CONFIGURATION CONUNDRUM: TEACHERS’ BELIEFS ABOUT GRADE-SPAN
CONFIGURATION AND STUDENT READING ACHIEVEMENT

by

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Configuration Conundrum: Teachers’ Beliefs About Grade-Span Configuration and Student Reading Achievement

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Abstract

Due to shifts in population distribution in British Columbia (B.C.) schools, school districts are scrambling to open, close, and reconfigure schools to meet the needs of fluctuating student populations. However, studies about the impact of grade-span configuration on student reading achievement are inconclusive. This study compared grade 8 teachers’ beliefs about grade-span configuration and student reading achievement through the mediating effects of school transition age and instructional practices. The concepts of sociotechnical systems theory and organizational cultures were used to frame the research. Data was collected from 32 teachers in two B.C. school districts using a mixed-methods survey; 22 respondents taught in middle schools (grades 6-8) while 10 respondents taught in secondary schools (grades 8-12). Participants taught English, Social Studies, and/or Humanities or were classroom/generalist teachers. The study was uniquely positioned to understand the context of B.C. schools because grade 8 students are either the oldest or the youngest in their grade-span configuration, something previous studies did not analyze. Because of the low number of respondents, only the qualitative responses were used in data analysis. The themes that emerged from the data were the supportive nature of middle schools, the need for more inclusive educational practices, and the need for meaningful implementation of the Middle School Concept (MSC). This study highlights the need for further school level research to understand the impact of grade-span configuration and the implementation of the MSC to support students.
Lay Summary

This study compared middle and secondary school teachers’ perceptions of grade 8 students’ reading achievement while factoring in instructional practices and the students’ transition age. Teachers’ responses indicated middle schools provide a more supportive environment; however, both school settings require more training and research to create inclusive classrooms that are sensitive to students’ identities, home environments, and learning needs. Furthermore, the concept of a middle school needs to be more effectively implemented within school districts to ensure these schools effectively support students at this age. Based on this study, further research should compare middle school implementation within a school district and between different school districts to understand how the concept is best implemented and highlight any discrepancies in understanding between district and school staff.
Preface

This thesis was wholly completed by the author with support from the supervisory committee members for the research design and editing. The identification and design of the research, the surveying process, and the data analysis were all conducted by the author.

This study was approved by the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board (certificate number: H18-02035).
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the hardworking teachers who have shaped me as a person and a teacher when I was their student or their colleague. Teachers often take on the difficult—and sometimes thankless—tasks behind the scenes, and their profession is becoming increasingly complex as our world continues to shift and tensions increase. This thesis was a chance for me to give teachers a voice in the research that might shape their schools and their programming.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Ever-growing populations and increased urbanization have forced educational organizations to adapt to handle the influx and outflow of students. School districts are reconfiguring their schools to accommodate over- and under-populated school buildings; this rationale is clearly evidenced in board meeting minutes from the Langley School District’s (SD35) decision to move to a district-wide middle school program (Stewart, Bradford, & Gill, 2017). However, impacts on student learning resulting from grade-span changes were not clearly represented in the decision-making process. Over the past 10 years, more research—such as Anderson (2015); Carolan and Chesky (2012); Clark, Slate, Combs, and Moore (2013); Dhuey (2013); Dove, Pearson, and Hooper (2010); Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufman (2008); Rockoff and Lockwood (2010); Schwartz, Stiefel, Rubenstein, and Zabel (2011); Schwerdt and West (2013)—has focused on the impacts of grade-span configuration on student achievement to attempt to determine the most effective configurations. For the purposes of this study, grade-span configuration will be defined as the grouping of grade levels in a single school (e.g. 6-8 or 8-12). Some districts have uniform grade-span configuration while others create diverse configurations simply to address population issues in these areas. While population and funding often serve as driving factors for grade-span configuration decisions, the chosen configurations may have long-lasting effects on student achievement that must be considered when making these decisions.

Because middle level education is largely an American concept (Waggoner, Leibzeit, & Darst, 1989), research on grade-span configuration has mostly been set in American schools and
districts. The majority of Canadian provinces and territories, 8.5\(^1\) out of 13 to be exact, also employ middle or junior high school configurations (Statistics Canada, 2019); however, less research has been done on these configurations in the Canadian context. Student achievement has been defined by standardized test score results and analyzed using statistical models that account for the type of school attended and other sociodemographic factors (Alspaugh, 1998b; Anderson, 2015; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Clark et al., 2013; Dhuey, 2013; Dove et al., 2010; Franklin & Glascock, 1998; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2011; Schwerdt & West, 2013; Wihry, Coladarci, & Meadow, 1992); however, the results of these studies were inconclusive and often contradictory to each other. Of the Canadian studies, Dhuey (2013) used standardized test scores in her analysis of British Columbia (B.C.) students’ performance in middle and junior high schools and Lipps (2005) used standardized test scores from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth; both other Canadian studies reviewed used teacher, parent, and/or student reported achievement data (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Whitley, Lupart, & Beran, 2007). Multiple studies referenced the biological—and, therefore, psychological—changes that occur in children during grades 5 to 8 and indicated that changing physical school environments at the same time may lead to unnecessary stress and drops in performance (Eccles et al., 1997; Franklin & Glascock, 1998; Jacob & Rockoff, 2012; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Schwartz et al., 2011; Whitley et al., 2007). More specifically, Eccles et al. (1997) discussed puberty’s effect on students’ maturation and school performance whereas Cantin and Boivin (2004) noted changes in students’ social networks that impacted their academic self-perception. Additionally, studies

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\(^1\) New Brunswick has two educational systems—an English system and a French system. The English system uses a middle school model whereas the French system uses a K-8, 9-12 pathway, resulting in the half a province noted in this statistic.
reviewed lacked contextual information about classroom practices, and authors regularly recommended this type of inquiry to better understand the differences beyond the names of the schools (Anderson, 2015; Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Clark et al., 2013; Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Whitley et al., 2007; Wihry et al., 1992).

In the studies reviewed, the results were regularly inconclusive or contradictory to previous studies. There were also different results depending on whether students transitioned earlier in their academic careers, such as after grade 4, or in the middle years, after grade 5 and before grade 8; additionally, transitioning to high school after grade 8 seemed to have the least effect on students. School transition age is an important concept to consider, but few studies were able to link socioemotional development directly to school transition age due to small effect sizes or information deficits (Anderson, 2015; Lipps, 2015; Whitley et al., 2007). Lastly, only Faulkner and Cook’s (2006) study attempted to understand the instructional practices in middle schools, but they did not compare practices between school types and their survey instrument was limited by face value distinctions between instructional methods.

The lack of contextual information about grade-span configuration prevents governing bodies from developing a genuine understanding of the topic beyond achievement data. For Metro Vancouver school districts to make informed decisions on this topic, they must have a variety of information based on their own districts’ statistics and teachers’ opinions and beyond the cost-effective, economic data provided in most studies. The Ministry of Education provides no guidance on this topic. In the Province of British Columbia’s (2014) “K-12 Funding - General” policy, definitions are included for “School age student,” “Kindergarten students,” “Elementary students in Grades 1 to 7,” “School age secondary students in Grades 8 to 9 FTE,”
and “Secondary students in Grades 10 to 12 FTE;” no mention is made of middle grades or middle level students. Tsoukas and Chia (2002) assert that we can only understand a phenomenon from putting ourselves within the context. Because of teachers’ hands-on, “front-line,” role working with students, they have an intuitive understanding of their students’ physical, social, and intellectual development; this understanding, and, therefore, teachers’ beliefs, shape what and how teachers instruct their students, ultimately impacting student learning and achievement. A survey of teachers’ beliefs sheds light on the potential benefits and issues with middle grade configurations. This knowledge better informs administrative decisions and practices in Lower Mainland school districts and surfaces ideas for future research.

1.1 Personal Background and Interests

Growing up in Walnut Grove, a northern suburb of Langley, I made the decision to attend an independent Catholic school in Abbotsford for secondary school for two reasons: one was because my brother already attended the school, and the other was because I did not want to be one student in a class of a rumored 800 grade 8 students at Walnut Grove Secondary School—one in 65 seemed more enticing. When I conceptualized this research project, I was teaching several classes of grade 8 students. I wondered how students made this jump from their small, close-knit elementary schools into these large secondary schools and still thrive both socioemotionally and academically. In my role as an English 8 teacher, I knew first-hand that my grade 8 students needed care, guidance, and patience; where do eighth-graders find that in a building with almost 2,000 people? I have often wondered if middle schools are the appropriate stepping stone to acclimatize students to the expectations and norms of secondary schools,
especially considering the positive accounts of middle school I have heard from friends who lived in different cities.

My role as a teacher has shaped my opinions about decision-making in schools. Decisions in B.C. education, and many educational settings around the world, tend to be data-driven, which sometimes includes eliciting opinions from parents, but reports rarely garner beliefs from teachers and students (Gomez, Gelb, Judson, & Rodgers, 2012). When wearing the hat of a researcher, my teacher-developed opinions still influence my research decisions: teachers and students are the main participants in the educational setting; thus, their observations and opinions matter. I wanted to know what teachers truly believed about grade-span configuration based on their experiences in the classroom with middle level students because their opinions have not been included in previous studies.

1.2 Rationale for the Study

The current studies on grade-span configuration and eighth-graders’ placement within configurations focus on K-8 versus 6-8 configurations because middle schools (6-8) are used throughout the majority of the United States (U.S.). Furthermore, the U.S. configures secondary school as 9-12, which means that most changes would occur in the elementary and middle levels rather than at the senior level. In Canada, only B.C. and the Yukon predominately use an elementary to secondary model (K-7, 8-12) whereas the other provinces and territories group eighth-graders with elementary or middle school configurations (Statistics Canada, 2019, p. 62). As previously stated, 8.5 out of 13 provinces/territories use middle or junior high configurations, two use elementary to secondary pathways, and 2.5 use a K-8, 9-12 model (Statistic Canada, 2019, p. 62). This difference in grade-span configurations creates an unique setting for research
on eighth-graders because, in B.C., they are either placed as the oldest in middle schools or as the youngest in secondary schools. Their placement in one of these configurations may impact their socioemotional well-being and/or the instructional strategies used in the configuration. In the studies reviewed, except for Dhuey (2013), eighth-graders have been the oldest grade level in their configuration regardless of whether it is an elementary or a middle school. Therefore, this study is uniquely positioned to inform practices in B.C. school districts.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The objective of this study was to examine teachers’ beliefs about the impact of grade-span configuration on teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement through the mediating effects instructional practices and school transition age. I selected teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement as the dependent variable because, in the literature, it was significantly impacted by grade-span configuration more consistently than math achievement (Anderson, 2015; Clark et al., 2013; Schwerdt & West, 2013), and, based on my own hypothesis, the more subjective and unprescribed instructional path—schools employ local reading programs and interventions that differ from other schools in their districts—for reading was more likely to be negatively affected by both school transitions and socioemotional changes in students. I conducted a one-time survey of 8th grade classroom and humanities teachers in two different school districts—one district with middle schools and one without—to obtain their beliefs about the relationships between these variables (grade-span configuration, teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement, instructional practices, and school transition age) based on their observations in their schools and classrooms. As previously mentioned, grade-span configuration was defined as the way students are grouped by grade levels in different
schools. Teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement was defined as the ability of students to meet Ministry-determined grade-level learning expectations for reading as perceived by their teachers. Instructional practices was defined as the methods of instruction used in classrooms. School transition age was defined as the age at which students move from one configuration to another.

1.4 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

Although administrators often want to believe that the decisions they make will lead to their intended outcomes, this process is rarely the case. In fact, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) proposed a shift from the term “organizational change” to “organizational becoming” due to the reality of change and stability (p. 570). Stability is often thought of as a static entity, but, in reality, there is a constant readjustment to maintain stability (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), suggesting consistent activity rather than the absence of motion. Furthermore, leaders often refer to change as a series of positions, a step-by-step approach to moving an organization to a new position; however, change is also a constant in organizations and, as noted by Tsoukas and Chia (2002), actually occurs between the labelled positions/steps that are part of a strategic change plan. The intended outcomes mentioned above fall into this category of change positions or steps: administrators aim to reach the next position but do not necessarily account for the true change that occurs between positions; this true change can lead to vastly different outcomes because it is unregulated by the vision of administrators.

Schein (2017) further complicate organizational change: they assert that organizational cultures reflect the way organizations operate and the implicit rules followed by their members. Moreover, these cultures, both the district culture and the individual schools’ subcultures, adapt
and learn together (Schein, 2017), meaning that new ideas are processed according to the organization’s members’ mindsets regardless of the initial intentions of decision-makers. School organization is similar: decisions made by district-level administrators can be interpreted and implemented differently in multiple schools and even in multiple classrooms within a single school based on the understanding of individual schools’ administrators and teachers. I focused on school-level implementation through the eyes of teachers in this study. This concept of cultural learning can be further explored through an understanding of the connections within organizations that directly and indirectly influence each other.

These theories of organizational culture and becoming trace back to Karl Weick (1976), who first coined the idea of “educational organizations as loosely coupled systems” and indicated that these systems have tight couplings that directly influence each other and resulting loose couplings that may indirectly influence each other (p. 1). His theorizing led to the understanding that educational organizations are not ideal bureaucracies but can produce unintended results because of these tight and loose relationships.

Weick’s (1976) theory is further explained by sociotechnical systems theory (STS). This theory indicates that there are four subsystems within the system of education—structure, human, task, and technology—that interact, meaning a change in one subsystem impacts the other subsystems and, therefore, the whole system (Owens, 2004). This reinforces the concept of tightly- and loosely-coupled constructs while adding the context of which areas of the educational organization are being investigated. The ability to understand where changes are made and what adaptations are then caused in other subsystems allows administrators to control the adaptations in subsystems or change different elements of the original subsystem to produce desired effects. In their study of a northwestern American municipal government, Howard,
Foster, and Shannon (2005) regrouped the subsystems in STS into two main groups: social and technical. The social subsystem was comprised of human and task because both of these require social interaction and interpretation. The technical subsystem included structure and technology because these aspects incorporated organizational structures and tools. For this proposed study, I blended Owens (2002) and Howard et al. (2005) together to attempt to grasp the interactions between the social and technical subsystems as well as the four smaller subsystems. These subsystems further help to understand why there may be tight- and loose-couplings between the key concepts in this study. Figure 1 captures the complete theoretical framework for the study.

**Figure 1.1 Sociotechnical systems map of theoretical framework for study**

My study used STS to frame the predicted relationships between the identified variables (see Figure 1.1). Based on my literature review, I formulated the following hypotheses:
1A) Grade-span configurations will have a weak negative relationship with instructional practices for reading based on teachers’ understandings and experiences of the configuration type. In this sense, I mean that when grade 8s are grouped with higher grade levels (i.e. secondary school), less instruction in reading will be reported.

1B) Teachers’ use of instructional practices for reading will form a weak positive relationship with teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement.

2A) Grade-span configuration will have a strong positive relationship with the age of students when they first transition to a new school, barring other reasons for a change, such as a family move or a school closure.

2B) Multiple school transitions during students’ pre-adolescent (between ages 9-14) years will have a strong negative relationship with teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement.

3) Grade-span configuration will have a weak negative correlation with teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement in that when grade 8s are grouped with higher grade levels (i.e. secondary school), teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement will be lower.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What are teachers’ beliefs about the mediating effect of instructional practices on the relationship between grade-span configuration and teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement?

   a. What are teachers’ beliefs about the impact of their schools’ grade-span configuration on instructional practices?
b. What are teachers’ beliefs about the impact of their instructional practices on teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement?

2. What are teachers’ beliefs about the mediating effect of school transition age on the relationship between grade-span configuration and teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement?
   a. What are teachers’ beliefs about the impact of their schools’ grade-span configuration on the school transition age?
   b. What are teachers’ beliefs about the impact of school transition age on teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement?

3. What are teachers’ beliefs about the impact of their schools’ grade-span configuration on teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement?

1.6 Overview and Structure of Thesis

This thesis is comprised of five chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, data analysis, and discussion and conclusion. Each chapter is comprised of several subheadings that highlight key themes or relate to specific research questions. The questionnaire for the study and other pertinent materials are included in the Appendices at the end of the thesis.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Reform movements to reconfigure schools surface frequently. Reconfiguration is likely a staple of reform movements because decisions to change school size and composition can be made and implemented at the local level (the school district) without involving higher government authorities such as the provincial or federal education officials. For example, curriculum is a legally-documented decision made by the provincial or state office for education; reforming curriculum requires engaging with the bureaucracy of provincial/state government to negotiate changes followed by a top-down implementation strategy, resulting in many years transpiring between starting the reform and actual implementation. District-level changes can be implemented in a shorter time-span—namely one or two years depending on the resources needed for the change—with opportunities for local, contextualized leadership.

These reform movements can be sparked for a variety of reasons, but Canadian reformers tend to focus on student well-being and success. For example, Cantin and Boivin (2004) focused on Quebec students’ perceived academic ability while Lipps (2005) and Whitley et al. (2007) used nationally representative data from Canada to understand the relationship between school transitions and students’ ability to adapt or cope with these transitions. Conversely, in the decision-making process, senior administrators, and American researchers such as Byrnes and Ruby (2007) and Rockoff and Lockwood (2010), discuss the possibilities, benefits, and disadvantages, usually in connection to finances and population demands, of various grade-span configurations, as evidenced by meeting notes from SD35’s board meetings (Stewart et al.,

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2 Reconfiguration, in this study, refers to changing the grade levels taught at a single school (e.g. changing a K-7 school to a K-5 school that feeds into a grades 6-8 school).
Stewart et al.’s (2017) report identifies over- and under-populated school buildings as well as which buildings can be sold or repurposed; included in these plans is the decision to convert one under-populated secondary school into a joint middle and secondary school to make more efficient use of the space. This report is important because it documents a reconfiguration process in the Lower Mainland of B.C., the same context as this study. Byrnes and Ruby (2007) echo this efficiency mentality in their recommendation not to reconfigure Philadelphia City middle schools into K-8 elementary schools because the impact on student achievement, which was statistically significant for reading achievement, was not significant enough to justify the expense. On the other hand, Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) perceived the lost student achievement due to New York City middle schools as too great a cost not to address; they valued student learning in the same vein as “inflation protected U.S. bonds” to determine an earnings loss of $25,000 per student who attends a middle school (p. 1059). Analyzing student learning using cost-benefit analysis equations commodifies students into capital and removes the humanity from schooling. In this study, I aimed to re-centre the conversation around human interactions with the school system by viewing school types\(^3\) and student achievement through teachers’ eyes.

This literature review aims to engage with current research about grade-span configuration, an often easy solution to dwindling achievement, to better understand its impact on student achievement, and particularly reading achievement; students’ social, emotional, and intellectual development; school transitions and child development; and teachers’ instructional

\(^3\) School type refers to the grade-span configuration’s title: elementary, middle, junior high, or secondary.
practices. I begin with an overview of Canadian and American middle and junior high schools. This overview is followed by detailed discussion of key areas of my theoretical framework: configurations and school types, school transitions, instructional practices, and achievement. Teachers’ voices are noticeably absent from the literature, a gap that my study aimed to fill.

2.1 Understanding Middle and Junior High Schools

Both junior high schools and middle schools were first conceptualized and implemented in the United States. In the early 1900s, American educators advocated for junior high schools as a more psychologically sound configuration for younger students (Dhuey, 2013). Canadian educational trends tend to follow American ones but often lag behind by approximately a decade (Dhuey, 2013). Therefore, when American school districts began to reconfigure their schools into junior high schools (grades 7-9), Canadian educational leaders watched and waited, beginning their own implementation in the 1920s: Penticton, B.C. opened the province’s first junior high in 1926 (Dhuey, 2013). Canadian schools were again reconfigured in the 1950s into three school types: “kindergarten through grade 7 schools, grades 8 through 10 schools, and grades 11 through 12 schools” (Dhuey, 2013, p. 470). However, a decade later, reformers, following the American model, advocated for middle schools (grades 6-8), leading to the implementation of middle schools across the nation by the 1980s (Dhuey, 2013). Currently, there are only 2.5 provinces and territories in Canada that do not consistently use some sort of middle school model: B.C., the Yukon, and the French educational system in New Brunswick (Statistics Canada, 2019). While some of the other provinces, like Ontario, employ an ele-middle model, using the K-8 configuration that has become popular in the U.S., most provinces use a K-12
pathway that incorporates a 5-8, 6-8, or 7-9 middle school or junior high school (Statistics Canada, 2019).

According to Meyer (2011), the middle school concept was derived from a speech given by William Alexander at Cornell University in 1963. He claimed junior high schools needed to be more responsive rather than just a hybrid high school. Meyer (2011) argues that Alexander’s speech was simply a “react[ion] to that era’s academic scare” of refocusing on math and science while taking time away from the arts and other pursuits (p. 42). This fact suggests that junior high and middle schools were implemented prior to pedagogical conversations about how these school types would differ from traditional elementary and secondary schools. The need for a clearer understanding of middle school pedagogy and practice led to research, associations, and documentation.

The American middle school movement is well-documented in comparison to the Canadian one, and middle schools are often thought of as an American concept (Waggoner et al., 1989). In fact, the Association for Middle Level Education, the only international association of its kind, was founded in the U.S. as the National Middle School Association before branching out globally and broadening its umbrella to discuss middle level education beyond just middle schools. Schaefer, Malu, and Yoon (2016) reviewed four middle level education publications to thematically describe the American movement decade by decade. At their inception in the 1960s and 1970s, middle schools were initially focused on “flexible scheduling,” “exploratory programs,” “transescent” needs⁴, and leadership (Schaefer et al., 2016, p. 6). As the movement

⁴“Transescent” is a term used by Schaefer et al. (2016) to refer to a student in transition from child to adolescent (p. 6).
gained steam, educational reformers shifted their efforts to create organizational structures for responsive, interdisciplinary, and exploratory work in middle schools (Schaefer et al., 2016). Middle level leaders focused on organization, structure, and practices while reformers continued to debate how integrated curriculum could be effectively taught (Schaefer et al., 2016).

The early 2000s brought a focus on 21st century skills and research-based models; however, Schaefer et al. (2016) also found most articles focused on the rise of standardized testing, or as the B.C. Teachers’ Federation ([BCTF], 2009) and Miller (2013) call them, large-scale assessments (LSAs), and their stifling impact on the flexible, interdisciplinary nature of middle schools. This focus on the barriers of standardization and searches for alternative instructional models to address these barriers continues to be the focus of studies that explore contemporary middle schools. The premises that shaped the push for middle schools are now hindered by LSAs, causing professionals to question whether this grade-span configuration is meaningful in modern education.

Despite these documented discussions about appropriate configurations, contemporary B.C. school districts are still wrestling with how to configure their schools to maximize cost-efficiency and meet population demands; therefore, some districts uniformly use middle schools while others have some or none. The B.C. Ministry of Education “does not officially recognize institutions as middle or junior high schools” (Dhuey, 2013, p. 470-471). A review of the Ministry’s “K-12 Funding – General” policy uncovers five key definitions of student—“School age student,” “Kindergarten students,” “Elementary students in Grades 1 to 7,” “School age secondary students in Grades 8 to 9 FTE,” and “Secondary students in Grades 10 to 12 FTE”—with no mention of middle or junior high students as a distinct category (Province of British
Columbia, 2014). Thus, despite the use of junior high and middle schools in B.C. school districts for decades, the Ministry still provides no clear definition or mission for the school type.

More recently, the discussion around grade-span configuration has focused on K-8 reform movements (Anderson, 2015; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Clark et al., 2013; Lipps, 2005; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2011; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Whitley et al., 2007), which aim to replace the K-5, 6-8 pathway with a single K-8 school. There have been mixed results when these school types are compared, notably differing in reading and math achievement as well as child development and behavioral impacts. The literature indicates that each transition acts as a stressor for students (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufmann, 2008), so the more transitions students encounter in their K-12 careers, the lower their achievement and more frequent their behavioral problems will likely be. Few British Columbian districts employ K-8 structures in urban settings, opting instead for K-7 or K-5 and 6-8 configurations; most schools with alternative elementary grade spans (e.g. K-8, K-9) are in lower population areas where there are real barriers, such as small cohort sizes and building availability, to flexibility in grade-spans. Therefore, studies focused on Canada analyzed students’ emotional and academic adaptation to new school environments through the comparison of elementary, middle, and high school students by grade cohort (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Dhuey, 2013; Lipps, 2005; Whitley et al., 2007).
2.2 School Type and Grade-Span Configuration

Grade-span configuration, as previously mentioned, is the grade levels that are grouped together in a physical building; school type is the categorical name attached to the actual school (i.e. elementary, middle, junior high, secondary). Erb (2006) distinguishes between the physical and the conceptual versions of middle schools. The physical middle school refers to the physical properties of the school: physical refers to the building that houses a specific grade level (Erb, 2006). Conceptual, on the other hand, concerns itself with the beliefs and approaches used to instruct students in grades 6-8 (Erb, 2006). This distinction between conceptual and physical is consistently mentioned in arguments about the efficacy of middle schools because implementation is often seen as the issue rather than the concept itself being flawed. For example, in his study of schools teaching students in grades 6 through 8 in northwest North Carolina, Hall (2015) found teachers in both 6-8 and K-8 configurations believed in the principles associated with the Middle School Concept (MSC); however, K-8 schools more effectively implemented these principles in their schools, resulting in a significant difference for supporting both students’ socioemotional and cognitive needs. Despite not having a designated ‘middle school building,’ these schools implemented the conceptual notion of middle level education, leading to more positive student perceptions of their schools (Hall, 2015). Adams (2015) echoed this finding by noting that, based on her mixed methods study of 12 schools in one Maryland school district, schools should focus their efforts on school climate and programming rather than grade-span configuration if they want to enhance their students’ achievement.

Faulkner and Cook (2006) directly examined the use of the MSC and found teachers and administrators in the area largely supported MSC but were not adept at explaining and
implementing it. This finding echoes Hall’s (2015) findings as middle school teachers in surveys and focus groups were unable to articulate how the MSC was being implemented at their schools except for one or two aspects. Faulkner and Cook’s (2006) findings are limited by the lack of contextual understanding of practices. Many studies recommended further research on what is happening in schools and classrooms, similar to Faulkner and Cook (2006), to better understand the differences between middle schools and other configurations (Anderson, 2015; Cantin & Boivin, 2007; Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Clark et al., 2013; Dove et al., 2010; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Wihry et al., 1992).

2.2.1 Resources, Facilities, and Staffing

Studies also examine other school-related factors that can be caused by grade-span configuration, including teachers, resources, and demographics. Studies have indicated that years of teaching experience directly impacts student achievement more so than grade-span configuration (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Wihry et al., 1992). Middle schools often employ newer teachers or teachers who did not train specifically for the middle school setting, indicating that middle schools may impact student achievement indirectly because of their teachers’ lack of experience. The use of middle schools in culturally complex settings like urban centres may then compound schools’ problems because of the inexperience of the teachers. Eccles et al. (1997) found that student’s self-perception of subject area competency and perceived subject area difficulty were positively correlated with teachers’ self-reported efficacy in instruction, suggesting that, without proper training, teachers may have an inadvertent negative impact on student achievement. Multiple studies recommended further professional development and targeted training sessions for teachers in middle schools to improve reading instruction for
adolescents in these specific configurations (Bauer, Previts, & Moreau, 2014; Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Wexler, Swanson, Vaughn, Shelton, & Kurz, 2019). Wexler et al. (2019) further argue school administrators must take a meaningful leadership role in this professional development process by participating, leading, and following up with training sessions.

Larger schools are often able to offer more choices for students, and schools are often increasingly larger in size as students move into senior grade levels. In North Carolina, K-8 configurations were able to get all students involved in extracurriculars and choice courses but were only able to offer a limited range of options; conversely, 6-8 configurations were able to offer intramurals, competitive sports teams, and regular choice courses but were unable to allow as many students to participate (Hall, 2015). Part of the influence on these offerings were the amount of staff available and whether or not there were full-time staff at the school who could teach the choice courses: K-8 configurations did not have full-time specialist teachers in the elective areas and often shared these teachers across multiple schools whereas middle schools had full-time elective teachers hired specifically for their schools (Hall, 2015). Eccles et al. (1997) found elementary schools enabled students to participate in the decision-making process more so than middle schools, which supported students’ need for autonomy at this age. The literature was inconclusive on resources—and, therefore, student choice—because classroom teachers in elementary schools were often able to provide the same support that specialists in middle schools provided (Alspaugh, 2000; Hall, 2015).

### 2.2.2 Scheduling and Time

One of the key features of the MSC is flexible scheduling that creates space for interdisciplinary and exploratory learning (Schaefer et al., 2016). Based on the results of her
study of Pacific Northwest schools, Anderson (2015) recommended further research around 
school schedules to better understand what is actually happening in schools and how that might influence student achievement. Jacob and Rockoff (2012) also note the importance of 
scheduling, particularly concerning student well-being. Teachers in elementary schools often have more flexibility to meet because there are less teachers to coordinate with and more opportunities to adjust the schedule to allow for common planning time; middle school teachers are meant to collaboratively plan but often have multiple teams to plan with and larger numbers of teachers on each team, which results in less time to collaborate (Hall, 2015). For the MSC to be realized, teachers need the schedule to benefit their work and create time for planning and meaningful learning experiences while simultaneously teaching core skills, such as reading.

2.2.3 School Differences Despite Configuration

While grade-span configuration may provide some insight into school-level factors that influence student achievement, there are many confounding factors, such as school size (Alspaugh, 1998a; Alspaugh, 1998b; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Clark et al., 2013; Erb, 2006; Hall, 2015; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2011; Schwerdt & West, 2013; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Wihry et al., 1992) and student demographics (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Wihry et al., 1992), that complicate this analysis. Carolan and Chesky (2012) found no significant relationship between grade-span configuration and student achievement and noted the difference between schools may come from school attachment. Furthermore, they note that school transitions may mean students transition into a better or a worse school regardless of configuration (Carolan & Chesky, 2012), which may impact student achievement because of school climate and
environment rather than configuration. This concept of ‘better’ or ‘worse’ schools may be influenced by the “sociodemographic differences” of the school (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006, p. 250), which may change as students from multiple elementary schools are merged into a single middle school (Alspaugh, 1998a). When student demographics were controlled for, achievement at new K-8 schools and 6-8 schools was not statistically different in the Philadelphia City School District (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007), reinforcing the notion that demographics may be more influential than configuration. In Maine, Wihry et al. (1992) found there was a significant correlation between grade-span configurations and student reading achievement; however, there was also a positive correlation between socioeconomic status and student achievement. In their study, socioeconomic status was conceptualized as “the proportion of community residents having completed four or more years of post-secondary education” (Wihry et al., 1992, p. 62), meaning students attending school in areas with a more educated population were more likely to succeed academically.

2.3 School Transitions

Grade-span configuration—or school type—has been approached from multiple theoretical and conceptual frameworks. One of the more prevalent theories used is stage-environment fit theory. Eccles et al. (1997) explained stage-environment fit theory as an extension of person-fit theory that incorporates the concept of the developmental process: applied to adolescents in schools, it “look[s] at the fit between the needs of early adolescents and the opportunities afforded them in the traditional junior high school environment” (p. 479). Their research indicated a strong correlation between the fit of a school and students’ self-esteem and intrinsic motivation, key factors related to student achievement. However, Anderson’s (2015)
sample of Pacific Northwestern schools in the U.S. was too small for her to accept or reject the theory, and Whitley et al. (2007) rejected the theory because they found no significant difference between grade-span configurations. Whitley et al. (2007) did note that biological changes combined with increasing self- and social awareness may result in reduced academic achievement.

School transitions are a significant factor related to student achievement. The timing of transition and amount of transitions were particularly important indicators of student achievement, and loss of achievement was more significantly correlated with transitions that amalgamated multiple elementary schools into a single middle school (Alspaugh, 1998a). Researchers found that students felt that the most common transition problems were feeling unknown, new expectations, getting lost, homework organization, new teachers, and making new friends (Andrews & Bishop, 2012; Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Whitley et al., 2007). Andrews and Bishop (2012) indicate schools with effective transition programs involve multiple stakeholders, share information early, plan longitudinally, and collaborate across schools. Another important finding amongst the research was the conceptualization of school attachment as an aspect of transition: Carolan and Chesky (2012) found that school attachment was significantly related to student achievement and recommended that school districts foster a sense of attachment—a sentiment that may be disrupted by the shift to a new school—rather than worry about grade-span configurations. This finding was echoed by Hall (2015) who found that grades 6-8 students in K-8 schools more positively perceived their schools than their peers in 6-8 configurations. Adams (2015) also found the K-8 school climate was more positively perceived than 6-8 and 7-8 configurations in Maryland schools.
2.3.1 Socioemotional Effects of Transition

Socioemotional changes connected to adolescent development may be a complicating factor for students’ scholastic achievement at this age. Cantin and Boivin (2004) found that Quebec City students increased in social competency and support while decreasing in self-perception of academic competency and self-esteem, similar findings to Weiss and Kipnes’ (2006) study in Philadelphia, suggesting that students may become more socially aware and engaged during this period, which further indicates that school transition may complicate this shift in focus. Whitley et al. (2007) found that students reported lower general achievement in grade 7 than in grade 5 regardless of school type. As students begin to mature and experience puberty, there may be shifts in self-perception that impact their ability to learn and succeed academically despite no actual change in their academic abilities. Eccles et al. (1997) connected these maturation changes, both physical and emotional, to students’ desire for greater autonomy, which may impact how they view their school configuration based on whether the school can provide the autonomy they desire.

For some researchers, middle school created a stepping stone that helped mitigate socioemotional impacts on students. Lipps (2005) found students who transitioned directly from elementary to secondary school (either into a 7-12 or an 8-12 configuration) self-reported a significantly higher number of physical stress symptoms than their peers who transitioned to middle school or stayed in elementary schools for one more year; Hall (2015) also found middle school students fared better than elementary school students in the transition to secondary school. Gunter and Bakken’s (2010) findings about transitions for grade 6 students in Delaware contradict Lipps’ (2005) findings: grade 6 students who remained in K-6 schools self-reported higher rates of violent and suicidal thoughts than their peers in 6-8 configurations. Gunter and
Bakken’s (2010) study is particularly notable because it looks at grade 6 as a terminus or non-terminus grade level whereas most studies analyze grade 7s or grade 8s when they are the middle grade level or the oldest grade level. Students and parents in Rockoff and Lockwood’s (2010) study rated 6-8 configurations lower than K-8 configurations for “safety . . . and adult pro-social behavior” (p. 1057), suggesting students felt supported with socioemotional challenges in K-8 schools but lacked this support in middle schools. Weiss and Kipnes (2006) also found a positive correlation between middle school attendance and perception of threat but could not determine if this correlation was influenced by school demographics or grade-span configuration.

Teachers and principals in Hall’s (2015) study commented that middle school students were more prepared than their elementary school peers for the changes in their social networks when they moved to secondary school because they had already experienced these changes when they transitioned into middle school. Therefore, age, maturity, and experience may impact students’ ability to transition successfully into a new grade-span configuration. Lipps (2005) advocated for further research about the interaction of personal and pubertal stressors’ with school transitions to better understand the impact on students at this age. Furthermore, Jacob and Rockoff (2012) argued the need for students to remain in K-8 settings to reduce stress while they are experiencing pubertal changes.

### 2.3.2 Relationships as a Factor in Transition

School attachment, as described by Carolan and Chesky (2012), can be attributed to relationships between students and between students and teachers. When students feel they belong, they are more likely to have a positive perception of their school, which eases the transition. Eccles et al. (1997) found students’ self-reported value of a subject area was positively
correlated with their relationship with the teacher of that subject. A transition to a new school disrupts relationships and forces students to bond with new teachers, which may impact student self-perception of academic ability (Cantin & Boivin, 2004) and student perceptions of their schools (Hall, 2015). Furthermore, Eccles et al. (1997) found students in middle grades have the greatest mismatch with their parents’ views, reflecting conflicting views at home. A transition to a new school where students need to build new relationships with teachers while simultaneously withdrawing from their parents may leave them without supportive adults in their lives. This lack of an adult support network may lead to the heightened social awareness noted by Cantin and Boivin (2004).

Some schools have programs that support transitions and foster new relationships for students, which can ease the process for students. Ganeson and Ehrich (2009) studied sixteen Year 7 students in New South Wales as they transitioned into secondary school, using student journal entries to gather their data. Structured peer mentoring programs, such as having senior students mentor younger students, supported the transition and reduced incidents of bullying, and positive relationships with teachers also helped students feel at ease in their new environment (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009). Teachers and principals in Hall’s (2015) study remarked that students who transitioned first to middle school and then to secondary school fared better socially than their peers who attended a K-8 school prior to secondary school because they were more accustomed to the process of losing friendships and making new friends, something students in Ganeson and Ehrich’s (2009) study found challenging. Whitley et al. (2007) also advocated for the implementation of transition programs.
2.3.3 Gender

Relationships may also be impacted by teachers’ perceptions of students’ abilities based on implicit biases, particularly about gender. In her 2018 book *Boys: What It Means to Become A Man*, Rachel Giese identifies the impacts gender-based biases may have on students’ learning: “all children behave badly at times, and some more so than others. But the biases held by teachers and school administrators may sway how they interpret and address children’s behaviour” (p. 82). Giese (2018) further explains that “over time a child who is regularly seen as a problem will inevitably become one, and will likely view school not as a place of learning and care but as a place where they’re unwelcome” (p. 82). Alspaugh’s (2000) findings in Missouri schools support this assertion: male students were more likely to drop out than female students and, the smaller the secondary school grade-span (i.e. 10-12), the more pronounced the difference between male and female dropouts became. Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufman’s (2008) longitudinal study of 265 students in the southeastern U.S. tracked students from kindergarten through seventh grade, noting the impact of the district’s double transition: the district used a K-4, 5-6, and 7-8 pathway. Students who were male, non-white, and/or had less educated mothers had increased disciplinary problems during the first transition from grade 4 to grade 5 (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Gender was also a factor in Lipps’ (2005) study of nationally representative data from Canada: female students who transitioned directly from elementary to secondary school had higher rates of self-reported depression symptoms than male students and than female students who remained in elementary school or transitioned to a middle school prior to secondary school. These findings indicate that gender may play a factor in students’ ability to transition effectively to a new grade-span configuration, and, as Giese (2018)
highlights, teachers’ perceptions of student ability based on their gender may also impact student success.

### 2.3.4 Level of Intelligence and Learning Delays or Disabilities

With the shift towards inclusive education, teachers are expected to differentiate their instruction for students of all abilities in their classroom. This ask requires teachers to have a sound understanding of learning delays and disabilities as well as gifted students to appropriately address their learning needs. In a study of three school districts on Vancouver Island in B.C., Bauer et al. (2014) found teachers categorized students who were low achieving in reading as being below grade level and often blamed low achievement in reading on the school system and at-home factors, such as parents’ reading ability, family perceptions of reading, and reading practice at home. These teachers believed, furthermore, that low achievement required pull-out and specialist sessions to improve the students’ reading abilities (Bauer et al., 2014), practices typically reserved for students with identified learning delays or disabilities, suggesting a misunderstanding of factors impacting reading and with the impact of learning delays or disabilities on student achievement. Gender may also play a role in perceptions of students and learning disabilities. Giese (2018) notes that boys are more likely to be identified as learning delayed or disabled compared to girls:

> According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 10.4 percent of American children have ever been diagnosed with ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder], and 14.2 percent of boys have received a diagnosis, compared to 6.4 percent of girls. Autism spectrum disorder, meanwhile, is about 4.5 times more common among boys (p. 88).

This discrepancy in diagnoses may be due to genetics; however, considering modern understandings of gender as a spectrum and, therefore, as an area without a clear, genetic
explanation, it is more likely that there is a bias in referrals for psychological evaluations because boys’ behaviours are more likely to match descriptions for these diagnoses (Giese, 2018).

2.3.5 Age of Transition

The school transition age of students may also be influential. Although many studies have found middle schools and junior high schools have a negative impact on seventh and eighth-grade student achievement (Dhuey, 2013; Schwartz et al., 2011; Schwerdt & West, 2013; Wihry et al., 1992), other studies have found less impact for students who transition before grade 6 (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Dove et al., 2010; Gunter & Bakken, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2011); additionally, middle level students who transition schools after grade 8 are the least likely to see a sustained drop in achievement (Alspaugh, 1998a; Franklin & Glascock, 1998; Schwerdt & West, 2013). Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufman (2008) did find a significant effect of transition points on students who transition after grade 4 and again after grade 6, indicating that multiple early transitions may negatively influence student achievement differently than a single early transition. Furthermore, these authors labelled transitions as “stressors” (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008, p. 13), which may help stakeholders to better conceptualize the impact of school transition on students.

2.3.6 Home Life

Because reading is considered a sociocultural practice, many studies found students’ families and home environments to be factors in student reading achievement. As previously mentioned, Bauer et al. (2014) found teachers perceived students with low reading achievement to have unsupportive reading environments at home due to not reading at home, lack of value of
reading, and/or parents’ inability to read. Eccles et al. (1997) also found a strong correlation between a student’s home environment and their self-esteem and intrinsic motivation related to school activities. In New Zealand, Fletcher (2018) interviewed parents, teachers, students, and principals and found parents’ sociocultural beliefs about reading and their understanding of the rationale for their children’s reading levels impacted students’ reading achievement. In schools where parents and teachers collaborated to set individualized reading goals for their children, students were more successful with reading (Fletcher, 2018). Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufman (2008) noted early social competency was tied to student achievement in their study of students in the southeastern U.S. Social competency is a relative skill based on the local social norms, and it may be increasingly difficult to learn in a diverse urban area with a variety of sociocultural norms.

Home life is an external factor that schools cannot influence but must grapple with to provide effective instruction for students. The Institute for Public Education ([IPE], 2017) categorizes home life as an input, a condition that students come to school with. These inputs influence the experiences students have at school and, therefore, influence the outcomes students are able to achieve (IPE, 2017). Middle schools are often used as a population bridge and, therefore, are more likely to be found in dense urban centres. The demographics of students in urban centres are negatively correlated with student achievement such that the more diversity of socioeconomic status, cultures, and/or racial and ethnic identities, the lower student achievement (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Hall, 2015; Schwerdt & West, 2013; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). In fact, Byrnes and Ruby (2007) found newly implemented K-8 schools that replaced 6-8 configurations had no statistically significant difference from the 6-8 configurations even though previously
existing K-8 schools had higher achievement levels; they attributed this difference between the old and new K-8 schools to population demographics.

2.3.7 Work Habits

The jump from elementary school where students typically have one classroom teacher and a few specialist teachers to secondary school with eight different teachers and classrooms can be challenging for students. Students in Ganeson and Ehrich’s (2009) study noted that inconsistencies between teachers’ expectations were challenging to navigate and the overlapping deadlines for subject-specific homework assignments were difficult to follow. Students struggle with the increase in the amount of homework as well (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Whitley et al., 2007). Students at this age may lack the skills necessary for organizing their workload, extracurriculars, social life, and teacher expectations.

2.4 Instructional Practices

Instructional practices for reading can vary between districts, schools, and teachers. Some districts or schools may employ literacy specialists to coach teachers or may purchase specific programming to enhance student reading achievement. Do these instructional practices vary consistently based on grade-span configuration? Ali and Heck (2012) studied the impact of one year of additional schooling by analyzing students’ achievement in grade 7 and then analyzing the same students’ achievement in grade 8 and mapping their progress. Their study focused on students in grades 7 and 8 in public elementary (K-8), middle (6-8), and intermediate schools (7-8) to study the difference between the configurations. Middle schools were found to have more effective instructional practices for students at these grade levels, and the authors advocated for
further research at “the classroom level” to better understand these instructional differences that may be influencing student reading achievement (Ali & Heck, 2012, p. 112).

2.4.1 Purpose for Reading Instruction

Instructional practices for reading have been studied widely but have varied results based on implementation. For teachers to enhance student understanding, they must employ scaffolded, thoughtful instructional practices that help students develop their reading strategies. Often this implementation is contingent on schools’, teachers’, and students’ motivations, or purpose, for teaching or learning reading. Fletcher (2018) studied reading practices by interviewing principals, teachers, parents, and students in New Zealand about their final two years of primary school (ages 11-13). Fletcher (2018) aimed to understand the motivations, practices, and factors that influence reading achievement. Fletcher (2018) found learning to read was extrinsically motivated and linked to goals like academic achievement, career opportunities, and life success; there was no mention of reading for pleasure. Furthermore, parents’ socioeconomic status and sociocultural beliefs impacted their children’s reading abilities (Fletcher, 2018), suggesting teachers need nuanced, responsive instructional practices to meet learners where they are at and provide effective instruction for all learners.

2.4.2 LSAs’ Influence on Instructional Practices

LSAs are used as an accountability measure, prompting teachers to adjust their instructional practices to help students succeed on these tests. Miller (2013) found that math teachers in Prince Edward Island incorporated multiple-choice assessments that replicated LSAs and directly taught test content in their classrooms to support students. Faulkner and Cook
(2006) interviewed teachers in northern Kentucky to understand their beliefs about LSAs’ impact on their instructional strategies in middle schools. While the authors deemed their results inconclusive because of respondent/non-respondent bias, they found that teachers tended to choose strategies that they felt were efficient to allow for more coverage of material in preparation for state tests (Faulkner & Cook, 2006). The findings from Faulkner and Cook (2006) and Miller (2013) echo the 2000s literature in Schaefer et al.’s (2016) systematic review. Faulkner and Cook (2006) advocated for rethinking LSAs to match “research-based assessment strategies” to allow middle school teachers to fulfill the mission of their school type rather than conforming to standardized norms (p. 10). B.C. students are tested less frequently, on average, than American students and these testing requirements were recently revised to be broad-based numeracy and literacy assessments at the grade 10 and grade 12 levels (Province of British Columbia, 2018); the province’s elimination of yearly testing requirements could lead to non-test-centered instructional practices because the exams may be less omnipotent in teachers’ minds.

The working group tasked with revising the B.C. graduation assessments articulated specific aims for graduates based on the School Act: “[l]iterate; [n]umerate; [b]oth curious and a critical thinker; [a]ble to lead a healthy lifestyle; and [a]ble to understand and connect society and the community, and able to connect to one’s past, present, and future” (Magnusson & Frank, 2015, p. 2). While the aims of the new curriculum and these new assessments are lofty and move away from the traditional standardized assessment, the language used in articulating the “purposes of assessment in the graduation learning years” includes “assessing individual potential for future learning and future success in life” and directly mentions post-secondary institutions and factors related to admission into these institutions (Magnusson & Frank, 2015, p. 2).
3). Therefore, this new form of assessment in B.C. is still likely to confine teachers to a specific style of instruction to meet the aims of these assessments if the Ministry is aligning them with university admissions. Furthermore, as Fletcher (2018) found, these assessments, and, therefore, these skills (literacy and numeracy), become bound up in extrinsic motivations and outcomes rather than intrinsic motivations like reading for pleasure or personal learning.

2.5 Academics and Achievement

When studying the effects of grade-span configuration on student achievement, researchers consistently measured academic achievement using scores from state- or province-wide LSAs (Alspaugh, 1998a; Anderson, 2015; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Clark et al., 2013; Dhuey, 2013; Dove et al., 2010; Franklin & Glascock, 1998; Lipps, 2005; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Schwartz et al., 2011; Schwerdt & West, 2013; Wihry et al., 1992). Some researchers employed other methods for understanding the relationship between grade-span configuration and student achievement, such as using survey and interview data from previously conducted studies (Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Whitley et al., 2007) and analyzing individual students’ average marks from school files (Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). Whitley et al. (2007) used student self-reports and parent and teacher reports of overall student achievement on a 5-point scale to understand perceptions of students’ levels of academic success. Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufmann (2008) used report card marks but found elementary schools’ numeric rating systems and secondary schools’ letter grade systems for report cards difficult to compare. Only studies that analyzed LSA scores directly discussed grade-span configuration’s effect on academic achievement. Education tends to be a data-driven field that relies on LSAs to hold schools, teachers, and students accountable to state and provincial
learning standards; therefore, studies likely use test scores for academic achievement due to the perception that these scores are reliable and comparable sets of data.

2.5.1 Reliability of LSAs

LSAs have been used for previous evaluations of school effectiveness in connection with student reading achievement as noted in the preceding section. However, these assessments are not necessarily valid measures. In B.C., LSAs, such as the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA), are marked at the district-level by classroom teachers (Province of British Columbia, 2017). The “Foundation Skills Assessment: Information for Organizing Scoring” document describes “training” as a district lead teacher, who likely participated in a funded, Ministry-led training session, going over the FSA student response booklet, scoring guide, and scoring rubrics with the teacher-markers and then working with these teacher-markers to mark provincial exemplars, which have pre-assigned scores, to generate consistency amongst the teacher-markers (Province of British Columbia, 2017). Moreover, as two FSA markers reported, teacher-markers are encouraged to mark faster through completion comparisons and modelling of skimming essays rather than reading the whole text (BCTF, 2007). These marking practices alone deem LSA scores unreliable because proper time and attention is not spent to determine accurate marks.

Because of the accountability aspect of LSAs, IPE (2017) raised concerns about the actual purpose of these assessments, indicating that they are more likely to tie schools to a neoliberal curriculum rather than provide meaningful feedback; moreover, a district superintendent in Park and Fallon’s (2016) study in B.C. described FSAs as “decontextualized measurement[s] of print-based literacy reading and writing skills” (p. 30). This needed context that Park and Fallon (2016) refer to is explained as inputs (e.g. wellbeing, support staff,
resources), outputs (e.g. student understanding, new skills), and experiences (e.g. activities, interactions) by IPE (2017), identifying the narrow scope of reading as measured by these LSAs since the assessments only focus on one or two outputs and completely ignore inputs and experiences.

The BCTF (2009) further highlights issues with B.C.’s FSAs due to the invalidity of score reports. Public reporting of test scores removes the context of these scores, holding schools accountable for student achievement regardless of intermediary factors like socioeconomic status and school resources. Miller (2013) reported that, in her study of Grade 9 math teachers’ perceptions of LSAs in Prince Edward Island, 70.8% of teachers felt “[t]he press ignor[ing] the limitations of results when publishing rankings of schools based on provincial test results” was a serious (20.8%) or very serious (50.0%) issue (p. 331). The BCTF (2009) grounds this argument in B.C.’s LSAs: according to their research, “school and district administrators, the media, and the Fraser Institute[,] a self-professed research and educational organization[,] usually do not report the confidence intervals for FSA results” (n.p.). This omission results in a perceived difference between schools even though there is no real difference once confidence intervals are established (BCTF, 2009). In fact, IPE (2017) noted two different research institutes—the Fraser Institute and the C.D. Howe Institute—used the same data to generate school rankings and each institute produced radically different rankings based on the analysis methods used. Educational researchers tend to rely on these LSAs as a source of validity for quantitative analysis; however, in B.C., these LSAs are unlikely to provide more reliability than classroom teachers’ grade books.

Some researchers have argued for use of contextualized classroom-based assessment in research to provide a nuanced understanding of student achievement (Malaspina & Rimm-
Kaufmann, 2008; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Whitley et al., 2007). IPE (2017) reminds readers that teachers use diverse classroom-based assessments and accumulate a portfolio of assessment to determine their evaluations of students. This deep understanding of students’ results is a more accurate assessment of student progress. In their study of literacy as defined by B.C. policy documents and operationalized by LSAs, Park and Fallon (2016) interviewed senior officials in the Ministry of Education who indicated there is “an effort to simplify very complex and organic processes so that politicians and government officials can talk about [them] with the public” and, therefore, literacy came to be defined as “reading” in B.C. rather than the more complex definition generated by an advisory committee (p. 26; p. 27). These officials further explained that local contexts require “different methodologies and pedagogies . . . that go beyond reading scores” (Park & Fallon, 2016, p. 27). This assertion highlights the dual nature of reading in our province: LSAs and provincial policies require a simplified concept that can be communicated to the public—reading—whereas schools are moving beyond this simple concept to focus on ideological literacy that contextualizes reading practice in the school community’s sociocultural customs rather than separating it as a distinct set of universal skills. Classroom-based assessment, then, is best designed to measure the complex sociocultural reading skills that students are developing in our local schools, and teachers are the experts on classroom-based assessment, positioning them to best report on student reading achievement.

2.5.2 Grade-Span Configuration and Student Achievement Based on LSA Data

The literature indicates that middle school configurations have a consistently negative impact on student reading achievement compared to K-8, 9-12 and K-7, 8-12 configurations when student achievement is measured using LSA scores (Anderson, 2015; Byrnes & Ruby,
2007; Clark et al., 2013; Dhuey, 2013; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Schwerdt & West, 2013; Wihry et al., 1992). Only Lipps (2005), in his study of school transitions using a nationally representative sample of Canadian youth, found a non-significant relationship between middle or junior high school attendance and reading achievement. Dhuey (2013) analyzed B.C. students’ achievement on provincial LSAs to determine the impact of middle and junior high school attendance on reading and math achievement. The impact on students’ reading achievement was more pronounced than on their math achievement (Dhuey, 2013), which could be due to the disruption in student-teacher relationships from transitioning schools and from increased school and class sizes, a phenomenon noted by Eccles et al. (1997) and Alspaugh (1998a). The effect on reading resulted in lower achievement on both the English 10 and English 12 provincial exams (Dhuey, 2013), indicating that grade-span configuration can have a long-term effect on students’ academic success. It is important to note here that English 10 provincial exams were marked by teachers at the local school while English 12 provincial exams were sent out to be marked by trained markers, most of whom were teachers themselves. Schwerdt and West (2013) noted that middle school students were less likely to recover from post-transition achievement drops than their elementary counterparts during their K-12 schooling career. These findings indicate that multiple transitions could lead to lower student achievement.

Most of the literature explored both reading and math achievement based on grade-span configuration. My study only focused on reading due to the scope of my program and my interest, but understanding the findings about math achievement helps inform the discussion of grade-span configurations. Grade-span configuration had an impact on students’ math achievement, but researchers had mixed recommendations about which configuration was most appropriate. Several scholars agree that middle schools have a significant negative effect on math
achievement (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Clark et al., 2013; Dhuey, 2013; Rockoff & Lockwood, 2010; Schwerdt and West, 2013). Nevertheless, Anderson (2015) and Lipps (2005) both found no significant relationship between middle school configurations and lower math achievement. Dhuey (2013) found that middle or junior high school attendance in B.C. resulted in lower grade 7 math achievement compared to elementary school attendees, but the impact was not as pervasive as the long-term impact on reading noted above. Whitley et al. (2007) found that, on questionnaires, teachers and parents rated students’ grade seven math scores as lower on average than their grade five math scores while teachers rated grade seven reading scores higher than grade five reading scores, contradicting the aforementioned LSA data that indicates grade-span configuration has a negative effect on reading achievement. This contrast highlights a need for more in-school understanding of contextual factors related to achievement, and teachers are most likely to have contextualized achievement data because of their hands-on involvement with students.

### 2.5.3 Grade-Span Configuration and Student Achievement Based on Non-LSA Data

Student and parent survey and interview responses have provided some insights into their perceptions about achievement and academics. Cantin and Boivin (2004) found that Quebec City students who attended junior high schools self-reported their academic ability as lower than their elementary school contemporaries; the authors hypothesized that this shift in self-perception was likely linked to students’ increase in social activity but were unable to test this hypothesis using their data. Furthermore, declining self-esteem paralleled students’ diminishing self-perceptions of scholastic capability (Cantin & Boivin, 2004), suggesting that academic achievement may be
hindered by students’ socioemotional development at this particular age more than grade-span configuration.

Whitley et al. (2007) asked teachers and parents to rate their students’ achievement in grade 7 math and reading. They found the change in students’, parents’, and teachers’ achievement ratings from grade 5 to grade 7 had no significant difference based on grade-span configuration (staying in same elementary school or moving to a middle school); however, parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of student achievement in math dropped whereas parents’ perceptions of their children’s achievement in reading dropped but teachers’ perceptions remained consistent (Whitley et al., 2007). Interestingly, Rockoff and Lockwood (2010) found that New York City students and parents rated their middle schools as less academically rigorous on end-of-year district surveys compared to their counterparts in elementary schools. Similarly, Eccles et al. (1997) found elementary schools used more higher order thinking tasks in classroom learning activities than middle schools. These data complement Whitley et al.’s (2007) findings as parents’ perception of their children as less academically successful suggests an increasing in rigour; however, these data seemingly contrast Cantin and Boivin’s (2004) findings because students who believe their schools are less academically rigorous are likely to see themselves as more academically capable.

2.5.4 Teachers and Student Achievement

Teachers also play an essential role in students’ academic achievement, but few studies have directly discussed teachers’ beliefs and influence on student achievement. Wihry et al. (1992) found a positive correlation between teacher experience and student achievement in Maine, concluding teachers with more years of experience were likely to have students with
higher achievement levels, but not all studies agree on this point. Byrnes and Ruby (2007) used teacher characteristics—teacher absentee rates, a school’s number of certified teachers, average teaching experience, and student/teacher ratio—as a control variable in their analyses of old K-8 schools, new K-8 schools, and middle schools in the Philadelphia City School District. In previous analyses of district scores, they found the new K-8 schools had similar achievement results to middle schools while the old K-8 schools performed better (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). With teacher characteristics controlled, the new K-8 schools produced a positive, significant impact on student reading achievement but not math achievement (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007). This finding suggests middle school students, at least in Philadelphia, do not underperform in reading on LSAs because of teachers.

Eccles et al. (1997) hypothesized that teachers’ dispositions towards and connections to students may be a factor in student achievement. Michigan seventh grade teachers in junior high schools with low self-reported efficacy were linked to lower student perceptions of academic competency and higher perceptions of subject area difficulty (Eccles et al., 1997). Each school type operates with a specific understanding of teaching. Hall (2015) noted grade 6-8 teachers in K-8 configurations often taught one subject to multiple grade levels (e.g. Math 6, 7, and 8) whereas 6-8 teachers in 6-8 configurations often taught one grade level and one subject (e.g. Math 8) with the exception of humanities. This 6-8 configuration model creates a pseudo-secondary school model and, as Hall (2015) noted, challenges for collaboration because of the number of teachers teaching the same students.

Byrnes and Ruby (2007) investigated training for a specific school type in their study, hypothesizing that teachers would leave middle schools to work within their area of training: either elementary or secondary school. They found that teacher characteristics, such as
absenteeism and years of experience, did impact student reading achievement, which may result in lower achievement for middle school students because of less specific training or less years of experience for teachers there. In B.C., teachers are not trained to specifically work at the middle or junior high school level. The two most-prominent teacher education programs are at Simon Fraser University (SFU) and The University of British Columbia (UBC). SFU does not offer a middle school or middle years program (Faculty of Education, n.d.). UBC offers a Middle Years cohort, but it is listed as a component of the Elementary & Middle Years program option (Teacher Education Office, n.d.). Therefore, B.C. teachers working in middle level education in middle schools may feel less equipped for that school type due to their training than if they were teaching the same grade level in an elementary or secondary setting, resulting in students with lower self-perceived competency and higher perceived subject area difficulty.

The emerging themes presented above encompass a wide variety of data and findings; however, results are still inconclusive. Studies have found mixed results about the impact of grade-span on student achievement, and most studies have noted the limitations of surface-level data that does not allow stakeholders to understand the classroom and school practices that may be influencing data. Ineffective survey instruments have limited research on instructional practices because they have asked teachers to identify their instructional practices rather than explain what their instructional practices require students to learn. Attempts have been made to bridge the gap between elementary and middle or even elementary and secondary schools to assist students with this transition; however, the stage-environment fit theory and other research around behavioral outcomes suggests that biological changes may be a major influence that requires more research (Eccles et al., 1997). My study aimed to examine a Canadian setting to
add to this body of research while also examining the loose linkage between grade-span
configuration and student reading achievement, a relationship hinted at by previous studies but
not theorized in this manner. The B.C. context will be most pronounced through the comparison
of eighth-grade in middle school versus eighth-grade in secondary school because American
studies, which make up the majority of the literature, have focused on K-8 or 6-8 configurations.
Moreover, my study elicited teachers’ beliefs about grade-span configurations’ effect on
teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement, something other studies have not yet done.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Educational systems are composed of individuals within organizations within larger organizations. Thus, there are many levels of organization, and administration, working within education, resulting in a complex set of relationships that guides individuals’ actions. Moreover, each school district has its own culture and set of processes, making each district unique from other districts. Weick (1979) asserts, “organizations, despite their apparent preoccupation with facts, numbers, objectivity, concreteness, and accountability, are in fact saturated with subjectivity, abstraction, guesses, making do, invention, and arbitrariness” (p. 5). Education falls under this umbrella. Tests are taken, statistics are analyzed, and decisions are made; however, each of these decisions is then enacted in the organization through the members’ efforts. Typically, teachers are the individuals who eventually receive this information and must interpret and apply it in daily classroom activities. However, teachers’ individual beliefs and schools’ cultures have an impact on the interpretation and application of this decision. Both Schein (2017) and Tsoukas and Chia (2002) have clearly shown that this trickle-down effect, or organizational becoming, can lead to the implementation of unintended practices and unaligned changes.

These concepts of culture and interpretation move education away from the post-positivist tradition despite the attempts of many researchers to make sense of education through this paradigm. My study sought to understand teachers’ beliefs about grade-span configuration based on their experiential knowledge; this focus more closely aligns with social constructivism in which “individuals seek understanding of [their] world . . . [and] develop subjective meanings of their experiences” (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). The epistemologies encompassed in this paradigm seek to gain insight into the complexities of a phenomenon through participants’ experiences, social and historical negotiations, and cultural norms (Creswell, 2014). Similarly, Weick (1979)
asserts that organizational theorizing needs to focus on the processes and relations between participants and the persistent patterns and rationale that influence decisions. He also reminds us that each representation of an organization is simply “an arrangement” that was generated subjectively from one individual’s (or a small group of individuals’) viewpoint (Weick, 1979, p. 45). Therefore, any discussion of education’s organizational decisions must incorporate the views and opinions of multiple stakeholders within the community to construct a larger understanding of the phenomenon.

3.1 Method

Weick (1979) asserts that educational organizations are interdependent social bodies whose definitions and structures may change depending on the socially accepted norms and cultures of said organization. This conceptualization of educational organizations ties into Andres’ (2012) belief that survey research garner data about “[a] world constructed and reported by an individual” (p. 9). Based on these concepts, in this study, I employed a mixed method survey design that tested the relationship between grade-span configuration and teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement. Faulkner and Cook (2006) articulated the mismatch between standardized assessments and best practices for instruction that is often noted by teachers but not addressed. To address this concerning mismatch, teachers were asked about the average reading achievement of their students based on the Ministry of Education’s published definitions for “reading” and “literacy.” For the purposes of this study, survey is best defined as “a patchwork of different kinds of data, collected by different means and processed in different ways” (Converse, 2010, p. 33). Additionally, the study may not be representative of other
districts in this province or in North America because it is based on data from two specific school districts.

As previously mentioned, teachers are the final “actors” on the ground implementing the decisions made in different areas of the educational organization; therefore, their perspectives are different from those who are not in classrooms. The goal of survey research is to develop an understanding of the “characteristics, behaviours, and attitudes” of an identified group of people (Andres, 2012, p. 1). My study aligned closely with this goal because it aimed to better understand the impacts of grade-span configuration on eighth-grade students by gathering the beliefs of their teachers. Thus, the constructed world that each teacher reported helped to better understand the accepted norms and cultural patterns—evident through the beliefs and internalized routines in which each individual participates—that underlie specific grade-span configurations and may, directly or indirectly, impact teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement.

3.2 Data Collection

The survey instrument for this study was composed of closed and open-ended questions to provide statistical and contextual data. Through this questionnaire, I sought to understand each construct—grade-span configuration, teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement, school transition age, instructional practices—and to relate the independent variables to the mediating variables and the mediating variables to the dependent variable (see Table 3.1 below).
Table 3.1 Variables in study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>grade-span configuration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mediating Variables</td>
<td>instructional practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>school transition age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent Variable</td>
<td>teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey instrument can be found in Appendix A. The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions, including open and closed questions. Respondents completed a series of questions that provided their personal and school demographics; their instructional practices for reading, including hours spent instructing reading; their perceptions of students’ preparedness for their school environment; their perception of their students’ reading achievement; and their overall perception of the benefits and challenges of their school’s configuration for students’ reading. The questionnaires were placed in envelopes along with letters of informed consent and a two-dollar coin as a token of appreciation. Questionnaires were then placed into large envelopes addressed to each school and personally delivered to the principal or office staff—as per the principals’ instructions—at each school. Principals then coordinated the distribution to their teachers or department heads who then distributed to interested teachers.

Access to teachers who met the sampling criteria was a major limitation for my study. Because of the administrative organization of public school districts, the process of contacting the principal, delivering questionnaires to the principals or office staff, and relying on these individuals to distribute the questionnaires to interested teachers was the only way I was permitted to reach teachers. Furthermore, many principals contacted their teachers to find out who was interested in participating before allowing me to deliver questionnaires, meaning that I
was not given an accurate number of teachers who met the sampling criteria for each school. As a result, the number of responses for this survey was lower than expected, and I am unable to calculate an accurate percentage for the response rate because I do not have an accurate number of teachers who met the sample criteria. Principals, in this sense, acted as gatekeepers for their schools, deciding whether they felt their teachers had time to complete the questionnaire and whether the questionnaire was relevant or meaningful for teachers to complete. Some principals allowed their teachers to decide for themselves by sharing the questionnaire information with their teachers and asking for teacher interest while others made the decision on their own.

3.2.1 Timeline

Questionnaires were delivered to schools between April 4, 2019 and June 12, 2019. Participants were given 3-4 weeks to complete the questionnaires; however, some participants required less time and requested the questionnaires be collected earlier than the agreed upon date. Because of the timeline, the data collected represent teachers’ opinions of their students at the end of the school year as B.C. schools complete their school year during the final week of June.

3.3 Population and Sample

My study aimed to understand the relationship between grade-span configuration and student reading achievement for eighth-grade students. To make this comparison, I surveyed teachers at middle schools in one district and secondary schools in a second district. Middle schools use a grade 6 through 8 configuration while secondary schools use a grade 8 through 12 configuration. It was necessary to use two districts because districts typically do not employ two
different grade-span configurations for the same grade level within their district unless they are transitioning to a middle school program or away from a middle school program in the district. Most of the aforementioned research focuses on the difference between elementary school (K-8) and middle school (6-8) configurations, both of which place eighth-graders as the oldest students in the school. My study provides new insight into a uniquely B.C. context for eighth-grade placement since one configuration places eighth-graders as the oldest students and the other places them as the youngest students.

The first school district, labelled District A, follows a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 pathway with students making transitions from elementary to middle school at the end of grade 5 and middle to secondary school at the end of grade 8. District A is located in the Metro Vancouver area and is one of the five largest districts in the province. For this study, I surveyed eighth-grade generalist/classroom and humanities (English, Social Studies, and Humanities) teachers in the district, all of whom taught in middle schools. Middle schools in this district range from 300 to 600 students per school. The principals of all 14 middle schools in the district were contacted via email for permission to survey their teachers; some principals did not respond, and other principals indicated that teachers were too busy to participate. In the end, teachers from six of the 14 middle schools in the district responded to the survey with an average of 4.7 responses per school (n = 22; minimum: 1 response; maximum: 7 responses).

The second school district, labelled District B, follows a K-7, 8-12 pathway with students transitioning from elementary school to secondary school at the end of grade 7. District B also uses some elementary annexes (K-3) to provide community schools in specific locations around the city. District B is located in Metro Vancouver and is also one of the five largest districts in the province. The district has 17 secondary schools that use the grade 8-12 configuration; each
secondary school services between approximately 800 to 1,400 students. For this study, I surveyed eighth-grade generalist/classroom and humanities (English, Social Studies, and Humanities) teachers in the district. The principals of all 17 secondary schools were contacted via email to request permission to survey their teachers; some principals did not respond, others said their teachers had already participated in too many research studies this year, and others said their teachers were too busy. In the end, teachers from four of the 17 secondary schools responded to the survey with an average of 2.5 responses per school (n = 10; minimum: 1 response; maximum: 5 responses).

### 3.3.1 Participants

Thirty-one teachers responded to the survey from 10 different schools—six middle schools and four secondary schools. Only 31 responses were included in the data analysis; one response indicated more hours of instruction in reading than instructional hours per week, which created a discrepancy in the data, and was, therefore, excluded from the data analysis. There was a range of one to six respondents per school with a median amount of two respondents per school and a mean of 3.1 respondents per school. In Table 3.2, schools with a one-digit code are middle schools while schools with a two-digit code are secondary schools. Twenty-one of the respondents were middle school teachers, and 10 were secondary school teachers.
Table 3.2 Number of respondents per school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School ID</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;0&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;1&quot;</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;10&quot;</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;2&quot;</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;3&quot;</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;4&quot;</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;11&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;5&quot;</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;12&quot;</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;13&quot;</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Secondary school respondents reported more years of teaching experience: 71.0% of middle school respondents had six or more years of teaching experience while 90.0% of secondary school respondents had the same amount of experience. However, both configurations had approximately the same years of experience at their current school: 44.0% of secondary school respondents (n = 9) had been at their current school for six or more years while 47.6% of middle school respondents (n = 21) had been at their current school for the same length of time. Table 3.3 explains the subject areas taught by the participants. The majority of middle school respondents (52.4%, n = 21) were classroom teachers; middle school respondents were next most likely to teach humanities (23.8%, n = 21). For secondary school respondents (n = 10), 60.0% taught Social Studies while 40.0% taught English/Language Arts. Table 3.3 explains each subject area.
Table 3.3 Explanation of subject areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Area</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humanities (H)</td>
<td>A combination of English and Social Studies content and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/Language Arts (ELA)</td>
<td>English-based reading and writing skills and literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies (SS)</td>
<td>Social Studies and History content and skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom/Generalists (CT)</td>
<td>Teach all or most of the core subjects (English, Social Studies, Science, Math) to a single class of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (O)</td>
<td>A subject area that does not fall into one of these four categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4 Frequencies of subject area taught grouped by configuration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Area 1</th>
<th>Configuration</th>
<th>grade 6-8</th>
<th>grade 8-12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Teacher (generalist)</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/Language Arts</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teachers who participated in this study ranged from one to 10+ years of experience teaching with the majority of teachers falling into the 10+ category (see Figure 3.1 below). Approximately 69.0% of middle school teachers (n = 22) had 10+ years of experience whereas approximately 78.0% of secondary school teachers had 10+ years of experience (n = 9).
Teachers were asked to not include years of practicum or teacher-on-call (TOC) placements in their total.

**Figure 3.1 Respondents’ years of teaching experience grouped by configuration**

![Bar chart showing years of experience grouped by configuration.](image)

Teachers were also asked to report on their years of experience at their current school not including practicum and TOC years. Five secondary teachers (n = 10) had been at their current school for two years or less while five teachers had been there for 10 years or more. Middle school teachers (n = 22) were more spread with 10 teachers having been at their school for 10+ years while 12 teachers had been at their current school for five years or less. Figure 3.2 shows the number of years respondents had been at their current school divided by grade-span configuration.
Figure 3.2 Respondents’ years of experience at current school grouped by configuration

Eighteen teachers taught in mainstream school settings whereas three teachers taught in immersion programs and one teacher taught in a mini school program. Mini schools are choice programs for which students apply to enter a specialized district program, such as an arts or Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) program, offered at one school. Teachers’ participation in a mini school or an immersion program could impact their perceptions of students’ reading. In immersion programs, students may have different challenges because they are developing language skills for two languages simultaneously. In choice programs, students must apply, which means that students in the program may be more highly motivated learners. Figure 3.3 shows the number of teachers teaching in immersion programs divided by grade-span configuration.
Teachers were also asked about their own schooling experience to help understand potential influences on their perceptions. Specifically, teachers were asked if they attended a middle school (6-8) or a junior high school (7-9) during their education. Approximately 55.0% of middle school teachers attended a middle or junior high school during their childhood whereas only 45.0% of secondary school teachers attended a middle or junior high school. Figure 3.4 shows the number of teachers who attended middle school, junior high school, or neither divided by grade-span configuration.
Because reading is traditionally thought of as a skill students learn in English or literacy classrooms, teachers were asked to check off all subjects areas they taught to grade 8 students. Teachers who indicated both English/Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies (SS) were recoded as Humanities (H) teachers for the purposes of indicating subject areas in data analysis. Twelve respondents were classroom teachers/generalists (CT), three were English/Language Arts (ELA) teachers, eight were Humanities (H) teachers, and eight were Social Studies (SS) teachers. One teacher indicated Other (O) as their subject area. Five of the 32 teachers also indicated Other as their secondary subject, indicating that they teach multiple subjects. Figure 3.5 shows the subject areas of teachers.
All of the classroom teachers taught in middle schools; the other 10 middle school respondents were mostly Humanities teachers with a few teachers who taught English/Language Arts, Social Studies, or Other. The majority of secondary respondents (six) taught Social Studies; two secondary teachers taught English/Language Arts, and two secondary teachers taught Humanities. Figure 3.6 shows the number of respondents per subject area divided by grade-span configuration.
3.4 Data Analysis

My questionnaire was designed as a mixed-methods instrument so that some data could be analyzed quantitatively using regression analysis and some data could be used to provide descriptive context. Unfortunately, because of the number of responses ($n = 32$), there was not enough data to complete meaningful statistical analysis. Therefore, descriptive statistics were calculated for quantitative questions while thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative responses. Qualitative responses were coded based on the information mentioned. Responses were divided into middle school and secondary school groups to allow for comparison between the two groups of teachers.

3.5 Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Careful measures were taken in the proposed study to ensure the validity of results. Content and constructs were developed based on rigorous research, as cited in the literature review, that helped to define and operationalize these terms to avoid content and construct
validity errors. Teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement were measured by teacher ratings on two questions about reading level derived from the “Graduation Literacy Assessment: Specifications” definition of literacy and the “Foundation Skills Assessment: Description and Specifications” definition of reading (Province of British Columbia, 2018; Province of British Columbia, 2017).

The highest margin of error came from non-cooperation because teachers are busy individuals and often do not have the time or energy to complete extra tasks. While teachers were given an incentive to participate, some took the incentive and did not return the questionnaire and others were offended and did not return the questionnaire on principle. The incentive ($2) was offered because research has shown that including a $2 to $5 financial incentive with the survey generates higher response rates than incentives given only after an individual participates in the study (Andres, 2012). One principal also indicated that a teacher was not willing to respond because this teacher felt they could not complete a fair evaluation of their students without providing context about student learning challenges and other influential factors. While these factors are discussed in the literature (Alspaugh, 1998; Alspaugh, 2000; Bauer et al., 2014; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Eccles et al., 1997; Fletcher, 2018; Giese, 2018; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Whitley et al., 2007; Wihry et al., 1992), the aim of this study was to focus on teachers’ instructional practices in relation to student achievement, and student factors were not a variable.

Perhaps most importantly, this study presented reliability challenges because it is cross-sectional and hinges on teachers’ beliefs at a single moment. Andres (2012) indicates that “exact replication of the results of a survey research project is highly unlikely” (p. 123); this study falls into that category because a different class with a different composition of students and different
abilities would likely elicit a different response from a single teacher. However, the survey asked teachers to indicate their years of experience because teachers with more years of experience are likely to have more robust beliefs that go beyond a single class.

3.6 Limitations, Delimitations, and Generalizability

The limits of this study are greatly impacted by the number of participants. Sampling error arose because of the number of participants who responded and the number of schools represented by the respondents. This error is particularly problematic for secondary schools as only 10 teachers responded and these 10 teachers are from four schools in the district (23.5% of the district’s secondary schools). This study presented ecological validity that allows findings to be transferred to school settings and populations similar to the one studied; however, given the sample size, the results do not possess the external validity needed to generalize to a larger population. Because of the transparency of the study methods and clarity of the process, this study could be replicated with a larger population to obtain the necessary data.

While I was unable to truly test my theoretical framework because of the low numbers of responses, administrators can still use the framework to comprehend the theoretical implications of changes to these systems. Furthermore, the contextual information learned from the respondents may help refocus administrative conversations around reading instruction towards the actual issues plaguing teachers. Because of increasing population changes in the Metro Vancouver area, this study has potential for catalytic validity because it informs local administrators’ decisions about how to address population issues while being mindful of the impact on student reading achievement.
As previously mentioned, access was a major limitation for this study because of the process for gaining access to individual teachers. Principals make decisions about what is appropriate for their teachers based on the current demands of the school climate. Some schools were challenged with preparing their students to transition to new schools or were dealing with unexpected incidents that emotionally impacted their staff and students; therefore, principals did not want to add onto these already stressful situations. In other cases, principals indicated that teachers had already participated in research studies and did not want to ask their teachers to participate in any more studies this year. Some principals did not respond to multiple requests to survey their teachers. Many principals, on the other hand, were welcoming and supported the study in their schools. One principal indicated that the survey was well received at their school. However, some teachers were not as positive, viewing the two-dollar coin as insulting or indicating the questionnaire did not properly represent their student population, which resulted in teachers choosing not to complete the study. Because of the busy nature of schools and the individual perspectives of teachers, it was a challenge to obtain enough responses to generate meaningful data.

Another limitation was my own schedule. As a full-time teacher and a full-time graduate student, it was a challenge to schedule questionnaire drop-offs and pick-ups. In an ideal world, I would have had more time to connect with principals and discuss my study to gain access to more schools; however, with my schedule, I was fielding phone calls from principals in my spare blocks and in the short breaks between teaching my classes. Despite the obvious benefits of gaining teachers’ perceptions, survey proved to be a challenging method to balance with a full-time job.
Because of the limitations caused by access and my schedule, a crucial limitation is the number of questionnaire responses. With 32 responses (22 middle school, 10 secondary school), I was unable to follow my original data analysis plan of using linear regression to determine whether grade-span configuration impacts teachers’ perceptions of students’ reading achievement.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board and by District A and District B. Principals of each participating school were sent a letter of introduction, the district’s approval letter, the Ethics Board approval letter, and the questionnaire teachers would complete to inform them of the study and request their permission to survey teachers at their school. Participants were given a letter of informed consent that outlined the purpose and procedures for the study as well as the intended use of the study results, included being “reported in a graduate thesis” and potentially “published in journal articles and books.” They were informed that returning the completed questionnaire indicated their consent to participate. Participants were informed that their identity would be kept confidential and identifying information, such as their schools’ names, would not be used. Participants’ names were not collected to reduce the risk of identification. Participants were also informed that their open-ended answers may be quoted but “all identifiers (i.e. school name, teacher and student names) [would] be removed or changed.”

5 See Appendix B: Consent Form.
6 See Appendix B: Consent Form.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Due to the low number of respondents, descriptive statistics were generated from the quantitative data while thematic mapping was used to analyze qualitative data. Only 31 responses were valid and included in the data analysis; however, some respondents opted not to respond to certain questions. Where descriptive statistics were used, the number of respondents for a particular question was included to provide the reader with a sense of scale. The data analysis was organized by research question and attempts to answer each question with qualitative descriptions.

4.1 Grade-Span Configuration, Instructional Practices, and Student Reading Achievement

Respondents were asked to specify the number of hours they spend on reading instruction and explain why they do or do not teach reading strategies. Reading instruction refers to the intentional teaching of strategies that help students to make sense of what they read; these strategies may include teaching vocabulary, note-taking, inferencing, decoding, and more. Middle school respondents spent more hours per week instructing reading (M = 1.88, SD = 1.51, n = 21) than secondary school respondents (M = 1.28, SD = 0.516, n = 10). However, secondary school respondents spent a larger portion of their instructional time teaching reading (45.8%) compared to middle school respondents (21.0%). These data are captured in Table 4.1 below. Since more middle school teachers are generalist/classroom teachers, they may comparatively spend more time with students, which could result in the lower percentages of instructional time spent on reading instruction.
Secondary school respondents also perceived a higher level of reading achievement amongst their students: they indicated that, on average, 73.0% of students could make meaning of texts appropriate for their grade level (n = 10, SD = 15.5) and, on average, 64.8% of students could critically analyze texts appropriate for their grade level (n = 10, SD = 21.1). Conversely, middle school respondents perceived, on average, 70.7% of their students could make meaning of texts appropriate for their grade level (n = 21, SD = 20.5) and 58.8% of their students could critically analyze texts appropriate for their grade level (n = 21, SD = 21.1). Both middle and secondary school respondents reported 75.0% as the median score for percentage of students able to make meaning of texts appropriate for their grade level; when critically analyzing texts appropriate for their grade level, middle school respondents reported a median score of 60.0% while secondary school respondents reported a median score of 65.0%. These data indicate that secondary school respondents perceived their students to be stronger readers than their middle school counterparts, which may correspond with the percentage of class time spent on reading.
Table 4.1 Reading instruction and achievement grouped by grade-span configuration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Configuration</th>
<th>Hrs Reading Instr.</th>
<th>% Instruction Reading</th>
<th>% Make Meaning</th>
<th>% Critically Analyze</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>64.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>0.516</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>0.330</td>
<td>9.43</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When discussing instructional practices, teachers in both configurations mostly focused on reading as part of the curriculum requirements. One teacher stated the purpose for teaching reading strategies was “to prepare for high school” (003, 2) while another stated the purpose was to “prepare for secondary school/university” (008, 1). This second respondent (008, 1) also mentioned life situations and enjoyment of reading as reasons to teach reading strategies, suggesting a multifaceted purpose for reading instruction. Other responses indicated “[reading strategies are] part of the curriculum. . . [and they] help students learn” (009, 1), reading is a “cross curricular skill” (014, 5), and reading strategies “help students pull information from texts, especially textbooks and websites” (026, 3).

Middle school teachers, more so than secondary school teachers, referenced reading as a life skill or a foundational literacy skill for learning. For example, middle school teachers indicated, “reading is a necessary life skill for all disciplines” (001, 2). One teacher referenced
that students need “different strategies to match different life situations” (008, 1) while another stated they teach reading strategies “in order to help kids enjoy reading and become better writers” (027, 4). These purposes focus on individual growth and reading development. By comparison, secondary school teachers saw reading strategies as a way to teach students “how to look for important info/identify what is important” (017, 12), “to make it easier to learn as the texts get harder” (020, 13), “for [their] students to learn and retain the information [they are] teaching them” (023, 13), and “to check for understanding” (031, 10). Secondary teachers, therefore, focused more on teaching reading skills that would help students to succeed as they advanced further in their schooling.

4.1.1 Grade-span configuration and instructional practices.

Grade-span configuration had some impact on teachers’ instructional practices for reading. Of the 20 middle school respondents, 70.0% said their school encouraged reading instruction; of the eight secondary school respondents, 37.5% said their school encouraged reading instruction. These data (see Table 4.2 below) suggest that middle schools may focus more on foundational literacy skills, such as reading.

Table 4.2 School encouragement of reading instruction grouped by configuration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Encouragement</th>
<th>Configuration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interestingly, respondents from the same school were inconsistent in their responses about school encouragement of reading instruction. All six respondents from school 2, a middle school and both respondents from school 10, a secondary school, indicated that their school encouraged reading instruction while all four respondents from school 13, a secondary school, with the exception of one teacher who did not answer the question, indicated that their school did not encourage reading instruction. The rest of the schools had some respondents who believed their school encouraged reading instruction and some who did not (see Table 4.3 below).

Table 4.3 School encouragement of reading instruction grouped by school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>no</th>
<th>yes</th>
<th>n/a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;0&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;1&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;10&quot;</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;2&quot;</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;3&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;4&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;11&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;5&quot;</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;12&quot;</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;13&quot;</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To better understand these inconsistencies, we can look at the subject area of teachers and whether they believed their school encouraged reading instruction. Respondents whose primary subject area was English/Language Arts, Humanities, or Social Studies were inconsistent in whether or not their schools encouraged reading instruction. However, of respondents who identified as a classroom teacher (generalist), all of whom are middle school teachers, 90.0% (n
10) said their school encouraged reading instruction (see Table 4.4). The programmatic nature of middle schools and the use of generalist teachers may lead to more emphasis on foundational literacy skills than schools—both middle and secondary schools—that compartmentalize students into specific subject areas.

Table 4.4 School encouragement of reading instruction grouped by subject area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Area 1</th>
<th>School Encouragement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Teacher (generalist)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/Language Arts</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Instructional Practices in Schools that Encourage Reading Instruction

Teachers at schools, regardless of their configuration, who encouraged reading instruction described instructional practices that help students to comprehend and process information. As mentioned in the previous section, secondary school respondents focused more on teaching reading to support students as they progress further in school. Of those respondents who reported their school encouraged reading instruction, two were Social Studies teachers and one was an English/Language Arts teacher. These three teachers identified student understanding and development of independent reading skills as their purpose for reading instruction. For example, one teacher reported,

I use graphic organizers when reading, thus it helps students focus on the text, as well it allows students to be able to focus on concepts, relationships. I also use focused questions
which allow the students to think actively as he/she are ready, as well I encourage them to formulate questions and also have answers for them. (032, 10)

Another explained that they use reading instruction “to check [students’] level of understanding[:] . . . the reason [they] work on note-taking [is] because it serves as a tool to check for understanding, [and] pre-reading as well as [it] gets them processing the information” (031, 10). The third teacher also indicated that they teach reading to help students “learn how to look for important info[rmation]” and “how to approach information” (017, 12).

The middle school respondents who indicated that their school encouraged them to teach reading strategies had similar beliefs about the importance of reading instruction. For example, one teacher indicated that they teach reading “so that kids can take away more ideas/knowledge from the texts they read” and because “reading strategies support kids with thinking more deeply about the texts they read” (015, 5). Another believed that students “need to be able to break down the info[rmation] and focus on main ideas” (11, 5) while another indicated that they “[did] [a particular instructional] strategy often and s[aw] it as necessary to be taught so that students c[ould] use it when reading on their own” (007, 2). Other middle school respondents whose schools encouraged reading indicated they “explicitly [taught] reading skills as students encounter more difficult texts and different subjects/genres [because it] is vital to develop strong readers” (001, 2); they teach reading “to have students learn how to differentiate the information presented . . . [and] to have students work on their ability to predict, visualize, question, infer, evaluate, connect” (004, 2). These rationales for reading instruction match those of the secondary school respondents who perceived their schools as encouraging reading instruction, indicating there is no noticeable difference between middle and secondary configurations if their schools encourage reading instruction.
Instructional Practices at Schools Not Perceived to Encourage Reading Instruction

Both middle and secondary school respondents who reported that their schools did not encourage reading instruction viewed reading instruction negatively, as a skill prescribed by curriculum documents, taught in younger grade levels, or burdening their instructional time. If these teachers taught reading, they taught it because “[it was] part of the curriculum” (009, 1), it was a “cross curricular skill” (014, 5), it “ma[de] it easier to learn as the texts [got] harder” (020, 13), and “students still need[ed] to develop these skills” (030, 11). Those respondents who did not teach reading skills rationalized this decision because of time constraints or prior instruction. In particular, middle school teachers believed reading “strategies [were] taught in younger grades” (024, 3) and “the majority of [their] students [we]re aware of reading strategies (as [they] focus on them more heavily in grade 6/7)” (013, 5). Even one teacher whose school encourages reading instruction remarked, “I generally expect my grade 8s to have learnt these strategies prior to coming into grade 8” (016, 5). These responses suggest a programmatic approach to middle school reading instruction that puts emphasis on honing reading skills in grade 6/7 so that grade 8 teachers do not have to teach these skills.

Another barrier to reading instruction was time: “I do not teach these as much as I would like due to a lack of time” (013, 5). Even teachers who indicated their schools encouraged reading instruction mentioned time as a factor. One teacher remarked, “Time constraints are always the number one issue. Trying to get everything done during the week is impossible” (006, 2) while another commented, “I wish I had more time to work on [reading strategies]” (031, 10). Furthermore, teachers made decisions about which reading strategies to teach because of time: “Due to time constraints I find that I need to give more time to teach more strategies for analyzing literary (vs. informational) text” (025, 3). Thus, teachers at schools that did not
encourage reading instruction held similar perceptions of why they did or did not teach reading strategies regardless of their schools’ grade-span configurations.

4.1.2 Instructional practices and student reading achievement

The similarities in instructional practices between middle and secondary school respondents, particularly based on whether or not their schools encourage reading, were consistent with their perceptions of student reading achievement. While secondary teachers rated their students higher in ability to make meaning and critically analyze texts, both middle and secondary respondents had similar perceptions of the specific skills their students excelled at and/or struggled with.

Respondents were asked to identify two reading skills their students did well and two with which their students struggled. 74.2% of respondents (n = 21) indicated that comprehension was a skill their students did well; these responses included answering comprehension questions, summarizing texts, recalling facts, and identifying the main idea. However, 19.4% of respondents (n = 21) indicated comprehension was a skill that caused their students to struggle. Middle and secondary school respondents were similar in their responses to these questions. Respondents indicated that students struggled with “summarizing answers in their own words” (003, 2), “determining [the] main idea” (009, 1), and “effective note taking” (012, 5). Those respondents who saw comprehension as a struggling skill remarked that students were able to answer comprehension questions or summarize texts with support but could not do so independently.

Both middle and secondary respondents perceived that grade 8 students struggled the most with inferencing. 38.1 percent of middle school respondents (n = 21) and 30.0% of
secondary school respondents (n = 10) viewed inferencing as a weakness in their students’ reading skills. Inferencing included “understanding the general meaning of the text” rather than “focus[ing] on finding answers” (024, 3), finding the “higher/deeper meaning behind [the] written word” (021, 13), “inferencing what has been read” (007, 2), and “critically thinking about their reading” (003, 2).

Vocabulary was similarly identified as a commonly challenging skill for eighth-grade students. 28.6 percent of middle school respondents (n = 21) and 30.0% of secondary school respondents (n = 10) viewed vocabulary and word decoding skills as a challenge for their students. One teacher indicated that there are “many words [they] think [students] should know [but] they don’t” (023, 13). Another indicated that students struggled to “us[e] context to help determine the meaning of words they don’t know” (024, 3). However, 30.0% of secondary school respondents (n = 10) indicated that vocabulary was a strength of their students, listing “word recognition. . . [and] decoding” as skills students possessed (022, 13). Furthermore, one French immersion teacher indicated that their “student[s] are prepared to not understand all the vocab[ulary]” (emphasis in original, 020, 13), suggesting that students have learnt how to approach unfamiliar words in their reading.

While not a major commonality in all responses, 12.9% of respondents (n = 31) viewed student reading fluency and resiliency as a skill students possessed while 16.1% viewed this as an area of struggle. Approximately equal numbers of middle school teachers viewed reading fluency and resiliency as a strength or an area of struggle. However, 10.0% of secondary respondents (n = 10) viewed this skill as a strength while 30.0% viewed it as a struggle. The lone secondary teacher who saw fluency and resiliency as a strength of their students believed their students were “able to read for a length of time” including “working through tough texts” (023,
13). In contrast, those who viewed their students as struggling with fluency and resiliency indicated that students struggled with “continuing when the task [was] hard or complicated” (020, 13) and “sustain[ing] reading over long periods” (030, 11). This difference in success with fluency and resiliency for both middle and secondary school respondents suggests this skill is commonly inconsistent amongst children in grade 8.

4.2 Grade-Span Configuration, Student Transition Age, and Student Reading Achievement

Participants were asked to identify the percentage of students who were emotionally prepared, socially prepared, and intellectually prepared for their school’s grade-span configuration (see Table 4.5). Middle school respondents believed, on average, 80.0% of their 8th grade students were emotionally prepared for their configuration (n = 21, SD = 14.3, minimum = 50, maximum = 100) whereas secondary school respondents believed only 62.8% of their students were emotionally prepared (n = 9, SD = 19.5, minimum = 30, maximum = 90). Similarly, middle school respondents believed, on average, 77.4% of students were socially prepared (n = 21, SD = 12.1, minimum = 60, maximum = 95), which was more than the 70.0% average social preparedness reported by secondary school respondents (n = 9, SD = 13.9, minimum = 50, maximum = 90). Lastly, contrary to participants’ perceptions of their students’ reading achievement levels, middle school respondents believed, on average, 72.9% of their students were intellectually prepared for their configuration (n = 21, SD = 17.4, minimum = 30, maximum = 95) whereas secondary school respondents believed only 66.0% of their students were intellectually prepared (n = 10, SD = 20.4, minimum = 30, maximum = 95). Table 4.5
depicts this data. Participants were asked to rate their students from 0.0% prepared to 100.0% prepared; the data depicted follows this range of 0.0% to 100.0%.

Table 4.5 Student preparedness grouped by configuration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Configuration</th>
<th>Emotional Prep</th>
<th>Social Prep</th>
<th>Intellectual Prep</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>77.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>70.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Middle school respondents viewed their students as more emotionally, socially, and intellectually prepared for their grade-span configuration. Intellectual preparedness is of particular interest because middle school respondents perceived only 70.7% of their students to be able to make meaning from the texts they read appropriate to grade level and only 58.8% of their students to be able to critically analyze the texts they read appropriate to grade level. In contrast, secondary school respondents rated their students’ reading abilities more highly (see Table 4.6). This discrepancy begs the question as to whether, by the end of the school year, eighth-grade students in secondary school have made more progress than their middle school
counterparts in reading skills or if there is a difference in understanding of student abilities based on the grade-span configuration. Some studies reviewed found no significant impact on student reading achievement but attributed differences between configurations to school attachment (Carolan & Chesky, 2012), school size (Weiss & Kipnes, 2006), and population demographics (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006). These factors may also influence teachers’ perceptions of achievement based on how these factors interact with the schools’ locations, cultures, and demographics, particularly because the schools surveyed may not be fully representative of the population demographics for their district. The two districts are comparable in terms of population demographics, but school differences may have impacted the data.
Table 4.6 Students’ intellectual preparedness compared to perceived reading achievement grouped by configuration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Configuration</th>
<th>Intellectual Prep</th>
<th>% Critically Analyze</th>
<th>% Make Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
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<td>Missing</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>64.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>65.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>21.0</td>
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<td>grade 8-12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Minimum</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum</td>
<td>grade 6-8</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.1 Grade-span configuration and student transition age

Grade-span configuration has an obvious impact on student transition age because students can only remain in the school so long as they are in the grade levels offered in that building. Sometimes this pathway between schools (e.g. middle school to secondary school) is interrupted by outside factors, such as a move to a new district or a change in schools. Teachers were asked to describe a current student in their eighth-grade class that was thriving and one that was struggling. In participants’ responses, behaviours associated with thriving or struggling as a
student were largely attributed to traits and factors outside of students’ intelligence. When asked
to describe a struggling student, middle school and secondary school teachers had common
criteria for evaluating students: gender, intelligence and learning delays or disabilities (LDs),
home life, work habits, and socioemotional abilities. Their responses did not directly answer the
research sub-question; however, their responses suggested areas that may need more
investigation to better understand how they impact students differently depending on which
grade-span configuration students are enrolled and how students are supported through school
transitions.

4.2.1.1 Gender

When asked to describe a thriving student, many respondents avoided names or gendered
pronouns; however, 32.3% of respondents (n = 31) mentioned gender or used a gendered
pronoun in their response. Of these responses (n = 10), 60.0% of these responses described a
thriving female student while 40.0% described a thriving male student. Middle school
respondents were more likely to use gendered pronouns: seven out of 10 gendered responses
were from middle school respondents. They were also more likely to view a female student as
thriving; five middle school respondents used female gender pronouns for a thriving student
while only one secondary school respondent used female gender pronouns. Of the four
respondents who used male pronouns, two were secondary respondents and two were middle
school respondents. One secondary school respondent indicated, “Often female students seem to
do better” (018, 12) when describing a thriving student. This comment directly followed traits of
a thriving student, including “mature—emotionally resilient” and “[o]rganized” (018, 12).
In contrast to the gendered descriptions of thriving students, when asked to describe a struggling student, 29.0% of respondents mentioned gender or used a gendered pronoun in their response. Of these responses (n = 9), 100.0% of these responses described a struggling male student. Eight middle school teachers referenced gender either directly—“introverted, unmotivated, socially immature, and off-task…which describes most 13 year old boys” (006, 2)—or indirectly through use of gendered pronouns (he/him). One secondary school teacher used gendered pronouns (he/him) to describe a struggling student. These descriptions reinforce traditional gender stereotypes and may negatively influence students’ achievement if evaluation is based on their perceived abilities and dispositions from behavioral observations rather than their actual achievement. Because respondents may have concretely pictured the student who was struggling or thriving, their description may have been gendered based on the particular student they pictured. Nevertheless, not one teacher who concretely pictured a student pictured a female student as struggling, which supports the notion that gender biases may influence teachers’ perceptions. Past research has found that male students are more likely to drop out than female students, particularly as students enter into schools with larger populations (Alspaugh, 2000), which makes these potential gender biases a concern for student achievement.

4.2.1.2 Intelligence and learning delays or disabilities

Intelligence, while often an indicator of student achievement, was rarely mentioned as a trait of thriving students and was more often mentioned as lacking in struggling students; in fact, learning delays or disabilities and intelligence were equally mentioned by teachers when describing thriving and/or struggling students. One of the 31 respondents, a middle school teacher, mentioned intelligence as a trait of thriving students. This student was described as
“gifted intellectually” (007, 2). Two middle school respondents and one secondary school respondent mentioned intelligence when referring to struggling students. These teachers described students as having “low intellect” (008, 1) or “low ability” (023, 13) or simply being below grade level expectations. Teachers who discussed students’ level of intelligence were specific in their understanding of the students’ needs. For example, one teacher explained that their struggling students “operate at significantly below grade level as readers, thinkers, problem solvers” (001, 2). Another teacher indicated that their struggling student had “low ability” in “thinking, social emotional, [and] written output” (023, 13). However, these were the only two mentions of intelligence in relation to a lack of success in school, suggesting other factors may be more impactful on students’ reading achievement (Alspaugh, 2000; Eccles et al., 1997; Fletcher, 2018; IPE, 2017; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006).

Four of the 31 respondents (12.9%) mentioned LDs as a barrier to school success. No teachers mentioned LDs as a trait of a thriving student. 23.8% of middle school respondents (n = 21) mentioned LDs in reference to struggling students while only 10.0% of secondary school respondents (n = 10) mentioned LDs in the same context. Respondents described these students as struggling to “read or write at grade level” and “requir[ing] a very high level of school support w[ith] behaviour and learning” (029, 4). For some teachers, their struggling students were successful depending on the way in which they were asked to show their understanding of what they had read: “Orally, this student is quite articulate and can develop ideas in discussion[;] however, written output and expression is a continuous struggle” (025, 3). Several teachers also referenced a “lack of support for learning challenges” (013, 5), including a student’s need for “one-on-one attention from an EA [Educational Assistant]” that was only provided “once a month . . . on average due to the EA shortage” (009, 1). The lone secondary school respondent
who mentioned an LD focused only on “ADD” (attention deficit disorder) as a challenge for students but did not identify whether this was the teacher’s perception or an actual diagnosis (018, 12). Because of the low numbers of respondents, I am unable to discern whether perceptions of intelligence and/or learning delays and disabilities disproportionately impacts middle school students or secondary school students.

4.2.1.3 Home life

Students’ home life was seen as a major factor in students’ ability to succeed in school. 22.6 percent of respondents (n = 31) saw home life as a factor in students’ success at school; 35.5% of respondents (n = 31) attributed students’ struggles at school with their home life. 23.8 percent of middle school teachers (n = 21) mentioned home life as a factor for thriving students while 28.6% saw home life as a factor for struggling students. By comparison, amongst secondary school respondents (n = 10), 20.0% viewed home life as a factor for thriving students while 50.0% viewed it as a factor for struggling students.

When discussing thriving students, teachers mentioned parents were “actively involved in all aspects of their [children’s] lives” (001, 2) and act as a “strong support system” (022, 13) for their child. One teacher described a student’s success due to the support and expectations at home: “This student also has a supportive situation at home and expectations from parents are high” (025, 3). This positive view of parental support and expectations was commonly shared across middle and secondary school respondents.

Teachers were often aware of students’ specific home situations—“This student struggles mainly because of very challenging family circumstances dating all the way back to early elementary school” (002, 2)—and mentioned specific challenges at home, such as “addict[ion]”
“custody battle[s]”, “nonattentive parents”, “lack of stability”, “no accountability”. One teacher also mentioned that their struggling student had “no access to reading materials”, which makes it difficult for students to enhance their reading skills outside of the classroom. Another common concern about home life was the lack of attention towards students’ health and well-being. These concerns centered on a “poor diet, . . . lack of sleep”, and a lack of “physical exercise”. Another teacher also mentioned that their struggling student has “FAS”, fetal alcohol syndrome, which is a health condition that can cause learning challenges based on maternal substance abuse during pregnancy. Again, the concerns about home life shared consistent themes about lack of attention, unstable parents, unhealthy practices, and limited access across both middle and secondary school respondents’ descriptions, suggesting home life may be a factor regardless of configuration.

**4.2.1.4 Work habits**

Secondary school respondents perceived poor work habits in eighth-grade students as a serious hindrance to their success whereas middle school respondents were less concerned with work habits when evaluating students’ successes or struggles. 54.8 percent of respondents viewed work habits as a marker of student success; the exact same percentage viewed poor work habits as a marker of a struggling student. However, 57.1% of middle school respondents mentioned work habits in relation to student success while only 42.9% mentioned poor work habits for struggling students. This contrasts with secondary school respondents because 50.0% mentioned good work habits for thriving students while 80.0% mentioned poor work habits for struggling students, indicating work habits are essential for success in secondary
schools. Teachers’ concerns focused on work completion and effort, self-regulation, and organization.

Thriving students were described based on their effort, self-regulation, and organization. For example, one teacher described a middle school eighth-grader as “[w]orking hard for academic achievement [and] studying well” (004, 2). Another middle school respondent described the daily behaviour or habits of their student: “They arrive to class prepared, settle into tasks when asked to do so, ask thoughtful questions, and have a go when tasks are challenging” (009, 1). One teacher described a thriving student as “keep[ing] up with assignments[, and] . . . challeng[ing] herself with extra materials . . . because [she] has the study and organizational skills to stay on track with homework” (027, 4). Secondary school teachers described their thriving students similarly: “Several grade 8 students are thriving because they have been able to develop the work/study habits necessary for success. Examples include organization of binders/notes, effective time management, balance of academics, sports, and/or a social life” (021, 13).

When discussing work completion, respondents indicated that struggling students were unable to sustain attention on assignments or properly prepare for assessments. One respondent described their students as unable to complete work despite modifications: “They seldom sustain work in class—even if modified, [they] never do homework or prepare for projects, tests, etc.” (001, 2). Another spoke to a student’s lack of motivation towards school: “[K]eeping organized, doing homework, applying himself, is not what he enjoys or wants to do—so it’s difficult to motivate him to try a little more/harder” (004, 2). This description also aligns with the concerns about gender biases discussed in section 4.2.1.1. One teacher indicated that their struggling student “takes no responsibility for their learning” because their “parents either ‘let the kid off”
OR ‘does [sic] everything for them’” (emphasis in original, 023, 13). Another secondary school teacher described a student who is just trying to get by:

He will not participate in class discussions, if called upon will take a long time to respond or in some cases does not say anything. I have had many discussions about this, his completed or lack of completed assignments, and he always has some reason as to why they were not completed. Usually (ie term #1 and #2) will work really hard to just get 50% so that he is not considered a failure according to him. (032, 10)

Self-regulation was another major factor in teachers’ perceptions of students’ success in school. Some respondents attributed this lack of self-regulation to learning disabilities: “[Charlie] has a learning disability, and does not read or write at grade level. Poor self regulation and forgetfulness often mean he requires a very high level of school support with behaviour and learning” (029, 4). Others indicate that students need reminders and often become distractions in the classroom without teacher surveillance:

I have a particular student who is struggling this year because he has tremendous difficulty self-regulating the classroom without constant reminders. He alienates his classmates because he distracts them and frustrates them. He cannot self-initiate tasks, so instead he looks around the room for ways to amuse himself and for attention. (026, 3).

Some respondents spoke to the need for students to learn how to self-regulate: “They have not yet built the strategies to self-regulate” (012, 5). Other respondents focused on “phone addiction[s]” (008, 1), “social media and use of devices” (007, 2), “play[ing] videogames” (004, 2), socializing, and “vaping and other less than desirable activities” (028, 4) as negative factors impacting students’ success due to students’ inability to regulate themselves and make appropriate decisions.

Respondents viewed organization as a major factor in students’ ability to succeed at school. They described struggling students as having “no organization” (031, 10) and “weak” (022, 13) or “poor organization skills” (027, 4). There were no clear descriptions of what
‘organization’ should look like in grade 8; however, one teacher described a struggling student as “overwhelmed with [the] need to keep track of 8 classes” (018, 12), suggesting that the secondary school model may contribute to students’ organizational challenges. The concerns about students’ work habits were consistent between middle and secondary school configurations, again suggesting this trait may be a factor that influences grade 8 students regardless of which school type they attend.

4.2.1.5 Socioemotional abilities

Socioemotional abilities were consistently discussed as a key trait for thriving students in both middle and secondary school responses. 52.4 percent of middle school respondents (n = 21) and 60.0% of secondary school respondents (n = 10) viewed well-developed socioemotional abilities as a trait of thriving students. Most responses discussed a student’s ability to make friends or work well in groups. However, some middle school respondents directly referenced their schools’ focus on socioemotional learning: “The student I am thinking of thrives because we focus on social-emotional learning, core competencies, and have many extra-curricular activities available” (010, 0). Another teacher described their school’s approach to socioemotional development:

Classes and teachers that teach and enforce community in their classrooms (Tribes – 4 agreements, mutual respect, participation and the right to pass, attentive listening, no put downs); students feel they are known, acknowledged, understood, and respected by their teachers; have at least 1 strong peer connection (emphasis in original, 013, 5)
While the use of the word “tribes”\textsuperscript{7} in this response is troubling (013, 5), the concept of splitting the students into teams and using this model to develop strong relationships between students and teachers suggests a deliberate plan to enhance students’ socioemotional development. In contrast, secondary school teachers referred to socioemotional development as a quality the student already possessed. One teacher described a student as “mature – emotionally resilient” (emphasis in original, 018, 12) while another discussed their student’s “resilience” and “ability to bounce back from minor setbacks” (022, 13). Other secondary school responses described their students as “emotionally mature” (023, 13) and in possession of “excellent social skills” (030, 11).

Few respondents discussed a lack of socioemotional skills in connection to struggling students. Only five of 31 responses (16.1\%) mentioned socioemotional skills in their description of struggling students. These responses indicated that students were “emotionally . . . unprepared for their peers” (001, 2), “[v]ery sensitive and emotional, especially with relationships with friends” (007, 2), “socially withdrawn at times due to [their] feelings of not being good enough” (015, 5), and “low ability . . . [in] social emotional” (023, 13). They also “[do] not really have any friends” (011, 5) and struggle with “anxiety (academic and social)” (013, 5). These responses indicate that struggling students’ socioemotional challenges often come from self-esteem and relationships issues that they face in their schools. These responses were consistent in theme across both middle and secondary school respondents.

\textsuperscript{7} Tribes TLC\textsuperscript{®} is an American program that has been implemented in schools across the United States, Canada, and Australia to support socioemotional learning. This participant may have been referencing the implementation of this program. (Tribes Learning Community, 2020)
4.2.2 Student transition age and student reading achievement

Table 4.7 shows teachers’ perceptions of students intellectual, emotional, and social preparedness beside teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement to understand how transition age may interact with reading achievement.
Table 4.7 Perceived student preparedness and student reading achievement grouped by configuration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Configuration</th>
<th>Intellectual Prep</th>
<th>Emotional Prep</th>
<th>Social Prep</th>
<th>% Critically Analyze</th>
<th>% Make Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N grade 6-8</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing grade 6-8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean grade 6-8</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>77.4</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>70.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>73.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median grade 6-8</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard deviation grade 6-8</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimum grade 6-8</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum grade 6-8</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grade 8-12</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Secondary school respondents’ percentage-based responses for the three areas of preparedness—intellectual, emotional, social—are comparable to their percentage-based responses for student reading achievement. However, middle school respondents’ percentage-based responses for the three areas of preparedness are consistently higher than their perceptions of students’ reading achievement. This study did not produce enough data to complete a linear regression statistical analysis to determine if perception of preparedness may be a factor in perception of reading achievement.
4.3 Grade-Span Configuration and Student Reading Achievement

Respondents were asked what they believed their grade-span configuration’s benefits and disadvantages were for grade 8 students. Of the 31 respondents, 95.2% of middle school respondents (n = 20) answered both the benefits and the disadvantages questions and 60.0% of secondary school respondents (n = 10) answered the benefits question while 70.0% answered the disadvantages question. These two questions were on the last page of the questionnaire and may have been overlooked by some teachers, resulting in neither question being answered. Some respondents (included in the percentages above) simply indicated not applicable or stated they did not see any particular benefits or disadvantages of their configuration. One middle school respondent stated, “I teach grade 6/7 and 7/8 class configurations, and I do not feel they have any affect or benefit to grade 8 reading achievement” and that “[they] do not feel there are any [disadvantages]” (013, 5), suggesting that some teachers are indifferent towards grade-span configurations.

4.3.1 Benefits

Both middle and secondary school respondents saw resources and choice as a benefit of their configuration; however, secondary school respondents were more likely to see their schools as providing opportunities for choice because of the facilities and programs available. Middle school respondents referenced resources, such as book collections, as the sole means of providing choice. 50.0 percent of secondary school responses mentioned choice/resources while 15.0% of middle school responses mentioned choice/resources. Middle school teachers focused primarily on supporting struggling readers: “There are more resources for younger grades so it is beneficial for my students that struggle with reading” (010, 0). Another middle school
respondent saw the choices in their school as motivating for student reading: “They get a lot of choice in what they would like to read. Options help them feel more motivated when it comes to doing the work because they feel in control” (016, 5). A secondary school respondent echoed this sentiment indicating, “[they] have a large collection so [they] can offer texts of different difficulties to students for Lit Circles” (018, 12). The use of literature circles again emphasizes choices for student reading and reflects how teachers are able to scaffold reading for students through choices. Most secondary school teachers discussed the opportunities students have to engage in programming because of the resources and supports available. One secondary school respondent identified “[l]ibrarians who source appropriate reading materials” (022, 13) as a benefit of their grade-span configuration. Another spoke about “[a]ccess to facilities” and specialized courses, such as “TEAL [Teaching English as an Additional Language]” and “STEM” (031, 10). These types of courses are high-interest for students, which may also increase their motivation to read and participate in academic activities. Therefore, the programming, support staff, and facilities available to students at the secondary level may be more beneficial for advanced eighth-grade students’ reading whereas the resources at middle schools may be more appropriate for students who struggle with reading.

Some secondary school respondents briefly touched on relationships between students in different grade levels and departmental teacher collaboration as benefits of their configuration as well. These two areas focus on both sides of my theory diagram: relationships between students relates to students’ transition ages whereas teacher collaboration focuses on instructional strategies. Middle school respondents provided more detailed descriptions of the benefits of their configuration, speaking specifically to teacher consistency, instructional scaffolding, teacher collaboration, and socioemotional development. Teacher consistency, instructional scaffolding,
and teacher collaboration speak to the instructional strategies used to enhance student reading achievement while socioemotional development focuses on student transitions and their development as they transition between grade levels.

Because most middle schools use a 6/7 split program, grade 6 students move into grade 7 but stay in the same classroom with the same teacher; then, they move into a new classroom with a new teacher for grade 8. This process creates a small transition for students but allows for more consistency in instruction. In some schools, there are 6/7 and 7/8 splits that allow for appropriate scaffolding of instruction. Middle school teachers saw this program as allowing teachers to “have a better sense of a plan to develop reading skills” (001, 2) and to “focus and establish goals to build on and improve/continue working on the strategies that students need more support and practice with” (004, 2). Furthermore, this program also helps struggling students: “Some of the split 7/8 classes allow teachers to pick lower level books which may help struggling gr[ade] 8s” (027, 4). It also enables grade 8s to take on leadership roles: “The grade eights benefit greatly from being with the grade 6/7 peers as they have more leadership roles in classes sharing their thinking and this leads to discussion that further strengthens this understanding” (015, 5). One teacher stated, “The looping gives students opportunity to strengthen connections and learn skills such as reading in a mentoring situation” (025, 3), speaking directly to the positive social and intellectual impacts of a middle school program. Therefore, middle school respondents saw a benefit for students in the form of focused, consistent learning programs that provide appropriate scaffolding and leadership opportunities through teacher collaboration and school communities.

Another benefit identified by middle school respondents was relationships between teachers for collaborative purposes and between students for social purposes. For example, one respondent explained that teachers “can team teach and have students collaborate with peers in
other classrooms” (007, 2) because of the middle school structure. Another teacher spoke to the “opportunities to connect and collaborate” and the ability to “[f]ollow-up with teachers from previous years” (026, 3). Both of these responses indicate a collaborative approach to instruction fostered by the connections developed within the grade-span configuration. These collaborative relationships are possible because of the structures, like scheduling (Anderson, 2015; Hall, 2015), middle schools establish. Respondents perceived that students were “comfortable in their environment” in the middle school configuration because they “appear to be at ease socially with each other as the social/intellectual range is relatively narrow” (024, 3). One respondent also noted that students have a “feeling of safety in the school” because they do “[n]ot hav[e] to worry about larger external pressures that come with being the youngest in a big school” (008, 1)—a direct contrast to the secondary school setting other grade 8s encounter. Thus, grade 8 students in middle school configurations are likely to participate in more collaborative and supportive learning environments that see relationships as a key piece of the educational setting.

4.3.2 Disadvantages

In considering the disadvantages of their grade-span configuration, consistency of programming and schedule/time were mentioned by both middle and secondary school respondents. Consistency of programming for middle school respondents focused on consistency between teachers at the same grade level and between grade 6/7 teachers and grade 8 teachers. One respondent remarked that there are “[d]ifferent experiences for students depending on what team they are on” (003, 2); ‘team’ references the teaching team students are taught by. Others discussed the need for “a clearly articulated scope and sequence” (009, 1) that spans the three grade levels in middle school. These responses suggest middle schools vary in their ability to
implement team teaching and collaborative programming for their students. For secondary respondents, consistency often related to a focus on senior grade levels or a whole school approach that neglected the needs of grade 8s specifically. One secondary respondent indicated their configuration needed to “[f]ocus attention [on each] age group vs. the whole school” (031, 10), indicating the need for more attention on specific grade levels rather than on ensuring students graduate, which places the focus on senior grade levels. Another secondary respondent critiqued the attitude of teachers: “The focus here is on senior grades—what they need to graduate. Most teachers want only senior grades. Grade 8s suffer and get lost in the shuffle” (emphasis in original, 018, 12). The main difference between middle and secondary responses around program consistency is the desire for a clear sequencing of teaching in middle schools compared to the desire for more concern for grade 8 learning in secondary schools.

Similarly, middle and secondary respondents had different perceptions of the impact of scheduling and time on student reading development based on their grade-span configuration. In secondary schools, one respondent perceived students were challenged by “adjusting to a new routine, schedule, subject matter, and social world that is a part of secondary school configurations” (021, 13). Another described grade 8s as “get[ting] lost in the shuffle” (018, 12). One middle school respondent also perceived some students as “getting ‘lost’ in the system” (006, 2); however, most middle school respondents commented on scheduling and time as complicated because of the multiple facets of middle school programming. One respondent indicated, “A diverse schedule may mean that less time is spent on reading across subjects, leaving it for Language Arts only” (001, 2). Another teacher echoed this sentiment:

The challenge is one that I feel is based more on time, than grade span. Due to multi subjects, including Explorations and Advisory, there are fewer minutes in each day, week, month, year to devote to developing crucial, important reading skills. (002, 2)
When grade 8s are the youngest in the school in a secondary grade-span configuration, teachers perceive them as less able to cope with complex scheduling and time constraints; when grade 8s are the oldest in the school in a middle grade-span configuration, teachers perceive the school to offer too much programming that takes away time for meaningful reading instruction.

Middle school respondents had two main concerns for their grade-span configuration that secondary school teachers did not discuss: support staff and academic rigour. One teacher perceived there to be a lack of support for students with specialized learning needs:

Students who are needing remedial support are not receiving it due to our current inclusion model. These students may sit and listen and appear to be reading, however they are not actually able to decode text let alone extract information or build meaning. (002, 2)

This response suggests that middle schools, in comparison to secondary schools, may not have the support staff necessary to appropriately meet students’ needs in the classroom. This comment also reflects the sentiments expressed earlier when discussing struggling students. Another middle school respondent identified that there is “not enough funding for student services/support to help students who are struggling” including “in-class support staff/counsellor/EAs/etc.” (012, 5). Thus, middle schools may lack the staff support needed to appropriately meet the needs of students with academic and social challenges.

Academic rigour was also a concern for middle school respondents as they felt that grouping grade 8s with younger students did not allow the top students to be appropriately challenged. Most respondents discussed this concern in context with texts: “Gr. 8 students are often in a 7/8 split class, so the text level generally needs to be appropriate for both grades” (029, 4). Some teachers spoke to the lack of academic rigour as a challenge for student maturation as well: “There are less resources for students that excel in reading and/or could benefit from more
mature content/themes” (010, 0). Similarly, another middle school respondent stated, “Kids that do well and are not being challenged may feel like their assignments are too easy” (027, 4).

These comments highlight the need for more rigorous reading materials and assignments for grade 8s who may be academically talented despite being grouped with younger students.

In Rockoff and Lockwood’s (2010) study of K-8 and 6-8 configurations in New York City schools, parents and students rated middle schools as lower in academic rigour than elementary schools, suggesting that the middle school configuration itself may impact rigour rather than whether grade 8s are the oldest or youngest students in the configuration. There may also be a misunderstanding of ‘rigour’ in the middle school context compared to the elementary and secondary contexts, particularly if the MSC is an unique concept implemented only in middle schools.

Secondary school respondents only had one area of concern that was different from middle school respondents: relationships between students. 42.9 percent of secondary respondents (n = 7) expressed concerns about grade 8 students’ ability to adjust to the “social world that is a part of secondary school configurations” (021, 13). One secondary teacher spoke directly to their concerns about negative student interactions:

In some cases the Gr. 8 look around and see that the Gr 11/12 sometimes are engaged in different activities other than reading which then becomes a challenge for the teacher to convince students to read. [. . . ] Biggest problem with grade span is older students are not as engaged in reading therefore the younger Gr 8’s some will also follow suit. They are just looking at the pages and nothing more. Not really sure how to get a grip on this and make an impact. (emphasis in original 032, 10)

This social factor of older students negatively influencing younger students is a challenge specific to secondary schools because grade 8s are the youngest in the building. Therefore, secondary schools may need to consider how they deter negative influences—or foster leadership
opportunities for older students (Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009)—when it comes to reading instruction and reading practices in their schools.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The low number of responses coupled with the inability to calculate a response rate makes this study inconclusive; however, participants’ responses suggest a few areas for further research and improvement. Their responses were mostly aligned with previous research, suggesting that middle schools are more supportive for adolescents’ socioemotional development, particularly if the MSC is implemented appropriately. Secondary school teachers did perceive their students to be stronger readers, both for making meaning and critically analyzing texts, despite middle school teachers perceiving their students to be more intellectually prepared for their grade-span configuration. This finding should be explored to see if it accurately captures students’ reading development in secondary versus middle schools.

5.1 Conclusions Based on Research Questions

Without an adequate amount of quantitative data, I was unable to determine if there was a significant relationship between grade-span configuration, instructional practices, school transition age, and teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement; however, participants’ qualitative responses gave some insight into my research questions that may support future research and applications for these school districts.

Reading achievement may be perceived differently depending on which subject area a teacher instructs. Middle school classroom/generalist teachers were more likely to perceive their schools as encouraging reading instruction, and middle schools, in general, were perceived to encourage reading instruction more than secondary schools. In the more subject-specific settings of secondary schools, teachers were more likely to indicate they spent more time instructing reading but also spent less instructional time with students than middle school teachers who were
predominately classroom/generalist teachers. Similarly, secondary school teachers perceived their students to have higher reading achievement than middle school respondents. These data suggest humanities teachers in secondary schools may focus more on reading because it is part of their subject area—many secondary teachers instructed reading because it was a curriculum requirement or a necessity for further study in their subject area—which may lend to a higher perception of reading ability in this specific subject. Generalist teachers in middle schools may see students struggle with reading across multiple subject areas, which would negatively affect their rating of student reading achievement, even though they may be strong readers in a specific subject area, such as the humanities. This discrepancy in subject-specific instruction compared to generalist instruction makes it difficult to create a true comparison between the two configurations. Malaspina and Rimm-Kaufmann (2008) had similar challenges comparing elementary school and middle school report cards, suggesting that a neutral metric may be needed to effectively compare grade-spans because of the inherent differences between the models. This discrepancy in perception of reading achievement may also be due to the intellectual culture of the schools: grade 8 teachers in middle schools are the end-point of the academic program whereas grade 8 teachers in secondary schools are the starting point of the academic program. The impact of larger department-based secondary school divisions compared to tighter-knit middle school teaching teams may lead to further insights into the different academic experiences students have in these settings despite learning the same provincial curriculum.

Middle schools may be more effective at supporting student transitions, particularly because, when implemented appropriately (Erb, 2006; Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Hall, 2015), the MSC creates a supportive community for young adolescents. Middle school respondents
perceived their students to be more socially, emotionally, and intellectually prepared for their grade-span configuration than secondary school respondents, reflecting this supportive environment. Secondary teachers’ responses about thriving and struggling students demonstrated less understanding of students’ home lives and frustration with students’ work habits and poor organization; in contrast, middle school respondents seemed more aware of students’ home lives and how their home lives influenced students’ achievement and were less likely to discuss work habits and organization. This difference between teachers’ responses suggests middle schools may support students’ intrapersonal skill development and foster stronger student-teacher relationships that enable students to succeed. Alspaugh (1998a) found that transitions to larger schools had a negative impact on student achievement; this school size difference between a middle school and a secondary school may impact teachers’ ability to understand each of their students’ personal contexts. When thought of as a concept, the MSC could be implemented in any school regardless of the configuration; evaluating each configuration’s ability to meet grade 8s’ academic, social, and emotional needs may lead to a better understanding of areas of strength and growth for individual schools (Adams, 2015; Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Hall, 2015).

Each grade-span configuration has its benefits and disadvantages, and respondents were clear about what they perceived to be the strengths and shortcomings of their schools. Middle school respondents saw their configuration as beneficial for struggling students because of the split classes and resources for lower reading levels. Furthermore, they believed students had increased levels of safety in middle schools because of the strong sense of community and positive relationships amongst all community members. Middle schools’ disadvantages included lack of consistency between 6/7 and 8 teachers and individual classrooms and the challenge to
support strong students because of the lack of higher-level resources. Middle school respondents also expressed concerns about the impact of extra programming, such as advisory and inquiry, on instructional time for literacy and the lack of support staff for students with IEPs and other learning challenges. Secondary schools saw their benefit as providing choice for students through access to facilities and a variety of programs and providing strong support for students because of the available support staff employed at their schools. Secondary school teachers perceived there to be a heavier focus on graduation programs (10-12) than on grade 8 students, which may hinder their learning, and perceived some negative influence on grade 8s by older students with poor learning behaviours. These responses make it difficult to distinguish which configuration is more beneficial for grade 8 students because each one provides different benefits depending on the individual needs of each student. As other studies have indicated (Adams, 2015; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Erb, 2006; Hall, 2015), administrators in these schools and districts could listen to teachers and improve school-level program implementation rather than worry about configuration; this focus may provide more meaningful change than any change to configuration.

5.2 Inclusion in Schools

The Ministry of Education’s Professional Standards for B.C. Educators clearly indicate teachers must use inclusive practices in their classrooms and seek professional development should they need support with this area (BC Teachers’ Council, 2019). Considering teachers’ concerns in both middle and secondary schools focus on issues of diversity and inclusion—gender, learning abilities, home environments—there is a need for teachers to enhance inclusive practices in their classrooms to appropriately support all students. For example, the teacher who
indicated that their school uses “Tribes” (013, 5) demonstrated the cultural insensitivity used in naming their school’s groupings. Weiss and Kipnes (2006) found that schools serving African-American populations, regardless of grade-span configuration, had lower reading achievement, suggesting the importance of cultural competency in these settings. Moreover, 100.0% of my respondents who used gendered pronouns when describing a struggling student used male pronouns, suggesting that gender biases about behaviour may be impacting teachers’ abilities to appropriately address students’ needs, which is supported by the existing literature about reading achievement and grade-span configurations (Eccles et al., 1997; Giese, 2018; Lipps, 2005; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Bauer et al. (2014) found inclusion an area needing improvement for Vancouver Island teachers as well, indicating B.C.’s inclusion standard may be a challenge for many teachers across the province.

While Hall (2015) found elementary schools did not need the same staff resources as middle schools because classroom teachers often fulfilled several roles for their students, middle school respondents in my study expressed concerns about the lack of support for students with LDs while secondary respondents did not mention these challenges. This discrepancy suggests that middle schools may uniquely struggle with supporting students with LDs. Unlike Bauer et al.’s (2014) findings, the students discussed by middle school respondents in my study were noted to have Individualized Education Plans (IEP), meaning the school is required by the Ministry to provide extra support for each of these students. Student with LDs are more likely to be labelled as “‘bullies,’ ‘troublemakers,’ or ‘unmanageable’” and are more likely to be suspended or in disciplinary trouble at school (Giese, 2018, p. 86). This finding coupled with the literature suggests there may need to be more training and support for middle school teachers to
implement B.C.’s current inclusion model in their classrooms, especially because of the risk of students being mislabeled or regarded as discipline problems if their needs are not met.

Further experience with supporting students’ learning needs (Bauer et al., 2014) and combatting false gender stereotypes (Giese, 2018) may create more inclusive classrooms that support all students regardless of grade-span configuration. Ultimately, teachers are required to personalize learning for students, which requires them to understand the factors impacting students and the methods that will help them in teaching students with diverse needs rather than labelling them as unprepared or ill-behaved.

5.3 Strengths and Limitations

My study of teachers’ perceptions of student reading achievement based on grade-span configuration was significantly limited by the number of respondents and the inability to calculate a response rate. Because of the low number of valid responses (n = 31), this study is not generalizable to other contexts but may inform future research and provide some data for districts to reflect on in their own implementation of reading instruction. Teachers’ voices were the basis of this study, and their commentary on grade 8 students in their configurations helps understand what is actually happening in schools. Their opinions give insight into topics for future research and add colour to the existing literature that relies heavily on LSA scores and district data.

Previous Canadian studies have focused on the impact of transitions on student achievement through teacher, parent, and/or student reported achievement data (Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Lipps, 2005; Whitley et al., 2007) or through LSA data (Dhuey, 2013). Cantin and Boivin (2004) studied Quebec students while Lipps (2005) and Whitley et al. (2007) used
nationally representative data, both of which do not focus on the relatively unique context of B.C. where grade 8 students are either the oldest in their middle schools or the youngest in their secondary schools. Only Dhuey (2013) has studied the impact of grade-span configuration on student achievement in the B.C. context. This study further adds to the existing body of research on grade-span configuration in Canada, and B.C. specifically, because it provides more insight into the instructional differences between the two school types. Dhuey’s (2013) study only notes differences in student test scores from grades 4, 7, 10, and 12 based on the grade-span configuration attended; therefore, my study suggests areas for further research to understand why student reading achievement, as found by Dhuey (2013), is negatively impacted by middle school attendance.

5.4 Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings from my study, there are three areas where further research is required to inform decision-making about grade-span configurations, reading instruction, and school programming. These areas for further research, particularly in the B.C. context, are the impact of subject-specific instruction versus classroom/generalist teacher instruction on the amount and quality of reading instruction; differences between school districts and schools within districts in implementing the MSC and an environment that supports the beliefs associated with the MSC; and the beliefs of administrators and teachers about inclusion and external factors influencing student achievement.

Because students in secondary schools move between four or eight teachers in their schedule (depending on year-long or semester-long courses), I cannot calculate the number of hours of reading instruction each student experiences in one week of school. Conversely, many
middle school students are taught by generalist teachers, which means all subjects are taught by
the same teacher, creating a more accurate number of hours of reading instruction per week.
Alternatively, some middle schools have subject-area teachers or humanities and math/science
teachers, which may create a different perception of reading instruction. Malaspina and Rimm-
Kaufman (2008) had a similar challenge in comparing report card marks between elementary and
middle schools, which suggests that the variety in scheduling, marking, and programming
between the different configurations may create barriers for accurate understanding. A method
that enables researchers to more carefully track these hours of reading instruction and, if
possible, the instructional practices used in each case would create a clearer representation of
how reading instruction varies between configurations. Moreover, because of the new focus on
literacy instruction across all subjects in the new B.C. curriculum (Province of British Columbia,
2018), observing how literacy instruction takes place in the subject-specific classrooms that are
common in secondary schools compared to the generalist classrooms that are common in middle
schools may provide further insight into students’ reading achievement in each configuration.

The MSC is something that needs to be believed in by all teachers and administrators
within the school and implemented meaningfully through specific programming and instructional
practices. All the middle schools in this study were located in the same school district, yet there
was variance in whether teachers believed their schools encouraged reading instruction. This
variance suggests that the MSC is implemented to varying effectiveness at different schools,
meaning some districts may not have clear plans for implementation across all their schools.
Furthermore, if there are discrepancies among the schools within a district, there are likely larger
discrepancies between school districts. These differences may be due to population
demographics or due to varied understandings of the MSC. Researching how the MSC is
conceptualized, interpreted, and implemented within districts and between districts, particularly at the school level with school administrators and teachers, may give researchers more insight into the effectiveness of the middle school as a concept and may bring more understanding of whether implementation (Erb, 2006; Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Ganeson & Ehrich, 2009; Hall, 2015) or other confounding factors (Alspaugh, 2000; Bauer et al., 2014; Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Cantin & Boivin, 2004; Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Eccles et al., 1998; Fletcher, 2018; Lipps, 2005; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Schwerdt & West, 2013; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Whitley et al., 2007; Wihry et al., 1992) are the challenge facing middle schools.

Lastly, many studies found student demographics were a major factor in student reading achievement (Byrnes & Ruby, 2007; Carolan & Chesky, 2012; Malaspina & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Weiss & Kipnes, 2006; Wihry et al., 1992). Teachers’ responses, both in middle schools and secondary schools, suggested implicit biases about students, particularly students with challenging home environments. Bauer et al. (2014) noted teachers’ perceptions of home environments as a barrier to inclusive and effective reading instruction on Vancouver Island, which may be a similar challenge for teachers across B.C. Research into how teachers are trained—both in pre-service education and in mandatory professional development—to differentiate reading instruction for students from a variety of home environments might lead to better insight into the implementation of B.C.’s inclusion policy. Moreover, gender seemed to be a factor in teachers’ perceptions of thriving and struggling students, which may impact students’ socioemotional development and, therefore, academic achievement. Research about teachers’ perceptions of students based on gender is well-documented (Giese, 2018); future research that designs, implements, and evaluates pilot programs to educate current teachers about implicit
biases through carefully planned, localized professional development may be most beneficial to make meaningful change while understanding how to best educate teachers.

5.5 Improving Research Access in K-12 Schools

Conducting research in K-12 schools is challenging because of the many parties to be consulted before access to teachers is granted. While these procedures are necessary for safeguarding teachers’ time and professional reputations, they impede researchers in obtaining meaningful data from teachers that may influence educational outcomes and educational research. A major barrier to my research was obtaining approval to research in particular districts and schools, which impacted my ability to make a meaningful comparison. In some cases, researchers may view teachers as anti-intellectual for not participating in research; however, we must also question how relevant research is for teachers’ daily instruction and how they are being asked to participate. If we want meaningful data about schools, we must build intentional structures that give teachers the time and incentive to participate in said research. Teachers are the ones on the frontlines making meaning from educational policy and implementing it in their daily practices in classrooms. Without their input, we cannot come to a full understanding of schooling.

I recommend that universities, school districts, and the Ministry of Education collaborate to develop deliberate structures that support teachers’ work in the classroom while also enabling researchers to gather data to support their research. Structures that create this reciprocal relationship between teachers and researchers will undoubtedly serve to benefit education as it continues to shift with trends and topics of the time. Theoretically, strategic plans have been critiqued for emphasizing static steps to change rather than meaningful change (Tsoukas & Chia,
2002); however, strategic plans could be a guide for how school districts and universities can embed research and research participation in their programming. Universities, such as UBC, have placed emphasis on undergraduate student research in their strategic plans: “UBC will expand opportunities for undergraduates to gain first-hand experience in research” (UBC, 2018, p. 49). The University of Victoria and SFU also include undergraduate research in their existing strategic plans/visions (SFU, n.d.; University of Victoria, 2019), and the University of the Fraser Valley mentions “action research” as a component of their teacher education program (University of the Fraser Valley, n.d.). The existing Bachelor of Education model places teacher education in Canadian post-secondary institutions as part of an undergraduate program, meaning that teacher candidates, at least at the aforementioned B.C. institutions, should engage in research and develop skills to study their classroom and schools. If teachers were trained to research their classrooms and to participate in research studies, more accurate data about classroom practices and K-12 education could be obtained. Integrating research into teacher training programs would also foster a more positive disposition towards research, leading to more cooperation and collaboration between researchers and K-12 teachers.
References


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Appendices

Appendix A Questionnaire

Configuration Conundrum: Teachers’ Beliefs about Grade-Span Configuration and Reading Achievement

*Teacher Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Introductory Information</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>What is the name of the school you currently teach at?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Which subject area do you currently teach? (Choose one.)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom teacher (generalist)</td>
<td>English/Language Arts</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you teach in a French Immersion or Mandarin Immersion program?</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<th>How many years of classroom teaching experience do you have? (Do not count years as a TTOC or student teacher.)</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How many years have you been teaching at your current school? (Do not count years as a TTOC or student teacher.)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<th>Did you attend a middle or junior high school as a child?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>Junior high school</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade-Span Configuration</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What grade-span configuration does your current school have?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Practices for Reading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With your current Grade 8 class, how many hours per week do you explicitly teach reading strategies (e.g. vocabulary, highlighting techniques, text features, note-taking) to one class of students? <em>Explicitly</em> means that you are consciously instructing students about these strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_______ hours per week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For one class of Grade 8 students, how many hours of instructional time do you have per week?

| _______ hours per week |

Does your current school encourage you to teach reading strategies as part of your classroom activities?

| Yes | No |

Why do you teach reading strategies, or why don’t you teach reading strategies?

List two aspects of reading that, on average, your current Grade 8 students do well.

1. 
2. 

List two aspects of reading that, on average, cause your current Grade 8 students to struggle.
In your opinion, what percentage of your current Grade 8 students are able to **make meaning** from diverse texts at a grade-appropriate level? **Make meaning** refers to the ability to clearly comprehend texts.

_______ percent

In your opinion, what percentage of your Grade 8 students are able to critically analyze diverse texts at a grade-appropriate level?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade-Span Configuration and Reading Achievement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the greatest benefit of your school’s grade-span configuration (e.g. 6-7) on your current Grade 8 students’ reading achievement? Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| What is the greatest challenge of your school’s grade-span configuration (e.g. 6-8) on your current Grade 8 students’ reading achievement? Why? |
Appendix B  Consent Form

Configuration Conundrum: Teachers’ Beliefs about Grade-Span Configuration and Reading Achievement

Consent Form

Principal Investigator: Dr. Lesley Andres, Department of Educational Studies, 604-822-8943, lesley.andres@ubc.ca

Co-Investigators:
Jennifer Torry, MA Graduate Student, Department of Educational Studies, jennifer.torry@alumni.ubc.ca
Dr. Fei Wang, Department of Educational Studies, 604–822–4552, fei.wang@ubc.ca

This study is being completed as a requirement for completing a Master of Arts in Educational Studies.

Study Purpose: The purpose of the study is to understand teachers’ beliefs about how grade-span configurations impact student reading achievement based on students’ school transition age and teachers’ instructional practices for reading.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade-span configuration</th>
<th>the arrangement of grades in a single school (e.g. K-7 or 6-8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student reading achievement</td>
<td>your beliefs about how well your students meet the Ministry standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School transition age</td>
<td>the age(s) at which students move to a new school based on grade-span configurations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional practices for reading</td>
<td>the methods teachers use to teach their students how to read</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Study Procedures: This questionnaire will take you approximately 15 to 30 minutes to complete. Once completed, please return the questionnaire to the collection box at the front office.

Study Results: The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may also be published in journal articles and books. An executive report or full copy of the thesis will be given to your school district according to their research requirements.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Questionnaires will be kept in a locked cabinet on the UBC campus and electronic data will be kept on the Co-Investigator and the Principal Investigator’s encrypted and password-protected memory devices. Only the Co-Investigators and Principal Investigator will have access to the identities of study participants, questionnaires, and data files. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study.
The data for this study will be used to produce a Master’s Thesis in accordance with UBC graduate degree requirements and may be openly accessed. It may also contribute to research articles published in open access journals. Statistical information will be analyzed with no individual identifiers; open-ended question responses may be quoted in publications, but all identifiers (i.e. school name, teacher and student names) will be removed or changed. Making the data public should not increase your participation risk. Once the data is publicly available, you will not be able to withdraw your data.

**Potential Risks of the Study:** There is no known risk to you in participating in this study. If you don’t feel comfortable answering any of the questions, you can skip the question or decide not to complete the questionnaire at any point.

**Potential Benefits of the Study:** This study is not likely to have a direct impact on your work. However, school districts may use this information in the future when planning new programming and schools. This study will also give you a voice to describe what you see in your classroom rather than letting standardized exams be the sole metric for research.

**Payment:** Attached to this letter is a $2 coin as a token of appreciation. This token is yours to keep regardless of whether or not you complete the study.

**Contact for Complaints or Concerns:** If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

**Consent:** Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study at any time without giving a reason and without penalty. You may keep this consent form for your records. By completing and returning the attached questionnaire, you consent to participating in this study. Any concerns or questions about this study can be directed to the Principal Investigator or the Co-Investigators via the contact information listed above.

Thank you in advance for your participation!

**Jennifer Torry**
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