obvious connections to self
- reactions tend to be vague and unsupported

- makes obvious connections to self or other selections
- offers reactions and opinions; gives some support if prompted

- makes and supports logical connections to self or other selections
- offers reactions and opinions with some support

- makes and supports logical connections to self or other selections; may risk a divergent response
- supports reactions and opinions with reasons, examples

Note: Taken from BC Ministry of Education (2009, p. 225)
## Quick Scale: Grade 7 Reading for Information

This Quick Scale is a summary of the Rating Scale that follows. Both describe student achievement in March-April of the school year.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
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<th>Meets Expectations (Minimal Level)</th>
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<th>Exceeds Expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SNAPSHOT</strong></td>
<td>With support, the student may be able to read brief, straightforward information and procedures, but is often unable to complete all parts of an assigned task.</td>
<td>The student is able to read straightforward information and procedures that include some specialized language and complex ideas; may have difficulty completing longer selections and tasks. Work may lack detail.</td>
<td>The student is able to read straightforward information and procedures that include some specialized language and complex ideas. Work is accurate and complete.</td>
<td>The student is able to read elaborated information and procedures that include specialized language and complex relationships. Work is precise and thorough, often exceeds requirements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRATEGIES</strong></td>
<td>• unable to monitor own reading&lt;br&gt;• often &quot;stuck&quot; on new words&lt;br&gt;• has difficulty making predictions&lt;br&gt;• doesn't use text features</td>
<td>• needs prompting to adjust strategies&lt;br&gt;• when prompted, analyzes word parts in technical words&lt;br&gt;• makes simple predictions&lt;br&gt;• uses text features with support</td>
<td>• adjusts strategies for the material&lt;br&gt;• uses variety of strategies for technical language&lt;br&gt;• makes logical predictions&lt;br&gt;• uses text features efficiently</td>
<td>• chooses effective strategies for challenging material&lt;br&gt;• figures out technical language&lt;br&gt;• anticipates content and structure&lt;br&gt;• uses text features efficiently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMPREHENSION</strong></td>
<td>• work is often inaccurate, vague, or incomplete&lt;br&gt;• may confuse main ideas and supporting information&lt;br&gt;• locates some details if asked; omits a great deal&lt;br&gt;• needs help to make notes&lt;br&gt;• often unable to make inferences</td>
<td>• work is generally accurate&lt;br&gt;• identifies most main ideas&lt;br&gt;• locates some details; omits some&lt;br&gt;• makes simple notes&lt;br&gt;• some inferences are illogical or unsupported</td>
<td>• work is accurate, clear, and complete&lt;br&gt;• identifies main ideas and restates in own words&lt;br&gt;• locates specific, relevant details&lt;br&gt;• makes accurate, organized notes&lt;br&gt;• supports inferences or interpretations if asked</td>
<td>• work is precise and thorough; may include insights&lt;br&gt;• identifies and restates main ideas; explains how they are connected&lt;br&gt;• locates specific, relevant details&lt;br&gt;• makes accurate, detailed notes in appropriate form&lt;br&gt;• supports inferences with specific evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ANALYSIS</strong></td>
<td>• has difficulty making connections to prior knowledge&lt;br&gt;• evaluation</td>
<td>• offers simple comparisons to prior knowledge and beliefs</td>
<td>• compares key ideas with prior knowledge and beliefs</td>
<td>• compares new information with prior knowledge and beliefs; shows insight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Note: Taken from BC Ministry of Education (2009, p. 225)