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## Reading Intervention Strategies for General Education Middle School Students: Providing a Space for Teachers to Share Effective Methods

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READING INTERVENTION STRATEGIES FOR GENERAL EDUCATION  
MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS: PROVIDING A SPACE FOR TEACHERS  
TO SHARE EFFECTIVE METHODS

Amy Michelle Baas

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Reading Specialist

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Amy M. Baas

## **Abstract**

While studies have been conducted to highlight intervention strategies that will help struggling readers, very few of these empirical studies have used middle school aged students as participants. And among those studies which have, the results were based solely on quantifiable data; the opinions of the classroom teachers who work with these students daily cannot be found in these or any of the empirical studies. The purpose of this thesis is to fill this gap by offering a space for middle school English language arts teachers to share effective intervention strategies that they use in their classrooms to help struggling readers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions with seven middle school English language arts teachers. Phone interviews were transcribed and e-mail interviews were printed for the purpose of reading and analyzing the data. Selective and simultaneous coding was used to begin categorizing the data. Through analysis of these categories, five themes emerged as types of interventions these participants found to be effective: thinking-based, teacher-based, student-based, sensory-based, and interest-based. All of these strategies can be used in conjunction with independent reading. The five findings revealed some important recommendations for school administrations, middle school teachers, and educational institutions.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Problem Statement**

Background knowledge, prior knowledge, schema—all terms for the important tool that a reader brings with him or her to the reading process. “What readers bring to any act of reading is as important for successful reading as anything they use from the published text” (Goodman, 1996). Many students will be able to move through the stages of reading development to proficient reading without difficulty, while still others will struggle with reading comprehension at one stage or another (Cantrell et al., 2010). This can often be seen at the upper elementary and middle school levels as students are being asked to read more complex texts and often independently. Hall, Burns, and Edwards (2011) present that “for over 34 years, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2005, 2007, 2008) has consistently recorded that the majority of middle school students have persistent difficulties in comprehending print-based texts” (p. 3). Through years of experience, observations, and adjustments, teachers have discovered strategies and activities that successfully help their struggling readers advance more quickly in their reading comprehension performance; however, these methods are rarely noted in any research or publications. Publications that address comprehension in the middle school arena frequently propose a company developed comprehension model and either promote or extinguish the model’s success based on purely quantitative data; the classroom teachers are rarely given a space to offer observations or opinions. Joseph (2008) points out “there are only approximately 24 empirical studies published in peer-reviewed journals in the last 20 years that address teaching basic reading skills to adolescents” (pg.42). Strategy development to fill this gap is essential to improving adolescents’

reading comprehension (Biancarosa & Snow, as cited in Cantrell et al., 2010). Few reading programs are marketed towards low-performing middle school students. Therefore, because middle school English or English language arts teachers must often find, and in some cases develop and try, their own interventions with struggling readers, interviews must be conducted to allow these frontline voices to be heard regarding effective intervention methods.

Students learn in different ways, and therefore, have different needs pertaining to receiving instruction. Struggling readers can have instructional needs that are very different from peers who are reading at or above grade level (Hall et al., 2011). Minimal research-based guidance exists for effective reading interventions for older students (Kamil et al., 2008). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (2005) emphasizes that previous studies have resulted in funding for assisting struggling readers in early grades, but they have not addressed the need for interventions amongst adolescents (as cited in Cantrell et al., 2010). NCES (2005) provides that there were more than 6 million readers in grades 7-12 in schools across America, and at least half of all middle and high school students do not have the necessary grade-level reading skills to successfully master curriculum standards (as cited in Gibbs 2009). One teacher in a study conducted by Moreau (2014) stated, “I think the percent of struggling readers we’re dealing with at the middle school level is vastly under-recognized. I don’t think it’s recognized that in some of the classrooms, 25-30% of our students are struggling with reading” (p.12). The result is students who separate themselves from both school and the world, who fail academically, and who often drop out of high school. “Beginning intervention immediately upon entering middle or high school may make the difference

in success or failure for the student” (Gibbs 2009). Middle school reading intervention studies, such as those conducted by Burns et al. (2011), Cantrell et al. (2010), and Schorzman and Cheek Jr. (2004), supply only the quantitative results of the strategy(s) tested on a particular group of students; the teachers’ opinions were not solicited. These studies fail to include teachers’ voices regarding student progress and reading instruction—a gap exists. That is, studies that report on attempted intervention strategies do not focus on the classroom teacher as a valid voice regarding the benefits or lack thereof with these mandated programs. Studies on specific reading strategies such as *Collaborative Strategic Reading* (Annamma et al., 2011), *READ 180* (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), and *Strategy-Based Intervention* (Cantrell et al., 2010) report their findings based on the test scores of these students about whom the researchers know very little and about whom the test scores provide the only evidence for comprehension increase. The perceptions of the classroom teacher are not indicated in any of these studies, whether investigating programs for-purchase or teacher-created interventions.

### **Importance of the Problem and Rationale for the Study**

Middle school struggling readers will only see this gap widen between their actual reading level and the grade level at which they are supposed to be reading if appropriate interventions are not used. Additionally, middle school students who are two or more grade levels behind in reading are not just at risk for falling behind academically, these students are also at a greater risk for dropping out of high school (Snow & Biancarosa, as cited in Fisher & Ivey, 2006; Gibbs 2009; Rief & Heimburge, 2006; Hall, Burns, and Edwards, 2011). Papalewis (2004) also notes, “What is known is that if a student cannot read by the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, the likelihood of dropping out is almost a given” (p. 24). However,

Fitzell (2011) concludes that referring students in grades 6-12 to the traditional special education programs is not the answer either. Therefore, all middle school teachers, even those who teach content areas outside of reading or English language arts, need skills and strategies to use with struggling readers, such as using pre-reading strategies, building connections and activating prior knowledge before reading, and engaging the students in meaningful reading experiences that will develop an interest in reading. Middle school teachers are frustrated by the lack of resources and programs available for assisting their struggling readers and do not know how to best teach adolescents who have severely delayed reading skills (Olson, Platt, as cited in Joseph, 2008). Therefore, because middle school English language arts teachers must often develop and try their own interventions to increase the comprehension of struggling readers; research is needed, sharing teachers' voices regarding effective intervention strategies.

It is also necessary to take into consideration the developmental issues that arise at the middle school level. Middle school students are often reluctant to participate in pull-out interventions due to self-esteem issues (Gibbs 2009). The alternative to pull-out interventions would be "inclusive" interventions. While this style of delivery rarely lends time for the intensive interventions needed, interventions provided more discretely are perhaps more effective. Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of the self-esteem issues that often weigh heavily on the middle school aged population when determining which interventions to use with these struggling readers. Hall, Burns, and Edwards (2011) state, "how struggling readers identify themselves as readers, and how they want to be identified by others, may largely determine how they use strategies during reading" (p. 89). If comprehension strategies are going to slow them down, or inhibit them from

“keeping up” with their peers, they will often choose to forfeit using comprehension strategies in order to avoid the negative stigma of being a poor reader (p. 88).

In contrast with the ease at which pull-out intervention programs can be used with elementary students, the time and opportunities to implement interventions at the middle school level is much more inhibited. Fitzell (2011) explains that the pullout approach is difficult to implement at the secondary level because schools are short-staffed, and it’s difficult to find a class from which to pull students because pull-outs for English interventions should not happen during English class – “an intervention requires extra time, not replacement time” (p. 9).

Hunley and McNamara (2010) also address the issue that several factors interfere with teachers’ abilities to implement interventions in the classroom:

Roach and Elliott (2008) cite research showing that integrity of implementation is degraded by increased intervention complexity and time required for implementation and as the need for multiple resources increases. If students are poorly motivated or resistant to interventions, integrity of implementation will undoubtedly suffer. Characteristics of interventionists also influence integrity, with higher levels of training, education, and motivation exerting a favorable impact. (p. 107)

### **Background of the Problem**

In the past, students who struggled with reading were placed in remediation rooms; however, more recently schools have shifted to using more intervention strategies to help these readers accelerate their growth more quickly (Papalewis, 2004). Papalewis (2004) notes, “Intervention strategies reflect a powerful philosophy shift in ensuring

school practices are meant for all students, especially older poor readers” (p. 25). This more recent focus on intervention over remediation has proven successful for older students, especially. Neal and Kelly (as cited in Papalewis, 2004) offer six characteristics of successful intervention programs: (1) Consider individual student needs, (2) Implement an apprenticeship model of teaching and learning, (3) Select appropriate materials, (4) Establish a focus on accelerative instruction, (5) Consider the role of fluent responding, and (6) Provide for affirmation of success.

Research has not identified a single strategy or program that has achieved the intended results for helping struggling adolescent readers. This has become a particularly worrisome issue as a result of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act passed by the United States Congress in 2001. According to this legislation, all children are supposed to be able to read fluently by the third grade, and the literacy gap is supposed to be closed in all schools. Because of this, schools have recently begun to place more emphasis on the need for classroom teachers to find ways to assist struggling readers in middle school. The pressure of this emphasis has caused tremendous stress on classroom teachers as the when and the how come into question: “When can I find time to give justice to these interventions?” and “How am I supposed to do them?” Thus, the need for teachers to hear effective strategies that other teachers are using to aid in the comprehension of struggling readers is more important than ever.

Vygotsky’s Dynamic Assessment model for reading intervention is theorized on the notion that scaffolding plays a critical role in literacy learning. This Dynamic Assessment has its origins in Vygotsky’s writings on the “zone of proximal development,” which noticed that children perform differently based on the amount of

assistance received. This theory dating back to the late 1970's found that the experience of engaging in activities where assistance is provided can in and of itself bring about reading development (Macrine & Sabbatino, 2008).

Today, schools are still looking for ways to engage students in activities that will aid in their reading and comprehension development. Some of the more popular programs that schools report using include DISTAR, PHAST, Early Steps, Reading Recovery, Reading Apprenticeship, and Direct Instruction. While each of these programs date back to the late 1970's and later, newer computer-based programs, such as Scholastic's *READ 180*, have come to the forefront as reading intervention strategies. Papalewis (2004) reports, "Read 180 is a reading intervention program created as a result of more than ten years of research by experts at Vanderbilt University" (pg. 26). This program is very specific to the reading needs of middle school students, supporting teachers in their efforts to improve their students reading levels. However, while many of these programs are still being used in today's classrooms, no empirical evidence is available to prove their effectiveness with middle school students. And besides, a "one-size-fits-all classroom instruction violates virtually everything we've learned from a hundred years of educational research" (Allington, 2002, p. 284).

At the heart of teaching is a desire to help each and every student become life-long learners. As a result, teachers will naturally try, devise, revamp, and create strategies and methods for helping students who are reading below their current grade level. Teachers are skilled in evaluating the effectiveness of strategies not just based on numeric test scores, but through discussions with students and an aptitude for eyeing a glimpse of more confidence and understanding from struggling readers. Studies are not

available, however, that share these victories. These effective strategies are ones that must be heard.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore effective intervention strategies used by experienced middle school English language arts teachers, whose methods have gone untapped. Through qualitative methods, I will explore the array of intervention methods seven middle school English language arts teachers have tried, and those that in their professional opinion have proven to be successful based on improved reading skills determined through both informal and formal assessments. Previous research studies, which will be discussed in chapter two, have investigated a variety of different intervention strategies. Many of these studies will use classroom teachers to teach the strategies, but do not solicit the teachers' opinions regarding effectiveness. Test scores can only provide a linear scope on the effectiveness of the specific skills taught and tested; whereas, teachers can provide a bigger picture of which intervention strategies result in personal growth for the development as a whole reader and which do not. This study will celebrate effective intervention strategies, as determined by middle school English language arts teachers, which are best suited for middle school students who are reading below grade level.

### **Research Questions**

This study seeks to provide middle school English language arts teachers a space to share intervention strategies they have found effective for general education struggling middle school readers. Specifically, I seek to answer one main question: What strategies have middle school English language arts teachers found to be most effective in helping



struggling readers in the classroom? To get to the heart of this main question, however, certain premise questions need to be built upon. These questions include: 1) What strategies do you use in your classroom to help with the reading development of struggling readers; 2) How are these interventions provided; 3) Who provides these interventions; and 4) How do you determine the effectiveness of a strategy?

### **Design, Data Collection and Analysis**

In this qualitative study, middle school teachers (6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grades) were interviewed regarding effective intervention methods they have used with general education struggling readers. Data was collected through private phone interviews and email correspondence. Phone interviews were transcribed and emails were saved in word documents. The interviews and emails were printed for the purposes of coding and analyzing.

I interviewed seven middle school English language arts teachers to investigate their perceptions of effective intervention strategies for middle school general education students. These semi-structured interviews, conducted by phone or via email, included a series of questions designed to gain information regarding the topic of specific reading interventions, but were structured in such a way that the participants' responses could be compared and contrasted later (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). Throughout each interview, whether by phone or via email, I was looking for and trying to solicit effective intervention strategies that these teachers found to use with individual, small groups, and whole classes—effectiveness based on the teacher's observations of the students' abilities to demonstrate an increase in comprehension, as well as through both formative and summative assessments.

Once the interviews were completed, I searched through each participant's statements for relevant experiences that described effective methods. I first categorized the data by using codes to indicate: 1) how reading levels were determined (methods used to determine reading level; 2) what types of reading interventions the teacher tried (i.e., published reading programs, school resources, teacher-created); 3) how and when the reading interventions were provided (including who provided the intervention, whether it was a pull-out or push-in intervention, group size and time of day that the intervention was provided); 4) if student identity was observed to be impacted by the use of an intervention; 5) how progress was determined; and 6) the role that motivation and interest played in the intervention. After coding, analyzing, and synthesizing the data, I then clustered their experiences and perceptions into themes (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). Five themes emerged. By presenting each of these themes in detail, I am providing a space for middle school English language arts teachers to share effective intervention strategies they use to assist general education middle school students who are reading two or more levels behind their grade level.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Comprehension** – relating the new to the already known; relating aspects of the world around us—including what we read—to the knowledge, intentions, and expectations we already have in our head; comprehension is a state rather than a set of skills or a process (Smith, 2004)

**Engagement** – the level of cognitive involvement that a person invests in a process (Guthrie et al., 1996; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; as cited in Kelley & Grace, 2009)

**Formative Assessment** – assessments that give immediate evidence of progress and provide an opportunity to make changes to instruction by telling teachers what was learned and where the gaps are in students’ skills and thought processes (Shores & Chester, 2009)

**Reading** – a complex, recursive thinking process (Fielding and Pearson 1994; Ogle 1986, as cited in Tovani, 2000); making sense from print (Goodman 1996)

**Reading Identity** – how capable individuals believe they are in comprehending texts, the value they place on reading, and their understandings of what it means to be a particular type of reader within a given context (Hall, Johnson, Juzwik, Worthan, & Mosely, 2010, McRae & Guthrie, 2009; as cited in Hall 2012)

**Reading Motivation** – the individual’s personal goals, values, and beliefs with regard to the topics, processes, and outcomes of reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, as cited in Becker, McElvany, & Kortenbruck, 2010)

**Strategy** – an intentional plan that is flexible and can be adapted to meet the demands of the situation. [Tovani, 2004 (adapted from Pearson et al. 1992)]

**Struggling Readers** – a proficient reader who struggles to read a text because of their lack of interest, motivation, or background knowledge or because of the complexity or quality of the text (O’Brien, Stewart, & Beach, 2009)

**Summative Assessment** – assessments used at the end of a unit to determine whether students have mastered explicit educational objectives (Shores & Chester, 2009)

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study focuses on intervention strategies that middle school English language arts teachers have found to be effective with general education middle school struggling readers, thus creating a venue for teachers to speak vividly about strategies they have observed to be useful in improving the comprehension of their struggling readers.

While the goal of this thesis was to have participants who cover a broad range of diverse school environments, the study was dependent on teachers accepting the invitation into the study. Therefore, the study does not offer a list of effective strategies that come from a diverse population of teachers (including gender, years taught, and grade level taught) or from diverse school environments (including physical location within the United States, economic and ethnic make-up of the school, and type of school). Other factors that were not taken into consideration were the percentage of English Language Learner (ELL) students in a teacher's classroom and the percentage of general education students who were reading two or more levels behind their current grade level.

While environmental factors suggest limitations to the study, another limitation that must be addressed is that each teacher teaches from his or her own theoretical view of education. The common behaviorist and constructivist views approach education in two vastly different ways. As a result, a teacher's theoretical lens will impact the style of intervention used with struggling readers, as well as how the teacher determines the effectiveness of the strategy. The teacher's theoretical lens was not solicited before or during the interview process.

In addition, the question of how the quality of an intervention strategy is determined was not taken into consideration. The quality of the intervention was based solely on the professional opinion of the teacher. However, the question remains, by what standards can and should quality be determined. No strict guidelines, parameters, or formulas were put into place to arbitrate quality verses substandard or mediocre interventions. As the researcher, I ascertained effectiveness based on those strategies that were discussed by multiple participants.

Within the format of this study, I chose only one method of data collection: the interview. Because no other methods were used, triangulation could not be used to check credibility. Similarly, a member check was not conducted once the findings had emerged from the data. The use of these two sources would have served to enhance the credibility of the data.

Because I as the researcher am both the collector and interpreter of the data being collected, researcher bias can exist. To refrain from allowing my background or experiences to persuade any part of the interview, I asked open-ended questions, allowing teachers to discuss their own experiences. I allowed the teacher to be the main speaker during the interview and asked follow-up questions for clarification or to check my understanding (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

### **Organization of the Thesis**

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the important literature related to methods by which students practice and develop their comprehension, as well as strategies and approaches that teachers use to help students further their comprehension skills. Chapter 3 includes the

research design including a description of the participants and the procedures used for gathering and analyzing the data. The results from the analysis of the surveys, grouped into themes, can be found in Chapter 4. Lastly, Chapter 5 presents the conclusions that can be drawn regarding celebrated methods for helping middle school students improve their reading comprehension, along with a discussion evolved from the findings of the study, and lastly recommendations for administrators, middle school English language arts teachers, and educational institutions.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

A struggle exists in our educational system today—a struggle between the hearts of teachers and the reality that government so painfully inflicts. At the center of a teacher’s heart is a passion for students—their physical, emotional, and academic welfare—and the notion to help each student become successful, life-long learners. Success in all content areas at the middle school level is dependent on a student’s ability to read and comprehend the text being read. Middle school teachers understand that textual demands increase as students progress in grades. However, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2007) states that more than two-thirds of secondary students lack reading proficiency (as cited in Gibbs, 2009). And the crux of the matter is that struggling readers at the middle school level often don’t care whether their reading makes sense or not, either because years of not being able to comprehend has accosted this front or social status pressure trumps looking “stupid” and asking for help. Therefore, when a text doesn’t make sense, struggling readers tend to quit reading. Choosing to quit reading when the reading gets tough, however, can have serious consequences. Tovani (2000) points out that eventually even struggling readers will need to have skills to be able to read apartment leases, car-loan contracts, income tax forms, and materials associated with their jobs. And unfortunately, an inability to read often leads to dropping out of school, thereby limiting opportunities for careers, jobs, and success in life (Papalewis, 2004). As a result, struggling readers need to be presented with skills, strategies, and tools that can help enhance their comprehension abilities. A

teacher's desire is to help these students succeed academically, while helping the student combat the external factors and the identity crises they face.

This portrait of care and concern is diminished, however, by a government that places emphasis on evaluating learning based upon criterion-referenced, high-stakes test scores. This behaviorist approach that quantitative, observable measures can label the success of a student is at odds with the constructivist approach that teachers often bring to their classrooms. The government's involvement in education has continued to gain a stiffer stronghold over the years, as can be seen by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, which mandates that schools demonstrate Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006) and more recently the push towards the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) across all fifty states. The conflict emerges. Because schools have to be accountable to the government, administrations will jump on packaged reading program's "Buy our stuff and your scores will rise next year" bandwagon (Allington, 2002), in hopes of finding that strategy that will miraculously improve the reading test scores for their low-performing students. Reading curriculum publishers are well aware of the stress that schools are under to raise their test scores in a jiffy, so they produce an intervention strategy, pre-assess students, utilize the strategy, post-test students and use only the quantitative data to sell the strategy to schools who are desperately looking for a solution. "Everyone is hoping for the magic potion, the quick fix to the reading ills of the school, the district, the state" (Allington, 2002). Perhaps it is time to help prepare the teacher. Ivey (2000) and Duffy-Hester (1999, as cited in Ivey, 2000) state, "it's time for schools to take what seems like the hard road. Instead of professional development in which teachers learn how to implement particular reading



methods or programs, teachers should try out a range of practices or conduct self-initiated research in their classrooms” (p.45). After all, “programs don’t teach, teachers do” (Allington, 2002). The opinions of the teachers, however—the ones who know the strengths, challenges, and motivations of their students—are not sought, or solicited. The classroom teachers are the ones who see the direct impact that a reading strategy or intervention truly has on a struggling reader—both through short-term usage and being able to transfer the strategy to other contexts. But, alas, these teachers have no voice. This study seeks to shed light on the need for the voices of middle school teachers to be heard and more importantly to allow these teachers who work with struggling readers day after day and year after year, a venue to share effective reading strategies.

In order to better understand the role that interventions can play in the improvement of comprehension for struggling readers, a review of literature and empirical studies will be discussed following an overview of the theoretical framework that guides the interpretation of the literature and studies. To best understand the role of comprehension and the variety of approaches and intervention strategies, the literature and studies will present the conflict between the effective constructivist approach to helping students progress as life-long learners and the ineffective behaviorist view that readers will be best served through explicit instruction, which is the basis for the majority of the reading intervention programs. Identity theory will also be discussed as the transformation that takes place between an elementary child and a middle school young adult can influence one’s reader identity. A synthesis of the literature will follow, organized under the following headings: 1) Reader Identity 2) How middle school readers approach the reading process, 2) Assessing comprehension, 3) Intervention strategies,

and 4) Role of identity, perception, and motivation. This chapter will conclude with a summary of the reviewed literature and studies and a conclusion that identifies the gap in the literature, which will be addressed by this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is driven by two main theoretical views: Constructivism, which encompasses several sub-categories, including Psycholinguistics, Reader Response, and Social Constructivism; and Discursive Identity Theory. I will briefly explain each of these theories as the literature, studies, and the study of this thesis are grounded in these theories.

#### **Constructivism**

All readers have an active brain, and this brain is used to actively make sense of written text (Goodman, 1996). In this constructivist view, readers interact with the text by creating their own mental text parallel to the published text, whereby meaning is constructed. This is the heart of the constructivist theory. The constructivist theory is a top-down approach where knowledge is constructed when learners integrate new knowledge with existing knowledge while being actively involved in the learning process. This constructivist viewpoint to the reading process, as presented by Ken Goodman (1996), encompasses four key ideas:

- Reading is an active process in which readers use powerful strategies in their pursuit of meaning.
- Everything readers do is part of their attempt to make sense.
- Readers become highly efficient in using just enough of the available information to accomplish their purpose of making sense.

- What readers bring to any act of reading is as important for successful reading as anything they use from the published text (p. 91).

Similarly, Frank Smith (2004) states, “comprehension also depends on what an individual already knows and needs or wants to know” (p. 62), and follows this up with an effect to this cause and effect relationship, “whenever material bears no relevance to any prior knowledge, reading will become more difficult” (pgs. 88-89). Readers need to be invested in the text they are going to read; this investment can come in the form of previous knowledge, a connection, or an interest in the topic. DeHart and Cook (1997) describe, “Adolescent students are crying out for learning experiences that are connected to what they already know and what they want to know. They desire to become actively involved in learning and to interact with their environment” (p. 3). The key is that the relevancy must become apparent to the reader if comprehension is going to take place, and “new information, if it is to be useful to the students in the long term, must be either assimilated or accommodated into their existing cognitive framework” (DeHart & Cook, 1997, p. 3).

***Psycholinguistics.*** Psycholinguistics, which stems from constructivist theory, asserts, as well, that readers organize everything they know into schemas, or knowledge structures. “Psycholinguistics, as its name suggests, is at the intersection of psychology, the study of the way people think and behave, and linguistics, the study of language” (Smith, 2007, p. 56). In this theory, language and the filing systems in a student’s brain go hand-in-hand together. Reade Dornan (1997), a forerunner in the psycholinguistic theory, proposes that it’s not the words that give us the clue to meaning, but the situation in which the words are embedded (p. 26). Ken Goodman (1996) once referred to the

reading process as a “psycholinguistic guessing game” in order to place emphasis on the role of prediction and inferring in proficient reading, indicating that we use what we know, our backgrounds, our connections, our schema to make sense of the text. Atwell (2015) points out that “psycholinguistic theorists posit that fluent readers don’t read every word of a text. *We don’t need to.* Instead, we predict our way through. We eliminate some of the alternatives based on the knowledge we acquired from previous reading experiences” (p. 172). Atwell (2015) describes Frank Smith’s psycholinguist theory through a model depicting of sensory images entering the short-term memory. About every five second one of the items in the short-term memory will make it into the long-term memory, where it stays. Good readers will be able to use all of this information stored and organized in the long-term memory to make predictions. These experiences can only be gained through reading books. As a result, students need daily, meaningful encounters with pleasurable books (Atwell, 2015).

***Reader Response Theory.*** In addition, Reader Response Theory, another constructivist theory, offers the supporting view that what we learn and remember from what we read is influenced by key ideas related to our knowledge and experiences (Klinger et al., 2007). The view of this theory, which shadows the main constructivist view, is that reading involves a transaction between the reader and the text because a written work does not have the same meaning for everyone; instead, it depends on each reader’s individual background, knowledge and beliefs. This makes every reading experience unique to each individual. In the Reader Response Theory, as with each of the approaches to the constructivist theory, the reader plays an active, rather than a passive, role in his/her reading experience.

***Social Constructivism.*** Furthermore, the use of past experiences can also be seen in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, which is the realm on the learning continuum where through the help of the teacher and the environment, the learner can do something that he or she could not have otherwise done alone (Wilhelm, 2002). Learning must start somewhere; however, learning can only build on past experiences (Wilhelm, 2002). Vygotsky, a social constructivist, emphasized that community plays a central role in the process of making meaning, thereby placing an emphasis on culture, social factors, and the role of language. In Vygotsky's zones, students develop new cognitive abilities when a teacher leads them through task-oriented instruction, and then provides scaffolding, or instructional support, until the student reaches mastery of the task (Wilhelm, 2001). If reading comprehension is to be built, students need to be taught at their instructional reading level, which in Vygotsky's terms would be the Zone of Proximal Development. However, students should also be challenged, with teacher and environment support, to tackle grade level text with the support of the teacher and the learning environment (e.g., other learners).

### **Discursive Identity**

Discursive Identity Theory concerns the way in which others view and define us (Hall, 2007). Hall (2007) further states, "for teachers and researchers, using discursive identity as a framework for understanding the decisions that struggling readers make with texts can provide more accurate interpretations of their actions and more responsive instruction" (p. 133). In some instances, what appears to be apathy or lack of motivation to the teacher, may actually be an exhibition of the characteristics of discursive identity. Students may try to influence the discursive identity that others have towards them by

making specific choices on class participation, completing assignments, and reading text aloud. However, the challenge adolescence creates cannot be remised: “Adolescence is a key developmental phase for identify formation (Erickson, 1968), which brings with it many different challenges” (Wiley & Berman, 2013, p.1299).

Discursive Identity Theory refutes the idea that struggling readers do not engage with text due to lack of motivation or apathy about learning. Rather, Discursive Identity Theory takes into consideration the complexity of comprehension needs and abilities at the middle school level. After all, “identity is not something that is finally achieved; it is continually created with their ever-shifting circumstances” (Sumara, 1998, p.204). As a result, Johannessen and McCann (2009) note three key areas which must be addressed as a result of the link between struggling readers and Discursive Identity:

(1) The establishment of supportive and trusting relationships between teachers and learners; (2) the cultivation of partnerships among families, their communities, and the schools; and (3) the refinement of teaching practices that connect with the lives of learners in a culturally responsive way. (p. 66)

### **Synthesis of Research Literature**

The review of literature and studies in this section will begin by first addressing how readers are labeled “good” or “struggling” readers and how readers under each label approach the reading process. Next, reader identity will be established as a significant component to struggling reader’s motivation. Third, methods for assessing comprehension will be discussed before breaking down several reading strategies, or methods for helping struggling readers, under the headings of *Thinking Strategies*, *Instructional Strategies*, and *Independent Reading*. Fourth, the limitations of the studies

will be addressed. Last, the role identity, perception, and motivation play in a middle school student's decision to become a better reader are presented. The chapter concludes with a brief summary and conclusion.

### **Labeling Readers**

Good readers or bad readers? Poor readers or struggling readers? Proficient or not proficient? Challenged? The world of education seems unsure of how to “label” the status of readers in a given grade level. While the labels aforementioned are typically used, caution is given in regards to using such terminologies as students feel branded by these labels and their reader identity either continues to evolve or face despair. O'Brien, Stewart, and Beach (2009) note that in school, the reading identities often made available to students are limited to such descriptions as poor/struggling, average, and good/excellent. Reading identities are often constructed in terms of skills—what students can or cannot do with academic texts—and do not take into account the variety and depth of literacy practices students may engage in beyond traditional school reading.

For the purpose of this literature review and study, the term struggling reader will be used only to aid in the identification of those students who, according to test scores, are reading at two or more grade levels behind their current grade. Throughout this study, the term “struggling reader” will be defined as a proficient reader who struggles to read a text because of their lack of interest, motivation, or background knowledge or because of the complexity or quality of the text (O'Brien, Stewart, & Beach, 2009).

## **Approaches the Reading Process**

The constructivist lens acknowledges that readers approach the reading process with a bank of prior knowledge and connections.

Middle school students don't arrive at their classes as blank slates. Learners arrive at their learning environment already possessing a unique set of experiences, which in turn, have led them to develop cognitive structures through which they interpret new information and the world around them. (DeHart & Cook, 1997, p. 3)

What, then, sets apart readers who are frequently labeled as “good” or “proficient” from those who are considered “struggling”?

**“Good” or “proficient” readers.** “Good,” or “proficient,” readers naturally engage in a variety of strategies when the text isn't making sense: activate background knowledge and try to make connections, self-question the text, draw inferences from the text using background knowledge and clues from the text, synthesize information, and use sensory images (Tovani, 2004; Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2003; Gallagher, 2009). Klinger, Vaughn, and Boardman (2007) acknowledge that “good” readers use strategies and skills such as setting goals for reading, noting the structure and organization of text, monitoring their understanding while reading, creating mental notes and summaries, and making predictions about what will happen. Ken Goodman (1996) also points out that readers have an active brain that they actively use to make sense of written language and that “during the [reader's] transactions [with the text], the author's text is transformed into the text the reader makes sense of—my miscue has provided abundant evidence of that” (p.91). These transactions with the text are often indicators of the independent



strategies that struggling readers have not yet grasped. However, addressing the transactions will be of no use if identity is not also addressed. “What gets ignored in the rhetoric of helping students become ‘good readers’ is that doing so requires more than helping them learn specific skills. It requires a shift in their identities” (Hall, 2012, p.369). In all simplicity, however, the mere act of reading a lot is indicative of a good reader. Smith (2006) promotes,

Not surprisingly, children who read a lot tend to be very good readers. It’s not that they need to be good readers in order to be able to read a lot, but the act of reading brings about the mastery required. (p. 116)

**“Struggling” readers.** In contrast to observations made about what “good” readers do while reading, Klinger, Vaughn, and Boardman (2007), have observed that poor readers, in contrast to good readers, are often less interested in reading, lack motivation, use few metacognitive strategies to monitor their reading, have inadequate vocabulary and background knowledge, and often cannot focus on learning from the text because decoding and fluency are lacking.

Several factors can inhibit comprehension. Tovani (2000) indicates that readers struggling with comprehension will often encounter one or more of these inhibiting factors: they don’t have the comprehension strategies necessary to unlock meaning; they don’t have sufficient background knowledge; they don’t recognize organizational patterns; and they lack purpose. Or perhaps, it may not be that students don’t *have* the strategies, as much as they don’t *know how to use* the strategies. Sibberson and Szymusiak (2008) note that many students, even struggling readers know comprehension strategies and can talk about and describe them, but they often don’t know when and how

to use a strategy when reading difficult texts independently. Gallagher (2009) agrees that struggling readers are often not using the metacognitive skills that good readers will naturally use including not making predictions, cannot make inferences, do not ask questions of the text, and are unable to answer comprehension questions at various levels. Hunley and McNamara (2010) conclude that “decisions (i.e., about the need for intervention, characteristics of appropriate interventions, and effectiveness of interventions) are based not on the judgments or opinions of teachers and other instructional personnel but on data generated in the course of assessment” (p.1).

In addition, Tovani (2000) further supplies that while reading, struggling readers demonstrate some of the following characteristics: fall asleep, daydream, fake-read, read the back of the book instead of the whole book, see the movie instead of reading the book, read without paying attention, just look at the words, start books and never finish them, and/or lose their place. While these behaviors will draw a negative stigma, teachers must be careful to not quickly label the students as unmotivated, because a reader’s identity will reveal itself in what appears to be motivation.

**Role of identity.** As researchers attempt to determine how to best help struggling readers, they have begun to take into consideration the role of reader identity. “Because the reader’s sense of identity emerges, in part, from perceived and interpreted knowledge about the world, response to reading alters a reader’s sense of self” (Sumara, 1998, p. 205). Hall, Burns, and Edwards (2011), make the statement that how struggling readers identify themselves as readers, and “how they want to be identified by others, may largely determine how they use strategies during reading” (p.89). Regardless of how a reader identifies his or her reading skills, however, Ken Goodman (1996) makes one sure

point, “readers are intent on comprehending” (p.114). However, the desire to read can often be overshadowed by the “Matthew Effects,”

Keith Stanovich’s “Matthew effects” (1986) provides insight into the cumulative effect of differential reading experiences among youth. According to Stanovich, people who are considered more proficient readers are provided more opportunities to increase the volume of and expertise in reading; however, those who struggle with reading are afforded fewer and less varied opportunities, resulting in a perceptual and vicious cycle of deficiency for struggling readers. Such cycles substantially increase the probability of reader disengagement. (Graff, 2009/2010, p. 14)

O’Brien, Stewart, and Beach (2009) conclude that by middle school, years of the Matthew effect have left struggling readers too tired, disengaged, and lacking in self-esteem to want to become proficient. Thus, it falls upon teachers, reading coaches, and other professionals to determine how to help struggling readers develop the skills and use reading strategies more naturally and effectively while also attending to reading identity.

Regardless of reading level, test scores, or ability, students are well aware of the identity placed on them by teachers and peers, and it’s this identity they tend to adopt as they view themselves as readers. Hall, Greene, and Watts (2011, as cited in Hall, 2012), explain that students must engage in conversations about their identity as readers.

Students have extensive opportunities to consider what it means to be a certain type of reader in school (i.e., good reader, poor reader) and where they fall within this continuum. They have been placed into categories and assigned reading identities by teachers or peers based on things such as test scores, reading levels,

and how they engage with texts. Students are very aware of the identities they have been assigned, regardless of whether they are positive or negative, and they are capable of discussing their understandings of what the assigned identities mean as well as what they do and do not capture about them as readers. (p. 369)

Johnston (2004) also warns against using the terminology “good reader” in the classroom to identify the appropriate use of a reading strategy. The use of this affirmation then validates the use of the good-bad binary as a sensible descriptor for readers, leaving open the question of who the bad readers are and how you can tell (Johnston, 2004). As children are becoming literate, the terminology they associate with themselves as readers early in their development will foreshadow the people they see themselves becoming, “They are developing personal and social identities—uniquenesses and affiliations that define the people they see themselves becoming” (Johnston, 2004, p. 22).

So, which comes first, then, a lack of motivation or a negative stigma on reader identity that leads to an ineptitude to read and comprehend at grade level, or a lack of strategies to read and comprehend, resulting in resistance to reading or engaging in any activities associated with making meaning from text? In order to answer this question, teachers must assess and/or interview their struggling readers to better understand how to provide the most effective interventions.

### **Assessing Comprehension**

In order to get to the bottom of the comprehension disparity, researchers have used a variety of comprehension assessments to identify areas of strength and areas of need. The context of truly understanding the comprehension of a reader is to know what background knowledge and reading skills the reader can use independently. To provide

an accurate picture of a reader's comprehension, a qualitative, constructivist approach will provide the optimal picture of the reader's abilities and areas for instruction.

Assessments should be approached as a venue to understand what skills a reader brings with him or her to the reading process and which skills may need more stimulation in order to better comprehend text. Assessments, such as miscue analyses and Qualitative Reading Inventories (QRI) take a whole language approach by which students need to use background knowledge throughout the assessment. Comprehension cannot be quantified because the only person who can say whether the student comprehends what he or she has read, is that particular student (Smith, 2006). For a teacher, then to determine "whether children can make sense of a book or a lesson from their own point of view is not to give them a test, but simply to ask, 'Did you understand?'" (Smith, 2006, p. 94).

**Miscue analysis.** Ken Goodman (1973), the forerunner on miscue analysis concludes, "Nothing a reader does in reading is accidental. Both his expected responses and his miscues are produced as he attempts to process the print and get to the meaning" (p.5). A miscue is defined by Goodman as "as actual observed response in oral reading, which does not match the expected response" (p.5). Goodman (1996), who has performed many thorough studies on the miscues that readers make while reading, insists that these miscues are not only a window into the comprehension occurring during reading, but "these mistakes are part of the process of making sense of print" (p.5), and an important piece of evidence that readers are intent on comprehending. A semantic miscue analysis, Goodman says, frequently shows that comprehension depends on prior knowledge. A miscue assessment is not meant to focus on the individual words that a student skips,

changes, and pronounces incorrectly, rather the focus needs to center on why these miscues were made and be the window into the student's comprehension.

Comprehension has a direct link to the schema brought to the reading process: "When readers are encouraged to read for meaning rather than for accuracy in word identification, they often demonstrate an uncanny ability to comprehend, despite their surface miscues" (Dornan, 1997, p. 36). Children who are doing well in reading don't necessarily make fewer mistakes, but they go back and correct the mistakes they make (Smith, 2004). Goodman (1973) concludes that a miscue analysis is not a method for teaching reading, "it's a technique for examining and evaluating the development of control of the reading process in learners" (p.11). According to Goodman (1996), comprehension is assessed after the reading through retells and questioning strategies; however, if we want to focus on a student's ability to comprehend, we need to utilize a miscue analysis while the student is reading because this gives a picture of the student's success in the process of making sense of text.

**Qualitative inventories.** Informal reading inventories (IRI), such as the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI), are additional reading assessments that take into account the background knowledge and the metacognitive skills that readers bring with them to the reading process.

To avoid the problems and limitations of norm-referenced reading tests, many educators use informal reading inventories (IRIs) to help determine reading levels (McCabe, Margolis, & Barenbaum, 2001). IRI's can be teacher-made or from published materials. These assessments analyze miscues to help diagnosis decoding or comprehension difficulties and gauge comprehension based off of the responses to

questions the student answers after reading the entire passage. IRIs “help a teacher determine at what level a student can read text either independently or with instruction, or if the text is at the student’s frustration level (less than 90% accuracy with impaired comprehension)” (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006, p. 641).

The Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) is one of the most frequently used informal reading inventories (Clark & Kamhi, 2014). This informal reading inventory provides a number of assessment options which will help teachers estimate a student’s reading level. Leslie and Caldwell (2011) define their assessment,

The Qualitative Reading Inventory-5 (QRI-5) is an individually administered informal reading inventory (IRI) designed to provide information about (1) conditions under which students can identify words and comprehend text successfully and (2) conditions that appear to result in unsuccessful word identification or comprehension. (p. 1)

The results of the QRI-5 are used to get a picture of each individual student, unlike a norm-referenced or standardized assessment which would compare data. Student scores are used only to determine each individual student’s independent, instruction, and frustration levels, and not compared to any norm group. (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006).

The QRI-5 assesses comprehension through retelling and questions. Prior knowledge is assessed by asking students questions regarding key concepts and through a predictions task, based on the concepts and the title of the selection provided. Think-alouds provide valuable information regarding prior knowledge that is being employed, “Readers who connected the text to their background knowledge, constructed inferences, and integrated information across the text demonstrated higher comprehension” (Leslie &

Caldwell, 2006, pp. 12-13). Text structure and retells are also used in the assessment protocol.

Word identification is also assessed through the QRI-5. Speed and automaticity is measured through timed portions of word lists and rate of reading as measured in words per minute or correct words per minute on the passages. The primary reason for the focus on speed and automaticity is that the ability to read words correctly and quickly has a direct correlation with comprehension. The QRI-5 also uses a miscue analysis to determine if miscues are the result of the reader's graphophonic cue system, syntactic cue system, or semantic cue system. The miscue analysis can help determine strengths of the readers, such as the ability to use context clues. While a miscue analysis can become a quantitative measure, if only errors in the graphophonic system are analyzed, the assessment can remain qualitative (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006).

Assessments that focus on individual skills without any regard for prior knowledge or use of additional skills are not as effective; however, these assessments can provide insight for skills that may need to be explicitly taught to aid in comprehension development. Shores and Chester (2009) establish, for example, that criterion-referenced tests are benchmark assessments for determining comprehension; however comprehension cannot be quantified (Smith, 2006).

**Additional assessments.** Other assessments commonly used to assess a student's reading ability include the Group Reading and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) pre-test, the Gates-MacGinite Reading Test, and the Texas Assessment of Knowledge Skills (TAKS). While each of these tests attach quantitative numbers to individual skills in the reading process, which is ineffective in and of itself, the results can be used as a starting



point to determine a student's strengths. However, regardless of the assessment used, teachers must remember the complexity of comprehension and the role of identity in the reading process as they grapple over the use of specific interventions.

### **Intervention Strategies**

“Reading teachers can do more than measure comprehension. With direct, explicit instruction that demonstrates what good readers do, struggling readers can be taught how to comprehend better” (Tovani, 2000, p. 108). The debate then becomes which strategies provide the best instruction for struggling readers, building upon their prior knowledge, while at the same time remaining conscious of reader identity. Many experts in the area of education, including Shores and Chester (2009) and Hunley and McNamara (2010) insist that researched interventions must be used—interventions must be based on scientific, research-based strategies, and the people implementing the interventions must be trained. As with any program, one should cautiously approach scientific, research-based strategies, as these are often quantifiable and may not take into consideration the student's background knowledge or skills he/she already brings to the reading process. Smith (2006) points out that “comprehension is not a quantity, it is a state—a state of not having any unanswered questions” (p. 93). Before grabbing onto a research-based program, one should do his/her own research to examine the credibility of the strategy, taking into account both its validity and reliability. While these strategies will be summarized in this review, it is only being done to shed light on the ineffectiveness of many of these “research-based” strategies used in schools today. The purpose of this study is to educate teachers on effective reading intervention strategies, as perceived by

middle school teachers. Therefore, teachers must be educated on the vast array of reading strategies being used.

**Research-based.** Research-based learning strategies are often ineffective because “the intervention must be taught in a systematic way and extra steps must be taken to ensure fidelity (Shores & Chester, 2009). According to Hunley and McNamara (2010), an intervention can be declared “research-based” if the intervention is supported by “strong” evidence of its efficacy, which is determined by research of acceptable quality and quantity or if the intervention is supported by “possible” evidence of efficacy through support via research using several well-designed and implemented, but non-randomized, designs (p. 102).

From a constructivist lens, however, “a red flag should go up whenever you hear ‘research-based’ ... make sure the claims and evidence are credible and valid” (Routman, 2003). Routman (2003) insists that teachers have a reason to be cautious about research-based programs and should always ask some big questions before adopting a new program. First and foremost, relevancy needs to be taken into consideration; more specifically, look into the population that the research-based intervention included, and ask if the results are relevant to the population of students being served. Other questions to consider include who are the researchers? Do the researchers or interpreters of research fairly and broadly represent the evidence available? How current is the data researchers are relying on? What views do the researchers hold and can they be objective? Is the evidence compelling? And lastly, what are the long-term results?

Allington (2001) reports that research-based publications sometimes rely on hyperbole to sell the program, insisting that “hundreds of studies show...” when in fact

significantly fewer than 100 studies could even be found to examine. Too often, the publications are also often misleading when the publication venue is attached to the company that produced the materials and programs. “More often than not, the majority of the few published studies are authored by the developers and marketers of the materials and programs” (p. 10). Allington cites examples of research-based programs that have very few evaluations outside of direct connections with companies producing the programs. For example, even though the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) program, which uses computer programs to foster reading comprehension in upper-grades, is widely used, almost all of the published materials on the effects of this program have been authored (or coauthored) by the developer. The Accelerated Reading program is also widely used, but “almost no published research is available and no experimental independent studies have been published in research journals” (p. 10). The majority of the evidence on the effective practices of the Direct Instruction (DI) materials was published in *Effective School Practices*, an in-house magazine of the Association for Direct Instruction and edited by one of the Direct Instruction program authors. Other programs can fall under the same scrutiny. Unbiased researched-based programs are difficult to find. In fact, Allington (2001) says, “‘What the research says...’ is currently an almost meaningless phrase” (p. 11) because it is too easy today for publishers to find means to create, control and design published evidence that cites positive effects for their product.

In 1998, the Reading Excellence Act (REA) was signed into law. The REA guidelines require instructional practices to be supported by “scientifically based reading research” in order to receive federal funds. The characteristics of “scientifically based

reading research” as specified in the REA include the following: (1) use of rigorous, systematic, and empirical methods; (2) adequacy of the data analyses to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusion drawn; (3) reliance on measurements or observational methods that provided valid data across evaluators and observers and across multiple measurements and observations; and (4) acceptance by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review (p. 13). In other words, the REA was determined to once again take a scientific approach towards reading interventions, which as was just noted, is not always an effective method for developing reading comprehension and creating life-long learners.

**Thinking strategies.** As discussed earlier, students will already bring background knowledge, connections, and other reading skills with them to the reading process. In addition, readers also use metacognitive processes when they think about their thinking, or when they reflect on whether they know something, whether they are learning, or whether they have made a mistake (Smith, 2004). These thinking-based skills are critical to build upon while helping develop other skills with which the reader may struggle. “The impact that prior knowledge has on learning is also influenced by topic interest, but untangling the relationship between prior knowledge and interest has not proven easy” (Clark & Kamhi, 2014, p. 291).

**Building schema.** As many constructivist theorists will attest, schema, or background knowledge is a key factor in a student’s ability to make connections with text, and ultimately to be able to comprehend at higher levels. Dornan (1997) contends that “without some pre-existing knowledge of the subject we are reading about,

comprehension of that text is virtually impossible” (p. 31). Tovani (2000) points out that once students begin using their background knowledge, they are more likely to draw inferences, ask questions, and make comparisons and contrasts. Fitzell (2011) adds that at the secondary level, students must be able to draw upon their schema to read interpretively and achieve high-level comprehension.

In his book, *On Reading*, Ken Goodman (1996) shows that he is a strong supporter of background knowledge as a key for improving comprehension. He points out that no matter how proficient a reader may be, his or her comprehension is always dependent on what he or she brings to the reading process in terms of knowledge, experiences, interest, and values. Goodman suggests “students need to be reading materials relevant to their experiences” (p. 46). In the same book, Yetta Goodman emphasizes that readers must bring experiences and background knowledge to the reading process to successfully understand.

Often students have been told to open a science book to page 253, to read the chapter, and to do the answers at the end without concern for the experiences and the background knowledge a reader *must* have prior to the reading experience in order to successfully understand. (pp. 49-50)

Therefore, success in reading comprehension begins even before the reader reads the first word—success is often directly related to the background knowledge and connections that the reader brings to the text.

Nancie Atwell (2015) describes a game like Hangman that practices schemas about word order that are stored in long-term memory. In this game, a line is drawn to represent each word of the sentence. Students start guessing with the first blank. If they

take fifteen guesses without identifying the word, she gives it to them and moves on to the next word. At the end of the sentence, they discuss the schemas that were activated, when they were activated, and how.

Klinger, Vaughn, and Boardman (2007) suggest that “one of the most effective practices relates to schema theory—link students’ background knowledge to the text” (p. 103). Linking background, or prior, knowledge with the text about to be read can occur during a text preview, which is a technique that motivates students to read for understanding. To make the previewing technique most effective, Klinger, Vaughn, and Boardman suggest that teachers prepare in advance to lead the preview, keep it short and succinct, and review it after the reading as a review. After all, “Successfully bridging what students know or need to know to what they are learning is essential” (p.103). Depth of comprehension is contingent upon a reader’s ability to make connections, because making connections helps readers relate to characters, visualize, avoid boredom, pay attention, listen to others, read actively, remember what they’ve read, and ask questions (Tovani, 2000). This last connection strategy, asking questions, will help readers improve their comprehension in four ways: by interacting with text, by motivating themselves to read, by clarifying information in the text, and by inferring beyond the literal meaning (Tovani, 2000, p. 86).

Burns, Hodgson, Parker, and Fremont (2011) propose that comprehension begins before the student even begins to read the text; therefore, previewing the text and pre-teaching keywords are both important strategies. These strategies also activate background knowledge. These premises were the basis for their study of 19 eighth grade students, 14 female and 5 male, from two different middle schools. Half of the group was

given a preview intervention strategy, while the other half received a keyword intervention strategy before reading a QRI-4 reading passage and answering questions on the text. In their results, they reported both the previewing and pre-teaching of keywords strategies proved to be effective—pre-teaching of keywords, just a little bit more.

Schorzman and Cheek, Jr. (2004) also conducted a study that examined the effectiveness of activating background knowledge to increase comprehension. Six sixth-grade classes in a southern suburban school district participated. Three classes from one middle school received three research-based strategies: pre-reading plan; Directed Reading-Thinking activity; and graphic organizers. The duration of the study was 28 days/ 4 days a week / 45 minutes per day. A norm-referenced reading assessment and an informal assessment instrument given at the beginning and at the end of the study calculated quantitative with mixed results: the standardized test results did not indicate significant differences between the control and treatment group; however, the clozed procedure, which required students to use contextual clues indicated significant results. Quantitative data cannot be used to determine success in comprehension. Teacher feedback would have been a stronger indicator of success. In this study, feedback from the teachers was recorded during the study, but no changes were made based on the feedback.

In short, Fielding and Pearson (1994) summarize the correlations between schema and comprehension best,

The relationship between prior knowledge and comprehension ability is reciprocal – the more one knows, the more one comprehends; and the more one

comprehends, the more one learns new knowledge to enable comprehension of an even greater and broader array of topics & texts. (p.1)

***Think-alouds.*** Sometimes, struggling readers do not understand that reading is not just individual words or independent sentences to be read; they sometimes don't understand that words and sentences, together, create a big picture that invites meaning to be made. The use of think-alouds will help students to do the following: understand that reading should make sense, move beyond literal decoding to comprehending the global meanings of text, and learn how to read by using many different strategies (Wilhelm, 2001). In lieu of giving up on reading a text or plowing through it just to "get through it," learning think-aloud strategies will help students focus on understanding, interpreting, and summarizing the text being read. A think-aloud of reading, as defined by Jeff Wilhelm (2001) is "creating a record, either through writing or talking aloud, of the strategic decision-making and interpretive processes of going through a text, reporting everything the reader is aware of noticing, doing, seeing, feeling, asking, and understanding as (he)/she reads" (p.19). Struggling readers often have a difficult time getting past decoding to making meaning with those words, which is why think-alouds can help struggling readers. Think-alouds allow all students to hear how others "sleuth out" and make sense of text clues so that they can begin using these strategies on their own (Wilhelm, 2001).

Think-alouds can be a form of assessment, as well, but must be administered individually. Before, during, and after reading a passage at their current reading level (instructional level), teachers ask questions that will highlight which strategies the reader used such as, marking predictions, revising predictions, making inferences, drawing



conclusions, paraphrasing, summarizing, generating questions, monitoring understanding, and using context clues (Klinger et al., 2007). The student's responses from these before, during, and after questions will allow the teacher to "draw conclusions about the extent to which the student appears to use strategies effectively and efficiently for monitoring understanding" (Klinger et al., 2007, p. 39). This information can then be used to devise recommendations for instruction.

**Instructional strategies.** Because comprehension is the outcome of applying skills before, during, and after reading, researchers have analyzed a considerable amount of strategies that when used independently or in conjunction with others, are proclaimed to be feasible ways to improve comprehension. A few of the most noted strategies will be briefly discussed in the following sections.

**Text structures.** The wide variety of narrative and expository text structures can be a hindrance to the comprehension of struggling readers. A text structure, as defined by Klinger, Vaughn, and Boardman (2007) is "the way a text is organized to guide readers in identifying key information" (p. 76). Good readers can usually discern which text structure is being used in a text and, in turn, apply the appropriate reading strategies to aid in their comprehension; however, this is often not the case with struggling readers. Many researchers and writers have summarized some of the more well-known, and most-used strategies for teaching text structures. The following is a culminating list of strategies that have become popularized by their use and success with narrative texts: story maps, story mapping, story gloves, story recipes, retelling, TELLs (acronym for T: study story titles, E: examine and skim pages for clues, L: look for important words, L:

look for difficult words, S: think about the story settings), prediction task, cloze task, and scrambled stories (Klinger et al., 2007; Margolis & McCabe, 2006).

“*Expository text structure* refers to the ways text is organized to guide readers in identifying key information and making connections among ideas” (Klinger et al., 2007, p. 87). Using explicit instruction and guided practice, students’ comprehension would benefit from being able to independently identify each of these five basic organizational structures for expository text: description, sequential order, cause-and-effect, problem/solution, and compare/contrast. Meyer (1984) suggests that “when students are familiar with the way a text is structured, this knowledge can help them: (1) form expectations about what they will read, (2) organize incoming information, (3) judge the relative importance of what they read, (4) improve their comprehension, and (5) enhance their recall” (as cited in Klinger et al., 2007 p. 76).

***Decoding, fluency, and vocabulary.*** Interference can occur in reading comprehension if a student is struggling with decoding, fluency, and/or vocabulary (Klinger et al., 2007). “Knowing how to read, or decode, words is not a small part of the reading process—it is a critical link whose absence inhibits understanding” (Klinger et al., 2007, p. 6). Strategies to increase decoding skills include creating word banks or word walls for unknown words; practice breaking words into syllables; teach common prefixes, suffixes, and affixes; and keep a word wall of irregular words. However, Atwell (2007) points out,

When reading is meaningful, understanding cannot be separated from decoding.

Comprehension isn’t a set of sub-skills children have to be taught to bring to bear after they have translated letters to sounds. When kids are reading stories that are

interesting to them, when the books are written at their independent reading levels, comprehension—the making of meaning—is direct, and the kids *understand*. (p. 14)

Similarly, Smith (2006) points out, “Even if readers were able to decode written language into speech, they would still be confined by the problem of trying to determine meaning from what has now become spoken language” (p. 24).

The ability to construct meaning from the text being read can only occur if the words are being read quickly and accurately, or in other words, as Smith (2006) suggests, “Not reading so slowly that the short-term memory is over-whelmed (p. 10). To improve fluency, teachers can have students reread difficult passages, listen to books or texts prior to reading independently, teach difficult vocabulary or proper nouns in advance, and have students read and reread texts with peer partners. Questioning the text and making predictions prior to reading and while reading can also increase fluency (Smith, 2006). Developing fluency does not, however, require a focus on decoding or extra work on phonics, fluency development is directly related to the practice of reading itself (Smith, 2006).

Although it is often missing from instruction, vocabulary is essential to reading comprehension. Klinger et al. (2007) cite some best practices for acquiring word familiarity and knowledge. Strategies for teaching vocabulary include mnemonic or word strategies and direct instruction of word meanings. Strategies for independent word learning include efficient use of resources (dictionaries and thesauruses), analyzing word parts (prefixes, suffixes, and roots), and using context clues to identify the meaning of unknown words. The over-arching theme, however, is simply “the amount that students

read is related to the number of words they know and, in turn, allows them to read and understand increasingly complex text (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991; Hirsch, 2003; as cited in Klinger et al., 2007). From a constructivist view, teaching “culturally grounded vocabulary” is suggested because it draws on students own funds of knowledge to help them learn academic vocabulary (Hall et al., 2011). “As students learn new words, they do so in the context of language and experiences that are already familiar to them” (Hall et al., 2011, p. 118). Building of vocabulary and using strategies to build vocabulary is important to the increase of comprehension because the amount that students read is related to the number of words they know, and in turn, allows them to read and understand increasingly complex text.

A study conducted by Vaughn et al. (2010) included a mixture of strategies taught in three phases to 6<sup>th</sup> grade students who scored below proficiency level on their state accountability test over the course of a school year. The results were mixed, as well. Students showed only small gains on measures of decoding, fluency, and comprehension in comparison to the comparison group. While significant gains were reported on measures of word attack, spelling, passage comprehension, and phonemic decoding, these appeared mostly in subgroups. Vaughn et al. determined that the interventions provided over the year were not “robustly effective.”

Another study conducted by Manset-Williamson and Nelson (2005) took place during the first six weeks of summer break. Twenty-one students ranging in age from 9 to 14 years participated in this study. Each participant scored at least two years below their expected grade-level achievement based on subtests of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, which was used to measure decoding, fluency, and

comprehension. While all students were taught phonemic awareness/analysis, decoding, and fluency instruction one-on-one, the experimental part was the explicitness with which the comprehension strategies were taught. One group was presented all of the comprehension strategies simultaneously (used with guided reading); explicit instruction was used with the other group. In this group, students would master one strategy before a new one was introduced, but then continued to use these strategies as new ones were being learned. While results indicated that the explicit comprehension strategy produced greater gains than the guided reading, the continuing use of strategies mastered while new ones were being learned proved beneficial.

***Summarizing and questioning.*** What students do after they read is just as, if not more, important for building comprehension as what they do before or while they read. Students should engage in summarizing key ideas and seeking clarification for difficult words or concepts. Klinger, Vaughn, and Boardman (2007) suggest, “The most effective strategies for students with reading problems to learn to apply both during and after reading are (1) questioning and (2) formulating main idea and summarizing” (p. 108). Questioning to promote comprehension needs to engage students in critical thinking—these questions should not just be asked by the teacher, but students should be taught and encouraged to generate higher-thinking questions, as well. Asking the right questions of the text is essential to comprehension. “If we don’t know the right questions to ask of a particular passage, then we won’t be able to read it, no matter how hard we concentrate” (Smith, 2006, p. 10). Through the questioning technique, it is important that students go back to the text to find support for their answers. Stating the main idea and summarizing both help students to best identify how well they comprehended what they read. Whether

the main idea is implicit or explicit, being able to identify the main idea will help students understand what is important to remember. While summarizing the text, students should learn to synthesize the information, using only the main idea, important details, and key vocabulary or concepts. Students need to be taught to use their own words to write a summary and not copy from the text or include small or unimportant details.

Summarizing and questioning are two of the four main components of reciprocal teaching.

***Reciprocal teaching.*** Reciprocal teaching, comprised of four main strategies (prediction, summarization, question generation, and clarification), is a scaffold, gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student model, where the final outcome is for students to naturally use all four strategies during text discussions with peers and the teacher. Johannessen and McCann (2009) suggest that “to use these strategies effectively, poorer readers need direct instruction, modeling, and practice in reading situations” (p. 68). After modeling the task, the teacher will then work with the student to practice the strategy and gradually release the student to begin working on parts independently and with encouragement from the teacher (scaffolding). The students begin to take on the role of the teacher in cooperative groups (Rief & Heimburge, 2006). The final goal is for the students to “apply these strategies independently as they read so they can make sense of the text” (Johannessen & McCann, 2009, p. 68). Klinger et al. (2007) and Slater and Horstman (2002) conclude that through scaffolding and progress monitoring, teaching students to use the four strategies collaboratively in a dialogue will help them bring meaning to the text as well as promote their internalization of the use of the strategies, which will ultimately improve their reading comprehension. Vygotsky’s

zone of proximal development corroborates the effectiveness of reciprocal teaching because the focus is on how students' emerging skills and knowledge can be enhanced with guidance provided through interactions with others (Klinger et al., 2007).

According to Klinger et al. (2007), Rosenshine and Meister (1994) "reviewed 16 studies on reciprocal teaching and found that it consistently yielded statistically significant findings on different measures of reading comprehension" (p.132). Fielding and Pearson (1994) insist that a successful program of comprehension instruction must include:

- Large amounts of time for actual text reading
- Opportunities for teacher-directed instruction in comprehension strategies.
- Opportunities for peer collaborative learning
- Opportunities for students to talk with a teacher and one another about what has been read.

The reciprocal teaching model can be used with any size groups or whole class; it can be used when a teacher is present or when one is not. The flexibility and versatility of this strategy offers the feasibility of its use.

*Simultaneous use of comprehension strategies.* As can be seen with the reciprocal teaching model, the combination of comprehension strategies may provide an even stronger foundation for increasing comprehension abilities. The premise, though, is that whether just one strategy is being used or several combined, purposeful intervention practices can aid in comprehension abilities. The National Reading Panel report (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, as cited in Klinger et al., 2007) synthesized reading comprehension strategies, and based on 203 studies was able to

identify the following intervention practices that elicited improved reading comprehension outcomes:

- Teaching students to monitor their comprehension and to implement procedures when difficulties in understanding text arise.
- Using cooperative learning practices while implementing comprehension strategies in the context of reading.
- Providing graphic and semantic organizers that assist students in writing about, or drawing, relationships from the story.
- Providing support for questioning strategies through (1) story structures that assist students in answering critical questions about the passage, (2) feedback to students regarding their answers to questions about the text, and (3) opportunities for students to ask and answer their own questions about the text.
- Teaching students to write important ideas about what they've read and to summarize these ideas after longer passages are read.
- Teaching students to use multicomponent strategies that integrate and apply several strategies (p. 103).

Gibbs (2009) points out what she believes to be the most effective strategies that lead to improved reading comprehension:

1. Summarize main ideas both within paragraphs and across texts
2. Ask questions about what was read
3. Paraphrase what was read
4. Draw inferences that are based on text information and prior knowledge
5. Answer questions at different points in the text



6. Use graphic organizers

7. Think about the types of questions that are being asked to answer. (p.70)

Kamil et al. (2008) states that “comprehension strategies need to be taught explicitly by explaining and modeling the strategy, by using the strategy in guided reading practice” (p. 70). Students need to be actively using comprehension strategies if they are going to learn to use them independently and automatically.

Cantrell et al. (2010) state, “teaching readers to become strategic involves teaching students how to be responsive to the shifting demands of the reading context and continually monitor and evaluate one’s progress toward the ultimate goal of constructing meaning from the text” (p.258). Cantrell et al. (2010) used a randomized treatment-controlled group, pre-test and post-test design to assess the development of students’ abilities to use multiple strategies flexibly through Learning Strategies Curriculum (LSC). LSC focuses on developing students’ capacities in the processes of word identification, visual imagery, self-questioning, vocabulary, paraphrasing, and sentence writing, and seeks to facilitate comprehension monitoring that enables children to flexibly use these strategic processes to better understand text. Sixth and ninth grade students from 12 middle schools and 11 high schools in a rural southeastern state who scored the equivalent of two grade levels below grade level on the Group Reading and Diagnostic Evaluation received 50-60 extra minutes of targeted interventions a day from teachers who had received professional development on teaching this curriculum. While classroom observations and teacher interviews were conducted, the Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory, along with QRI-4, was used to determine results: positive impacts were noted on 6<sup>th</sup> grade students’ reading comprehension and

use of problem-solving strategies, but no significant impact on 9<sup>th</sup> grade students' reading comprehension or reported strategy use was indicated. The effect size, however, between the control and treatment groups was minimal – 0.128. A few factors that should be taken into consideration is the ineffective method of explicitly teaching each skill, and the researchers noted that “future investigations of adolescent reading interventions would do well to measure aspects of motivation and engagement” (p. 270).

**Independent reading.** At every age level, engaging in independent reading each day correlates with higher reading scores” (Atwell, 2007; Allington, 2001); however, independent reading declines after the elementary grades and so do reading scores (Atwell, 2015). State tests and explicit reading skill instruction are becoming the priority in the classroom. Gallaher (2009) warns, “High-interest reading is being squeezed out in favor of more test preparation practice” (p. 4) leaving independent reading at the wayside, even with the research indicating its importance.

The results from major assessments of reading ability indicate a direct correlation between proficient student readers and habitual independent readers (Atwell, 2015). “When an independent reading component is added, test scores go up” (Routman, 2003, p. 83). Independent reading is not just an act we perform to improve test scores, though, independent reading serves as a catalyst for improving reader identity: “During independent reading time our students discover who they are as readers” (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008, p. 62). Independent reading offers students the opportunity to get into the “zone” (Atwell, 2007). While in the zone, frequent, voluminous reading happens without distraction, allowing students to become immersed in the plot of the story and in the lives of their book’s characters.

In her book, *Reading Essentials*, Routman (2003), shares the story of a colleague/friend who was frustrated because she felt she did a much better job teaching guided reading, and yet, her student's proficiency test scores were similar to the student scores of another, less proficient teacher. The critical difference, Routman pointed out was that her colleague/friend spent only ten to fifteen minutes for independent reading each day, while the other teacher started out with thirty to forty minutes of teacher-monitored independent reading. Routman's suggestion to her colleague/friend was to "consider reallocating her reading time to include at least thirty minutes a day for independent reading" (p. 83). While this independent reading time needs to be a time of choice for students in selection of the books they read, it also needs to be carefully designed and structured with the direct interaction of the teacher including demonstrating, teaching, guiding, monitoring, evaluating, and goal setting.

"Independent reading time provides a great opportunity for assessment" (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2003, p. 63). Conferencing with students, informal chats, and student observation are examples of ways teachers can assess student progress while students are independently reading. Conversations with students are the way to assess, rather than through worksheets, tests, or book reports (Atwell, 2003).

Independent reading is not just another activity to add to a reading program but is the crucial learning context in which the reader assumes responsibility for applying smart reading behavior in order to gain and maintain understanding (Routman, 2003). "Only frequent, sustained, voluminous reading will bring [struggling readers] up to grade level" (Atwell, 2003, p. 43) because reading is the single activity that correlates with high levels of reading proficiency (Atwell, 2015). Through independent reading, students are

provided an opportunity to build their prior knowledge and schema (Gallagher, 2009). In addition, independent reading can help promote a positive reader identity as struggling readers seldom get to experience how great it feels to finish a book (Tovani, 2000). Therefore, “struggling readers need to spend more time reading, not doing activities about reading” (Routman, 2003, p. 187).

### **Limitations of the Studies**

In some studies, researchers (and their teams) will choose to carry out all of the steps of an intervention from pre-test to post-test completely on their own; in others, the researchers play the role of the trainer and observer by implementing a professional development for teachers involved in the study and following up with regular observations to ensure fidelity of the treatment. However, whichever the case, teachers’ thoughts and opinions about the intervention model or process are rarely solicited; they are generally just used as innocuous instruments of the study.

Shippen, Houchins, Steventon, and Sartor (2005) trained four 7<sup>th</sup> grade general education teachers (one in each of the core subject areas: science, social studies, math, and language arts) to carry out their study on the effects of two different direct instruction (DI) models. Each teacher received one three-hour training: two received training in using the Corrective Reading Decoding program and two received training in the REWARDS program; however, coaching and feedback throughout the intervention was intermittent. At the end of the study, the teachers’ opinions were gathered, but through the use of a three-point Likert scale, whereby teachers selected either *agree*, *neutral*, or *disagree* to each of the eight questions on the survey. While the study states that “one teacher was neutral about whether DI programs are easy to manage” (p.180), the opinions

of the other three teachers are not given. Two of the four teachers disagreed that the students were actively engaged during DI reading. While the Likert scale survey gives a snapshot of the teachers' opinions, teachers were not given the opportunity to elaborate on the effectiveness of the intervention.

In the study performed by Papalewis (2004) using the READ 180 program, teachers received either half-day or a whole-day trainings throughout the year on the implementation of this program. For the sole purpose of verification of the implementation of the REWARD 180 curriculum, one hour visitations by a trained observer occurred May through June of the school year. The READ 180 Observer Evaluation Forms were used to evaluate details such as length of class periods, size of class, and implementation of READ 180 class activities. Neither the analysis nor findings suggest that the teachers were given the opportunity to give their insights into the program's effectiveness. Student scores were only used to analyze effectiveness.

Schorzman and Cheek, Jr. (2004) used three sixth grade classrooms in their study of the effectiveness of three whole-class reading interventions. The three experimental group teachers received three hour-long trainings in the use and theoretical support of the strategies (the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity, the Pre-reading Plan, and graphic organizers); they also participated in a week-long pilot study to practice using the lesson outlines. The three control group teachers continued to teach the district curriculum. All six teachers were observed two days/week – 50 minutes/session for the duration of this seven week study. A checklist of objectives, specific teaching strategies, and responses was used when observing the three experimental group teachers. However, “although teacher feedback was recorded during the study, no changes were made to the content or

style of the lesson outlines” (p.45). Therefore, teachers were given an opportunity to share their opinions; however, this feedback was not taken into consideration.

Similarly to the previous studies, Cantrell et al. (2010) provided the sixth and ninth grade teachers, who provided the intervention strategies within their study, with professional development throughout the school year in order to provide training on the LSC strategies that would explicitly be taught. Each teacher received two scheduled classroom observations to determine treatment fidelity and the extent to which the teachers implemented aspects of the LSC strategies. Structured interviews with each teacher were considered to be part of the data collection of this study; however, the sole intent of the interviews was to discuss how the lessons fit into the interventions. The interviews were not a venue for teachers to share their opinions about the effectiveness of the interventions, “data from the interviews were only used to clarify each teacher’s implementation of the intervention” (p.265).

### **Role of Identity, Perception, and Motivation**

Students who struggle with reading and appear to lack motivation or appear uninterested in becoming a better reader may in actuality desire to learn and become better, but this is overshadowed by a desire to avoid labels and embarrassment, and to maintain social dignity. Therefore, it is important to consider how students can achieve both their academic and social goals (Hall, 2010). To better understand this silent factor of perception, Hall (2007, 2010), conducted a year-long case study of three middle school students (one from each grade 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>) to determine how middle school struggling readers and their content-area teachers made decisions about how to work with classroom reading tasks and each other. Three middle school content area teachers (social studies,

math, and science) and one struggling reader within each of their classrooms (one from each grade 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>) participated in a descriptive year-long multiple case study. Each classroom was located in a sixth-through-eighth-grade middle school, but from three different districts within the same suburban area. The students were chosen based on informal reading assessments and state reading assessments. The study spanned from the first day of school to the beginning of May, and included bi-weekly observations (50 minutes each), questionnaires, interviews (3 total – October, January, and May), and graded class work.

Sarah, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader, viewed herself as a poor reader, “probably the worst in the whole 6<sup>th</sup> grade,” but in interviews, she expressed that she liked to read and wanted to learn the social studies content and comprehend texts. But, she also did not want her classmates to identify her as a poor reader. This desire trumped her desire to learn and read. Hall observed that “Sarah’s goal to prevent a negative discursive identity from being created appeared to take precedence over her desire to learn content and improve her reading abilities” (p.1809). It was not from lack of trying that Sarah did not comprehend the text being read aloud or independently – she tried to pay attention, listen, and think about the text. However, she often was still not understanding, and she chose not to ask for help because then everybody would know that she couldn’t read and that would be embarrassing. She could name most of the comprehension strategies that her teacher taught, but she couldn’t understand how to use them on her own. While she knew that her ability to use them could help her to become a good reader, she said that they would just slow her down and cause her to fall behind. Sarah decided to sacrifice her literacy development in lieu of maintaining a positive social status.

Mrs. O'Reilly, Sarah's social studies teacher, viewed Sarah as a "really poor reader" with no motivation or desire to become a better reader. These conclusions were created because, Mrs. O'Reilly believed that if Sarah wanted to become a better reader, she would attempt to use comprehension strategies, ask for assistance, and participate in class discussions about the reading tasks. Mrs. O'Reilly viewed Sarah's lack of responsiveness to questions and lack of participation in reading activities as a lack of desire or motivation. Because of this, Sarah received limited personal interactions with her teacher because the teacher chose to put more effort into the students who demonstrated that they wanted to become better readers.

Alisa, an 8<sup>th</sup> grader, viewed her reading ability very similarly to Sarah. She did not want to ask for help out of fear that she would look stupid and then everyone would know that she couldn't read. She felt that by listening in class and to her peers that she could at least learn some of the content and that would be better than nothing.

Both Mrs. O'Reilly and Mrs. Baker (Alisa's science teacher) admitted that they would help readers who demonstrated a desire to learn and provided little assistance to those students who did not outwardly show that they wanted to learn or become better readers. Both teachers stated that they had a lot of struggling readers in their classes who need their help, so they had to make decisions on who to help and those who appeared to have a desire to learn were the ones who won their attention. The students and the teachers played a role in the opportunities that each student had to develop as a reader. The student's desire to place social identity above literacy development and the teachers' interpretation of the students' desire to learn compromised each other. Therefore, in this case study both the students and the teachers were at fault for little improvement in



reading skills. Because the readers did not view themselves as good readers, they approached reading tasks in ways that they hoped would not allow them to be identified as poor readers, or in a way to convince others that they were good readers. “The social positions that they desired took precedence over developing their reading abilities, learning content, and acquiring the identity capital that their teachers associated with good readers” (p.1823).

In addition to the experiences that teachers need to make regarding providing assistance to struggling readers within the classroom, Donalson and Halsey (2007) propose that “many adolescents who are struggling readers are unmotivated in remedial reading classes” (221). Using surveys, observations, and semi-structured interviews with eight eighth grade students enrolled in a remedial reading class, Donalson and Halsey performed a case study to explore struggling adolescent readers’ perceptions about reading. Their study was guided by two questions: How do adolescents in a remedial reading program perceive their reading abilities? How do adolescents perceive remedial reading programs? The students were chosen through purposeful sampling – all eight students were determined to be below average in reading ability based on the State Mandated Criterion Reference Exam. These students were pulled from an elective course and placed in the remedial reading class, without consent or warning of this change. The eight students completed a learning styles survey (based on Howard Gardner’s learning styles) and The Reader Self-Perception Scale that measures readers’ attitude. Both used a Likert scale. Researchers spent six weeks in participant observations taking anecdotal field notes, and then during the final week, students were individually interviewed, using semi-structured interview questions. The results of the study showed that students were

often pulled from elective classes that more closely met their learning style. More than anything else, they wished they had been informed in advance about their schedule change. Many felt “dumb” because of their placement in a remedial reading course and some believed that they would have to take the course again the next year. The concluding summation is that a single measure—one standardized test score—can be detrimental to adolescent readers’ perceptions of themselves as readers. “The relationship between self-efficacy and engagement is a reciprocal one since the perception children have about themselves as a reader influences whether they pursue or avoid literacy experiences” (p.223).

Similarly to perception, motivation can also be influenced by discursive identity. David Paige (2011) selected just over 100 6<sup>th</sup> graders and 100 7<sup>th</sup> graders to show that extrinsic motivation for reading will exhibit a direct and positive relationship on the construct of oral reading proficiency, which will have the same correlation with reading comprehension and will have the same correlation with academic achievement. The classroom teacher administered the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire, which uses a Likert scale to determine extrinsic motivation, and the reading comprehension assessments, which included the Test of Reading Comprehension-3, consisting of four subtests: sentence sequencing, paragraph reading, syntactic awareness, and general vocabulary to identify reading comprehension, over the course of a week, under the supervision of the researcher. The researcher and two doctoral students administered the oral reading tests over a 3-week period: the Test of Word Reading Efficiency, Form A, which consisting of two subtests (Sight Word Efficiency [SWE] test and the Phonemic Decoding Efficiency [PDE] test), and the Gray Oral Reading Test -4. Academic

achievement was ascertained through statewide proficiency exams that assessed curriculum objectives for math, reading, science, and social studies. The result was a medium sized relationship between extrinsic motivation for reading and oral reading proficiency, and significant relationships between oral read proficiency, comprehension, and academic achievement. As a result of the study, Paige offers teaching implications, such as whole class chorale reading, readers theatre, reading historical speeches & poems (meant to be read orally so invoke interest), echo reading, and antiphonal reading (the class is split into sections and takes turns rewording parts of the text), in order to trigger confidence, and therefore, reading success. Paige suggests that “as the student experiences positive feelings and increased competency with oral reading, value for the activity of reading may increase” (p. 418).

Research has shown that while struggling readers may appear unmotivated or uninterested, this may not always be the case. Discursive Identity theory aids in the understanding of the intrinsic perceptions and motivations that drive the outward actions of a middle school reader. Hall (2007) indicates that “discursive identity theory can help teachers make sense of student behaviors and potentially alter their instruction to be more supportive,” and “by understanding how struggling readers view text, perceive themselves, and want others to perceive them, teachers can more likely respond to students’ needs” (p. 134). Therefore, Hall (2007) suggests that teachers talk to the student(s) about the actions observed in the classroom when it comes to reading, asking and answering questions, and completing group and/or independent assignments. Communicating with students will provide insight into their motivation and goals and presents the opportunity to negotiate new behaviors that the student might try that may

not be a red flag to their peers. After all, “If teachers do not recognize and respond to students’ discursive identities, then even the most effective teacher may make little impact” (p.139).

Many teachers, tired of the inundation of ineffective strategies coming and going, and constantly changing, have developed and used effective strategies. These strategies produced from the idea that students use their background knowledge and take an active role in their learning, have produced results which have increased the comprehension levels of struggling readers. Fitzell (2011) concludes,

There are successful strategies that are used with students that do not have a research study to back them up. To assume that a strategy or method is not effective simply because one cannot find a study to validate its use seems disrespectful of many teachers’ skills – skills that rely upon their good judgment.  
(p. 16)

### **Summary**

In July 2002, the Michigan Department of Education, supported by the International Reading Association, defined reading as “the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interactions among the reader’s existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation.” This definition is grounded in the constructivist theory. Schema is at the center of the constructivist theory and at the core of one’s ability to comprehend text. Proficient readers use background knowledge along with an understanding of text structures, and other strategies such as context clues and questioning to innately aid in comprehension. Through the use of scaffolding, which includes Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal

Development, think-alouds, and reciprocal teaching, struggling readers can improve their comprehension.

Miscue analyses, the QRI-4, and the Woodcock-Johnson III, are all examples of assessments that utilize the immersion of text and background knowledge to gauge comprehension; these are grounded in the constructivist theory and useful to gauge effectiveness of an intervention strategy. Research-based strategies have been tried and tested, and even though some have only been raised and praised to the research-based level by the corporations who have created them or who financially back the study, these strategies only explicitly teach skills, resulting a numeric number to justify success.

Empirical studies present a variety of different techniques for providing interventions to struggling readers. Studies conducted by Burns, Hodgson, Parker, and Fremont (2011), as well as Schorzman and Cheek, Jr. (2004) emphasized methods that promoted the necessity for improving background knowledge, rather than skill. The Burns et al. study was found effective in the use of activating knowledge through the use of previewing text and pre-teaching vocabulary words. The components assessed by cloze procedure, which was the only assessment method that utilized background knowledge, of the Schorzman and Cheek, Jr. (2004) indicated growth. Studies conducted by Vaughn et al. (2010) and Manset-Williamson and Nelson (2005) explicitly taught independent skills to struggling readers. This method of providing interventions proved ineffective overall, although the Manset-Williamson and Nelson (2005) study indicated some effectiveness after teaching explicit skills, but only when the skills continued to be reviewed as new skills were being taught. Similarly, a study performed by Cantrell et al.

(2010), also concluded that an intervention offered minimal effectiveness when multiple strategies were being targeted explicitly.

When effectiveness that an intervention strategy has upon the reading comprehension of a middle school student is studied, rarely are the opinions of the classroom teachers solicited. Shippen et al. (2005) used a three-point Likert scale to elicit the opinions of the teachers involved in their study, but the teachers were not offered the opportunity to elaborate on their responses. In the Schorzman & Cheek, Jr. (2004) study, a checklist was used to observe teachers twice a week, but the feedback was not recorded nor used. Structured interviews with the teachers were part of the Cantrell et al. (2010) study; however, the interviews were only to discuss how the lessons fit into the interventions and not a venue for teachers to share their opinions about the effectiveness of the interventions.

Middle school students' discursive identity cannot be ignored. The way that a middle school student wishes to be perceived by his/her peers often overshadows his/her need to receive reading interventions or to even independently use reading strategies. In her study, Leigh Hall (2007, 2010) observed and interviewed three middle school girls (one from each grade 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup>) who were identified as struggling readers based on informal and state reading assessments. While each girl identified herself as a poor reader, all three made choices to hide their struggle for fear of embarrassment, being called "dumb," or losing social position with their peers. Therefore, even though they had a desire to learn, this was overshadowed by maintaining social status. Two of the girls' teachers, however, viewed their lack of unresponsiveness and disinterest in participating as a lack of motivation and an apathy to learn. Because each of their

classrooms had many learners who requested help or asked questions, their teachers admittedly put more effort into these students who demonstrated a desire to learn and become better readers. Perception and motivation may just be the red herring of reading struggles at the middle school level.

Schema identifies that reading comprehension is based on more than just the words on the page. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development shows that a teacher's role in scaffolding instruction is essential. And Discursive Identity Theory alludes that comprehension cannot just be assessed or intervened by using quantitative measures, because perception and motivation play a meaningful role in the use of reading strategies at the middle school level. The connection between all of these, then, is that the role and opinions of the teacher, who is most often at the forefront of providing the reading comprehension strategies, are significant.

### **Conclusion**

In short, while many different factors pertaining to intervention strategies can be discussed and analyzed, the main point is that struggling readers need intervention strategies that will meet their needs. The comprehension does not depend first on the marks on the paper, it depends first on the sense the reader brings to it (Goodman, 1996), and comprehension isn't derived solely from highlighting a text, using sticky notes, or writing the correct words on a comprehension worksheet, but rather meaning arrives because we are purposefully engaged in thinking while we read (Tovani, 2004). This comes first in the form of background knowledge, and then through the ability to recall and use a variety of reading strategies. However, just because we teach our students strategies, doesn't mean that they will apply them (Wilhelm 2001, Routman 2003,

Sibberson and Szymusiak 2003), and reading strategies are only important if they assist readers to make meaning from the text being read (Wilhelm 2001). As a result, middle school students who are struggling with comprehension need to be exposed to effective reading strategies in a small group settings that are either teacher-based or student-based, through the use of sensory-based interventions, and/or interest-based interventions that will help promote engagement and motivation. Teachers' opinions about reading strategies need to be heard because not only do they see the effectiveness more qualitatively, but they can more accurately identify that motivation and perception can make implementing comprehension interventions more complex. Teachers must understand that at the middle school level, struggling readers will often compromise understanding of the text being read because the use of strategies may hinder speed that could jeopardize social status (Hall, 2007; Hall, 2010; Hall et al., 2011; Donalson & Halsey, 2007). Because multiple factors can impact the effectiveness of reading comprehension strategies at the middle school level, quantifiable data will not be a valid indicator of effectiveness. Instead teachers, who work with struggling readers on a daily basis, who know their needs, personalities, and abilities can best choose, provide, and determine effectiveness of intervention strategies. For these reasons, this study will share effective strategies that middle school teachers have used with struggling readers.



## **Chapter Three: Research Design**

### **Introduction**

The aim of this study was to give teachers a venue to share reading strategies that they have used and found to be effective through the use of formative and summative assessments for struggling readers. This study sought to answer the research question: What strategies have middle school English language arts (ELA) teachers found to be most effective in helping struggling readers in the classroom?

In this chapter, I provide background descriptions of the participants, followed by an explanation of the instrumentation used. Next, I delineate the method used to collect data and discuss the analysis procedures. A brief summary of the research design concludes this chapter.

### **Participants**

#### **Recruitment**

This study used a purposive/homogeneous (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012) sampling to select the sample of participants. The homogeneous criteria included teachers who were teaching, or had recently taught, English language arts (ELA) at the middle school level (grades 6, 7 or 8). I initially used two recruiting methods. First, in August 2012, the selection process began by sending e-mails with a cover letter (a copy of the email can be found in Appendix A) describing the purpose of the study and an invitation for participation to Reading Specialist graduate students at Grand Valley State University (GVSU), who were also middle school ELA teachers. Second, also in August 2012, I joined the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). I sent similar e-mails to members of NCTE who made contributions to blogs regarding reading and who stated

that they were middle school ELA teachers. My hope was that within this purposive sampling, I would still yield a generalizable sample including teachers representing each of the middle school grades, a mix of male and female teachers, a variety of years taught in the classroom, and a variety of types of schools represented. Selecting the purposive sample, I, as the researcher used my “knowledge of a population and the specific purpose of the research [to] use personal judgement to select a sample” (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012, p. 100). I used my personal judgment regarding the professionalism that GVSU’s Master’s level literacy program instills in its graduate students and regarding the commitment one must have to pay yearly dues to be a member of NCTE, in order to be sure that participants from these two populations would provide quality data regarding reading instruction, assessments, and intervention strategies.

Of the initial emails sent to GVSU Reading Specialist graduate students, four responded affirmatively that they would be interested in being interviewed for this study. Of the initial emails sent to NCTE members, only one responded affirmatively to participate in the study. After sending out the consent letters, however, only two GVSU students returned the signed consent form (a copy of the Permission Letter and Consent Form can be found in Appendix B). An attempt was made to contact the two other potential participants from GVSU, but neither responded to the second communication. Similarly, the one NCTE member who originally responded affirmatively to participate in the study did not respond to a second or third communication attempt.

Because my initial contacts still had not yielded the desired amount of participants, I broadened my search to opportunistic and snowball sampling (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). In January 2013, an article I read that posed some very

stimulating information on the research topic led to an invitation for the author of this article to participate in the study. Also during this time of acquiring participants, a GVSU Reading Specialist graduate student suggested that her husband would be a quality candidate for this study due to his position, years of experience, and his familiarity with effective reading strategies. Having just four participants at this point, and desiring a minimum of six, a fellow educator suggested the middle school ELA teachers at a local award-winning school. The middle school assistant principal recommended one of her sixth grade ELA teachers along with both her seventh and eighth grade ELA teachers. Once permission was granted to invite these three teachers to participate, an e-mail containing the cover letter presenting the study was sent. All three of the teachers replied affirmatively; all three requested to answer the research questions via e-mail (Curasi, 2001) due to time constraints and family dynamics.

### **Descriptions**

Seven teachers participated in independent interviews, which allowed them to share their knowledge and experiences regarding reading interventions and strategies that have been successful with their students. Six of these teachers were female; one was male. All seven teachers have taught middle school (6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, or 8<sup>th</sup> grade) for a minimum of five years, with the average years taught calculated at 8 years. Six of the seven teachers teach only ELA or ELA with one other main course to students who switch classes throughout the day; one teacher taught all subjects in a self-contained sixth grade classroom. Three of the seven teachers teach in the public school setting, three in charter schools, and one in a private school. Six of the teachers teach in the West Michigan area: two in schools along the lakeshore and four in the greater Grand Rapids area. The

seventh participant teaches in California (see Table 1: *Breakdown of Participant Characteristics*).

### **Instrumentation**

The primary instrument used for this study was a semi-structured interview (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006): “Semi-structured in-depth interviews are the most widely used interviewing format for qualitative research” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 40). The interview protocol in this study had two parts. The first set of questions asked about teaching variables, or background information. The second part was composed of experience questions: participants were asked questions about the identification of struggling readers and interventions used to assist struggling readers (for complete protocol see Appendix C). The semi-structured interview questions (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) for this study were based on the review of literature discussed in chapter two.

The second portion of the semi-structured interview questions was created based on the premise of my thesis proposal—a desire to give teachers a venue to share effective reading intervention strategies used in their classrooms. These questions were also shaped by my background as a middle school ELA teacher. As a qualitative researcher, my background shapes the knowledge I desire to gain.

All research is interpretive; it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied . . . Each interpretive paradigm makes particular demands on the researcher, including questions he or she asks and the interpretations the researcher brings to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 33)

Table 1  
*Breakdown of Participant Characteristics*

Participant	Gender	Teaching and School Characteristics				
		Grade Taught	Subject(s) Taught	Years Taught	Type of School	School Location
Mrs. N	Female	7 <sup>th</sup> & 8 <sup>th</sup>	ELA, Math, Drama	5	Public	West Michigan/Lakeshore West
		7 <sup>th</sup>	ELA	1.5	Public	Michigan/Greater Grand Rapids area
Mrs. L	Female	8 <sup>th</sup>	ELA	11	Public Charter	Greater Grand Rapids area
Mrs. V	Female	6 <sup>th</sup>	ELA & Math	5	Public Charter	Greater Grand Rapids area
Mrs. S	Female	7 <sup>th</sup>	ELA	5	Public Charter	Greater Grand Rapids area
Mrs. D	Female	6 <sup>th</sup>	ELA (part-time)	7	Private	West Michigan/Lakeshore
Mr. G	Male	8 <sup>th</sup>	ELA & History	11	Public	Greater Grand Rapids area
Mrs. B	Female	6 <sup>th</sup>	ELA, Math, Science, & Social Studies	9	Public	California
		4 <sup>th</sup>	ELA, Math, Science, & Social Studies	4	Public	California

Before a discussion about intervention strategies could begin, I needed to first understand the method used by each teacher, or each teacher's school, to determine the reading level of students. This provided some foundation for the discussion that would follow regarding how interventions are determined, who receives interventions, and how the interventions are provided. Second, I wanted to examine what resources were available to the teacher for helping the struggling readers in his/her class, including curriculum-based programs. As was discussed in chapter 2, some studies have been done regarding the use of programs such as Scholastic's *Read 180*, so I wanted to give teachers an opportunity to offer their opinions regarding the use of these types of programs that they may be asked to use, as well as the availability of additional staff members or curricular tools which can influence the teacher's choice of and administration of interventions. Third, I desired to hear what interventions the teacher was using in his/her classroom, including ones he/she tried or created based on professional knowledge. The identification of different styles of interventions and the discussions surrounding their purposes and effectiveness/ineffectiveness from the literature and studies discussed in chapter two, led to the formulation of these questions; through offering a space to general education middle school ELA teachers to share their effective reading strategies, I wanted to see if there were any similarities, ones that may lead to themes, between their responses to the data and descriptions provided in the literature and studies. The data gathered through these interview questions provided the specific details necessary to understand the whole picture of reading interventions used before concentrating the discussion on the last question, in which I asked the teacher to delineate success seen through the use of effective reading interventions; effectiveness, again, being determined through the use of

observations, discussion, and formative and summative assessments. The semi-structured nature of the interview questions (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012) allowed me to probe for more information when appropriate, ask follow-up questions, or add new questions where necessary in order to more clearly understand the effective interventions being used. A complete list of these semi-structured interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

The interview questions were selected using the following criteria. First, the questions needed to be open-ended, allowing for teachers to speak freely about the interventions and their use. Secondly, the purpose of the study was to investigate effective intervention strategies; therefore, the questions were formed to elicit effective methods, rather than allowing ineffective methods to weigh more heavily. Third, the wording of the questions needed to be specific to allow for a comparison of the data surrounding the style, frequency, duration, and implementation of the intervention (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

## **Data Collection**

### **Phone Interviews**

Three of the semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone, using the speaker function on my cell phone and a digital recorder to record the interview; I also took anecdotal notes during the interview for the benefit of future analysis and to show holes that needed further elaboration. The interviews contained a series of open-ended questions designed to gain information regarding the topic of specific reading interventions, but were structured in such a way that the participants' responses could be compared and contrasted (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). Interviews are recognized

as the “primary medium through which social interaction takes place” (Silverman, 2000, p. 821). Silverman (2000) also asserts, “If our data are transcripts of audiotapes, then we come face-to-face with how talk organized the world” (p. 821). Therefore, the phone interviews allowed me to make sense of the teachers’ understandings around effective reading interventions for struggling middle school readers.

Phone interviews allow participants to “remain ‘on their own turf’ and also allow the respondent to have the anonymity of non-face-to-face interaction” (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006, p. 399). The stigma of formal postures and body language are not present, therefore allowing both the interviewer “auditory vigilance” (Tausig & Freeman, 1988) to maintain and to gather data responsively and sensitively (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). Therefore, the phone interview allowed the interviewee to concentrate on the information of the interview questions rather than on any discomfort that an in-person interview may have caused.

### **E-mail Interviews**

Four of the semi-structured interviews were conducted via email. “We are in a moment of discovery and rediscovery, as new ways of looking, interpreting, arguing, and writing are debated and discussed” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 29). The initial intent of this study was to conduct interviews in person or by telephone only. However, “just as dance mirrors and adapts to life, qualitative design is adapted, changed, and redesigned as the study proceeds, due to the social realities of doing research” (Janesick, 2003, p. 73), meaning that I had four participants request e-mail interviews due to time constraints and family dynamics. While e-mail is not a traditional interview method, it is becoming more widely accepted as a qualitative research method due to the many advantages of e-mail



interviewing. For example, “Online informants are able to read and reread their responses, making editorial revisions prior to returning their responses. The responses from computer-mediated interviews will probably be better thought out” (Curasi, 2001, p. 370).

Three separate studies (Curasi, 2001; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006; and Meho & Tibbo, 2002) examined the use of e-mail interviewing in contrast to more traditional methods of interviewing. All three studies concluded similar results. First, in regards to the quality of data gathered, the data from e-mail interviews tends to “be more complete, to include more self-reflection by respondents and to be seemingly more candid” (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006, p. 390) and these transcripts “discuss at length their feelings and experiences, sometimes in more depth than in some face-to-face interviews” (Curasi, 2001, p. 367).

Secondly, e-mail interviews are unobtrusive. Participants are able to complete the interview at their convenience and face less social pressure, so respondents tend to be willing to share more (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). E-mail interviews also “allow participants to take their time answering questions without the interruption of the interviewer” (Meho & Tibbo, 2002, p. 573). Participants can read and re-read the questions and think more thoughtfully and deeply prior to writing a response. Participants are typically willing to offer more personal and lengthier responses because they are “on their own turf,” more accustomed to typing revealing communications at their computers, and more comfortable than most interview settings allow (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006, p. 397).

Third, e-mail interviews do not have to contend with time constraints. E-mail interviews can be conducted over an extended period of time, yielding detailed, rich data (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006), because “follow-up questions allow the interviewer to attain greater details if the respondents do not go into greater depth during their initial responses” (Curasi, 2001, p. 368). And, e-mail interviews “allow for the totality of the exchange to be reviewed by either party (interviewer and interviewee) and eliminate any errors introduced through incorrect transcription” (Meho & Tibbo, 2002, p. 573).

The same interview questions asked of the participants in the phone interviews were sent electronically to the e-mail participants. Three out of the four e-mail participants received reminder e-mails after a week had passed without a response. All four responded to each of the interview questions with a detailed description of at least one intervention strategy found to be effective. Three out of the four e-mails appeared to be complete to me in quality, and therefore, there was no further communication outside of a returned e-mail of appreciation for time spent completing the interview. I did want to probe the fourth e-mail participant a little more regarding one intervention described. This probe extended into one more e-mail exchange.

E-mail as a method of interview, while not traditional, is effective in light of participants who feel more comfortable responding in writing and who like to think about each question a bit more thoroughly before responding. The challenge that arises with e-mail interviews is the inability to ask clarifying and probing questions immediately. The valid solution to this, however, is follow-up e-mails (*see Table 2: Interview Methods*).

Table 2

*Interview Method*

Participant	Interview Method
Mrs. N	E-mail
Mrs. L	E-mail
Mrs. V	E-mail
Mrs. S	E-mail
Mrs. D	Phone
Mr. G	Phone
Mrs. B	Phone

**Role of the Researcher**

The researcher in this study served as the instrument for gathering data through the interview method. As the researcher and a middle school ELA teacher, I probed to gain a better understanding of the interventions described, by asking follow-up questions or questions that lead the participant to clarify any misunderstandings I had. While I did make mental connections with the participants as they described their interventions, I maintained my integrity as the researcher by answering with a “yes” or “no” to questions asked of me. I maintained the role of the interviewer and did not contribute my own experiences.

**Trustworthiness of the Data**

**Credibility and confirmability.** Data for this study was collected using phone and e-mail interviews, which are both established methods for gathering data. The phone

interviews were digitally recorded, saved, and transcribed; the e-mail interviews were saved directly from the participant in their pure state, without any editorial revisions. The transcriptions and e-mail interviews were printed, coded using selective coding (Strauss, 2003) and simultaneous coding (Saldana, 2008), categorized, and analyzed. Through the analysis process, codes were regrouped and recategorized until five themes became apparent. The five themes that emerged from the study were based on similar intervention strategies that three or more of the participants discussed as effective. Because the interviews were conducted using open-ended questions, at no point were participants given any type of list or parameters around which to select or discuss intervention strategies. As a result, it could not be labeled coincidence or coerciveness that the strategies discussed through the themes were presented by multiple participants.

**Transferability.** The purposive sample used in this study was selected to include only middle school ELA teachers (grades 6, 7, or 8); however, the grade level and subject were the only parameters. The participants represented a variety of types of schools and locations of schools. Gender, years of teaching, type of school, and school location were not criteria used to determine participation; Table 1 provides these details for each of the seven participants.

### **Data Analysis**

After conducting all of the interviews, I read and reread through the data; I open-coded some key words and phrases while reading through the interviews the second time. Prior to reading through the data a third time, I generated codes (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Strauss, 2003; Saldana, 2009), according to what I anticipated I would find based on these interview questions. As I read through the data for a third time, I

commenced a combination of selective coding (Strauss, 2003) and simultaneous coding (Saldana, 2009), ciphering through line by line, placing codes by ideas and phrases that fit into the following six categories: how reading level was determined, types of interventions used, who provided the interventions, student motivation, student identity, and how effectiveness was determined. Within some data, multiple codes were assigned to a given idea or phrase. Based on the selective codes, I grouped data for better comparison and analysis. An example of the coding can be found in Appendix D. Within each code category, I looked for similarities and differences. As similarities became apparent, I rearranged and reclassified some of my data into different categories (Saldana, 2008). The reclustering and rearranging of codes occurred several times. I also discussed these categories with a colleague (Saldana, 2009) as I needed to audibly grapple with the categories in progression to determining themes. Saldana (2009) suggests “discussion provides not only an opportunity to articulate your internal thinking processes, but also presents windows of opportunity for clarifying your emergent ideas and possibly making new insights into the data” (p. 28). Through this careful analysis, five themes—thinking-based interventions, teacher-based interventions, student-based interventions, sensory-based interventions, and interest-based interventions—emerged based on what the teachers found effective. Based on these five themes, I began to write about each theme independently, allowing myself to elaborate each idea through writing. Using writing as a method of inquiry, I was able to discover new aspects of my topic (Richardson, 2000) by moving through successive stages of self-reflection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), which included multiple drafts of the research text. As I started writing about one theme, interest-based interventions, my initial thoughts were primarily focused on helping

students find independent reading books which would engage them based on their interest, so they would find pleasure in reading an entire chapter book. Through reflection on my writing and the inclusion of participant data, I gradually realized the importance of including a secondary focus on the benefits of independent reading for struggling readers. The primary focus from the data had centered primarily on motivation, but as an intervention strategy the benefits that independent reading has on comprehension and reader identity also emerged.

Some data or interventions were outliers, meaning that they did not fit into one of the five themes because either the teacher spoke about the ineffectiveness of a particular method or because the participant was not confident in its effectiveness. For example, one teacher shared an opinion about the ineffectiveness of Scholastic's *Read 180* program; as the focus of this study is to share effective methods, this was left out of the data categories and themes. Another participant articulated the use of a "back to the basics" individual learning plan program used at her school. While she attributed some positive aspects of the program to learner engagement, her opinions were overall mixed on this method, and she was unable to comment on its effectiveness as she left on maternity leave part-way through the program. These tangents were not included in this study.

### **Summary**

This study used a purposive/homogeneous (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012) sampling approach to gather information via semi-structured interviews using qualitative research methods. Seven middle school ELA teachers participated. The responses given to the open-ended questions were categorized using a code system (Fraenkel, Wallen, &

Hyun, 2012) to identify commonalities and contradictions. After close analysis and coding of the data, five themes emerged: thinking-based interventions, teacher-based interventions, student-based interventions, sensory-based interventions, and interest-based interventions. Each of these themes will be discussed extensively in chapter four.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

The purpose of this study is to provide a space for middle school English language arts (ELA) teachers to share strategies they have used with their struggling readers, which have aided in improving comprehension. However, to determine effectiveness, other factors surrounding the interventions needed to be taken into account. In this chapter, I first describe the context in which the interviews were conducted, followed by findings that evolved through a close analysis and coding of each of the interviews. Common topics were then grouped together. The information will be presented in five distinct themes that emerged according to intervention strategies that teachers found to be most effective.

### **Context**

Seven teachers participated in independent interviews, which allowed them to share their knowledge and experiences regarding reading interventions and strategies that have been successful with their students. Six of these teachers are female; one is male. All seven teachers have taught middle school (6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, or 8<sup>th</sup> grade) for a minimum of five years, with the average years taught calculated at 8 years. Three of the seven teachers teach in the public school setting, three in charter schools, and one in a private school. Six of the teachers teach in the West Michigan area: two in schools along the lakeshore and four in the greater Grand Rapids area. The seventh participant teaches in California.

### **Findings**

After a close analysis and coding of the data, five themes around effective interventions emerged: 1) thinking-based, 2) teacher-based, 3) student-based 4) sensory-based, and 5) interest-based.



## **Thinking-based**

Taking the time to teach students about what their brains are doing while reading and the importance of staying focused and engaged while reading is the first step towards developing the background students need to take an active role in their own reading process. This strategy often used to activate these metacognitive skills is a think-aloud. Harvey and Goudvis (2007) define the think-aloud process as “peeling back the layers of our thinking, show kids how we approach text, and make visible how understanding happens in a variety of reading contexts” (p. 45). Shores and Chester (2009) describe think-alouds as a form of explicit instruction as “the educator models cognitive and meta-cognitive processes that good readers use to construct meaning and monitor comprehension” (p. 70). Through teacher modeling, students see how to activate and connect background knowledge, make predictions, share questions and inferences, verbalize confusing points and demonstrate fix-up strategies, and sort and sift through information to determine important ideas (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Shores & Chester, 2009). Therefore, think-alouds help students “become more aware of the mental processes they use while reading and can thereby improve their comprehension” (Oster, 2001, as cited in Klinger et al., 2007, p. 36).

One participant, Mrs. B, who taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade for eight years before transferring to 4<sup>th</sup> grade, explained how students need to be taught the skills of the reading process until they are well-versed in them and able to interact with others using appropriate thinking strategies (i.e. predicting, making inferences, asking questions, summarizing) that they will begin to naturally apply these depending on the text and their purpose for reading.

As each new school year begins, Mrs. B begins her reading lessons by pointing out that depending on the text, we can all struggle to read and comprehend a text sometimes. Next, she spends time teaching lessons on metacognition, knowing what one is thinking about, especially while engaging in the act of reading. Through these lessons, she uses pictures to help kids understand that their brains are actually doing a huge amount of multi-tasking while they are reading, so if there is any interference, it's going to affect comprehension. The transformation from the beginning of the year where many students don't really know how to read to half-way through the year when they are metacognitive about their reading, knowing when something isn't making sense and asking for clarification, demonstrates growth in their knowledge of reading and comprehension.

As a constructivist would attest, schema, or background knowledge is an essential part of the reading process. Mrs. D, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade ELA teacher, told the story of one particular student who admitted that he hadn't read a book in years. After helping him find a book, she "worked with him one-on-one, showing him the prior knowledge—a little bit of what he needs when he comes to the book, and he ended up finishing the book that year."

### **Teacher-based**

"Small-group instruction is a fluid process. It is not a structure to be followed, but a foundation for deeper thinking" (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008, p. 123). Various models of teacher-based intervention groupings exist, including guided reading groups, workshop groups, and small groups. These terms are often used interchangeably because the same theme runs through all of them: providing opportunities for teachers to address

specific needs with a specific student or group of students. Routman (2003) views guided reading as “any learning context in which the teacher guides one or more students through some aspect of the reading process: choosing books, making sense of text, decoding and defining words, reading fluently, monitoring one’s comprehension, determining author’s purpose, and so on.” (p. 151). Sibberson and Szymusiak (2008) promote that the principles of guided reading make sense because of the fact that “it ensures that students are taught in groups with others who have similar needs. It makes sense to look for patterns of need and to group students accordingly” (p. 122). Similarly, within reading workshop, the teacher leads a 10-15 minute mini-lesson, and then while students are reading independently and applying the skills taught during that day’s mini-lesson, the teacher meets with small guided-reading groups (Morgan et al., 2013).

Research has been conducted to demonstrate that the size of a class has a significant impact on the way teachers interacted with students (Deutsch, 2003). In fact, smaller class sizes provide more interactive instruction. Deutsch (2003) states,

the smaller the class, the more likely the teacher [is] to interact directly with students, the more frequently the teacher used probes after asking a question, waited for a response to a question posed, and responded positively to an answer a student gave to a question. (p. 39)

If the research verifies the importance of small class size in secondary classrooms, then the same characteristics can be transferred to the small group setting. The teacher becomes more accessible to the learner as he or she is now helping and re-teaching a smaller number of students with needs specific to the challenges they face as readers. The participants in this study confirm the literature. While learning in a whole class

environment, struggling readers will shy away from volunteering to answer questions or participate in discussions because they don't want to bring attention to their lack of understanding or inability to read fluently. Morgan, Williams, Clark, Hatteberg, Hauptman, Marek, et al. (2013) concur that struggling readers are often reluctant to voice their opinions because they are afraid that their thoughts or answers may be incorrect. A teacher observed in a study by Morgan et al., (2013) further concluded after a successful small group reading discussion with struggling readers, "in a whole-group discussion there is a strong likelihood that these students would not have volunteered to share their contributions, only listening to what others had to say" (p. 23). Using a small group setting the teachers in this study, as well, found teacher-based, small-group instruction beneficial.

Mrs. L, who has taught 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA for 11 years, praises what her school labels the workshop model, calling it "fabulous." Mrs. L shared that for many years, she had two paraprofessionals come into her classroom twice a week for 45 minutes to help operate a workshop time. The workshop model, as described by Mrs. L, consisted of the students divided into groups based on skill subsets determined through the use of the Northwest Education Association (NWEA) scores, as well as classroom observations. Within each group, a teacher worked with the students on a need-based skill, as determined by using the Descartes information that is included within the subset rankings of the NWEA test data. Mrs. L attributes workshop time as being instrumental in helping her students who were behind grade level to make massive gains. Specifically, she said,

During this [workshop] time students are ability grouped and taught very specific lessons based on their NWEA scores and other needs I've observed in class.

These groups are semifluid, meaning that if a student struggles in one area they may find themselves in the intensive group for a week or two while we work on that skill. The next skill might be an area they need some challenging in so they would be moved up a tier for the duration of that topic.

Through Mrs. L's workshop/small group model, small groups of students were given the opportunity to work with other students who required extra practice with the same skill and with a teacher who was focused on just this small group; however, these groups changed according to skill. With the workshop model, Mrs. L has seen consistent growth every year from all levels of students, sharing:

The workshop piece is truly what I believe makes the massive difference . . . these kids are getting instruction that is tailored to their level for a very specific skill in a small group. They are not lost in the shuffle of the whole group this way. They can't just blend in and fly under the radar.

Mrs. V, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade ELA and math teacher, also attributes growth through the use of small groups, which she referred to as a "workshop model," as well, in her classroom. While her class is divided into small groups during this workshop time, she typically worked with her struggling readers.

I usually work with the low group of readers, and the activities that I do with them give me a better glimpse at their capabilities and how I can best help them. I have seen many of them grow and gain understanding in terms of reading and reading strategies during this time.

This small group setting has many benefits including focus on a particular skill, a more comfortable group size for students to ask clarification questions, and a better opportunity for the teacher to be able to check in with each student to formatively assess each student's success on that particular skill.

This section would be incomplete without a note about the effect that homogenous grouping can have on struggling readers. Teachers need to be cautious about sending the wrong message: "I worry about the message [ability] grouping sends to students—a message that they are somehow less capable" (Routman, 2003, p. 153). Sibberson and Szymusiak (2008) contend that teachers can avoid negative aspects of grouping, while making learning manageable, by meeting with individual or small groups of students on a need-basis, rather than working with the same small groups daily, like the reading groups of the past. Routman (2003) concludes that teacher-based interventions provided to ability-based groups are acceptable for a very brief periods of time (ten to fifteen) minutes, as long as daily opportunities for more varied groups are also available throughout the day.

### **Student-based**

Creating a safe environment must be a priority for the success of student-based learning. Shores and Chester (2009) state, "it is an easy assumption that a student must feel physically safe in the classroom. However, it is also imperative that a student feel emotionally safe" (p. 101). The process of creating a safe environment cannot be rushed, and may in fact take several months to teach, practice, and reteach before the students are ready to take ownership of student-based learning within an environment where students will feel safe sharing and learning with their peers. Once they do, however, and they take

on the role as teachers, helping each other and leading the other students in the group through the reading process, a higher level of learning will begin.

Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR) is grounded in sociocultural theory and the principles of scaffolding, zone of proximal development, and cognitive psychology (Klinger, Vaughn, and Boardman, 2007). In agreement with many researchers including Bryant, Linan-Thompson, Ugel, and Hamff (2000), Klinger, Vaughn, and Boardman (2007) report that over a 10-year period, “CSR has yielded positive outcomes for students with learning disabilities and those at risk for reading disabilities, as well as average and high-achieving students” (p. 143). Teachers who implement small groups, typically do so with characteristics of CSR in mind, including strategies used (i.e., activating prior knowledge, asking questions, clarifying, etc.) and assigning meaningful roles to each member in the group. Collaboration also helps to create interdependence among students as they work towards a shared goal (Hall et al., 2011). Several participants stated that they found the use of student-led small groups to be effective, most on the premise of engaging student participation in their own learning and the learning of others. Klinger, Vaughn, and Boardman (2007), articulate, “The goals of CSR are to improve reading comprehension and increase conceptual learning in ways that maximize students’ participation” (p. 142).

When students are put in a position to role-play the part of the teacher, or a peer tutor, they become an active participant in their own learning, rather than a passive member of a larger audience, and academic gains can be made. A study conducted by Bowman-Perrott et al. (2013) determined that “greater academic gains were achieved by

students engaged in peer tutoring interventions than nonpeer tutoring instructional arrangements” (p. 490).

The participants in this study reported similar results from the use of student-based interventions. “What I found most successful,” Mrs. N shared, “were literature circles.” She used literature circles in her middle school classes, which she credits for aiding in their comprehension because each small group was reading a different text that was appropriate to their reading level. “Within the small group, students could choose different roles so that they could express their comprehension of texts in a way that could be successful for them.” Students were receiving help comprehending literature from their classmates through cooperative learning, Mrs. N added. This is confirmed by Hall, Burns, and Edwards (2011) who via Gamoran (1993) espouse “When presented with challenging texts, marginalized readers are likely to be highly responsive and to end up *improving* their comprehension abilities” (p. 134).

Mrs. B, who taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade for eight years before transferring to 4<sup>th</sup> grade, designed a “reading coaches” model, which guides students through the process of reading development. She deems it important to teach lessons at the beginning of the year that show students the benefits of engaging with other students in small groups and discussing texts. Therefore, she teaches her students how to be reading coaches in-training, instructing them on reading comprehension, text structure, author input, author’s purpose, and many other strategies. To be reading coaches in-training, she teaches them strategies she learned while getting her master’s degree as a reading specialist: how to prompt kids to think about what they’re reading, how to prompt discussions about what they’re reading, and how to prompt comprehension by knowing what questions to ask.



They learn that they have to make choices about what questions to ask, and through this process, they are developing their comprehension. Through this model, she is forming each student into a reading coach by providing the scaffolding they need to make good choices as readers.

Mrs. B has identified success from this reading coaches model in several ways. First of all, every year her students tend to do very well on the state standardized test. She explained that she thinks a lot has to do with the aspects of the reading coaches program because it encourages students to not only think about the questions being asked, but also to think about what skills they need to use in order to be successful on the rote questions of the state test.

Secondly, the students learn to value each other as readers, providing the opportunity for all students to learn and share. Mrs. B also focuses on creating a safe, comfortable environment where students help each other through the mistakes they make and learn to value one another's multiple intelligences, emphasizing that all students have their strengths and weaknesses. Literature supports the need for this emphasis. Jeffrey Wilhelm in his book, *You Gotta Be the Book* (1995), describes three students who were able to think of themselves as readers with something worth sharing when they were able to respond to literature through art. Recognizing Howard Gardner's work with multiple intelligences from 1983, Wilhelm (1995) notes,

School should be a place where students are encouraged to use their natural talents and aptitudes. So language arts classes become a place where student strengths and interests are called on. If they are not, students will be unrecognized, bored, and unhappy. Gardner suggests that every child is gifted. By

providing various opportunities and choices, we help students to develop their own unique combinations of talents. (p. 141)

Thirdly, as a result of teaching and guiding students through this reading coaches model, Mrs. B noticed that more kids asked for help when they realized that something they read didn't make sense, or asked her to come join their reading group if the group was confused about something. The success of peers helping, coaching, or tutoring peers is linked to more time on task and more time engaging in discussion, which ultimately leads to increased academic achievement (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013).

### **Sensory-based**

“Reading aloud—in all grades—has long been viewed as a critical factor in producing successful readers as well as learners who are interested in reading” (Routman, 2003, p. 20). When two senses, seeing and hearing, can work together to simultaneously activate the brain, comprehension and fluency can both be positively affected. When students have the opportunity to hear the text being read, as well as see the words, several benefits occur. First, hearing the text read aloud allows the student to hear good fluency. The student hears the pauses, the influxes, the tones, and the pronunciation of words. Through the read-aloud strategy, teachers can model reading strategies and flexibility in reading, giving students power over the text (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008).

When asked to elaborate on any intervention strategies she has used or created to help improve the reading of struggling general education students in her classroom, Mrs. S., a 7<sup>th</sup> grade ELA teacher, responded, “We often read texts aloud in my classes with struggling readers, or we will listen to audio recordings of texts. I purposely stop and explain the rhythm with which good readers read aloud.” She attributes the connection

between the written word and the audible sound as a contributing factor of this strategy's success. In addition, she found "when some students can attach a voice to the reading, either audibly or mentally, it aids in comprehension." The third and foremost contributing factor that Mrs. S asserts that using audio recordings is an effective strategy with helping struggling readers is to aid in fluency through the correction of miscues. She explains,

I find that most struggling readers I encounter in 7<sup>th</sup> grade do not have difficulty with phonemic awareness or the ability to read the written word; however, they struggle with fluency and not correcting miscues that lead to comprehension problems. They will often continue to read after a misread word affects their comprehension or understanding of the text. Listening to audio or reading aloud helps with fluency, and modeling the correcting of miscues helps with understanding how those miscues can affect our comprehension.

Having the pressure off of focusing on correctly pronouncing each word allows the student to concentrate on understanding the text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). As a result, the student is "free to listen, think about the ideas, talk to each other, and use strategies to understand the text" (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 48). Students can think about making predictions, making inferences, analyzing the character, and making connections—skills that are essential to developing comprehension.

Listening to audio versions of text is quite typical in younger grades, so in light of middle school readers who are reading two or more grade levels behind, the listening aspect that goes along with the grade level for which they are reading is still quite relevant. Mrs. V uses CDs sometimes when reading whole class novels to help the

struggling readers. Using audio versions of books allow students the opportunity to experience books that may not be at their reading level (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008), such as whole-class novels.

Audio recordings can be sent home with the student to avoid possible identity issues. “Students who self-identify as poor readers often choose to disengage from reading rather than publically reveal their perceived weaknesses as readers” (Hall et al., 2011). Students can listen to the story or chapter that will be discussed in class the next day, which will allow the struggling reader the opportunity to be able to participate in whole-class or small group discussions, rather than disengage. Mrs. D, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade ELA teacher, shares that for the struggling readers in her classes, she will give them a CD and an extra copy of the reading anthology that they can take home. This way the student can listen and follow along with the story at home the night before it will be read in class. If he or she is in a small reading group, he or she will have had a preview of the story, and be more successful reading and discussing it with the group.

Audio recordings can also be used with small groups within the classroom or with the whole class so as not to single out the students who would most benefit from listening to the text. Mrs. S., Mrs. V. and Mrs. D all reported that audio recordings played a significant role in the comprehension development growth of their struggling readers.

### **Interest-based**

“Students who I believe are determined nonreaders become committed, passionate readers given the right books, time to read, and regular responses to their thinking” (Kittle, 2013). Motivating middle school students to continue reading is the most valuable way, according to the teachers in this study, to continue to improve comprehension and

lessen the gap of students reading below grade level. Literature abounds to support this conclusion. For example, Routman (2003) contends, “a longstanding, highly respected body of research definitively shows that students who read more, read better, and have higher reading achievement” (p. 85). To support this grounded research, the first step, getting books of interest into the hands of middle school students, is crucial.

In response to several different questions regarding the use of and the effectiveness of intervention strategies for struggling readers, Mrs. D confidently repeated the most effective intervention strategy that she has in her bag of tricks: gearing kids towards reading books at their interest level. Mrs. D shares the story of one student she had years ago who was classified as a “dumb jock.” He hadn’t read a book in years, she noted, because he would just skim by and pretend to do his assigned reading, but he’d never really read it. When she and another co-teacher discovered his interest level, it was a life-changing day in his reader identity. They gave him the first book in the *Michigan Chillers* series and worked with him one-on-one, showing him how to use prior knowledge and the connections he brought to the book. That year, he finished the book: the first book he had finished in years. He was so excited that he read three more of these books over the summer. Six years later as a high school senior, his mom shared that he still reads all the time. Mrs. D also told stories of how upset her students can be when it’s time to put their silent reading books away and another story of a student who emailed her at 10:30 at night to ask a question on his homework that he was just starting because he had been so wrapped up in his book all evening. With these many contributing stories, Mrs. D confidently believes that the best way to help struggling readers is to gear kids

towards their reading and interest level, making sure that they are excited about what they are reading. “I really think it’s the interest, just getting their interest high.”

After a dynamic discussion on the subject of reading interventions, when asked what effective strategies he used, Mr. G’s response was encouraging students to pick books that are at their level and of interest to them. He then conferences with kids on a regular basis (at least once a week) to discuss what they are reading and get them excited about what they are reading. In addition, he adds, being a reader, yourself, as the teacher is extremely beneficial because this knowledge of young adult books not only allows for quality discussions with the students about the books they are reading, but more importantly, when the teacher is familiar with a variety of books, he or she can help connect kids with books at their interest level. This, he adds, “makes a difference, especially with struggling readers because they need lots of ideas and suggestions.”

Mrs. V uses a reading assessment at the beginning of the year, which informs her of each of her students’ interests. Literature supports the idea of using interest inventories: “Teachers can use an interest inventory to determine topics and genres the student will enjoy and then find great books based on this information and the student’s reading level” (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2009/2010, p. 316). Then, Mrs. V continues, the students do several independent book studies that are based on these books within their reading abilities. “They are all doing the same work (summaries, character studies, plot studies, mood, theme, etc.), just reading different chosen leveled books that will interest them and be at their ability level.” The ability to choose from the next higher level of books is the goal, and growth has been seen. “We have seen growth with these independent book studies—I think partially due to reading a book that is at their level and

also the freedom of choosing a book that they are interested in.” When asked if she believes that this approach to reading would benefit other students, Mrs. V’s response was “Of course . . . it gives the students the freedom and the chance to read a book that is at their level. Plus, we all know that students are more likely to learn when they are interested in something.”

### **Summary**

Seven teachers, each with 5-11 years of experience teaching English language arts at the middle school level, were interviewed for this study. Each teacher was asked to discuss various strategies used in his or her classroom to help struggling readers. The strategies that they labeled as effective were analyzed and reanalyzed. Five themes emerged based on the strategies that teachers found effective. The first is thinking-based: thinking-based strategies guide students to use metacognitive strategies to think about what their brains are doing and their schema while reading. The second is teacher-based: teacher-led small groups can effectively address specific needs and skills. The third is student-based: student-led small groups help students increase reading comprehension through coaching each other during the reading process. The fourth, sensory-based: audio recordings increase both fluency and comprehension. Lastly, interest-based: getting books of interest in students’ hands is the most recognized effective method for helping middle school struggling readers, as shared by seven middle school ELA teachers.

The effectiveness of the thinking-based interventions stems from the need for students to think about and understand the reading process. The need to use this knowledge of the reading process and what the brain is doing while reading provides tools for students to invest in their reading development.

Teacher-based small groups may take the form of a workshop model where extra teachers, paraprofessionals, or other school staff work with small groups at the same time that the teacher is working with a small group. The effectiveness of these small groups is correlated to several factors, including: group size; the group's homogenous nature, meaning that all of the students in that particular group are reviewing or working on the same skill; and the ability of the teacher to be more accessible to student questions and needs, as well as more easily check for understanding so that students are unable to "fly under the radar" (Mrs. V).

Student-led small groups adorn students with capacities needed to take on the role of a teacher. Students must now take ownership of engaging in their own discussions, making choices of what good questions to ask, clarifying meaning, and leading others in the use of reading strategies such as making predictions, making inferences, and summarizing. Using motivational books, or books of interest, is a key component for the effectiveness of this strategy.

A sensory-based intervention combines audio with visually seeing the text. With the combination of the two senses, students can focus on comprehension rather than being distracted by word pronunciation and fluency. Audio recordings can aid students in developing fluency and help them to make meaning of the text. A student's privacy can also be more easily protected when audio recordings along with an extra copy of the text can be sent home with the student to preview before it is read and discussed in either whole class or small group settings.

Lastly, the strategy submitted by the most teachers interviewed was attending to the interest level of students and getting books in their hands that meet this interest. As



Mrs. D frequently repeated in regards to the method she identified as the most effective, “I think gearing towards interest level and pushing them [is the most effective]” (Mrs. D). The constructivist lens sheds light on the need for reading development to be embedded in the context of reading. When kids are immersed in a book at their interest level, they are using all of the skills they have been taught to bring to the reading process. The consistency with which students are practicing these skills will strengthen and develop their abilities as readers. Excitement for reading, and therefore a development of skills, can be created by giving students freedom of choice, engaging students in books at their reading and interest level, and setting aside time on a regular basis to conference with students regarding the books they are reading.

The next chapter will summarize the study; discuss the findings in relation to the Constructivist theory and Discursive Identity theory; and provide recommendations for administrators, teachers, and teacher education institutions, as well as offer recommendations for future studies on this topic.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to offer a space for middle school English language arts (ELA) teachers to share effective methods they have used, and adapted through their own experiences, for helping general education middle school struggling readers. While a few studies conducted by publishers of reading curriculum do exist that solicited teachers' opinions regarding their particular program or strategy, the teacher opinions were either limited to a Likert scale, used only for clarification regarding implementation of the intervention, or not even taken into consideration (Shippen, Houchins, Steventon, & Sartor, 2005; Schorzman & Cheek, Jr., 2004; Cantrell et al., 2010). This study, however, offered a space for middle school ELA teachers to reflect and elaborate on common methods they have used and found to be successful in increasing comprehension levels of their middle school students. This study used a purposive/homogeneous (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012) sampling to select the sample of participants. Seven teachers agreed to participate. Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews. After securing all seven interviews, data was analyzed using a combination of selective coding (Strauss, 2003) and simultaneous coding (Saldana, 2009). Once the data was coded, five themes emerged to answer the main research question: What strategies have middle school ELA teachers found to be most effective in helping struggling readers in the classroom? The five themes included: 1) thinking-based interventions; 2) teacher-based interventions; 3) student-based interventions; 4) sensory-based interventions; 5) interest-based interventions.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study is to explore effective intervention strategies used by experienced middle school English language arts (ELA) teachers, whose methods have gone untapped. Specifically, I seek to answer one main question: What strategies have middle school ELA teachers found to be most effective in helping struggling readers in the classroom? To get to the heart of this main question, however, certain premise questions needed to be built upon. These questions included: 1) What strategies do you use in your classroom to help with the reading development of struggling readers; 2) How are these interventions provided; 3) Who provides these interventions; and 4) How do you determine the effectiveness of a strategy?

In regards to strategies that teachers use in their classroom, five themes emerged from the study to identify categories of interventions used by teachers: thinking-based interventions, teacher-based interventions, student-based interventions, sensory-based interventions, and interest-based interventions. More specifically, teachers described pre-teaching metacognitive skills to their students, using flexible small groups to directly help students with skills specific to their needs, engaging students in literature circles or collaborative groups in a safe environment, using audio recordings of texts or read-alouds to aid with comprehension and miscues, and promoting interest-based reading.

In regards to how these interventions are provided and who provides them, with the exception of some small group models, which will sometimes use extra instructional staff, the interventions are provided by the classroom teacher within his or her classroom. Even, the teachers who reported the advantage of having additional support with what they labeled as “workshop,” commented that these staff members were being pulled from

their rooms, leaving them to conduct workshops on their own, without any assistance. Teachers reported that they will conference with individual students, re-teach skills to individuals or small groups, and when possible, send home an audio recording and written version of a text so the student can have additional time with the text.

In regards to determining the effectiveness of a strategy, the teachers provided some remarks concerning high-stakes tests as indicators of effectiveness, but the common response was that effectiveness was determined through changed behavior (reader identity) projected by the student, questions students asked that indicated a higher level of comprehension, informal conversations about books, and various types of formative assessments including exit tickets and white board responses.

### **Discussion**

“The major constraint for teachers in terms of adequately meeting the needs of their struggling readers is time” (Moreau, 2014, p.11). At the heart of a teacher, however, is a desire to help each and every student succeed, so an internal conflict is created. Moreau (2014) quotes one teacher from her study who spoke with exasperation,

I have many struggling readers and many who are above grade level and with so little support they are not getting their needs met. However, I am only one person and can't teach a range of seven to eight grade levels at once very often. The amount of planning necessary to do this would mean I would be working 22 hours a day. (p. 12)

This statement is one that is quite possibly pondered by many teachers who relish the thought of helping each individual student, but relinquish the fact that time constraints are a barrier to this desire. Education is also at a crossroad where spending large amounts

of time teaching to the state standardized tests has become a priority even though this narrow focus does not translate into helping students learn (Valencia & Riddle Buly, 2004). Because schools must meet the state requirements, or else be “targeted for ‘improvement’” (Valencia & Riddle Buly, 2004, p. 217), administrations seek out promoted “research-based” programs that sell confidence in their ability to help raise test scores. Smith (2006) retorts that programs produced by people outside of the classroom to determine what teachers and learners should do in the classroom, including predetermined activities, drills, exercises, target behaviors, criterion levels, and “accountability” do not work because these programs “rarely engage children in meaningful reading enterprises” (p. 140). Smith (2006) further expounds on the negative stigma presented by the use of reading programs by emphasizing a trust factor:

Teachers need programs if they don’t trust children to learn, if they fear that involvement in written language won’t be sufficient to promote children’s learning to read. And people outside the classroom insist on programs if they don’t trust teachers to teach and feel they must be controlled every step of the way. (p. 141)

These programs are often ineffective for addressing the vast needs of readers including promoting the necessary background knowledge needed to improve comprehension, addressing thinking-based strategies, promoting more time on task, while at the same time acknowledging the significant roles that engagement and identity play in the success of a middle school reader. Teachers are still responsible for helping their struggling readers regardless of the program or script that may be placed before them. For this reason, this study cuts through the red tape of what administrations may be requiring and

of the scripted programs, and instead, gave a voice to middle school ELA teachers who confirmed—two, three, four times—that the findings of this study are effective strategies. These methods have been confirmed by the literature through the words of leading reading and literacy gurus such as Frank Smith, Nancie Atwell, Penny Kittle, Kelly Gallagher, Richard Allington, Regie Routman, Frankie Sibberson and Karen Szymusiak.

Three important facets must be held in high accord when the terms struggling readers and middle school students intertwine: time, engagement and identity. Interventions that are thinking-based, teacher-based, student-based, sensory-based, and interest-based are all effective, but the dilemma many teachers will face is how to find the time for these and how can these be effectively addressed when engagement and identity are such key factors for struggling middle school readers. Some teachers may feel at a loss, overwhelmed, and uncertain about how to take the first step towards helping struggling middle school readers. There is one strategy identified by the research and confirmed by multiple participants in this study, through which teachers can effectively meet the needs of all readers: Independent reading. Through independent reading, teachers can attend to the crucial elements of engagement and identity, while still providing the effective interventions discussed in this study. In addition, Smith (2006) emphasizes that “children who find it hard to make sense of reading need more meaningful reading, not less” (p. 151). The crux of the matter, though, is that some schools are eliminating independent reading in favor of explicitly teaching special programs or specific interventions that will prepare students for the state tests (Valencia & Riddle Buly, 2004). “The overemphasis on testing is playing a major part in killing off readers in America’s classroom ... We are developing test-takers at the expense of

readers” (Gallagher, 2009, p. 7). If teachers are truly to engage students and help create life-long readers and learners, independent reading needs to remain a priority. Through independent reading, teachers can continue to provide effective intervention strategies while attending to reader engagement and identity.

### **Independent Reading Promotes Thinking-based Interventions**

Prior to independent reading, teachers can teach brief mini-lessons on a thinking-based skills, and then encourage students to practice that skill while reading. Routman (2003) asserts, “Independent reading provides the indispensable practice that literacy learners require to become successful, self-regulating, self-monitoring readers” (p. 87). In addition, teachers, like Mrs. D, also find that helping struggling readers learn to apply background knowledge and connections to their reading, might just be the help the reader needs to find enjoyment in reading books. “What constructivist learning theory says is that meaningful learning must be connected to prior knowledge and previous experience” (DeHart & Cook, 1997, p. 3). Students need to be able to make connections between their life experiences and the texts they read in order to aid comprehension (Hall et al., 2011). Independent reading, along with teacher conferences supports this strategy.

Thinking-based interventions can also occur in the form of self-reflections. Atwell (2015) promotes the use of reading journals. Every three weeks, students offer a critical response, in the form of a letter, about a book he/she has recently finished. In these letters, students critique an element of the book, which can include anything from a literary element to comparing and contrasting the book being critiqued to another book. Reading logs can also offer a form of self-reflection. Sibberson and Szymusiak (2008)

periodically encourage students to review their reading logs and write a reflection about what they notice:

This gives the child an opportunity to really look at [his]/her writing and set reading goals . . . The reflection forms also become springboards for individual conferences. Students have already thought about their reading, they are ready to talk about what they have discovered. They are also ready to think more deeply about their needs as readers. (p. 70)

### **Independent Reading Promotes Teacher-based Interventions**

Conferencing with students during independent reading is an excellent approach to helping specific readers with specific reading skills, such as vocabulary and text features for a new genre a student is reading for the first time. The teacher may choose to address a skill with a specific student or with a small group if multiple students need support with the same skill (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008). These fluid groups support the effective teacher-based interventions discussed by Mrs. L. and Mrs. V.

Conferences can address and can provide opportunities for fluency checks by having students read aloud from a page from the book that he or she is currently reading, while the teacher uses a photocopy to mark the student's rereads, errors, and self-corrections (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008). Since disruptions in fluency can disrupt short-term meaning and making sense of text, monitoring fluency development is an important element of helping a student develop his/her comprehension (Smith, 2006).

Conferencing opens many doors, including attending to teaching specific reading strategies, providing feedback, and allocating time for brief check-ins. Kittle (2013) explains that one type of conference is a "teaching strategic reading" conference. During



these conferences, teachers have the opportunity to address specific reading skills needed by that particular reader in a short amount of time. Teachers can teach strategies that will empower readers to work through challenges in the text on their own (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008). During reading conferences, teachers can also assess students and provide feedback: “Teacher feedback is necessary to ensure readers are applying what we’ve been teaching them, are reading for understanding, and are continuing to set new goals” (Routman, 2003, p. 87). Assessment can come in the form of meeting with individual students, small groups, or observing (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008).

Reading Check-Ins (another form of conferences) provides opportunities for teachers to monitor progress, understanding, and level of satisfaction (Atwell, 2015). These brief check-ins can cover a range of topics from book genres, structure of a book, understanding, reasons for book abandonment, next books, characteristics of the main character, traits of the author, and book satisfaction, including inquiry if the student has not made much progress in his/her book. Conferencing, according to Atwell (2015) is a way to check in with readers to make sure that they are engaged, on-task, and using reading strategies. When students seem restless or abandon books frequently, conferences provide insight into the nature of the abandonment (comprehension issues, loss of interest, poor book choice, etc.). Once the reason for abandonment is known, teachers can help the student find a book at his/her interest level.

Independent reading is not enough in and of itself, students must be monitored and assessed. After all, if no one is monitoring their progress, not much changes; by carefully monitoring individual students during independent reading, teachers can learn which skills and strategies to teach next. (Routman, 2003).

## **Independent Reading Promotes Student-based Interventions**

The basis for reading independently is reading by oneself. Since significant research has promoted both the positive impact that independent reading has on reading development and the need for students to read books of choice and books of interest, who better to provide recommendations for good books to read than fellow students? Using book talks to promote interesting books to struggling readers is significant. Atwell (2007) defines book talks as “short, direct, and mostly enthusiastic: *endorsements of* particular titles, not oral reports (p. 67). As part of the book talk process, students keep a running record of book titles in their reading notebooks that they can turn to once they have finished a book and are look for their next new read.

Discussions about texts can guide struggling readers to a better understanding of their world and help them to take control of their learning through a dialogue about the text, their interpretations, their questions and concerns, all while developing their reading comprehension abilities (Hall et al., 2011). As the literature has confirmed, background or prior knowledge is a necessary proponent for interpreting or understanding text: “Reading becomes a meeting of the reader’s prior knowledge *and* textual meanings that work together to create a greater sense of things” (Wilhelm, 1995, p. 17). Therefore, through small group or peer discussions, students are able to share knowledge and questions that are framed by their experiences both inside and outside of school (Hall et al., 2011). Informal discussions can also be useful because “they tell us what students are doing outside of the routines of the classroom” (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008).

Atwell (2007) promotes the use of reading journals used as a platform for students to reflect on books they are reading or respond to the reflection of a friend. For the

reading journal entries, students are asked to go back and skim a book recently read, chose a significant piece of text that “shows something essential” in terms of the book’s theme, problem, character development, plot arc, or to the author’s style and write a response to identify the significance of one of these elements (pp. 76-77). Requiring student to read and respond to a friend’s reading journal provides students with the opportunity to see the reflections and interpretations of other readers, and through this, can reflect on and adjust their own thoughts as readers.

### **Independent Reading Promotes Sensory-based Interventions**

Books on tape (CD) support readers who need to build stamina (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008). Listening to books read by professional actors or readers will, like read-alouds during class time, allow struggling readers to hear good fluency including pauses, influxes, tones, and the correct pronunciation of words. In addition, while listening to a book read on tape/CD students can focus solely on comprehension and not be distracted by challenging vocabulary. Having the pressure off of focusing on correctly pronouncing each word allows the student to concentrate on understanding the text (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). As a result, the student is “free to listen, think about the ideas, talk to each other, and use strategies to understand the text” (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007, p. 48). Students can think about making predictions, making inferences, analyzing the character, and making connections—skills that are essential to developing comprehension.

Sometimes a student’s reading level may not match his/her reading level; listening to the book allows the student to experience books at their interest level. Because discursive identity plays a critical role in how middle school students view

themselves as readers (Hall, 2007), it is important to give struggling readers exposure to the popular books that other students are reading. Giving struggling readers the opportunity to interact with these books will offer them the opportunity to engage in discussions with their peers, and as a result, positively impact their reader identity.

### **Independent Reading Promotes Interest-based Interventions, Including Engagement and Motivation**

“High reading motivation and engagement attributes are strongly related to higher levels of learning and achievement” (Hall et al., 2011, p. 47). As both Mr. G and Mrs. D pointed out, student engagement occurs when students are interested in the books they are reading. This interest is procured through students choosing their own independent reading books. “Student choice is synonymous with student *engagement*” (Atwell, 2015, p.21). Because of the necessity of student choice, teachers must fill their classroom with a vast variety of books that students will find interesting and worthwhile (Atwell, 2015). This means that teachers need to know the interests of their students. Boys tend to be a bit more difficult to connect with interest-based books, so it will be important to find books with rich characters and plots that boys will be able to connect with and engage with, as well (Atwell, 2007).

In addition, teachers can also provide interest-based interventions by talking about books, sharing book talks and suggesting interest-based books. In order to do this, teachers should read a voluminous amount of young adult literature, as well as learn about the tastes of individual readers and search for books that will interest and challenge them (Atwell, 2015).

To maintain engagement, students need to also understand that abandoning a book that is not interesting, or engaging, is okay (Atwell, 2007, 2015). Students should never feel the need to “make it through” a boring book. Through conferencing, teachers make sure that students are interested and engaged in the books they are reading, and when they are not, teachers need to be confident to take books out of readers’ hands (Atwell, 2007).

“Engagement means that the reader uses a variety of moves and strategies to enter and involve herself intensely in worlds of meaning” (Wilhelm, 1997, p. 144). Reader Response Theory is evidenced when the reader uses a variety of strategies to enter and involve him/herself intensely in worlds of meaning (Wilhelm, 1997). When students are engaged, they are fully submerged in the task mentally, emotionally, and even physically; however, when students are not engaged, they are barely aware of the task (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2009). Comprehension is also a result of engagement because “when students read stories that engage them, and when the difficulty of the book falls within their abilities as readers, reading *is* comprehension” (Atwell, 2015, p. 168). Engaged readers actively interact with the text, seeking to avoid distractions in order to actively interact with the text. These engaged readers choose to read because they find interest and enjoyment in it, and as a result these students demonstrate higher levels of reading achievement than students who were less engaged (Kelly & Clausen-Grace, 2009). Therefore, to assist reader engagement, struggling readers need to be given the strategies for focusing on entering the story world, visualizing people and places, and taking up relationships with character, as engaged readers typically engage in intensely visual, emphatic, and emotional responses to their reading (Wilhelm, 1997). In addition, readers

need books that carry them along, compelling them to read, as well as need reading goals and a wide variety of books (Kittle, 2013).

However, there is a vast continuum of reading engagement in the classroom, so identifying the engagement level of each student will help teachers meet everyone's needs during independent reading time, which according to this study is a valuable method for helping struggling readers. According to the continuum presented by Kelly and Clausen-Grace (2009), four types of readers fall below the engagement level. One of these types, the challenged readers, are often the struggling readers or English language learners. Reading is difficult for these students, and they typically read below grade level. Teachers can assist these readers by having them take an interest inventory and use this, along with knowledge of the students' reading level, to assist them with making book choices that they will enjoy and find success in reading. These students also benefit from peer discussions, frequent monitoring, teacher conferencing, and feedback. Stopping frequently to state the big idea or summarize what they have read will also engage the thinking-based skills of these struggling readers.

Because engagement is always job one of independent reading, getting to know each student is an essential first step (Kittle, 2013). Interest inventories and brief check-ins during independent reading are effective methods for getting to know each individual reader (Atwell, 2015). Students who feel their teacher genuinely respects them as readers will be more eager to read, and the impact of this voluminous reading will directly affect both comprehension and identity. Engagement and motivation are linked to a respected teacher-student relationship, "Developing reading stamina by cultivating an individual

reading habit requires relationships with students and systems that support, encourage, and challenge readers” (Kittle, 2013, p. 24).

### **Independent Reading Promotes Reader Identity**

Research has stated in numerous ways the impact that a middle school student’s identity as a reader has on his or her ability to interact with text and develop comprehension. Elizabeth Moje (McCarthy & Moje, 2002) suggests, “identity matters because it, whatever *it* is, shapes or is an aspect of how humans make sense of the world and their experiences in it, including their experiences with text” (p. 228). Throughout this study, interest-based independent reading has reoccurred most frequently as an effective strategy for helping struggling readers grow in their reading development. The literature confirms this need for significant time spent each day reading independently. (Atwell, 2013, 2015; Routman, 2003, Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008). The relationship between these two can be quite positive then: the more a student reads and gets involved with interest-based text, his/her reader identity will also be positively affected, and when a reader’s identity takes on a more positive tone, the more he/she will want to engage in reading. However, while it is wishful thinking to believe that all students will desire positive interactions between independent reading and their reader identity, there are going to be students who decide to avoid the act of reading. As teachers look out at a classroom of students with books in their hands, who appear to be reading, how are they to know that a given student is actually reading, and what can he/she do to perhaps guide the reluctant reader?

As readers get caught up in a story by identifying with characters and getting involved in the conflicts presented by the plot, they make connections between their own

experiences and those of the characters (Sumara 1998). Therefore, it is integral to present books to students with which they will not only be interested, but also be able to make connections. These connections will increase the sense of reader identity. These connections will bring the reader into the “zone,” as Atwell (2007) describes it. “As readers identify with and interpret the experience of characters, they learn to reidentify and reinterpret themselves” (Sumara, 1998, p. 209).

Identity is multi-faceted and middle school students are involved in identifying their identities in multiple areas of their lives. They are “continually generating new ways of communicating and representing their identities, and of questioning dominant norms” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 236). Therefore,

Teachers should offer students opportunities to explore identity constructions and representations, especially in relation to the various texts they encounter in classrooms. Reading a wide variety of fiction that represents diverse groups of people with different backgrounds and experiences is one way to engage students in explicit discussions about identity, subjectivity, positionality, and power.

(McCarthy & Moje, 2002, p. 237)

Through reading conferences with students, teachers send a message to the student that they are interested in the reader, their reading development, and their goals (Sibberson & Szymusiak, 2008). This relationship is paramount as “worldwide, the strongest predictor of reading achievement is the quality of student-teacher relations” (Routman, 2003, p. 13). Ultimately, developing reader identity is a partnership between the teacher and the student. While teachers can instruct and provide opportunities for students to formulate positive reader identities, success is dependent on a shift in the reader’s attitude: they



must begin to see themselves as playing a primary role in their development as readers (Hall, 2012).

Many teachers will agree that some factors that would aid in their abilities to help struggling readers (i.e., more mentoring, more demonstration lessons, smaller classes, eliminating mandated reading programs and scripted lessons, etc.) are out of their control (Margolis & McCabe, 2006); however, “what teachers can control when teaching struggling readers, and what can help mitigate—to some extent—the negative effects of mandated programs and scripts that ignore readers’ differences and needs, is the teachers’ knowledge of motivation.” (Margolis & McCabe, 2006, p. 436).

Amongst the top services that a teacher can provide a struggling reader, or any reader for that matter, more than teaching every skill in the book, is promoting a caring environment where reading is a priority. Johnston (2004) perhaps says it best,

To me, the most humbling part of observing accomplished teachers is seeing the subtle ways in which they build emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities—intellectual environments that produce not mere technical competence, but caring, secure, actively literate human beings. (p. 2)

## **Implications**

Gallagher (2009) points out, “The Alliance for Excellent Education points to 8.7 million secondary students—that is one in four—who are unable to read and comprehend that material in textbooks, and “three thousand students with limited literacy skills drop out of school every day in this country” (p. 3) These statistics are alarming and point to the need for teachers to help use effective strategies to help their struggling readers. Teachers need to help their struggling readers find books of interest and at their reading

level to read during independent reading. These students should stop frequently to write down the big idea or a quick summary on a sticky note to help them maintain focus on what is happening in their books. Teachers should check-in with these students frequently, as well as allow them time to talk about their book with peers. As these student make connections with the characters and plots of their books, their reader identify will also be shifted.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

#### **For School Administrations**

At the heart of every teacher is the desire for all students to become life-long learners. This, however, is in conflict with state and national education standards that propose and enact acts and standards to quantify reading development. The Common Core State Standards, which includes a yearly Common Assessment, and the close monitoring of the government to make sure that schools are meeting annual yearly progress (AYP), are two such examples of placing more emphasis on reading scores rather than developing motivated learners. However, the reality is that schools will need to remain accountable to the state and national educational systems.

Because of the pressure to ensure that schools are addressing the gaps that exist with the reading levels of students approaching middle schools, administrations should use fiscal resources to maintain one to two interventionists for middle school grades. These interventionists, paraprofessionals, or cognitive coaches should solely work with small groups of students who need additional instruction on various reading skills. Several of the teachers interviewed in this study (Mrs. N, Mrs. V and Mrs. L) all referenced the fact that over the past year or two, they were no longer receiving the help

of additional teachers, resulting in difficulties for using the workshop or small group model. As all three of these teachers avowed, the small group/workshop model was an extremely helpful intervention strategy, since student confidence and ability increases with the benefit of a very small group and very specific instruction, administrations need to consider finding resources to support these additional staff members.

In addition to providing financial and staffing resources to enable the effectiveness of small groups, resources would also be wisely spent to increase an audio library and help school and classroom libraries maintain a vast variety of books at all different reading and interest levels. Three out of the five themes brought to light by what teachers determined as effective intervention strategies included interest level books (and/or audio versions of these books). If getting these books into the hands of kids has been found to be so effective, then school administrations would be wise to invest in this integral component of their schools. Allington (2001) points out, “The school library is important. Too many school libraries have been underfunded so that collections are undersized and the facility is understaffed” (p. 57). Reflecting on what schools can do to help readers, Ivey (2000) encourages schools to “allocate more resources for a wide range of reading materials, and let teachers and students decide what to buy” (p. 44).

Also, because of the emphasis placed on standardized test scores, it is even more essential to make reading a priority for every student, in every classroom, every day. Ivey (2000) suggests that fundamental changes in policies, rather than new methods for differentiating instruction, need to be made outside the classroom. One of these is prioritizing time for reading in the school day: “Giving all students, especially those experiencing difficulty, more time to read in school is the most certain way to help all

students become more skilled and engaged and even to be more prepared to achieve on standardized tests” (p. 43).

Lastly, middle school teachers need professional development. Teachers need time and the opportunity to become more acquainted with young adult literature. The teachers in Swanson’s study (2001) voiced that they wanted to promote reading with their students, but they did not feel adequate in their knowledge of young adult literature, and therefore, did not feel comfortable recommending books. Mr. G attested to the same idea by emphasizing the importance for teachers to be reading books of interest for their students. Teachers also need time and opportunities to learn more about how to help struggling readers in their classrooms, because many feel a lack of skills in this area: “Of the teachers who admitted they felt a lack of skills in the area, all said they would be very interested in further professional development” (Moreau, 2014, p. 12). Ivey (2000) proposed that a fundamental change that must be made in schools is to “develop better reading teachers instead of looking for better reading programs” (p. 44). Having books that will interest students and professional development to inform teachers on the topic of young adult literature will have a positive impact on student engagement (Swanson, 2001).

### **For Middle School Teachers**

For middle school teachers who must find ways to provide interventions for middle school students, teaching the students the ins and outs of the reading process, how to interact with text, which questions to ask to increase comprehension, and then enabling them to take on teaching roles within the environment of a small group will benefit the students who are two or more grade levels behind. Teachers have the option of creating

homogenous leveled groups or heterogeneous leveled groups. There are benefits to both. When students are in homogenous leveled groups, they don't run the risk of being overshadowed by students who understand the text at a higher level and therefore push the group ahead, leaving the struggling reader with a hole in his/her understanding. A homogenous group of students, who are all reading at approximately the same level, allows appropriate leveled text to be selected for this group, for students to address questions at their developmental level of their reading progress, and for shared responsibility in the teaching and learning process. The teaching aspect is of particular significance because teaching a skill to others, or taking on the role of the teacher, helps to solidify the thought process of the skill and aids in comprehension. The benefit to heterogeneous groups lies in the use of these groups for grade-level text, especially information, such as social studies and science text. Students whose reading level falls two or more grade levels behind, still need to be challenged and learn grade-level information. As a result, heterogeneous groups can provide the extra support that struggling readers may need to learn. Student learning increases through discussion and interaction with their peers while discovering informational text. As a result, when teachers must become creative in helping struggling readers without the assistance of additional teachers or support, the use of student groups with the students as the reading coaches has testified benefits.

In addition, classroom libraries should be filled with current middle school aged and interest appropriate literature. Classroom teachers need to acquaint themselves with the interests of their students. Interest inventories should be administered early in the school year to ensure that students are getting books in their hands right from the

beginning of the year. Teachers should also stay current with the new literature being published for their age-level students, and if possible, find time to read many of them, so that they can offer more recommendations to their students. Motivation is definitely a factor with middle school students, so it is of extreme importance to recommend and offer books that will peak their interest and maintain their motivation for reading all year long. The most common theme that reoccurred throughout the interviews conducted for this study was to keep kids reading by keeping good books in their hands and devote time each day for reading. Without being given any parameters for their answers, four out of seven teachers (Mr. G, Mrs. B, Mrs. V, and Mrs. D) decisively concluded that when middle school students who are reading two or more grade levels behind added reading interest level books to their daily schedule, the gap in reading level decreased.

### **For Educational Institutions**

For educational institutions that teach and prepare future middle school teachers, it will be important to supply these future teachers with the tools necessary to organize and manage multiple small groups of students simultaneously within the classrooms. If the pattern that Mrs. N, Mrs. V and Mrs. L all referenced continues, extra staff or teachers will not be available to assist with these groups. This, however, does not diminish the effectiveness of small groups, and therefore, teachers should be prepared to continue investing time in small groups of homogenous students. Teaching programs should also require secondary level future teachers to take a class in adolescent literature. Since interest-based literature topped the list of most effective intervention strategies, a knowledge of good literature and how to find interesting literature for middle school students will be crucial.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Several factors concerning classroom statistics were not taken into consideration during this study. Some of these factors include 1) the socio-economic makeup of the schools at which each of the participants taught, 2) the percentage of ELL learners within each teacher's classroom, 3) the total number of students in each teacher's classroom, and 4) the percentage of the general education students within the classroom who were reading two or more grade levels behind. Each of these factors could independently or collaboratively influence the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of particular interventions. Future studies that pole teachers' opinions regarding the effectiveness of reading interventions may want to adjust interview questions to diversify these salient factors.

Fitzell (2011) concludes, "There are successful strategies that are used with students that do not have a research study to back them up. To assume that a strategy or method is not effective simply because one cannot find a study to validate its use seems disrespectful of many teachers' skills—skills that rely upon their good judgment" (p.16). Who better to speak on the effectiveness of middle school reading interventions than middle school language arts teachers, themselves, who are daily absorbed in the reading development of their students? There is no doubt that publishing houses and reading gurus will continue to produce what they will label "the most effective intervention yet!" for raising the scores of middle school readers. However, it is imperative that we do not let the voices of middle school teachers go unheard.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Initial E-mail Sent to Potential Participants**

Dear Fellow Middle School Teacher,

My name is Amy Baas, and I am reaching the end of my Reading Specialist Master's program at Grand Valley. I am currently working on writing my thesis as the final step in my degree program. Through my thesis, I am investigating effective methods that teachers use to help improve the comprehension abilities of middle school students who are, according to standardized tests or other informal testing methods, labeled as reading two or more levels behind their current grade level. I'm looking for participants who have celebrated effective methods through school directed curriculum, strategies found through doing one's own research, and/or lessons developed and tried by one's own self. Does this describe you? Have you seen growth in a student's comprehension as a result of an effective strategy tried by yourself or another member of your team? If this describes you, I would love the opportunity to interview you, either in person, by phone, or via email, regarding your strategy. My desire is to give middle school teachers a venue to allow their voices to be heard regarding effective reading intervention strategies for middle school students.

Please let me know as soon as possible if you'd be willing to participate in my study. If you have an effective strategy and are willing to speak in more detail about it, I will send you a more formalized letter welcoming you into my study and asking for your permission to interview you. I am eager to hear back from you!

Thank you for your time,

Amy Baas  
Reading Specialist Master's Degree Candidate at GVSU  
6<sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts Teacher at Vista Charter Academy  
[\(email address\)](#)  
(cell phone number)

## Appendix B

### Permission Letter and Consent Form

August 2013

Dear Middle School Teacher:

My name is Amy Baas, and I am the 6<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts teacher at Vista Charter Academy in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I am a graduate candidate in the Reading Specialist program at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) and am currently working on my thesis. I am conducting a research study titled, *Reading intervention strategies for general education middle school students: Providing a space for teachers to share effective methods*. This study offers middle school teachers an opportunity to share effective reading intervention strategies that they have either been required to try, gleaned from other professionals, or those they have created for their specific students.

As a fellow middle school teacher, I am requesting your participation in this research study. Participation will include an interview conducted by myself either in person (which will take place in a private conference room in the Eberhard Center of GVSU's downtown campus and be digitally recorded) or through email correspondence. Your agreement to participate in this study will be signified by signing the consent form below, emailing it back to me, and will allow me to interview you regarding effective intervention strategies for general education middle school students who have been identified as having reading difficulties.

At no point during the interview will I ask for the names of any schools you have taught at or at which you are currently teaching; the names of these schools should at no point be given or referenced. Also during the interview, no names of students will or should be used; I will ask that you assign a number to reference students with whom you have seen growth in comprehension through your interventions. Lastly, while frequently standardized test scores, such as the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) computerized test, are often quick references to observe reading growth, exact scores will not be asked for and cannot be used, indicating spectrum advances, such as a slight or significant growth, may be referenced.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and will not affect your current job or educational standing in a graduate program. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used in order to protect confidentiality. There are no direct benefits from participating in this study other than the benefits of adding to the knowledge base regarding effective reading intervention methods for middle school general education students whose reading comprehension is two or more levels behind their current grade level. After I have completed my thesis and it has been approved by my committee, a copy will be electronically filed in GVSU's

ScholarWorks data base. As a follow-up, I will email you a direct link to this digital copy of my thesis.

All written notes, emails, and recordings collected through teacher interviews will be only used and analyzed at my house. During the analysis and writing stages of my thesis, all notes, printed emails, and recordings will be kept in a locked box at my house when I am not using them. After I have completed analyzing and using the data to write my thesis, all written notes, printed emails, and recordings will be stored in a locked file in the on-campus office of my thesis chair (accessed only by her key) for three years. After that time, she will shred the printed data, and the thumb drive upon which the recordings and emails had been saved will be permanently deleted.

If you have any questions concerning this research study or your participation in this study, please contact Amy Baas at (cell phone number) or [\(e-mail address\)](#).

Sincerely,

Amy Baas

By signing below, you are giving consent to participate in the above study.

---

Signature

---

Printed Name

---

Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact the Human Subject Review Board at Grand Valley State University: [hrrc@gvsu.edu](mailto:hrrc@gvsu.edu) or 616-331-3197.

## **Appendix C**

### **Open-Ended Interview Questions**

1. What is your current teaching position?
2. How many years total have you been teaching 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, or 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts?
3. What method(s) do you use to determine the reading level/ reading ability of your students?
4. What resources do you currently have available for helping your general education students who are reading two or more grade levels behind?

Financial:

Curriculum:

Paraprofessional Support:

Other:

5. What type(s) of intervention(s) do your general education students who are reading two or more grade levels behind receive?

Individual:

Small Group:

Whole Class:

Who provides these interventions?

Have you noticed any of these methods helping your students' progress towards reading at grade level? Explain.

6. Tell me about any reading intervention methods that you have been asked to try or use in your classroom.

What noticeable changes did you observe in your student(s) who were two or more grade levels behind in reading after using this strategy?

Did the student(s) reading improve based on your method of determining reading level/ability? Explain.

Do you believe that this approach to reading would benefit other students? Explain.

7. Tell me about any intervention strategies that you have created or strategies gleaned from a personal resource to help improve the reading of the struggling general education students within your classroom.

Have you observed success with reading progress using this strategy? Explain.

Did the student(s) reading improve based on your method of determining reading level/ability? Explain.

What do you perceive was the contributing factor(s) for this success?

Do you believe that this approach to reading would benefit other students? Explain.

## Appendix D

### Examples of Coding and Categorizing Methods

#### *Open Coding example:*

We have <sup>1</sup>“workshop” <sup>2</sup>twice a week in sixth grade. <sup>3</sup>Two paraprofessionals come <sup>4</sup>into the classroom, and the students are broken into <sup>5</sup>three groups based on their reading <sup>6</sup>NWEA scores (high, mid, and low). I <sup>7</sup>(the classroom teacher) look at the objectives in <sup>8</sup>Descartes that groups struggled with and assign objectives for each group to receive a mini-lesson on. The objectives are <sup>9</sup>different for each group. The purpose is to help each of these students become better readers in all aspects.

- <sup>1</sup> WORKSHOP
- <sup>2</sup> FREQUENCY
- <sup>3</sup> PARAPROFESSIONAL
- <sup>4</sup> DURING CLASS
- <sup>5</sup> SMALL GROUP
- <sup>6</sup> USING TEST SCORES
- <sup>7</sup> CLASSROOM TEACHER DETERMINES
- <sup>8</sup> TEST-BASED OBJECTIVES
- <sup>9</sup> DIFFERENTIATED/NEED-BASED

#### *Selective Coding example:*

We have <sup>2/3</sup>“workshop” <sup>3</sup>twice a week in sixth grade. <sup>3</sup>Two paraprofessionals come <sup>3</sup>into the classroom, and the students are broken into <sup>3</sup>three groups based on their reading <sup>1</sup>NWEA scores (high, mid, and low). I <sup>2</sup>(the classroom teacher) look at the objectives in <sup>2</sup>Descartes that groups struggled with and assign objectives for each group to receive a mini-lesson on. The objectives are <sup>3/4/5</sup>different for each group. The purpose is to help each of these students become better readers in all aspects.

- <sup>1</sup> HOW READING LEVEL IS DETERMINED
- <sup>2</sup> TYPES OF READING INTERVENTIONS
- <sup>3</sup> HOW READING INTERVENTIONS ARE PROVIDED
- <sup>4</sup> DID STUDENT IDENTITY SEEM TO BE AFFECTED
- <sup>5</sup> HOW PROGRESS WAS DETERMINED
- <sup>6</sup> WERE ISSUES WITH MOTIVATION/INTEREST OBSERVED



***Simultaneous Coding example:***

We have <sup>2a/3a</sup>“workshop” <sup>3b</sup>twice a week in sixth grade. <sup>3c</sup>Two paraprofessionals come <sup>3</sup>into the classroom, and the students are broken into <sup>3d</sup>three groups based on their reading <sup>1a</sup>NWEA scores (high, mid, and low). I <sup>2b</sup>(the classroom teacher) look at the objectives in <sup>2c</sup>Descartes that groups struggled with and assign objectives for each group to receive a mini-lesson on. The objectives are <sup>3e/4a/6a</sup>different for each group. The purpose is to help each of these students become better readers in all aspects.

<sup>1</sup> DETERMINING READING LEVEL

<sup>1a</sup> CRITERION-REFERENCED TEST SCORES

<sup>2</sup> TYPES OF READING INTERVENTIONS

<sup>2a</sup> WORKSHOP

<sup>2b</sup> DETERMINED BY TEACHER

<sup>2c</sup> TEST SCORES DETERMINE TYPE

<sup>3</sup> PROVIDING READING INTERVENTIONS

<sup>3a</sup> WORKSHOP

<sup>3b</sup> FREQUENCY

<sup>3c</sup> USING EXTRA STAFF

<sup>3d</sup> FLUID GROUPS

<sup>3e</sup> NEED-BASED

<sup>4</sup> EFFECT ON STUDENT IDENTITY

<sup>4a</sup> LEVELED/NEED-BASED GROUPS

<sup>5</sup> DETERMINING PROGRESS

<sup>6</sup> EFFECT ON MOTIVATION/INTEREST

<sup>6a</sup> NEED BASED/MORE DIRECT SUPPORT

***From Codes to Categories:***

***Category: Small Group Interventions***

***Subcategory 1: Determining Interventions***

Code: CRITERION-REFERENCED TEST

Code: TEACHER DETERMINED

Code: TEST-DRIVEN OBJECTIVES

Code: FLUID GROUPS

***Subcategory 2: Grouping Students***

Code: WORKSHOP METHOD

Code: HOMOGENOUS GROUPS

Code: HETEROGENOUS GROUPS

Code: EFFECT ON MOTIVATION/INTEREST

***Subcategory 3: Types of Interventions***

Code: NEED-BASED

Code: READING/LITERATURE CIRCLES

Code: PULL-OUT

Code: STUDENT-LED

***Subcategory 4: Progress Determined***

Code: HIGH-STAKES TEST SCORES

Code: SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Code: FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

Code: STUDENT QUESTIONS

Code: CONVERSATIONS

Code: OBERVATIONS

***Recategorizing:***

***Category: Teacher-Based Interventions***

***Subcategory 1: Grouping Students***

- Code: SMALL GROUPS
- Code: FLEXIBLE/SKILL-BASED/FLUID
- Code: AWARENESS OF IDENTIFY
- Code: ONE-ON-ONE INTERVENTIONS

***Subcategory 2: Teacher's Role***

- Code: DETERMINE SKILLS NEEDED BY STRUGGLING READERS
- Code: PROVIDE NEED-BASED INSTRUCTION (INCLUDING WHEN & HOW)
- Code: MORE ACCESSIBLE FOR INDIVIDUAL HELP AND QUESTIONS
- Code: SUPPORT MOTIVATION AND INTEREST

***Subcategory 3: Determining effectiveness***

- Code: HIGH-STAKES TEST SCORES
- Code: OBSERVATIONS
- Code: DISCUSSION/CONVERSATIONS
- Code: FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

## Appendix E

### HRRC Approval



DATE: July 22, 2013

TO: Amy Baas  
FROM: Grand Valley State University Human Research Review Committee  
STUDY TITLE: [363086-2] Reading intervention strategies for general education middle school students: Providing a space for teachers to share effective methods  
REFERENCE #: 13-020-H  
SUBMISSION TYPE: Continuing Review/Progress Report

ACTION: EXEMPT  
EFFECTIVE DATE: July 22, 2013  
REVIEW TYPE: Administrative Review

Please note that as of 07/01/2013 continuing review of exempt studies is no longer required by the HRRC. You may continue to conduct research on this approved study without further notification of the HRRC unless you propose to make changes to the study. Changes must be reviewed by the HRRC and approved prior to implementation.

As with all studies, any serious adverse events or unanticipated problems also must be promptly reported to the HRRC. This project remains eligible for selection for post-approval compliance monitoring.

If you have any questions, please contact the HRRC Office, Monday through Thursday, at (616) 331-3197 or [hrrc@gvsu.edu](mailto:hrrc@gvsu.edu). The office observes all university holidays, and does not process applications during exam week or between academic terms. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

CC:

\*Research is a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge (45 CFR 46.102 (d)).