

A Personal Journey: Effective Research-Based Teaching  
and its Impact on Students' Reading

by

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**Abstract**

This project is a personal journey of a grade one teacher that considers the questions of: (1) what strategies, approaches, and components to teaching reading have shown to be most effective on student learning of this important skill? (2) how can I have the most impact when teaching grade one students to read? These questions are considered through this personal narrative as it explores best practices in reading. The work of Marie Clay, Richard Allington, Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell are analyzed and juxtaposed with the importance of reading and factors that affect literacy development to find answers to the underlying questions. Findings, which are based on current trends and research in the area of literacy development, are examined and new strategies and approaches are implemented in a classroom setting.

Key words: balanced literacy, reading processing system, Guided Reading, Reading Recovery, reading difficulties, early learning, struggling reader

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**Chapter 1: Introduction to the Project**

“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.”

~ *John Dewey (1859-1952)*

The calling of a teacher takes patience and perseverance, kindness and understanding. An effective teacher should also have a passion for teaching, a love of children, an understanding of the role that schools play in the life of a child, and a work ethic that doesn't quit. It can, at times, be very challenging but it can also be even more rewarding, which is why once they make it through the first few years, teachers make this profession a life-long career. The ultimate goal for me as a teacher, is to teach my students to be confident and independent learners and to instill in them the joy of learning. I try to motivate and encourage, and to inspire every child who walks through my classroom door. In the early primary grades, amongst other things, this requires teaching children to read; not just the ability to decode words, but to read fluently and to make meaning from the words and for children to be able to extend their thinking into the real world. In grade one, this can sometimes be quite a challenge for teachers. Some students come to school and have had considerable exposure to language – through stories, books, preschool experiences, conversations – while others have had very limited exposure. This makes the starting ground for teachers very diversified, yet the end expectation is the same for all students. Given the right opportunities, support and assistance, studies have shown that all children are able to learn to read, although not always at the same pace (Clay, 2001; Lyons, 2003). The challenge for teachers is to understand this and be able to teach all of the children in a classroom to read; and read at an independent, proficient level.

In this chapter, I outline my personal experience and interest in literacy learning, the context for learning in which I am situated – which is the Southern, interior part of British

Columbia - and the rationale for this project. In following chapters, I present a literature review of relevant topics in the area of early literacy skills development, including the importance of reading, factors that affect reading development, and influential researchers. Next, I share my personal journey regarding what I have done with this narrative inquiry around teaching reading, new information that I have gathered and what I propose to do now that I have this new-found material. I finish with a reflection of this program and what I gleaned through this University of Victoria capstone project.

### **Background**

Reading is a passion of mine and it has been ever since I can remember. Even as a child I enjoyed reading books and listening when others read to me. I have fond memories of sitting on the couch reading to my younger sister, and my mother even recalls me often reading aloud to a group of neighbourhood children. Both of my parents were teachers and encouraged reading. I remember many bedtime stories and poems being read to me when I was growing up. My favourite author was Roald Dahl and I read as many of his books that I could get my hands on. My favourite poem was *Hiding* by Dorothy Keeley Aldis and was from a collection of children's poems. I have fond memories as a teenager, of reading into the wee hours of the morning, and hiding my book under the covers whenever I heard someone coming, because I could not seem to put the book down until it was finished. I have tried to pass on this love of reading to my own children and to the students in my classes. When I think back to when I was in school however, I cannot remember actually learning how to read. I do recall what the leveled readers looked like and I remember going around the class, with each of us reading a paragraph, or page, out loud, all from the same set of readers. I have no recollection of learning phonics or decoding strategies but somehow I learned to read and developed a love of reading in the process.

I began my teaching career providing fine arts teacher prep relief and job-sharing part-time in intermediate classrooms. Although I knew that I wanted to have my own classroom, I did

this for five years, knowing it was just a matter of time before something opened up for me. When a full-time classroom position was presented to me, I jumped at the opportunity, even though it was teaching in a grade one class and other than a few times being a teacher-on-call in a grade one classroom, I did not have experience with the grade level. I jumped in but always felt ill-equipped on how to directly teach students to read. Somehow they seemed to learn and I survived year after year producing children who could read, although not really sure if what I was doing was the best that I could be doing for them. Over the years I have learned new strategies to teach and concepts to cover which help teach literacy but it has been only in the last few years that I have really wanted to learn more about the reading process and further explore how I, as a teacher, could benefit the children in my class the best possible way. I had students who could read but were not at the level I had wanted them to be despite the fact that they had received the same, or even greater, instruction as the rest of their peers. I wanted to learn how I could not only get students through grade one, but to help them reach their full potential, in their future years of schooling, and in life itself. The words of Marie Clay (1997) really resonate with me; “The learning difficulties of the child might be more easily overcome if he had practiced error behaviour less often, if he had less to unlearn and relearn, and if he still had reasonable confidence in his own ability” (p. 15). I want to help my students get the best start possible.

I have specifically chosen to investigate deeper into the works and subsequent recommendations of Clay, Allington, and Fountas and Pinnell as the school district in which I work draws on the theories and ideas that are based on their research and intervention strategies. Many schools in the district have implemented strategies based on Leveled Literacy Intervention (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011) and Guided Reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) and Reading Recovery (Clay, 1993) principles. When current teachers are learning how best to teach children to read, the three names mentioned above are the ones that are cited regularly in professional teacher

resource books. Books such as *The Daily 5: Fostering Literacy Independence in the Elementary Grades* (Boushey & Moser, 2006), *Choice Words: How our Language Affects Children's Learning* (Johnston, 2004), *One Child at a Time: Making the Most of your time with Struggling Readers, K-6* (Johnson, 2006), *Joyful Literacy Interventions: Early Learning Classroom Essentials* (Mort, 2014), *Catching Readers Before they Fall: Supporting Readers who Struggle, K-4* (Johnson & Keier, 2010) and *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades* (Miller, 2013) are but a few of the multitude of professional teaching reading books available to teachers and which mention any or all of the three researchers noted above. This project will touch on some of the main concepts and ideas of their theories and ways in which they are similar in their ideas and how they differ. As a teacher, it is important to have an understanding of how children learn and it is important to investigate many points of view. It is with this understanding, that we can, and should, clarify our own beliefs in regards to reading instruction and let our professional practice flow from there (Miller, 2008). If we, as teachers, teach with intention and purpose - if we know why we do what we do in our classrooms – we will have the direction and goals clear in our heads and the students in our classroom will benefit (Miller, 2008) which will result in children leaving our classrooms as engaged, independent and lifelong learners.

### **Personal and Professional Motivations for the Project**

Having been a public school teacher for the past twenty years, I have experienced a variety of changes within the education system. Some of these changes have been province-wide, such as changes in learning outcomes and philosophies. Other changes have been at a local level with new resources and district learning goals. Other changes have been with children themselves and it is within this area that I will focus my final project and corresponding research. I have had the pleasure of teaching grade one students how to read for the past nine years and in



that time I have learned many different schools of thoughts, philosophies, programs, and tools and strategies to teach these students to be independent readers. One observation I have had during this time, however, is that while most of the students in my class learn to read, regardless of the exact program I have used, there seems to be some students who struggle when acquiring this skill.

In the last few years, I have noticed that there seem to be more and more students entering grade one who are really not ready for reading. For some students, this is demonstrated in terms of their pre-reading skills and for others, it seems to be in their motivation and desire. They seem to find it discouraging and frustrating seeing their peers reading and surpassing them in this area and they spend the whole year trying to catch up to them. While trying not to take their struggles personally – as a result of my teaching - I have really tried to consider why this may be happening. It could be that more parents are working and do not have the time to talk to and read to their children at an early age. Perhaps there is a correlation to the influx of technology in this generation and the amount of time that people spend on devices versus engaging in conversations or reading a book. It may be that there are physical reasons why a child may experience difficulties when learning to read.

Research has shown that all students are able to learn to read (Clay, 2001; Lyons, 2003). Whatever the reason that some experience difficulty, I have taken it on as a personal challenge to learn as much as I can and do whatever it is that I can do, in order to ensure that every single one of my students is reading to the best of their ability by the time they leave my classroom at the end of the year. This is a journey fraught with successes and frustrations, of challenges and celebrations but nevertheless a journey of personal growth and discovery.

The question arose of how I could reach every child before any error behaviour begins. What can I do to ensure my students are on the right track to learning the correct reading

behaviours in order to ensure future success? Being a grade one teacher comes with a sense of responsibility; I feel responsible to give the students the solid foundation on which they will build their futures. As Anderson, Heibert, Scott, and Wilkinson, (1985) stated, “Reading is a basic life skill. It is a cornerstone for a child’s success in schools, and indeed, throughout life. Without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfillment and job success will be lost” (p. 1). It is with the previous quote of Marie Clay’s (1997) regarding overcoming reading difficulties, with this M.Ed. program, and this final capstone project, that I am motivated to learn more about how to reach all of my students. In doing so, I am coming to a better understanding of how children learn to read and what I can do to help improve their reading skills. This new understanding is guiding my teaching practice which should have a more positive effect on the students in my class this coming year and in the years to come.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The school in which I teach is a small community school in the outskirts of our city which is located in Southern British Columbia. The students at this kindergarten to grade five school come from a wide range of backgrounds; there are students from both extremely high and very low socio-economic backgrounds, there are students who come to school well-clothed and fed and there are others that come to school unclean, with no socks, broken shoes and hungry stomachs. The strong home support is also displayed through the healthy lunches that are brought to school, the parent involvement given throughout the school year in volunteer opportunities, participation in the home reading program, and attendance at parent-teacher meetings. Unfortunately, some of our students do not have that same support and involvement from their parents. In fact, there have been some parents that I never had the opportunity to meet.

Our school has the most First Nations students in our district. Many of these First Nation students are assessed and identified to have low vocabulary and grammar skills and as a result,

receive English as a Second Dialect (ESD) support throughout the school year. They have grown up speaking Okanagan language at home and lack some of the grammar and vocabulary necessary to learn to read and write in English. The climate of our school is one of acceptance and kindness, friendship and respect. We have worked hard to build it to this point but the diversities sometimes still show up in the classrooms. It is harder for children to learn when they come to school tired, hungry or still emotionally dealing with issues that have happened at home. I have personally noticed that often, the students who struggle are the ones who have come to school hungry, have not gotten the sleep that they need or whose home life is not stable. When it comes to reading, these children often do not have the support at home to practice and reinforce what has been learned at school. The gaps between the students in the class widen and self-confidence in some of these students wavers.

Knowing that children begin school with a wide range of abilities and skills, I begin the reading journey each year finding out where each student is along the reading continuum. At a reading conference, Anne McGill-Franzen once heard Marie Clay say that we need to teach to the strengths of children, not their weaknesses (\* n.d.). To know where to start instruction, you must know what the child can do and what their strengths are. Effective teachers build on what children know (McGill-Franzen, 2006). With the understanding that students are coming to school missing important pieces from their personal reading processing systems, I need to find out what they already know and from there, where I need to start with literacy instruction for each student. This is done through different types of assessment - formal, informal and observational – and is done regularly throughout the year.

This year, for the first time ever since teaching grade one, I felt that I needed to do an alphabet assessment with many of my students at the beginning of the year to find out what letter sounds they knew, instead of beginning with a sight word inventory. Based on the information

that I gathered – many students did not know even half of the letter sounds - I knew that this year my biggest challenge was going to be teaching *all* of my students to read. The information gathered from the assessment should be used to guide thoughtful and meaningful instruction. With this in mind, I wanted to try and discover what reading strategies, interventions or tools would be most effective in teaching all of the students in my class to read. As a result, I have participated in various workshops and professional development opportunities such as: spending four half days observing in other primary classrooms at different schools to see what strategies, approaches and resources are being used; attending an after school, district-wide PM Benchmark workshop; meeting with the early literacy helping teacher in our district to discuss research, strategies, and resources and having her come into my class to do a lesson with my class while I could observe; and having the Learning Assistance Support teacher come into my class once a week to provide support for students instead of having pull students out. I also read many professional journals and teacher resource books to try and learn new ideas and strategies that would have the most impact on my reading instruction with my class this year. The ones that I found most useful were *Catching Readers Before they Fall: Supporting Readers Who Struggle* (Johnson & Keier, 2010), *The Daily Five* (Boushey & Moser, 2006), *One Child at a Time: Making the most of your time with struggling readers, K-6* (Johnson, 2006) and *Choice Words* (Johnston, 2004). I have also implemented many new ideas in order to try and boost the literacy skills in all of my students. I implemented The Daily Five program in my class this year where every day students would; read to self, read to someone, work on writing, listen to reading and do spelling/word work. I used the *Words Their Way* (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnston, 2010) program for word work where, the students would work with words for a week based on their results after a word pattern assessment. The authors define word study as the integration of phonics, spelling, and vocabulary instruction. I was a 2<sup>nd</sup> year participant in Changing Results for

Young Readers, a provincial initiative whereby one student is selected as a case study and interventions are done to best benefit this one child, but often benefitted the whole class, as well. When working with this student I used a combination of Reading Recovery, Early Literacy Intervention and Leveled Literacy Intervention lessons/suggestions. I also ran Guided Reading groups in the last half of the year with students who I felt needed a little extra support. This final masters' project will be a narrative inquiry around teaching reading and my own personal journey with my grade one class this year.

### **Purpose of the Project**

This project will look at some of the works of four of the most influential researchers in the area of children's reading; Marie Clay, Richard Allington, and the partnership of Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. I chose to investigate Marie Clay and Richard Allington as I agree with Mallette and Barone (2014) when they say that these two researchers have had the greatest influence on classroom practice by empowering teachers and enabling them to make informed choices. I also decided to include Fountas and Pinnell because I was introduced to Guided Reading the first year that I taught grade one and it has influenced my teaching practice over the years ever since, and because their Leveled Literacy Intervention program (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011) is being used in the school district in which I teach. All four of these researchers have conducted their own longitudinal research studies, developed their own ideas of the ways in which children learn to read, as well as ways to reach those students who require extra support or intervention in order to demonstrate reading success. This project will explore some of the main concepts and ideas of their theories and ways in which they are similar in their ideas and how they differ. I will also discuss some of the underlying themes which are present and may influence a child's reading progress. As a teacher, it is important to have an understanding of how children learn. It is with this understanding that we can, and should, clarify our own

understandings of how children best learn in regards to reading instruction and let our professional practice evolve from that starting point (Miller, 2008). If we, as teachers, teach with intention and purpose - if we know our students well and understand why we are doing what we do in our classrooms – we will have the direction and goals well planned and understood and the students in our classroom will benefit (Miller, 2008). This will result in the children leaving our classrooms being engaged, independent and lifelong learners.

I chose to take a narrative inquiry approach to this project because I planned to inquire into - or ask questions about and looks for deeper understanding of – one particular aspect of life experience called reading, and in particular, teaching reading to grade one students. Narrative inquiry falls under observational research and is a type of qualitative research. This project was prompted by my desire to reach a struggling reader and was motivated by my desire to reach all students who come through my classroom door. Narrative inquiry often focuses on the experiences of one or a few participants rather than those of a larger group (Chase, 2005) which is the case here. I have also focused on my own personal experiences with my students. Narrative inquiry is a useful form of research for this project because it draws on my own experiences and those of students in my class. This particular project was prompted by my own wondering how to reach one particular student that was struggling with learning to read, and then reaffirmed when I noticed other students struggling, as well. Limitations with using this type of research are around the fact that it is based on my own biases. It is very site-based and situational with my own personal experiences and those of the students who attend our small, community school.

Learning to read is a complex process involving multiple skills and systems that must be coordinated in order to result in fluent reading behaviors (Adams, 1990; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Johnson, 2006). Marie Clay (1991) defined reading as a “message-getting, problem-solving activity, which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practiced” (p. 6). When

children learn to read, they activate a reading processing system that has been developing within themselves since they first interacted with text. This processing system is composed of a multitude of strategies that children use in order to construct and extract meaning from print which Clay described as “mental activities, initiated by the child, to get meaning from text” (1993, p. 18). A significant portion of children have difficulty learning how to read and successfully developing and coordinating the various elements involved. Each of the researchers mentioned above have formulated their own version of a reading processing system. When a child is building a processing system that will deal with literacy tasks, the child has to learn the letters and the words and their relationship to sound but they also have to build and expand the part of the brain that processes all of this information. These systems must work together at a great speed as he reads, and makes meaning, from text (Clay, 2005b). These reading processes are the same for every child although children learn the specifics for their own systems at different times. Clay (1998) described children learning to read as a journey to literacy along different paths but to common outcomes.

If the reading processing system is imagined to be an orchestra, as many researchers have done (Clay, 2005b; Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Lyons, 2003; Smith, 2005), we know that all of the instruments blend together in a way that is pleasing to the ear. If one of the instruments is out of tune, or playing the wrong melody, we notice it right away because it does not fit with the rest; it stands out and does not make sense in the same context as the other instruments. It takes all of the minor parts of individual instruments working together to make up a symphony orchestra. If we imagine looking inside the head of a reader, the strategies they have learned would all be working together to make meaning of the text, just as each instrument does in an orchestra (Clay, 2005b). Fountas and Pinnell (2009) generated a visual (see Appendix A) of their processing system, with twelve parts in the shape of a wheel with spokes. If any one of the twelve parts are

weak or missing, the wheel will not turn. This is also true for the child who is missing one, or more, parts in their reading processing system. They may be able to decode words, or make the letter-sound connection, but perhaps with little, or no, comprehension. All of the different components of the processing system must be working together (Clay, 2001; Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Lyons, 2003) in order for the reader to be able to decode words correctly and make meaning from what is being read. Lucy Calkins (2005, National Reading Recovery Conference Keynote) noted that reading is nothing more or less than thinking, just guided by print. With this in mind, if we want to be successful at helping our students unlock this thinking guided by print, our teaching needs to be designed to meet the needs of each and every child. We must really understand what the strengths of each child are and what they may be struggling with, and constantly search for effective ways to reach all the students. If it is indeed the case that all children are ready to learn, then it is us, the teachers, who need to know how to recognize where each child is, and create appropriate instruction for them. Clay (2001) and Allington (2005) both agree that although about 80 percent of children learn to read with regular instruction and no extra interventions, regardless of the program used, there are still about 20 percent who struggle. It is this 20 percent that I am interested in learning how to reach.

With this understanding of how children learn to read, the next step for teachers is to plan their reading program in order to teach all students to read. Based on their research, Fountas and Pinnell created the idea of Guided Reading groups (1996), Marie Clay founded Reading Recovery literacy intervention and Allington recognized that a variety of programs can be used to successfully teach students to read. He believes however, that the quality of the instruction is the determining factor of student success. He states that “investing in effective teaching – whether in hiring decisions or professional development planning - is the most “research-based” strategy available” (Allington, n.d., “6 Ts of Effective Elementary Literacy Instruction”, para. 2).



The success we have at reaching all students within our chosen program, however, is dependent on many factors. Not only does learning follow an individual pattern of growth for every person, it is also influenced by factors such as; gender, family support, family perceptions, social ideals, social barriers, curriculum, curricular bias, administrative emphasis, culture, school focus, provincial or district initiatives, resource availability, motivation, classroom quality, level of intellect, and health/nutrition (Elley, 1994; Fredriksson, 2002; Guthrie, 1978; Lehmann, 1996; Lietz, 1996; OECD, 2001, 2002; Purves, 1973; Taube, 1988). Each individual child within a class makes that classroom a very unique, special place.

### **Questions**

Knowing that students come to school with differing background knowledge yet needing to strive for the same goals set out by the British Columbia Ministry of education, I have decided to look at the idea of teaching reading to grade one students from the perspective of a teacher. I will be investigating the research of three of the most influential researchers in the field of early literacy – Richard Allington, Marie Clay, and the partnership of Irene Fountas & Gay Su Pinnell – and implementing some of their interventions in my classroom. While doing so, I will be considering the following questions: How can I have the most impact when teaching my grade one students to read? What strategies, approaches and components to teaching reading have shown to be most effective on student learning of this important skill? By addressing these questions, I will organize what I feel is the best plan for me for teaching reading to the students in grade one at the school in which I currently teach, which will be based on the needs of the students in this particular school. I then plan to organize regular after school meetings with other teachers interested in talking about reading practices, and share what I have learned and discuss current research and new trends in the area of literacy. This will provide an opportunity for discussion and conversation around the area of reading instruction.

## Summary of Chapter 1

As any teacher or parent, or really any adult, knows all children are unique individuals. It is the special job of teachers – those adults who not only teach, but have influence over who each child in their class becomes - to teach all students as equals, regardless of backgrounds, abilities or personalities and help them learn to be independent, lifelong learners. For the short period of time that they are in our classroom, effective teachers strive to do their best and teach their students the best they know how. Research points to the importance of ensuring that children enter grade one with the attitude toward, and knowledge about literacy that will enable them to succeed (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). It is my goal, as I teach reading to grade one aged children, to have all students reading by the end of the year.

Researchers tell us that all students are able to learn to read (Clay, 2001; Lyons, 2003) but more and more children seem to be having difficulty when acquiring this skill. Reading difficulties occur on a continuum, meaning that there is a wide range of students from those who pick up the skills of reading with ease, those who experience reading difficulties and those anywhere in between. There are those students who are diagnosed with a reading-related disability but there is an even larger group of students (without diagnoses) who still require targeted reading assistance (Drummond, n.d.). When children struggle with this concept, teachers need to determine how and why they are struggling and then intervene as soon as possible. When children continue to struggle it affects future learning and self-confidence (Snow et al., 1998).

In my own personal experience as a teacher of grade one children, I have noticed that over the last few years, more and more students are entering grade one with their reading readiness skills at levels lower than what has typically been seen. In fact, the kindergarten teacher at our school has also commented that the literacy levels of the children recently entering kindergarten have been low, and as well, she has commented that often many parents are not

helping their children practice reading at home when her home reading program starts, as has been the norm in previous years. The purpose of this Masters project is to determine what strategies, approaches and components to teaching reading have shown to be the most effective on students learning to read. This is based on my personal journey of research and discovery, experimentation and trials. In this chapter I will investigate the importance of reading and some of the current statistics pertaining to literacy levels in Canadian society, discuss some of the factors that influence children's abilities to learn to read and look at three of the most influential researchers in the area of children's literacy.

There have been many different theories on how best to teach children to read. For example; specific instruction in the major parts of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) (The National Reading Panel, formed by the U.S. Department of Education), individualized instruction whereby modern brain imaging methods will be used to figure out the unique learning style of each child, and digital text-delivery programs will be used to teach reading to each child according to his or her unique needs and way of learning (Rose & Dalton, 2009), phonics instruction where students learn to read by learning their letter sounds and how to put the sounds together, and whole language approach which is a literacy philosophy which emphasizes that children should focus on meaning and strategy instruction.

If teachers assess and notice deficiencies in their students' literacy development, it is essential to have interventions set in place right away in order to close the gap between vulnerable readers and those students who have developed their reading processing system easily. "Carefully recorded observations can lead us to modify our instruction to meet the learning needs of particular children in the formative stages of new learning..." (Clay, 2002, p. 4). Not all students will develop in the same way or at the same rate, but most students develop

at a steady pace so that by the end of third grade, they are able to read grade appropriate material fluently with comprehension. It is important that a student not get too far behind in learning how to read, as reading difficulties are best addressed when they are caught at a young age.

The next chapter in this paper will review related literature around the topic of early literacy. I will investigate the importance of reading and some of the current statistics pertaining to literacy levels in Canadian society, discuss some of the factors that influence children's abilities to learn to read and look at three of the most influential researchers in the area of children's literacy. The main purpose of this Masters project is to determine what strategies, approaches and components to teaching reading have shown to be the most effective on students learning to read at the school in which I teach. This is based on my personal journey of research and discovery, experimentation and trials.

Teaching children to be successful readers and planting within them a desire for lifelong learning is a hope that I have for all of my students. How best to accomplish that takes much patience, experience and willingness to be flexible in approaches to teaching. Whether a child struggles or not, my hope is that every student enjoys school and wants to come to school every day. It is just as important to me that the academic goals are reached as well as the social and emotional needs of every one of my students. Instilling confidence and security and the willingness to take chances in their learning are also personal goals that I have for myself. By exploring current research and new theories and ideas, I hope to be the best teacher that I can be for the betterment of all my students. Clay (2001) and Allington (2005) both agree that although about 80 percent of children learn to read without overwhelming difficulties, regardless of the program used, there are still about 20 percent who struggle. It is this 20 percent that I am interested in learning how to reach.

## Chapter 2: Primary Literacy Skills Development

A primary school classroom is a busy place. Children in these classrooms are continuously learning throughout each day. When they engage in dramatic play, they are learning to imagine and create, role play, listen and speak, take risks and understand and express feelings. When they complete puzzles they plan and solve problems, investigate pattern and sequence, develop spatial awareness and improve hand-eye coordination. By building with blocks, children learn to sort, classify and count, share and cooperate, experiment with gravity and balance, and solve problems. When children interact with books by listening to a story, reading pictures or words and orally telling a story, they are learning to become literate. Literacy has been defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as: “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts”. (UNESCO, 2004, p. 13).

Teaching children to read, and be literate, is a major focus of early primary teachers all over the world (Coltheart, & Prior, 2006; Fredriksson, 2002; Niemi, Toom, & Kallioniemi, 2012; Wren, 2003). Schifferdecker (n.d.) recognized that the overall goal of a reading program should be to help children develop the skills and strategies they need for reading while nurturing a love of reading and exposing children to a variety of reading materials. Teachers’ knowledge of language and literacy is essential in creating high-quality interactions with their students (Merisuo-Storm & Soininen, 2014) that will ensure the proper development of the necessary skills and strategies. When children read, they are using a reading process system that has been developing within themselves since they first interacted with words and text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Johnson, 2006). This processing system is composed of a multitude of strategies that students use in order to construct and extract meaning from print (Johnson & Keier, 2010). These strategies are mental activities which are taught to, and initiated by, the child so they are able to

get clear messages from text (Clay, 1991; Taberski, 2000). As they are exposed to print, and interact with it through stories, conversations, and environmental print, components are developed in their reading processing system. Children come to school with differing background experiences and knowledge and as such, their processing systems are at different stages of development. For instance, one individual might use one strategy in one situation, while another individual might use a different strategy entirely, perhaps because of his or her purpose for reading, background knowledge and level of skill or because of the nature of the text being read (Biggam & Itterly, 2008). It is the responsibility of the teacher to help their students acquire and further develop the important skill of reading.

Because of individual and experiential variations, it is common to find within a Kindergarten classroom a five-year range of literacy-related skills and functioning (Riley, 1996). Readers who have developed a solid reading processing system often do the following: keep a constant check on themselves and think about what they are reading, notice when their reading does not make sense, sound right or look right, stop when something does not seem quite right and take action and use a variety of strategies, behaviours and strategic actions to fix up any errors or confusions (Johnson & Keier, 2010). As educators of literacy, teachers must have as an instructional goal, regardless of age, grade, or achievement level, the development of students as purposeful, engaged, and ultimately independent. “No matter what grade level you teach, no matter what content you teach, no matter what texts you teach with, your goal is to improve students’ comprehension and understanding” (Rasinski, Padak, Weible Church, Fawcett, Hendershot, Henry, Moss, Peck, Pryor, & Roskos, 2000, p.1) and help students develop their reading processing systems. Expert decision making lies at the heart of effective teaching; when to begin teaching certain skills, in what ways, and using what resources (Allington & Gabriel, 2012). For students at public schools in British Columbia, this process of learning to read begins

in Kindergarten and continues throughout their primary years and perhaps even into the intermediate grades. For some children, this new skill acquisition is an easy process and is not dependent on the particular resources or approaches that their teacher uses (Allington, 2005; Clay, 2001). Children are exposed to print through looking at books, listening to stories, talking about books and making personal connections. This is a process that is begun when children are young and parents begin talking to them, reading them stories and communicating about what is happening in the world around them. It is through this variety of experiences that they are able to build their own reading processing systems which enable them to understand and decode books (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009). Good readers are phonemically aware, understand the alphabetic principle, apply these skills in a rapid and fluent manner, possess strong vocabularies and syntactical and grammatical skills, and can connect reading to their own experiences. Difficulties in any of these areas can impede reading development (Lyon, 2000). For these children, learning to read is not an easy journey and for a variety of reasons, they struggle to learn to read. They are often being taught in the same classes as other children who this skill comes easy to, yet they do not make sense of the words themselves or have difficulty learning to decode words on a page. There may be a physical reason why these children struggle, they may not have had the same exposure and experiences with books as some of their peers, or it may be that they just require more time or different types of instruction to develop the skill of reading.

According to the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 42% of adults in Canada between the ages of 16 and 65 have low literacy skills. Less than 20% of people with the lowest literacy skills are employed because they do not have the literacy skills required to get into job training programs (Canadian Learning and Literacy Network, 2015). Learning to read and being able to understand and communicate is a life skill and is paramount to the future successes of students (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2012). When reading does not come

automatically to a child, it is up to the teacher to recognize the difficulty the child may be having and try to find other ways to help the child learn to read. It is imperative that teachers pay attention to the students in their class and complete assessments in order to find out where there students are along the reading continuum. The earlier any interventions are started, the faster the gap between students closes. Research shows that early intervention, provided by skilled teachers, can increase reading skills to average reading levels (Zygouris-Coe, 2001).

### **Importance of Reading**

Reading is a life skill. One of the most important ways to prepare our students to become lifelong learners and to be successful later in life is to ensure that they are literate. Being able to decode words, make understanding from them and communicate with others enables people to interact with their environment. There is environmental print everywhere but there are many people with low literacy rates who are unable to decode or understand print at even a minimal level. Schooling is provided for children so that they can learn the skills they need to be successful in the future but some children struggle to learn to read. Although reading is, and has been a major focus of the Canadian school system for years, there are young adults who enter the work force with low levels of literacy. The latest literacy study by Statistics Canada shows that millions of Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to keep pace with the escalating demands of our rapidly changing world (Dr. Paul Cappon, from The Canadian Council on Learning's Prose Literacy Map, Sep 8, 2009, cited on The Excellence in Literacy Foundation website). This loss of potential impacts the social and economic well-being of individuals, families, communities and our country (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2015).

When children grow up in families where parents have low levels of literacy, their life is directly impacted. Quality of life for families, including income levels and employment status, is directly related to the literacy levels of parents (International Adult Literacy Survey [IALS])



1995/1997). Parents' educational background, occupation, and related economic status also have a bearing on the family's resources beyond school that support their children's learning, in terms of, for example, books, computers, magazines, hobbies, language courses or private tuition. In these ways, the economic, cultural and social capital of the family does influence the children's learning in various ways, either promoting or hindering it (Bourdieu, 1986).

### **Effects of low literacy for adults.**

Literacy, as defined by UNESCO, "involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society" (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2015; Linnakylä, Malin, & Taube, 2004). Unfortunately, many people are unable to live to their full potential or participate fully in society due to their own low levels of literacy. 42% of Canadian adults that are in the current work force have low literacy skills (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2015) and this rate has changed little in the past 15 years. Because of their low literacy skills, many adults entering the work force are not prepared for the current demands of our society and economy. The demand for skills continues to move toward more sophisticated tasks, as jobs increasingly involve analyzing and communicating information, and as technology floods all aspects of life, those individuals with poor literacy skills are more likely to find themselves at risk (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2013). Even entry-level positions now often require digital literacy skills. This lack of basic literacy is a barrier to employment and the job training necessary to gain employment or promotion (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2015). Although there are job training programs in place, many disadvantaged adults do not enroll in literacy skills upgrading programs that could help them get in to job training programs, in fact data shows only about 5-10% of eligible adults enroll (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2015). As a result, those with low literacy are more than twice as likely to be unemployed and

when they are employed they tend to work in occupations with lower skill requirements (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2013).

Not only do low literacy rates affect employment, it also affects health and well-being. Current statistics show that 55% of working age adults and 88% of adults over the age of 65 are estimated to have less than adequate health literacy skills (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2015). This means that they are unable to obtain, understand and act upon health information and services to make appropriate health decisions on their own. Individuals with lower proficiency in health literacy are more likely than those with better literacy skills to report poor health. An understanding of medical dosages means fewer mistakes and interventions resulting in greater individual self-sufficiency, including among seniors, which means less reliance on health-givers. As fewer resources are needed, the cost on the healthcare system is likely to decline (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2013). This results in benefits for society as a whole.

The Canadian health system is not the only area that would see an improvement if the literacy rates of Canadians were improved. Our society and smaller communities would also benefit. Green and Riddell (2007) note that literacy skills play a fundamental role in enabling individuals to function to their full capability in society and the economy. Without literacy, individuals cannot take full and equal roles in social and political conversations: they become less than equal members of society without the basic tools required to pursue their goals (Green & Riddell, 2007). Higher levels of literacy are associated with higher levels of involvement in various community groups and organizations and in volunteer activities (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2013). Higher levels of literacy skills improves chances of employment, builds self-confidence and trust, and enables discussions and actions that affects the welfare of individuals and their community (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2013). An individual who improved his or her

literacy skills might be expected to have better employment opportunities and command higher earnings leading to a higher level of well-being (Green & Riddell, 2007) leading him or her to be a more productive member of society.

### **What low literacy means for children.**

When parents have higher literacy skills, it transfers down to the next generation of citizens in a positive way. Quality of life for families, including income levels and employment status, is directly related to the literacy levels of parents (IALS, 1995/1997). Children from low-income households are at risk of low poverty, which, along with low literacy rates, form a cycle that is very difficult to break (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2012). Children from families living in poverty or in households in which parent education is low typically enter school with lower levels of foundational skills, such as those in language, reading, and mathematics and unfortunately, these early achievement gaps tend to increase rather than diminish over time (NAEYC, 2009) even though there may have been early interventions in place. Children from low income neighbourhoods, those with limited proficiency in English, persons who may experience hearing impairments or preschool language impairments, and children whose parents had difficulty learning to read are particularly at risk of arriving at school with weaknesses in literacy skills and are more likely to fall behind (Snow et al., 1998). In addition, research indicates children with early exposure to books and reading are better at performing mathematical tasks (National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, Statistics Canada, 1996-1997).

Not only does early experiences with print benefit children's future literacy skills development, it affects other areas of schooling, as well, since many higher level subjects are textbook based with higher levels of vocabulary and content matter. Although this is not the only contributing factor, high dropout rates occur among children whose parents are not able to

become involved in the school system and support their children due to low levels of literacy skills. Literacy BC notes that research has shown that children have a better chance of becoming fully literate adults themselves if reading is valued and encouraged in the home (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2013). Unfortunately, more than 80% of people in Canada experience difficulty in learning to read. This may be due to a variety of reasons, including limited experience with books, speech and hearing problems, and poor phonemic awareness (Lyon, 2000). Learning disabilities affect over 10% of Canadians, immigrant families have fewer choices of jobs, education, and areas of advancement and parental literacy is linked to the literacy levels of their offspring (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2012). It takes a team effort to help all students learn to read; teachers need to recognize reading difficulties and be flexible in their strategies and approaches used with students, parents should talk with their children to expand vocabulary and provide literacy experiences, and other support staff in the schools, like learning support teachers and certified educational assistants should be available with time, expertise, and support.

Children come to school from different backgrounds and develop at different speeds and in different ways. This developmental diversity (McNaughton, 2014) looks different under unique instructional systems that embrace diverse curriculum and instructional emphases (Thompson & Fletcher-Flynn, 2012). There may be a dissimilar focus of the school district or province in which the teacher works compared to where a particular student may be from. Perhaps there is a cultural focus specific to the area in which the school is which may be different from the culture in which a student was raised. This may result in unfamiliar vocabulary and connections. Maybe there is underfunding in the district and therefore resources and support are limited so interventions are restricted to what the teacher knows and is able to carry out. Whatever the range, teachers must be flexible in their planning and instruction in order to meet

the needs of each child in their class (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009) which can ultimately lead to a higher quality of life for those children. After all, it is children who, by nature, are ready to learn and therefore it is up to the teachers to create the appropriate instruction for where each child is at along their learning continuum (Clay, 1997).

It is important for teachers to keep up with current research and instructional strategies to be able to identify what strategies are needed in order to ensure competency in reading literacy is attained for their students (Sholes, 2009). Literacy therefore is not only a foundation for learning a child's first language or other school subjects such as science, mathematics, and social studies, but also a prerequisite for successful participation in most areas of youth or adult life (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2002; Smith et al., 2000;). A wider range of career opportunities, and thus higher wages are available to adults when they have higher levels of literacy (Green & Riddell, 2007). Longitudinal studies have shown that there is a 90 percent chance that a child who is a poor reader at the end of grade one will be a poor reader at the end of grade four (Juel, 1998). Without consistent, good teaching, whereby teachers recognize when there is a difficulty and have the training to know what other approaches to use, the majority of children with reading difficulties rarely catch up and failure to develop adequate reading skills by age nine may result in a lifetime of illiteracy (Lyon et al., 2001). Allington (1998) notes that it is troubling that schools are so ineffectual with children who begin school with few literacy experiences that we can predict at six years of age, what their lifestyles will be like when they reach adulthood. When equipped with literacy and communication skills, students are able to interact with the world in a manner that enriches their life and supports them in becoming an engaged and responsible citizen. Teachers need to be aware of the individual students' needs when building their literacy programs which means

working in ways that evens out the differences between students in the class, not distributing instruction equally to all students (Allington, 2008).

There are a multitude of benefits for people who become strong literate citizens. It benefits them, their children and the communities in which they live. Adults with strong literacy skills are more confident, more likely to volunteer in their communities and often hold higher paying jobs (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2013). They are also better able to ask questions or find information regarding health concerns and an understanding of medical dosages means fewer mistakes and interventions (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2013). Green and Riddell (2007) also found that in order for people to fully participate in society, individuals should function at least at a minimum acceptable level. When this level has been achieved, most people are then able to make better informed decisions regarding their health, politics, and money. When parents do more reading and literacy activities in the home, they better prepare their children for success in school and they help to encourage a lifelong love of reading and learning.

### **Influencing Factors on Reading Skills Development**

Many teachers are a hard-working and dedicated group of professionals. Their passion for teaching is distinguished by their commitment to student achievement (Mart, 2013). The more that teachers care about teaching, the more time and energy they devote to it (Baum, 2002). Some teachers devote countless hours creating lessons that are content rich, pedagogically effective and which meet the prescribed learning outlines set out by the local ministries of education (Hume, 2011). They want the lessons to be relevant and engaging for their students and they plan how to deliver those lessons with energy, enthusiasm (Baum, 2002) and with a touch of their own personal style. By the end of the lesson, the term or even the year, they hope that their students have learned all that they are supposed to, and have had fun and enjoyed themselves along the way.

The question arises, however, of what to do when a student does not demonstrate a solid understanding of what has been taught. Some children have difficulty with their learning. Learning disabilities present a major obstacle to literacy and affect over 10% of Canadians (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2012) but with the right learning strategies, techniques, supports, and interventions, many children can overcome the challenges of learning difficulties (Saskatchewan Learning, 2004). Perhaps the struggle with reading for some children may be linked to the simple fact that more time is needed to learn and process new things than their peers. Sholes (2009) states that children learn in different ways and need different approaches to learning. It is the responsibility of teachers to teach every child to the best of their ability. In order for this to happen, teachers must be aware of what each individual student is capable of and work from there. According to Allington and Guice (n.d.), a balanced literacy program, where teachers balance phonics instruction with structured reading lessons, reading literature, listening to stories, and writing, will result in a classroom where all students learn to read. This is supported by other researchers (Clay, 2001; Lyons, 2003) who have found that given the right opportunities and assistance, all children are able to learn to read, although not always at the same pace (Clay, 2001). There is great pressure on teachers from the British Columbia Ministry of Education that by the end of grade one, all students are able to recognize and fluently identify all alphabetic letters and their associated sounds, and recognize word patterns and some high-frequency words (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006). “Teachers may feel pressured to start formal literacy lessons before their students are fully prepared to participate in an academic setting that is significantly more demanding than preschool or kindergarten” (Mahiri & Maniates, 2013, p. 255). While achieving this benchmark may seem quite realistic for all students, some school districts put a certain leveled expectation on reading levels and for some children, this level is difficult to reach by the end of the year, but

perhaps this is what Clay (2001) and Lyons (2003) are referring to in their research when they say that some children just need more time to reach expectations.

There have been a multitude of previous studies (Calfee, 1983; Elley, 1994; Fredriksson, 2002; Lietz, 1996; Linnakylä, 1995; Lundberg & Linnakylä, 1993; OECD, 1995, 2000, 2001; Purves & Elley, 1994; Taube, 1988; Thorndike, 1973; Wilcockson, 1995) which have consistently acknowledged factors as significant in explaining or being associated with reading literacy performance. For instance, Calfee (1983) found that “The reading achievement of students can be predicted, but the bulk of the predictable variance is associated with student background factors; instructional factors appear less important” (p. 60). Lietz discovered that in addition to student-level factors such as socio-economic status (Geske & Ozola, 2008) and reading resources in the home, there are also school-level factors such as class size and library resources that affect literacy development (1996). There have been numerous other researchers who add contributing factors to this list (Elley, 1994; Fredriksson, 2002; Guthrie, 1978; Lehmann, 1996; Lietz, 1996; OECD, 2001, 2002; Purves, 1973; Taube, 1988). These include variables related to students’ gender, self-esteem, motivation, parental involvement, reading interest and activities as well as parents’ education. Due to the importance of reading, especially during the primary grades, difficulty in learning to read influences children’s motivation to learn (Zygouris-Coe, 2001). Merisuo-Storm and Soininen (2014) support Taube’s (1988) findings that children’s self-esteem correlates significantly with their reading comprehension skills, reading attitudes and attitudes towards studying. Linnakylä, Malin, and Taube (2004) found that another factor increasing the risk of low achievement in both Finland and Sweden was the heavy use of computers in the younger generations. “Technology holds tremendously useful tools that can help us engage students in learning, but these tools are meaningless and even detrimental to that learning without a predetermined worthwhile purpose” (Hume, p. 161). Often at home children



play on computers for entertainment purpose, not with a predetermined learning outcome and this often results in shortened attention spans (Linnakylä et al., 2004). Another research study has found however, that email and searching for and distributing information over the Internet, whether for schoolwork or for hobbies, have proved to contribute to better reading literacy (Leino, Linnakylä, & Malin, 2007). Not only does learning follow an individual pattern of growth often dependent on home and environment, it is also culturally defined by these various factors. A study done on low reading achieving students in Finland and Sweden show that the risk of being a low achiever is strongly determined by gender and by several sociocultural factors as well as by students' personal characteristics, attitudes and activities both at and outside school (Linnakylä et al., 2004). Logan and Johnston (2010) also report that gender differences are consistently found in national and international assessments and these differences often continue into adolescence. They have even found evidence to suggest that "boys and girls have naturally different reading strategies and benefit from different types of reading instruction" (Logan & Johnston, p. 176). Marinak and Gambrell (2010) have similar findings regarding gender differences but they attest these differences are often due to the low motivation of boys in reading compared with girls. This section will touch further on three of these underlying themes which are present and may influence a child's reading progress.

### **Gender.**

There are many elements that influence the development of reading skills in children; gender is but one of those contributing elements (Kaushanskaya, Gross, & Buac, 2013; Logan & Johnston, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Over the years in fact, a variety of differences between the genders have come to light. Educators must share the common goal of providing equitable learning opportunities for every student in the classroom. Teachers play a particularly important role in determining how individual students develop as readers and writers and it is

critical they provide classroom experiences that respond to the interests, needs, and learning styles of all students, and that they explore ways to engage boys and girls equally as readers and writers.

Some of these differences noticed include, compared with girls the same age, that boys show a decreased interest in reading (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995), a low motivation to read (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010) and that boys read with less frequency than girls (Logan & Johnston, 2009). It is interesting to note that Marinak and Gambrell (2010) revealed that boys who are average readers are still less motivated to read, and “specifically that they value reading less than girls who are average readers” (p. 136). It is essential for teachers to create classroom environments that foster personal motivation to read and are highly motivating for all students (Logan & Johnston, 2010). Logan and Johnston (2009) report that this higher frequency of reading and better reading ability could be an explanation for girls’ more positive attitudes to reading. Other differences noted include the fact that boys exhibit more unwanted behaviours during reading times at school, that girls show reading readiness earlier than boys, and the type of reading that boys prefer is different than that of their counterparts in the class (Hall & Coles, 1999). Leino, Linnakylä, & Malin, (2007) found that the readers more involved in fiction seem to be mainly girls, which complies with the trend that is consistent in every OECD country. A study done comparing children in Finland and Sweden showed that boys were clearly at a greater risk of low achievement than girls. (Linnakylä et al., 2004; Marinak & Gambrell, 2010). Being able to read is a skill which is the foundation of almost all processes of learning and it is necessary not only for students to acquire languages and to study literature, but also for learning in other subject areas (Geske & Ozola, 2008; Linnakylä et al., 2004) and a prerequisite for successful participation in most areas of youth or adult life (OECD, 2002; Smith et al., 2000).

Research has uncovered that there are differences between genders. It is important that teachers are aware of these differences and learn how to best motivate all students.

### **Family Involvement.**

Having parents who read with their children from a young age and get involved with their child's education are nurturing a love of reading and a love of learning in their child (Carter, Chard, & Pool, 2009). Children aged two or three years who are read to several times a day do better in kindergarten and in the primary school years, than children who are read to only a few times a week or less (Geske & Ozola, 2008; National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, Statistics Canada, 1996-1997). There are many children however, who enter kindergarten and have not had this exposure to print, yet they are still able to learn to read. Their reading processing systems are slower to develop because they have not had this prior experience but they are still able to acquire this new skill (Johnson & Keier, 2010). Children's individual differences in language and early literacy skills at the start of school have been attributed to the quantity and quality of language interaction with their parents and exposure to print in the home environment (Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Hart & Risley, 1995). Geske and Ozola (2008) found a close relationship between the value of education to parents and their childrens' learning achievements. In other words, if education is regarded as being important to the family, there is a greater possibility that children will have high learning achievements (Balster-Liontos, 1992). Some research has even found that variables in the home that contribute to children's early literacy success may even outweigh those in the school setting (Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006; Wigfield & Asher, 1984).

Unfortunately, some children enter school with significant differences in language, early literacy skills and motivation to learn which puts them at considerable risk for developing long-term reading difficulties (Carter et al., 2009; Hart & Risley, 1995; Neuman, 2006). It has been

shown that reading to children more than once a day has substantial positive impact on their future academic skills (National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, Statistics Canada, 1996-1997). Children raised in literate households are likely to enter grade one with thousands of hours of one to one pre-reading experience behind them (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2013). Having a parent or other childcare person read aloud with their children helps children learn listening skills, vocabulary and language skills, as well as develop imagination and creativity (Family Literacy Foundation, 2001). Research has shown that there are many different, and usually very complex, causes for the differences in the achievement level of students when it comes to reading (Carter et al., 2009; Geske & Ozola, 2008; Merisuo-Storm & Soininen, 2014; Zeece & Wallace, 2009). There are often factors beyond school influence such as the income level and education of the parents, which correlates with the academic levels of students (ABC Life Literacy Canada, 2013; Goodwin, 2000; Literacy Skills for the Knowledge Society [IALS], 1997) but there are also many school-based factors that influence students' learning achievements.

### **Resources.**

Another consideration, in addition to personal background of students, is the notion of resources that are used in the classroom. Primary school teachers have the difficult task of not only teaching their students how to read – a skill which is critical to the future of today's children – they have the difficult task of discerning what resources to use, how to use them in their classroom and what other supplementary materials to have. If children are to read a lot during the school day, they need a rich supply of books they can actually read (Allington, n.d.). It is especially important for students who are struggling learning to read, to have books that they are able to read with success (Allington, 1983). Often this decision of what resources to use is made for teachers due to limited funding for new materials (Allington & Gabriel, 2012) and teachers

simply must use the resources that are available to them at their school. Merisuo-Storm and Soininen (2014) tell us that the classroom, and ultimately the school, should be an environment where every child gets the support he or she needs from adults. This includes resources, as well. When children have available different stories, poetry, parts of fiction books or plays to read at school at least once a week, better achievements in literacy have been shown (Geske & Ozola, 2008). Since we know that motivation plays such a key role in literacy development, providing a variety of books that will interest all students will also help to motivate them (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010) as will doing a large variety of different tasks instead of the same activities day after day (Merisuo-Storm & Soininen, 2014).

As mentioned previously, Allington (2005) suggests that students will be able to learn to read regardless of the materials used for instruction. He notes that teachers need to teach according to the needs of their students, not by following any one approach or set of materials (Allington & Guice, n.d.). He strongly argues that it is the amount of time spent on developing literacy skills that makes the difference for teaching students to read. Other researchers also report that extensive reading is critical to the development of reading proficiency (Krashen, 2001; Stanovich, 2000). Allington (2001) suggests that children should spend at least one and a half hours a day reading in school and the quality of instruction in the classroom must also match the development of struggling readers (Allington, 2008). That is to say, “if struggling readers are not learning how to read, then [teachers] need to look at [themselves] and [their] teaching, searching harder and longer to discover how to teach them better” (Johnson & Keier, 2010, p. 10). He also notes that if a reader is struggling, additional reading time is necessary, not merely extra instructional time in a one-on-one separate setting while the rest of the class is also reading (Allington, 2008); they require additional time reading appropriate level text. By providing

additional reading support time outside of the core reading lesson block, these students receive the regular whole-class instruction as well as extra help.

The classroom is the foundation for public education, regardless of the materials used or the programs in place, and differentiated instruction needs to be provided to meet the diverse needs of the entire class. Current trends indicate that the classroom where children learn to read should be an environment rich with print (Yokota & Teale, 2000); that is, a classroom with books at different levels, on diverse topics, assorted types of books, and with a variety of both fiction and non-fiction titles. It should also be an environment where children are engaged in and motivated with their learning (Merisuo-Storm & Soininen, 2014). Phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension are necessary to allow students to be skillful and strategic readers (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010), but without the intrinsic motivation to read, students may never reach their full potential as literacy learners (Gambrell, 1996). A Canadian study done in 2004 revealed that boys “might fall behind in reading in the primary grades resulting in low motivation to engage in reading in later grades” (Marinak & Gambrell, 2010, p. 130). By providing opportunities for children to make choices about their literacy learning by allowing them to read material that is relevant to their lives, they become engaged and more proficient readers who enjoy reading (Sanacore, 2012). Allington and Gabriel (2012) claim that the experience of children choosing the book that they want to read in itself boosts motivation.

Research has also demonstrated that access to self-selected texts improves students’ reading performance (Krashen, 2011). In a study done in 2004, Guthrie and Humenick found that the two most powerful instructional design factors for improving reading motivation and comprehension were (1) student access to many books and (2) personal choice of what to read. By giving students the opportunities for choice, teachers help them to develop the ability to choose appropriate texts for themselves, which is a skill that greatly increases the chances that

they will read outside of school (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Reis et al., 2007). When they read outside of school, their processing systems become stronger the more it is put to use (Johnson & Keier, 2010) and “the more opportunities a student has to put his system to work, the faster, stronger, and more efficient that system becomes” (Johnson, 2006, p. 45). After all, “to become skilled at almost any activity requires extensive and continual practice” (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2008, p. 22). This additional practice provides the opportunities for students to consolidate the skills and strategies they are working to develop with their reading (Allington, n.d.). Haugland (1999) states that engagement in the learning process is directly linked to motivation. Filling the classroom with a large array of student-appropriate books, magazines, and resources (whether paper or electronic) will help to engage and motivate students.

Knowing the students well and being aware of their interests and hobbies help teachers make informed decisions regarding the types of books to bring into the classroom in order to create a print-rich environment. Teachers should have knowledge of literature and reading materials that boys, and girls, find interesting, such as science fiction and fantasy stories (Linnakylä et al., 2004), and if not, ask for support in creating this print rich environment in their classrooms. Ideally, having this type of literacy environment would help all children to realize that reading, fiction included, can be enjoyable and interesting (Baker, Afflerbach, & Reinking, 1996). By providing a large collection of books from which to choose to read, students will feel empowered and a part of their own learning. It will also help them to learn not only how to decode the words but it helps to improve confidence and self-esteem (Merisuo-Storm & Soininen, 2014). If teachers can create a motivating environment, then students will be able to experience the ‘happenings’ – the unexpected, meaningful moments - that Van Manen (1991) claims are the foundation for learning to take place.

## **Influential Researchers**

This section looks at four of the most influential researchers in the area of children's reading; Clay, Allington, and the partnership of Fountas and Pinnell. All of these researchers have conducted longitudinal studies and the results can provide insight into how children learn to read, as well as ways to reach those students who require extra support or intervention to demonstrate reading success.

Learning to read is a complex process. Reading involves messages expressed in a special kind of language that is found in books and often not in our everyday speech. Spoken language contains many slang words (e.g. yup or yeah instead of yes; I dunno instead of I don't know) and shortened words (e.g. 'cause instead of because; 'kay instead of okay) and tends to be full of repetitions, incomplete sentences, corrections and interruptions. Written language tends to be more complex and intricate than speech with longer sentences ("Differences between writing and speech", n.d.). Reading also involves knowing about the conventions used in print language – direction rules, space formats and punctuation. It involves interpreting visual patterns. Reading also involves breaking messages up into words (Johnson & Keier, 2010), something that oral language does not always do clearly. These are all different areas of learning which facilitate reading acquisition (Clay, 1997). Clay, Allington and Fountas and Pinnell have all formulated their own versions of the reading processing system but all agree that when a child is building their processing system that will deal with literacy tasks, they learn the letters and the words and their relationship to sound but also need to build and expand the part of the brain that processes all of this information. This network of strategies in the head of the learner is also called a reading processing system (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001) and works to help solve problems the reader encounters with print (Johnson, 2006). Most learners are able to develop this complex processing system, regardless of the way they are being taught (Johnson & Keier, 2010) but there



are about 20 percent who struggle (Allington, 2005; Clay, 2001). These systems must work together at a great speed as one reads, and makes meaning, from text (Clay 2005b). Reading processes are the same for every child although children learn the specifics for their own systems at different times. Ongoing and early assessment is essential for teachers during this process. They must learn how to monitor, analyze, and interpret what a child does as he reads, compare that information against what a proficient reader does and then make teaching decisions using that information (Johnson, 2006). It is necessary therefore, that teachers know how to teach reading, as that is just as important to beginning readers as the literacy knowledge they acquire (Johnson & Keier, 2010). Regular observational assessment of students' learning determines what individual or whole-group support is needed (Mahiri & Maniates, 2013).

### **Marie Clay.**

Clay was from New Zealand but her focus was on global educational literacy. She was dedicated to the idea that children who struggle to learn to read and write can be helped with early intervention. Clay (1998) described children learning to read as a journey to literacy along different paths but to common outcomes. Clay developed the Reading Recovery intervention program, which was adopted by all New Zealand schools in 1983. In 1985, teachers and researchers from Ohio State University brought Reading Recovery to the United States and it is now used in many countries around the world, including Canada. Reading Recovery is a school-based, short-term intervention designed for first grade children, who are the lowest achieving in literacy after their first year of school, often approximately 20 percent of children. These children are often not able to read the simplest of books or write their own name before the intervention. The question can be raised, based on alternative research, if it is appropriate, considering what we know around cognitive development, for children of this age to be exposed to such expectations. Considering countries like Finland and Sweden have a school start age of

seven and their literacy rates are among the highest in OECD countries (UNESCO, 2014), perhaps it is not so critical for such expectations and subsequent interventions on Canadian children who struggle with literacy acquisition.

Reading Recovery is a pullout intervention which involves intensive one-on-one lessons for 30 minutes a day with a highly trained literacy Reading Recovery specialist, for between 12 and 20 weeks (Johnson & Keier, 2010). This program is designed to close the gaps between those who are demonstrating difficulty establishing their reading processing systems on their own and their peers. Clay has “articulated the startling concept that poor instruction can *induce* reading difficulties” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 31). For this reason, it is essential that teachers have the proper knowledge and understanding of the various difficulties children can experience when learning how to read, and are familiar with ways to help those students. A major contribution of Clay’s has been to change the conversation about what is possible for individual learners when the teaching permits different routes to be taken to desired outcomes. Clay (1998) described children’s journeys to literacy as different paths to common outcomes. At present this journey begins in Canada when children begin school at age four or five. The Ministry of Education’s expectation is that children are reading by the end of grade one (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006) and if they are not, then interventions should be put into place to support these learners since school should be an environment that supports the needs of every child (Merisuo-Storm & Soininen, 2014). It comes back to the same question as to whether the common outcome of five and six year olds reading successfully is reasonable and age-appropriate.

**Irene C. Fountas & Gay Su Pinnell.**

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) have spent over two decades of research and practical work with teachers from kindergarten through to high school, immersing themselves in Reading

Recovery intervention and reviewing academic research. Through this work, they recognized that it was essential to match books to readers and to provide differentiated instruction through working with small groups in reading (Johnson & Keier, 2010) resulting in *Guided Reading: Good First Teaching for All Students* (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The premise behind Guided Reading groups is to teach to small groups of students who needed additional support in the same area. For instance, one group of students may require additional instruction with blending letters together while another group may have a need for understanding punctuation. Perhaps some students need help learning new strategies to help them read unfamiliar words. The reading levels of the students may be different but the skill or strategy that they need help on is the same. Through Guided Reading, readers will develop “systems of strategic actions for processing increasingly challenging texts” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006, p. 373). Providing these small group lessons helps students to get the support they need. The particular students that are involved in these Guided Reading groups may not always stay the same and as such, the teacher alters the students involved as their needs change. The teacher and each group would meet for about twenty minutes at a time, and at least three times a week. Guided Reading groups are focused on early primary students and can continue throughout the school year. Guided Reading is defined by Johnson and Keier (2010) as “reading with children in small groups or one-on-one” (p. 78). By teaching children in small groups, who share similar needs, they can be taught in a way that is more focused on their specific needs, and as a result, their progress is accelerated. According to Fountas and Pinnell (1996), all students need instructional support so they can expand their competence across a greater variety of increasingly challenging texts. The selection of text chosen by teachers is one of the most important aspects of Guided Reading as it must be purposeful and have the needs of the learners in mind and should encompass a wide range of reading comprehension strategies. The book chosen for a group should be one that the students

will want to read, it should be one that requires support when processing the text, - that is, at their instructional level – and it should contain the skills that the group requires further instruction on (Johnson & Keier, 2010). These books should then be available for the children to read during independent reading times to give them more practice time using their system of strategies. “The more opportunities a student has to put his system to work, the faster, stronger, and more efficient that system becomes” (Johnson, 2006, p. 45).

**Richard L. Allington.**

Allington is one of the most influential, current researchers in the area of early literacy and reading. He has published over 150 research articles and is the author of several prominent books including *Classrooms that Work: They Can All Read and Write* (2011), *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research-Based Programs* (2011), and *Reading Instruction that Works: The Case for Balanced Teaching* (2014). Although he has not invented or created any one intervention strategy, his research in the areas of reading and learning disabilities and effective instruction, especially in classroom settings, has influenced many new thoughts and ideas on how to best reach all student learners. Based on his research, Allington has recommended that students should spend a minimum of one a half hours a day reading in school and any instructional time should be in addition to these ninety minutes (Boushey & Moser, 2006). He has also been instrumental in initiating changes for the just-right level of text appropriate for readers. In 2005, he stated that current research indicated that an independent or just-right book should be one that children can read with 99 percent accuracy (Boushey & Moser, 2006) and this percentage is still recognized today as the standard.

Allington’s work around struggling readers has allowed teachers and learning specialists to better understand reading and learning difficulties. He has been quite influential in developing practical ideas for improving student learning. Allington has long advocated for intensifying

instructional support for struggling readers, and he is often credited with helping lay the groundwork for the response to intervention concept (Rebora, 2010). Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. Struggling learners are provided with interventions at increasing levels of intensity to accelerate their rate of learning (“What is RTI?”, n.d.).

Another important suggestion that Allington has made is the idea that schools do not necessarily need more staffing and funding to make better gains with students who have difficulties learning. Instead, they should look at the resources they already have and simply do things a little differently (Allington, 2013) such as put interventions into place immediately for kindergarten and grade one children, instead of waiting until they are in grade three to assess and begin intervention at that point. In their book *Schools That Work: Where All Children Read and Write*, Allington and Cunningham (2006) suggest an approach to intervention where the learning assistance teacher, assuming such a teacher is available, comes into the classroom for additional in-class support instead of taking a child out to another classroom. Their research has shown that this type of support produces achievement gains at least as large as the gains from pull-out instruction without having a negative impact on the achievement of other students in the classroom (Allington & Cunningham, 2006). They validate this approach identifying that the stigmatism of being pulled out of the regular class for a special class is removed and it eliminates the transitions that can be difficult for some children (Allington & Cunningham, 1996).

Through his research, Allington has also suggested that one of the keys to students making improvements in their reading skills is ensuring that students increase the amount of time that they read each day (Allington, 2009). Allington (2001) suggests that children should spend at least one and a half hours a day reading in school. He ascertains that teachers who allocate more time to reading and language arts are the teachers whose students show the greatest gains in

literacy development (Allington & Cunningham, 1996) yet the quality of instruction must also match the development of struggling readers (2008). He believes that the quality of the instruction is the determining factor of student success and considers that “investing in effective teaching – whether in hiring decisions or professional development planning - is the most “research-based” strategy available” (Allington, n.d., “6 Ts of Effective Elementary Literacy Education”, n.d., para. 2). The way teachers structure the learning environments in their classrooms and the way students spend their time influences the level of reading proficiency the students have attained at the end of the academic year (Boushey & Moser, 2006). Of course it is dependent on the school and the school district in which they teach, but often in Canada, teachers are responsible for how their classrooms are organized and which books are contained within it. Investing in good quality teacher instruction is perhaps more important than the type of reading program used (Allington, n.d., “6 Ts of Effective Elementary Literacy Education”, n.d.; Allington & Johnston, 2001). Allington notes that if a reader is struggling, additional reading time is necessary, not merely a pullout session for one-on-one support while the rest of the class is also reading (Allington 2008); they require additional time reading, and the text being read is something that students could easily read for themselves (Allington & Johnston, 2002) without requiring additional support. He suggests that challenging them with more difficult text, when they are reading independently, could only serve to frustrate and discourage, as the students would most likely have difficulty decoding and understanding the book. By providing opportunities for children to experience success in reading – decoding correctly and comprehending what has been read - teachers help to build confidence in their students.

### **Similarities and Differences.**

Allington, Clay, Fountas and Pinnell all have research backgrounds in the area of early literacy. They have also all been influential in bringing about changes in the approaches,

strategies and instructional planning that teachers take when teaching literacy in their classrooms. All of their intervention ideas and strategies have come about as a result of their widespread research. At the forefront of their recommendations has been the importance of addressing the needs of individual students, not the class as a whole, but the individual students who make up the class. In order for teachers to really know these specific needs, much consistent, on-going assessment is essential. It is crucial that for any of these strategies or interventions to work, teachers must have a clear idea of the needs of the students and in what areas individual students may be lacking.

Once the needs have been determined, then the plan that would best benefit the teacher and student(s) can be implemented. If there is a small group of students requiring support with the same concept, then the teacher could plan for Guided Reading groups. If a child is particularly struggling, then perhaps a Leveled Literacy Intervention or Reading Recovery program is needed. If a teacher lacks a wide variety of books, then he or she can plan on how to acquire them. Teachers can borrow from school or public libraries, purchase books from used book stores or ask parents to donate gently used books. Knowing the students' needs, understanding what is involved in learning to read and being creative with instruction and planning is ideal to reaching the needs of all students. It is necessary for teachers to consider what their own beliefs are about what is best for struggling readers and what knowledge they have about the reading process when planning for teaching these students.

Clay, Allington, and Fountas and Pinnell all suggest daily literacy activities in order to help students develop their reading processing systems. These activities include having the students: read by themselves, write about something meaningful, talk about what they have read and listen to someone else read (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Clay, 1993; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Allington recommends increasing the amount of time that students spend reading books

and for teachers to ensure that the books their students are reading are at an appropriate level for them (“6 Ts of Effective Elementary Literacy Education”, n.d.). Based on observation and assessment, students should be choosing books that they can read with 99 percent accuracy. This will help students read more fluently and with greater comprehension. All of the components of students’ reading processing systems are interconnected and even a beginning reader (who is not struggling) uses multiple processes at once (Johnson & Keier, 2010). The more children are able to practice reading, the faster and more developed their processing systems will become (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2008). This also holds true for the intervention approaches that have been developed by Clay, and Fountas and Pinnell. Although Reading Recovery began in New Zealand with Clay, it is now being used around the world, as is Fountas and Pinnell’s Leveled Literacy Intervention program.

There are also many differences between these three literacy intervention programs. For instance, Guided Reading groups can continue within the classroom setting throughout the school year. Reading Recovery is much different however, in that it is an intensive pull-out program for one child at a time and taught by a highly-trained Reading Recovery specialist. Guided Reading lessons are taught by the classroom teacher while Reading Recovery specialists must go through intensive training in order to get certified.

### **Summary**

With this understanding of how children learn to read, the next step for teachers is to plan their reading program in order to teach all students to read. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has outlined a framework called Developmentally Appropriate Practice which promotes young children’s optimal learning and development. Developmentally appropriate practice requires both meeting children where they are—which means that teachers must get to know them well—and enabling them to reach goals that are both



challenging and achievable (Johnson & Keier, 2010; NAEYC Position Statement, 2009). Based on their research, Fountas and Pinnell created the idea of Guided Reading groups (1996), Clay founded Reading Recovery and Allington feels that a variety of programs can be used to successfully teach students to read. Allington believes however, that the quality of the instruction is the determining factor of student success and notes that effective teachers are the best research-based strategy available, even more so than any particular program (Allington, n.d., “6 Ts of Effective Elementary Literacy Instruction”). The success educators have in reaching all students within a chosen program, however, is dependent on many factors. Not only does learning follow an individual pattern of growth, it is also culturally defined by factors such as; gender, family support, family perceptions, social ideals, social barriers, curriculum, curricular bias, administrative emphasis, home support, culture, school focus, provincial or district initiatives, resource availability, motivation, classroom quality, level of intellect, and health/nutrition.

Readers develop their own thinking systems, or reading processing systems, regardless of the way they are taught. The processing systems deal with literacy tasks and “the reader must build and expand the intricate interacting systems in the brain that work together at great speed” (Clay, 2005b, p. 102). Reading processing systems involve interconnected thinking strategies (Johnson & Keier, 2010) and help readers to:

Keep a constant check on themselves and think about what they are reading, notice when their reading doesn't sound right, or look right, or make sense, stop when something doesn't seem quite right and take action, and use a variety of strategies, behaviours, and strategic actions to fix up their errors and confusions. (Johnson & Keier, 2010, pp.11-12).

Each part of their processing system, or each instrument of an orchestra, can function independently but it does not work if they do not also function together as a whole. Fountas and Pinnell's (2009) diagram of the parts that make up a reading processing system makes it very clear to see how all the parts are interconnected (Appendix A). When a child is learning to read, their processing is often slow. With lots of practice, the child's ability to use the system speeds up (Clay, 2001) and they become a better reader.

With all of this in mind, if teachers want to be successful at teaching all of their students to read, their teaching needs to be designed to meet the needs of each and every child. They must constantly search for effective ways to reach all the students. If it is indeed the case that all children are ready to learn, then it is the teachers who need to know how to recognize where each child is, and create appropriate instruction for them. The most effective prevention strategy is excellent instruction (Snow et al., 1998). Teachers must be prepared to be committed and dedicated to students and their learning (Mart, 2013). They must be aware of how to create a learning environment that is conducive to teaching all of their students to read (Boushey & Moser, 2006). By creating an effective learning environment, teachers also increase the learning potential of students (Mart, 2013). This involves understanding the reading process and all of the parts involved. Research asserts that quality classroom instruction in kindergarten and the primary grades is the single best defense against reading failure. In fact, when done well, classroom instruction has been shown to overwhelm the effects of student background and supplementary tutoring (Snow et al., 1998). Teachers have an incredibly important job and they are extremely important in the lives of children. They have a responsibility to each and every child, not just the ones for whom reading comes easily. This speaks to how powerful literacy is, "powerful enough to change the lives of some children, to lift them up out of the cycle of poverty" (Johnson, 2006).

### **Chapter 3: Reflect, Explore, Grow**

This past year has been one of reflection, exploration and professional growth. By examining ways that I can be a more effective reading teacher to the grade one students in my class, I have had to reflect on my own teaching practices and what I know about reading and the processes that students go through when learning to read. When I have questioned something I have done or something I have read, I have queried others and undertook more reading of professional resources. I have examined my own practices and beliefs and have been open to learning new strategies and approaches in order to be a more effective teacher, especially in the area of teaching reading to grade one students. This challenge of trying to get all students reading by the end of grade one, at the levels determined by the school district in which I teach, is one of the things that I love about teaching grade one – and one of the things that is most frustrating.

I set it as a personal goal for myself to have all of the students in my class fully meeting grade level expectations in reading by the end of the year. For years, I have achieved this and felt that I was doing a good job of teaching literacy. That has been changing over the years, however. In the past few years I have had more and more students who were not meeting expectations at the end of the year in reading and it was then that I began questioning my teaching practices and starting to think about how I could be approaching teaching reading differently in order to help more students achieve reading success.

Last year the kindergarten teacher shared with me some of her understandings of the children who would be in my class. She thought them to be a very nice group of children, great listeners and they loved to learn, but also quite low academically. I decided that this sounded like it would be a great class for me to try some new teaching strategies and ideas.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) tell us that a teacher's moment-by-moment actions and interactions with children are the most powerful

determinant of learning outcomes and development. Curriculum is very important, but what the teacher does is paramount (NAEYC, 2009). With this thought in mind, I wanted to take this year to try new strategies in my class and to research the theories and data behind them. In this narrative inquiry, I will share the variety of strategies that I experimented with when trying to help my students make larger gains in their reading. I will also comment on which of the strategies I found to have the most impact when teaching my grade one students at my rural British Columbia interior school to learn to read.

### **Reflection**

When I first began teaching grade one, I felt very overwhelmed with the responsibility of teaching children how to read. Fortunately, the learning assistance support teacher at the school where I was working at the time knew that it was my first year with grade ones and that I did not have experience instructing students on how to read. She worked with me and helped me to get through the year by introducing me to resources at the school that I had not used before and taught me how to run Guided Reading groups in my class. She helped me to develop a schedule in order to be able to work with all of the groups at least three times a week. I have drawn on that knowledge and experience I gained that year ever since. As I became more confident and comfortable teaching reading, I have tried new and different things in my class such as SmartLearning (Close, n.d.) lessons using picture books and moving away from traditional spelling programs. In my own experiences the last few years however, I have been noticing that, on average, the classes have been coming to grade one with lower literacy skill levels than the previous year. I have had to put in increasingly more effort trying to ensure that students are at reading levels set out by the school district and for some children, there have been a growing amount of challenges and frustrations trying to acquire this skill. In spite of the amount of

literacy intervention provided, some students still struggle to meet even the minimum level set out by the school district.

The fact that students still struggle to learn to read despite interventions, has prompted me to reflect about what I already know about teaching reading, and inquire into how students learn to read. I knew that there were different aspects to reading and, as a teacher, I tried to ensure that I was teaching my students these aspects. My reading program had a balance in the components that I knew were important in the reading process. I reviewed letter sounds and blends, taught digraphs and diphthongs, ran a spelling program and read stories to my class every day (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton and Johnston, 2010; Johnson, 2006; Johnson & Keier, 2010; Mahiri & Maniates, 2013; Miller, 2013). I made available from which to choose, books in a wide array of topics and made sure there were both fiction and non-fiction titles. I gave students choice in some of what they read and ensured they were also reading books at the level appropriate for their level of development, also known as just right level of text. Just right text ensures that the books children are reading are at a level that they can read most of the words independently and are able to understand and make meaning from the text. Allington has found that just right level text should be read with 99% accuracy or higher (Allington, 2005). Despite all of this, not all students were meeting expectations in reading by the end of the year. I knew I needed to try something different. I started by exploring how students learn and about additional aspects of reading. Through reading professional journals articles, reading teacher resources, attending workshops, observing other teachers in the classroom and asking lots of questions, I now have a better understanding of how children learn, improved ideas of ways in which to teach reading, and new concepts and strategies to use.

## **Exploration**

After this past year of exploration, I now realize that what I have been doing since I first began teaching reading to grade one students has been good but I have also discovered ways that I can make it better. For example, I still read stories out loud to the students in my class but I use some of these times to initiate deeper thinking. I provoke the students to think beyond the words on the page, and to learn how to infer and predict instead of simply listening for entertainment's sake. Based on the principles of SmartLearning, created by Close (n.d.), I have used picture books as a springboard through which to extend learning to writing responses, and oral language and drama activities. SmartLearning is an approach that the school district in which I teach, has readily adopted. It is a system of research-proven practices that equip all learners with powerful tools for learning (Close, n.d.). The framework is suitable for students of all ages and

Motivates students into deep comprehension and higher levels of achievement through various activities which activate and build background knowledge, set goals in relation to criteria established for tasks at hand, use multiple ways to process information, monitor and regulate learning as it progresses, transform learning into personalized demonstrations of understanding, and reflect on personal learning as the learning unfolds (“SmartLearning”, n.d., para. 4).

As part of the SmartLearning approach, I have also used a program called *Words Their Way* which is a word study approach. I chose to use this approach as it is widely used in the school in which I teach and supports student understanding by looking closely at the words to discover patterns or conventions of the English language. This structure involves the students working daily with a collection of words in a variety of activities.

The words for each student are determined after an initial assessment to determine where each child is at with their literacy skills development. Some students are still learning beginning letter sounds while some are further along the continuum and need more work on recognizing

digraphs in words. After Spring Break, I also introduced an Independent Reading piece to the literacy program as all students were able to read by this point. Independent reading is also based on the SmartLearning (Close, n.d.) philosophy. It is a process that involves students making predictions about their individual books, sharing that prediction orally with a partner, reading a small portion of their book, orally retelling what happened and then writing about it.

This past year I also attended Leveled Literacy Intervention (L.L.I.) system training. This is a “small-group, supplementary literacy intervention designed to help teachers provide powerful, daily, small-group instruction for the lowest achieving students at their grade level” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2011). The kit that our school has is for grade two students and since I had grade one, I used the format and ideas from these lessons and used them for grade one groups. This was easy to accomplish as there was a wide range of books for the grade two level and the easiest books in the kit were suitable for the groups that needed the support. I began these groups after Spring Break when I noticed there were seven students who were having difficulty with similar skills.

I divided these seven students into two groups and I met with each group twice a day, three times a week. Each of the lessons involved having the children warm up by whisper reading a previously read book while I listened closely to each student as they read. After listening to all students, a new book was introduced to the group. I chose the book for the strategy or skill that was to come from it. The initial task was a picture walk whereby students looked solely at the pictures then shared their connections with the group or made predictions. I would read it aloud first while the students followed in their own copy. Next they would read it again with me. Finally the students would read the book together as a group while I listened, ensuring that students were reading the words correctly. Students would take turns reading a passage aloud when I indicated. I would then ask them to read it one more time with a partner

from the group. As detailed in chapter two, research has shown that repeated readings help to secure the syntax or sentence structures and vocabulary children have heard, into their own memories (Johnston, Invernizzi, Helman, Bear, & Templeton, 2015). I noticed that by practicing a new book repeated times while the words are still fresh in their memories students were better able to retain new vocabulary and transfer this vocabulary to new books or into their writing.

This year I also participated in Changing Results for Young Readers (Changing Results, n.d.), a provincial initiative sponsored by the Ministry of Education. The goal of this initiative is “simply increasing the number of engaged successful young readers” (Johnson, 2012, para. 3). Schools are chosen to participate and each school is required to send a team of three teachers to take part. Being involved with this required choosing a case study student in the class and focusing on something in our current teaching practice to make changes to in order to make a difference in their reading. Some of the areas teachers explored were student motivation and engagement in reading, self-regulation and social-emotional strategies, use of language in the classroom, student conferencing and explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies. Educators in the district participating in the initiative met six times during the year with other primary classroom teachers and learning support teachers and shared what we were doing in our classrooms and what, if any, changes we were noticing.

My emphasis in the initiative this year was working one-on-one with my case study student to focus on explicitly teaching reading strategies and improving this student’s self-confidence. The learning support teacher at our school into my classroom for one, 45 minute period of in-class support instead of taking some students for a pull-out session to work with her in her room, which was the previous model of support. I used this time to work one-on-one with a student in an intensive reading intervention. I based my instructional strategies for this time we had every week on a combination of ideas from Fountas and Pinnell’s Guided Reading (1996)



and L.L.I. (2011), Clay's Reading Recovery (1993) lessons and Allington's recommendations for literacy success. Each lesson included warming up with a previously read book, introducing and reading a new book, and teaching a lesson based on what was noticed when the student was reading. By including a previously read book, the student's confidence increased as she felt successful during this reading time. The student was able to choose the new book from a selection that I had prechosen for her. These books included text that contained examples in areas that needed further development for her. We had the opportunity to read each new book prior to it being sent home for practice. I also read with her two other times a week and did mini lessons on skills needed. After only one month of these sessions, the student's parents commented on how much better she was reading and also how her confidence was increasing. I began including a writing component each session as well, as I had learned that often reading and writing develop together and even reinforce one another (Clay, 1998). Over the last ten years research has shown that reading and writing are more interdependent than we thought. A child's literacy development is dependent on this interconnection between reading and writing ("The Relationship between Reading and Writing", n.d.). Graham and Hebert (2010) also found that while reading and writing are closely connected, writing is an often-overlooked tool for improving reading skills and content learning. The addition of a writing in our sessions proved to be an important component to our time as she was not only able to correct many letter reversals and incorrect letter formation with the direct support, her writing development grew, as well.

The learning assistance support teacher and I also decided to track student progress throughout the year. We endeavored to read as often as possible with students and keep running records and notes on each session. Due to my schedule this year, this support teacher was teaching in my class for four, 45 minute periods each week and we worked together throughout the year to increase the literacy levels of the students. The records we kept proved to be very

informational and helpful. We kept running records on books that were read and with that we were able to plan differentiated instruction. The data collected helped us track which students had been listened to most recently and the approximate level of the books read. We could also very easily identify which skills students had mastered and which skills they still were having trouble with. We made notes for ourselves and for one another regarding what strategies and grammar rules we had taught and how the students were progressing. We also had the opportunity to meet once every six weeks to discuss student progress and make plans for the next professional collaboration time. This dedicated time and the conversations that took place between us were extremely valuable and helpful for me with my assessment of each student as far as their reading skill development went during the year. It reaffirmed some of the concerns I had or things I had noticed, and it brought to the forefront the biggest needs of the students and therefore helped in my instructional planning.

I also explored initiating *The Daily Five* (Boushey & Moser, 2006) structure in my classroom. In their book, Boushey and Moser (2006) suggest specific tasks which should be a part of every child's day - Read to Yourself, Read to Someone, Work on Writing, Listen to Reading, and Spelling/Word Work – and they all work towards getting the children to be motivated, independent learners. This process supports the concept of identifying and implementing set tasks suggested by Allington and Gabriel (2012). Many of the five components of this program were already a part of my regular day, so I had to add a daily writing component, as well as a daily opportunity for students to read a book they had already practiced to a partner. The delivery of all of these components changed from my usual routine in that I was trying to get students to a more independent level in their literacy development. This proved to be the most difficult part for me with this approach as I found grade one students still require much direct guidance and support.

In addition to these new changes I made to my normal literacy routine, I continued to do many of the usual activities that I have been doing for years. These included developing a word wall which included common sight words and student-initiated words that students asked for help in spelling when it was writing time (words such as sleepover, weekend, party, birthday, community centre are examples of some student initiated words). I also added some teacher-initiated words such as seasonal words or context-based words (like field trip or performance related words). These words were kept up on a wall for the entire year and students could refer to these words when writing. Based on previous success, and research (Adams, 1990), I continued to encourage students to sound out unfamiliar words when they were writing in order to encourage inventive spelling. Adams noted “the evidence that inventive spelling activity simultaneously develops phonemic awareness and promotes understanding of the alphabetic principle is extremely promising, especially in view of the difficulty with which children are found to acquire these insights through other methods of teaching” (1990, p. 387). I also included the ‘Bag of Books’ independent reading component. Students kept a collection of leveled books in their desk that were chosen by them, but at levels determined by me. This bag included five books: two that were a level below their independent reading level for warming up, two books that were at their independent reading level (a level in which students could read the books independently and with about 99% accuracy) and one book was a level higher in order to challenge their cognitive ability and acquire new vocabulary. The students read from their book bag four times a week during both independent and partner reading times. The expectation that I had for the students was that the books were each read three times: the first time was for decoding the words, that is figuring out what the words are; the second reading was to improve the fluency in which they could read it; and the third reading was to work on expression and further fluency. Once each of the books had been read three times they would check in with me

and often I had time to quickly listen to them read a passage from the highest level book they had. They would then go out in the hallway to where the collection of leveled books is kept and get new ones. Based on the running records we kept and how well students were doing, they were moved up levels when needed.

I also implemented a home reading component to my literacy program as I have done in other years. I have found that students who regularly read books at a suitable level, at home, become better readers than those students who do not. This is enforced by Guthrie (2004) who suggests that the benefits of reading outside the classroom are bidirectional: students who are better readers tend to be more interested in reading outside of school, but more reading outside of school also makes students better readers. By reading at home on a regular basis, students are able to practice and reinforce the skills, tools and strategies that they had been taught at school. I have found that not only do students become better readers the more they read, their vocabularies also expand more quickly. This is confirmed by Shany and Biemiller, (1995) who found through their research that increasing reading practice can increase vocabulary and comprehension. By providing just right books for students to take home and read with their parents, I have offered opportunities for parents to engage in their child's schooling and help their children learn listening skills, vocabulary and language skills (Family Literacy Foundation, 2001).

This past year I also incorporated a student reader schedule, which began in January. One student each day read a story to the class. This was a story chosen by the student and was to be a practiced book. It could be a story from the student's bag of books, a book from home, a book from the home reading component or any other book. Allington and Gabriel (2012) note that the experience of choosing what students read boosts motivation. Ivey and Broaddus (2001) and Reis et al., (2007) also confirm through their own research that "by giving students opportunities to choose what they read, it helps them develop the ability to choose appropriate texts for

themselves – a skill that dramatically increases the likelihood they will read outside school” (Allington & Gabriel, 2012, p. 11). I took this opportunity while they were reading for more assessment to use in my teaching; not only assessment of learning but assessment for learning, as well. Knowing what children are able to do informs assessment, makes it easier for reporting purposes and helps when planning future literacy lessons for my students.

### **Growth**

After a year of reflecting on my current teacher practices and approaches and then exploring current reading research and trying new ideas, I have a much better understanding of not only how children learn to read and the different pieces that make up their reading processing system, I also have an improved understanding of the various components that are involved when learning to read. When I reflect back to when I first read that Clay believes that all children can learn to read, though not at the same pace (2001), I felt an even bigger sense of responsibility to try different approaches when teaching reading when a student is experiencing difficulty. If a person with as much research background as Clay says that all students can learn to read, I felt that I needed to look at teaching reading differently. It motivated me to learn more about reading processes. This was reinforced when I read Allington (2013), who noted that:

Every primary-grade teacher needs to know how to teach several decoding approaches effectively – several because no single approach works for every child and effective teachers adapt their teaching until they locate the best method for developing decoding proficiencies for each child (p. 522).

When I refer back to my original questions of: (1) what strategies, approaches and components to teaching reading have shown to be most effective on student learning of this important skill? and (2) how can I have the most impact when teaching grade one students to read? I was hoping this early childhood master’s final project was going to give me a definitively clear answer. I am able

to say that running Guided Reading groups had a tremendous effect on the students' reading skill development, and their confidence for those that were within the two groups. The students involved got excited when they were able to read books they had previously thought were too difficult. They seemed to look forward to the times that we met and sometimes even asked when we were next going to read together. Because there were seven students involved in that group, I would consider the Guided Reading intervention to be the most effective in having a positive impact on the students' reading progress. If I look at the progress made for improvement in reading levels, then I would identify that the one-on-one time that I had with the case study student from my Changing Results for Young Readers initiative had the greatest impact as she moved from not yet meeting expectations for reading in both the November and March reporting periods to fully meeting grade level expectations in reading (an increase of twenty levels) by May of the same school year.

When I consider how so many students kept asking when they could read with me during silent reading times, I cannot help but wonder if it was because they were motivated by being able to choose their own books or whether they wanted me to do a running record and possibly move them up a level. What I do know is I have experienced firsthand that fact that children want to read and they enjoy reading one-on-one and because of that, I am considering changing how my independent reading looks next year and possibly inviting parents to come in and read with students and/or organizing some big buddy reading opportunities with older students in the school.

Reflecting back on the past year, I have difficulty coming up with any one specific intervention or strategy that proved to be significantly more effective than another because each idea I tried showed success, just successes in different areas and in different ways. Because of this, the big idea that this narrative inquiry really reinforced for me is the idea that there needs to

be a balance in what is taught in school, as well as a balance in how things are taught. I have always felt the importance of balance in all aspects of life; food, exercise, screen time, work and play. As a teacher, I have also felt the importance of finding a balance and this research project has led me to the concept of balanced literacy (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). A balanced literacy approach includes various reading and writing contexts (Johnson, 2006) such as reading and writing to children, with children, and by children in every teaching day (Johnson & Keier, 2010). Balanced reading instruction means providing all children with opportunities to master concepts of print, learn the alphabetic principle, acquire word recognition skills, develop phonemic awareness, engage in and sustain interest in reading, and experience a variety of developmentally appropriate materials in the context of developmentally appropriate instruction. Teaching reading from this approach continues to be the major deterrent against reading failure (Adams, 1990; Snow et al., 1998). By taking the best strategies and approaches I know, and now that I have a better understanding of how children learn to read, I can apply the strategy or approach to the context it would apply to the best in order to best support all of my students. It is important to ensure all of these components of reading and writing are included every day, however the duration of time spent on each component will differ depending on the needs of the students. The key idea to a balanced approach is to provide different amounts of teacher support and different amounts of student responsibility, thereby a balance between the two.

This past year I implemented more literacy interventions and strategies than I ever had before, yet the results that I saw in my class were very consistent to the results that I have seen in past years. I saw progress in the students with which I did Guided Reading lessons. There was considerable progress made with the student that I spent one-on-one time with teaching specific reading strategies. Students consistently asked if they could read with me. There was excitement and motivation during book times. Could these successes be attributed to the interventions in

place this year or could they be because of the particular group of students or some other factor? What I can be certain about, is that there needs to be a balanced approach to the literacy instruction within a classroom. As Clay (2001) and Lyons (2003) have identified, most children are capable of learning to read so it is up to teachers to “make the decisions about instruction that compromise or supplant the kind of experiences all children need to become engaged, successful readers” (Allington & Gabriel, 2012, p. 10). “The way teachers structure the learning environment and the way students spend their time influences the level of reading proficiency the students have attained at the end of the academic year” (Boushey & Moser, 2006, p. 7). It is important to provide a balance of literacy skill instruction, a variety of books available to students, and activities that motivate students. By giving students these occasions, teachers help to provide the elements of effective instruction (Allington & Gabriel, 2012) and provide thoughtful teaching and learning opportunities (Miller, 2013). “Diversified strategies and methods employing content determined by learners’ circumstances must be sought, building on local knowledge and experiences as well as on the specific environment and cultural conditions” (UNESCO, 2004, p.15).

I chose to explore these particular programs and approaches based on the professional reading that I had completed this past year. By comparing the suggestions set out in the various books I read – *The Daily Five* (Boushey & Moser, 2006), *Reading with Meaning* (Miller, 2013), *One Child at a Time* (Johnson, 2006), and *Catching Readers Before They Fall: Supporting Readers Who Struggle, K-4* (Johnson & Keier, 2010) – and comparing it to what Allington, Clay, and Fountas and Pinnell have found, I explored various instructional strategies to use in my class to address literacy skills instruction. A common theme that occurred through each of the books was that literacy instruction should be meaningful and balanced. *The Daily Five* suggests that every day a student should: read to self, read to someone, work on writing, listen to reading, and



spelling/word work. A typical *Leveled Literacy Intervention* (Fountas & Pinnell) lesson includes reading, writing, phonics, word study and oral language. The authors of *Catching Readers Before They Fall* feel that students should take part in various reading and writing activities such as read aloud, shared reading, Guided Reading, independent reading, community writing, independent writing or morning message daily. Schifferdecker (n.d.) believes that a combination of reading theories and instructional approaches may be the best approach to teaching children to read.

This next school year, I plan on continuing to have literacy as a focus. I like the individual aspects of The Daily Five but I find the independent focus of the program too much for children as young as grade one or kindergarten, but I like the idea of reading to self and to someone else, listening to someone read, writing and word work every day. I can definitely see the advantages to running Guided Reading groups as it benefits a greater number of students, if there is a small group that needs the same support. The only difficult part about running groups is managing the rest of the class while you are teaching a group. That is where prior training comes into play to prepare the rest of the students of what to do when a Guided Reading group is going on. One strategy that I have gotten away from over the years has been a morning message. This is something that I would like to implement once again in my practice. A few of the books mention the benefits of it and I can understand how it would help children learn some sight words, work on problem solving, teach them about punctuation, work on reading fluency, understand the concept of words and learn letter-sound correspondence.

Based on my research and investigations this year, literacy will continue to be a priority for me in the form of a balanced literacy program. I plan to have my students reading books, listening to others read books and talk about books they have read or heard every day. I also plan to have students write and take part in word work activities every day. When needed, I will also

lead Guided Reading groups. Of course, these activities will be dependent on the needs of the children in my class and the additional support that I may possibly get. Although I will have a literacy focus in my class this year, I also plan on having much play-based, as well. Through the research I have done, I have learned that although literacy is crucial for children's future success, some children are not ready for learning at this early age and unstructured play and outdoor learning is also very important. The key word for this next year is balance.

Sharing my findings with other teachers may help them to realize how important having a balance is to literacy instruction in the classroom and that the teacher is the most important component to a successful literacy program (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Zygouris-Coe, 2001). I feel that all of the professional reading and exploring that I have done in the past year has helped me to be better informed when I make the important decisions regarding teaching reading in my classroom. It is essential that teachers understand the reading process as a network of strategies that each child constructs for himself, work together as a staff and with parents to support all readers and to make the most of every teaching encounter with readers (Johnson, 2006). As a result of this journey, I now have a better understanding of the reading process, and I have become a more knowledgeable, confident teacher.

## **Chapter 4: Reflections**

The purpose of this chapter is to share my personal and professional reflections regarding my journey throughout the M.Ed. program. I have organized my reflections into three categories. First, I will look back at some of the various courses and highlight some of my enduring understandings. Next, I will share where I plan to go from this point. Finally, I will reflect on my capstone project by making recommendations for further research considerations.

### **Reflecting Back on my M.Ed. Program**

Being involved in this Early Education Master's Program through The University of Victoria has been an incredible journey for me. After being absent from student life for more than twenty years, I embarked on a new chapter of life and enrolled in the program. My initial motivation to take a M.Ed. program was for an increase in pay and to contribute to my pension when it came that time. I enrolled in this particular Master's program at The University of Victoria because it was an early childhood education focus and not only do I really enjoy this age group, but I also knew there was going to be a future opportunity for me to change my focus from teaching grade one to teaching kindergarten, if I wanted, when the kindergarten teacher at our school retired. The thought of teaching children so young and being the first introduction to public school for many of the children was a scary notion for me so my motivation was to get as much information about the stages of development, expectations and current research regarding kindergarten before making the decision to change grades. While still enrolled in the first course, I realized that I would be taking away much more from this program than I had originally thought.

That first semester, I was very overwhelmed by the amount of reading required but even more than that, the quality of writing that was expected. I had gone from handing in papers in a hard copy version, with footnotes that I had typed out on a typewriter, to submitting papers

completely electronically – no hard copies involved, at all. There were times when I questioned whether or not I was smart enough to be in a master’s program because I felt like I was not a strong writer, critical thinker or effective presenter. It was a huge learning curve for me changing how I think and write to the academic level that was required. I look back with pride on how far I have come and I think about what a profound learning experience it has been for me personally, and professionally, and what a great opportunity it has been to reinforce to my own children that a person can accomplish something they really want to, no matter how large or daunting it may, at first, seem to be.

Over the course of this journey through the M.Ed. program, I feel that I have been introduced to a much larger world. Instead of only being aware of initiatives and changes going on in the school district in which I work, I have been exposed to global ideas, theories and practices. I have been able to take away something new from all of my courses but some have been more impactful than others. One of my first discoveries was the introduction of the Reggio Emilia approach to education. I had never heard of this before that first semester and since then, I have heard more and more references made to this approach in the province. Not only in larger centres like Vancouver and Victoria, but I have even seen advertising this past year for a Reggio-influenced preschool program in the small, interior city in which I live. I really connected to the idea of learning through exploration and discovery and the principles of respect, responsibility, and community on which Reggio Emilia is based. I have been involved in some district-based inquiry learning and it was interesting to see how that same concept can be applied to children’s learning.

Something else I really connected to is the idea of taking learning outdoors. As a mother, I have struggled at times with getting my own children outside more and in front of a screen less often. I really appreciated gaining new ideas and learning how better to incorporate the outdoors

with my students, as well as my own children. This was a new idea that I incorporated immediately into my own teaching practice. I started taking my students outside regularly for unstructured free-play time which led to many learning experiences. I became excited along with my students at new discoveries and I saw the immediate benefits of learning in outdoor settings. I started sharing my excitement with other teachers at my school and some of them also started taking their students outside more. Because of the benefits I have seen and the enthusiasm that I see in my students, this is a component of my classroom practice that I will be continuing.

Another aspect of this M.Ed. program that I have really valued has been the conversations and discussions that I have been involved in. These discussions have taken place with professors and peers within classes I have taken, but there have also been many meaningful conversations outside of class. Because we are all in this particular program and interested in children within the early childhood realm, there are common interests within our cohort. There are also many disparities and that is what has deepened the conversations. Many of us live in different parts of Canada and as such, our experiences are varied. This variety of experiences and geographical locations of our members has made for great discussions and I have enjoyed, and valued, hearing what is happening in various preschools and kindergarten classes throughout the country. My thinking has regularly been challenged and even altered through the discussions and sharing of experiences and thoughts, which has often led to either a new, transformed or deeper understanding of the topic.

Through the research, assignments and discussions in this Master's program, I have gained more background knowledge and understanding into some of the current trends and practices in education. This has given me an increased confidence as a teacher. I do not question, or doubt, as much some of the activities that I do in my classroom and I am more willing to try new ideas. For example, in my grade one classroom, I still provide opportunity for unstructured,

free time every day. I have always felt that play was so important for children, even in an academic, school setting, and there is so much can be learned through the interactions during this time, such as problem-solving, turn taking and taking risks. I used to question my practice of providing this time, however, as there are so many other more academic activities that I could be doing instead of allowing my students to play. Taking a course that had a focus on play, and reading the research that supports this type of activity, really helped me to feel confident about my decision about continuing this free time.

I am also more willing to try new things in my classroom and take chances by getting out of my comfort zone. This year, by researching reading theories and then blending some approaches, I have tried new programs and activities with my students such as *The Daily Five*, more partner reading opportunities, tracking reading progress and doing more running records to keep track of students' progress, Guided Reading groups for students that need the additional support and more one-on-one reading with students. I have also attended as many reading related meetings and professional development opportunities as has been available to me, including a workshop on PM Benchmarking (assessment), a presentation by a trained Reading Recovery intervention teacher, Leveled Literacy Intervention training, a conference with Peter Johnson, author of *Choice Words*, the Changing Results for Young Readers initiative, and observing in four other primary classrooms. I experienced success with many of these trials and disappointment with others. *The Daily Five* is a great approach and I have an appreciation for how it could work in a classroom but I found that a grade one classroom is most likely not the ideal setting for this type of independent learning approach as the students still require much teacher support. I expect it would work considerably better in an upper primary or even intermediate age classroom. I have new-found confidence, though, to try new ideas and

approaches; not because somebody has suggested it, but because I think it might be beneficial for my students.

Another aspect that has changed for me during this program has been the introduction to the vast array of literature that is available on so many different topics. Initially I read articles and looked at professional resources only when needed. I did not even consider reading journal articles or researching different topics on my own accord. For me, they were something to do for a course or because it was required, perhaps by an administrator. This past year, I have started searching out articles and researching information simply out of curiosity or information's sake. I have developed a desire to read further professional literature and learn more about the latest research and trends in education, especially in the areas of literacy, play, outdoor education and how they relate to the kindergarten and primary classroom settings. I am reading and researching not only for interest's sake, but also to get information that may help me to be an even better teacher.

### **What Now**

One of my initial reasons to take this particular M.Ed. program was to get the latest research and information on kindergarten-aged children in order to make an informed decision whether or not to switch from teaching grade one to kindergarten. Now that I have this new confidence and newly found information, I hope to continue looking to research to help answer questions I am sure I will have in the future, especially with regards to making this move. By teaching younger students and learning new curriculum and outcomes, I am certain of the need to find answers to questions that are yet to come. I plan to continually challenge myself in my teaching and my thinking about how best to reach all students in my class. I also hope to continue to think deeper and seek out others with which to have meaningful discussions and conversations, especially in regards to new trends and research. I anticipate with the

implementation of the new British Columbia Ministry of Education redesigned curriculum, there will be numerous opportunities to try new approaches and explore new ways of teaching.

In regard to this capstone project, I hope to take what I have learned and share it with teachers interested in improving their literacy teaching. Our district is beginning a mentorship program and this M.Ed. program has inspired me to be more of a leader within the area of literacy instruction. Teaching reading has always been an area that I have always been interested in and now that I have more information to back up my thoughts, beliefs, and ideas, I feel that I could be a help to other teachers who are beginning their careers teaching children to read, but require more knowledge, or perhaps confidence, regarding how best to be successful at literacy instruction. Many teacher education programs provide strong foundational knowledge for teaching but experiencing teaching in a real classroom is often very different than what has been learned in a university class. Being available as someone to whom teachers could ask questions or get feedback from, would be a good beginning to build a community of reading teachers within our district. It would bring together people with a common interest and goal of being the best reading teacher they can be. It would also provide the opportunity to share resources and ideas that have been tried. Merisuo-Storm and Soininen (2014) find that when people feel confident, they are more willing to try other new things. Being part of a community of like-minded teachers would provide a safe environment where teachers should feel comfortable talking about activities or strategies that they have tried in their classrooms and sharing the difference they observed. I feel that a community feel like this is what I was missing when I first began teaching reading to grade one students.

Not only have I had an increase in content knowledge during this M.Ed. program, I have learned how to look at, and think about, things in a different manner. In the recent past, I have often taken what people have said as certainty. I have not questioned them, and I have assumed



that if they are saying it, it must be true. For example, running Guided Reading groups is how to teach reading. That is what I was told ten years ago when I first taught grade one. I have since learned that there is more needed than that but that was the foundation I once believed. This capstone project has given me opportunity to look deeper into what is involved not only for teaching reading, but learning how to read, as well. I have discovered how to go deeper with my thinking, speak about things with more confidence, write with more meaning, and research topics that interest me. Researching topics often lead to new ideas and concepts and thus expands my knowledge. I have also gained experience learning how to research concepts and topics. I have discovered professional journals and have developed an enjoyment for reading articles of interest. These are all skills that will benefit not only my teaching practice but how I interact with my peers and help in a leadership capacity as a mentor within my school district.

In doing this particular capstone project, I have learned much about the ways that children learn to read and some of the components involved with literacy development. I have discovered that my personal beliefs regarding teaching reading lie within the balanced literacy approach. A balanced literacy program strikes a balance between both whole language and phonics. Knowing this has given me a better understanding of what and how to teach. For instance, to ensure reading to, with, and by children I can read aloud, do shared reading and interactive read aloud, Guided Reading and independent reading. To approach writing to, with, and by children, activities can include morning message, community writing and independent writing. I would like to share this specific information about reading and writing and corresponding ideas with other teachers and be available for further discussions. As such, I would like to organize opportunities to get together with other literacy teachers in the school district and have the opportunity to share ideas, suggestions or even concerns with others. I also plan on continuing my personal exploration of new reading trends and current research and I

would like to be able to share this information with this group via regular emails. An impactful discovery for me during the course of this Master's program was discovering some of the information that is available to me. As a new teacher, I would have appreciated having another teacher with literacy instruction experience being available to talk and ask questions to and knowing how to access further information. As a further step, I would like to take what I have learned about teaching reading and then use that as a guiding point for approaching literacy in kindergarten. If I have an understanding of some of the various components that are involved in learning to read, then I can learn to teach them through some of the various activities mentioned above, like morning messages and reading activities. Having this background knowledge helps to create a better plan for approaching literacy in kindergarten.

### **Conclusion**

When I look back at all the information that I have gleaned about literacy, reflect on the new things I have learned about the processes involved when children learn to read, and I read about the responsibility that teachers can do to improve reading skills in primary-aged children, I have information on only one piece of a what a child has to learn. Even though literacy is only a part of a child's education, I believe that reading is essential to success in our society; it is the major avenue to learning (Zygouris-Coe, 2001). My motivation for this particular topic for the capstone project was a desire to become a better teacher after noticing that more children are struggling when acquiring reading skills. Over the last two or three years, I have had more children beginning grade one not knowing all of their letter sounds, more students than usual not participating in the home reading component to my literacy program, and throughout the year more students having difficulty learning to read. By the end of the year, I had fewer students fully meeting Ministry of Education expectations for reading than what had been the norm for the years leading up to it. I had been at the same school for seven years and the kindergarten

teacher was the same, so I knew the discrepancy was not a result of a change in teachers or school, yet more children were needing additional support.

I decided to look into this concern by investigating two questions. First, what strategies, approaches and components to teaching reading have shown to be most effective on student learning of this important skill? And second, how can I have the most impact when teaching grade one students to read? Although these questions have been answered through my research and investigation, in the process, more questions have come to light for me. For instance, most of the strategies that I tried this year showed success. How then, does a teacher determine which strategies to use? If research tells us that the most important times for intervention is when children are in kindergarten and grade one (Allington, 2008; McGill-Franzen, 2006) why is there not more funding available to support this? Research also indicates that if early intervention is delayed until nine years of age—the time that most children with reading difficulties first receive assistance—approximately 75 % of these students will continue to have difficulties learning to read throughout high school and their adult years (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). I cannot help but wonder if the reason that some children struggle so much with learning is not the school system or teachers failing the children, but perhaps it is linked to other factors. Such factors include: an increase of screen time by children, less communication and interaction with parents, poor sleep routines, nutrition and less time spent outdoors. Perhaps a solution for the increase in struggling learners could be better addressed by addressing some of these other factors.

Whatever the reason though, reading is the major avenue to learning, and it must be mastered in school (Zygouris-Coe, 2001). The nature of children is changing and is very multifaceted, and so the nature of learning. Teaching therefore, must also change. I would recommend further studies into these factors as possible contributors to children's learning difficulties. Instead of increasing teaching time and expectations on children, the answer may be

to get back to more outdoor time and more play. Allow children to be children for a little longer and remove some of the expectations that have been placed on them. After all, research has found that children who learn to read later (age 7), catch up to their peers earlier (by age 11) (Suggate et al., 2013). Perhaps by understanding the balance that is needed in a child's life (academics, play, sleep, nutrition, and physical activity) and ensuring that I am helping to keep this balance for the children in my class, they will not struggle as much in school. This is an area that I would like to further explore in the future.

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Appendix A

**A Network of Processing Systems for Reading**

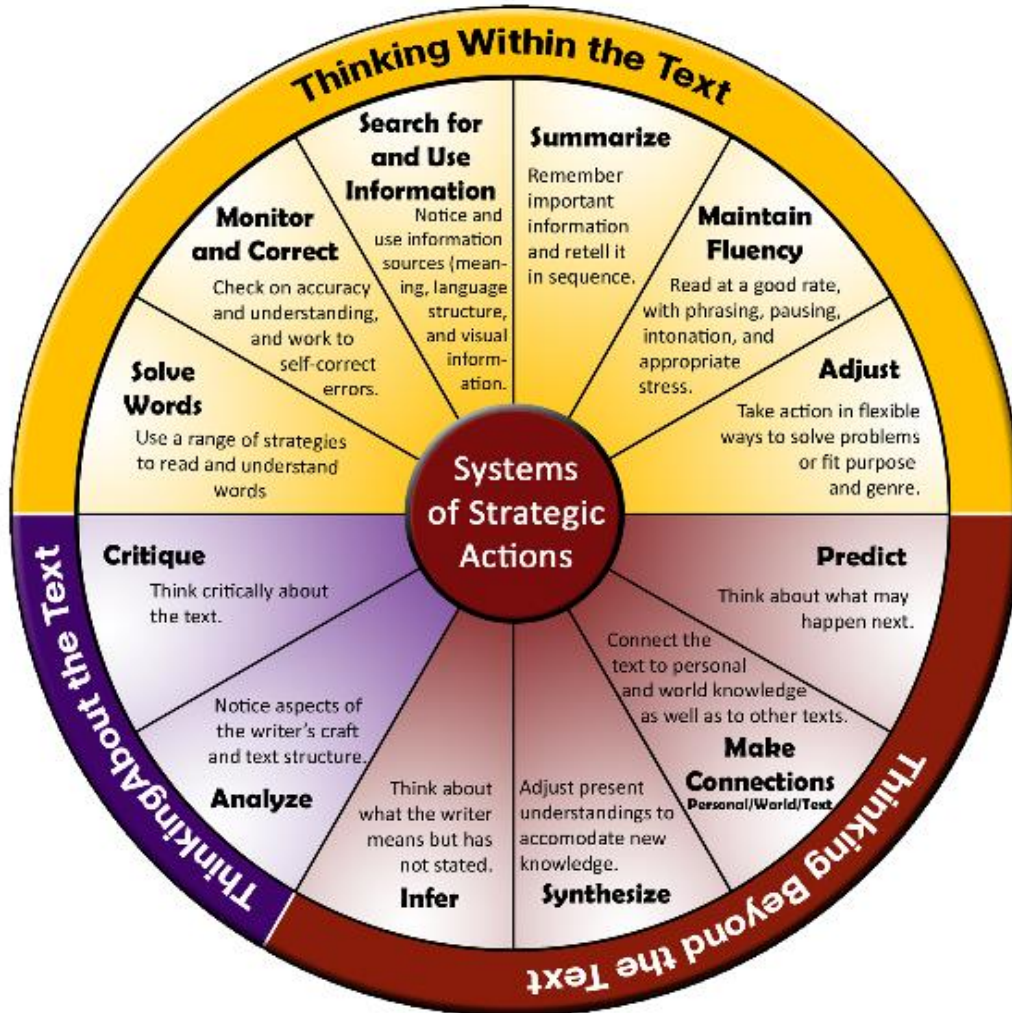


Diagram from inside front cover of Fountas, I. C. & Pinnell, G. S. (2009). *When readers struggle: Teaching that works*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.