

TRACING THE PATH OF
STRUGGLING INTERMEDIATE READERS

By

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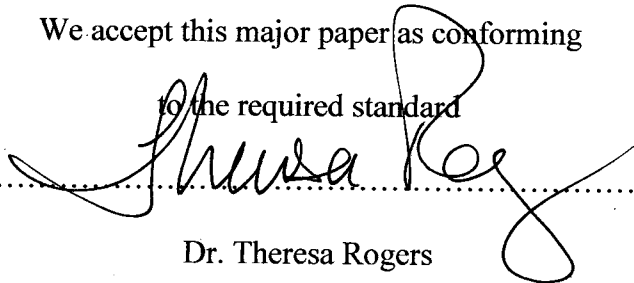
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to the required standard

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Theresa Rogers", written over a horizontal dotted line.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marlene Asselin", written over a horizontal dotted line.

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Abstract

This study investigated the potential factors that contribute to intermediate students' struggles with reading. Six participating students from a Grade five class were administered an IRA to determine their current reading levels as well as highlight area(s) of reading that each student struggled in. An interview protocol, formatted in three areas: attitude, home reading support and instructional environment, was conducted for the participants of the study. Three descriptive case studies were examined outlining a variety of possible contributing factors for their struggles in reading. The common potential factor for all three cases was the lack of strong literacy home support. A second likely factor amongst two of the participants was not enough time devoted to reading on a daily basis. The inability to read outside of school by the participants could be indicative of the type of instructional environment that they were exposed to in school. The implications of the study make aware the need for educators to look at the kind of reading environment established in their classrooms. It was also determined that there is a need for a more collaborative partnership between home and school in regards to intermediate students and their reading achievement.

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discover the causes that contribute to intermediate students' struggles with reading. Based on what the research states, I summarize the major factors that contribute either individually or in tandem to the reasons for students' reading difficulties. After examining three case studies from my own Grade five class, I outline the most prevalent factors found and provide some insight to educators on preventing intermediate students from progressively widening the gap in their literacy learning.

Being primarily an intermediate teacher for all my years as an educator, I have encountered a diversity of learning within my classrooms. My interest in struggling readers began before my years as a graduate student. I personally took on the responsibility of singlehandedly trying to "fix" each of my students with learning needs. I was able to recognize in a short period of time that a student was having difficulty, particularly in reading and advocated to the Learning Assistance Teacher that testing should occur to better diagnose the needs of the student. It wasn't until a year prior to becoming a graduate student that I became stumped. There were a couple of students in my class that tested out in the average to below average range of learning that didn't have any discernible learning disabilities. I then began to question how these students that struggle with reading progressed to this level of schooling without understanding what they read and without having any intervention implemented. It occurred to me that these two students didn't have anyone to read with at home. I implemented a Literacy Mentorship program that brought in members from the community to read with struggling readers in the intermediate grades once a week. There wasn't any tangible academic progress as a result of the short-lived program, but the confidence instilled within these students was measurable.

After reviewing a tremendous amount of research on struggling readers, I discovered that unfortunately, it isn't so uncommon to have a small group of students struggling in reading together year after year. There is much research and teaching support for students with reading difficulties. There isn't, however, much research to explain why struggling readers progress through the education system.

As a graduate student, my choice to focus my thesis in the Department of Language and Literacy was an easy one to make. After receiving my B.Ed. without any actual courses on Language Arts, for years I was unsure as to the composition of a Language Arts program in my class. Having taken my diploma in the department in years prior, I understood that this opportunity would benefit my practice. The Master's program has given me fresh eyes for my students and a multitude of ideas and strategies to take back to my classroom and school. I have had my own struggles in this learning journey, but I believe it has all been well worth it. To quote an African proverb stated by a colleague, "Smooth seas do not make skillful sailors" encapsulates my learning journey over the past few years.

Research Purpose

Most intermediate classrooms have at least a handful of struggling readers. They are neither labeled as an English Language Learner (ELL) or a student with a Learning Disability (LD), but still struggle with reading. There appears to be a fine line between students diagnosed with learning disabilities and those that are on the cusp of the below average range for learning. Within the last few years, the title of "Grey Area Student" has been more commonly used to refer to those students that seem to slip through the educational cracks. Much useful research has been done to help instruct or support struggling readers in the classroom for both primary and intermediate students once these students have been identified. However, little research has

been done to figure out how these students found their way to the intermediate grades having such difficulty without being recognized.

Each year I have at least two or three students in my intermediate class that struggle with reading. Some students are able to decode and read fluently, but have trouble understanding or remembering what they read. Others have such difficulty decoding that comprehension is lost in the frustration. It appears to be the basic assumption that students know how to read once they reach the intermediate grades. Yet, there are many students that progress to upper elementary and on to secondary without the fundamentals of reading or how to interpret the strategies. Each year struggling readers move through the education system without intervention and the literacy gap broadens. Being aware of factors that contribute to reading difficulties beforehand will assist educators to be more cognizant of the diverse learners in their classrooms and help prevent students from “slipping through the cracks” in literacy education. Therefore, my research question is: What factors lead to intermediate students becoming struggling readers?

Literature Review

There are a number of reasons as to how and why students fall behind in their reading levels in comparison to their peers. Single factors are often not the exclusive cause for difficulties in reading amongst adolescents. Rather, these factors co-occur with one or more other factors to prevent students from fully understanding and using the necessary reading strategies to succeed. The instructional environment, one of the recurrent factors, is viewed by students to have an extensive impact on reading ability. Struggling readers’ attitudes towards reading are often a result of existing literacy difficulties and have been closely tied to lack of support in their instructional environment. Another factor that causes students to continually fall behind in reading, and which is often beyond the student or teacher’s control, is socioeconomic

status (Alvermann, 2009), as the family's social class has been linked to literacy levels in school. The quality and quantity of home support in reading also influences the reading levels attained at school. The transiency rates from which students move schools effects the continuity of reading strategies taught and reinforced. Should these factors be widely known amongst teaching professionals, then cautionary measures and reading intervention can take place to prevent struggling readers from progressing through the grades without the necessary assistance.

Instructional Environment

A fundamental issue surrounding struggling readers and their related negative attitudes in school is the amount of time provided to middle school students for reading instruction in order for them to become proficient readers (McCray, 2001). Students' negative attitudes are found to be due to, but not restricted to, limited opportunities for book choice, independent reading or in inadequate reading instruction (McCray, 2001). Some middle school students are aware that they struggle with reading and experience feelings of hopelessness, whereas other students manifest the reading problems in inappropriate behaviour as a form of distraction. Appropriate reading materials and opportunities to simply read in school is a preferred activity amongst adolescents, which also promotes further reading outside of school (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Ivey, 2008). This is important as the time spent on reading outside of school is strongly associated with reading proficiency (Anderson et al., 1988). Many struggling readers appear to be unmotivated to read, but often these "Resistive readers" (Tovani, 2000, p. 14), are unmotivated for school reading and choose not to read (Ivey, 2008). This is not to say that students have lost interest in reading for pleasure outside of school (Moats, 2001). Many students have a different approach to reading in school and out of school wherein shortcut strategies are used to complete the reading assignments in school and higher-level strategies are

applied outside of school due to reading enjoyment (McCray, 2001). Middle school students' attitudes and reading performance rely on the type of instructional environment in which they are asked to read (Ivey, 1999).

Another problem is the disconnect between the literacy practices at home, that often include digital practices, and those being taught at school. Digital literacies are recent phenomena in the adolescent community, but they are not commonly recognized in the classroom. All too often adolescents, especially those that are struggling, are viewed as not reading significantly in the classroom, and yet they are motivated to use their digital literacy skills they use within the multimodal world outside of school (Alvermann, 2009). Instructional environments need to be motivating for adolescents in reading and writing in order to ensure student success (Ivey, 2008).

Socioeconomic Status

Families from different social environments use language in different ways and thus compose different types of meanings from text (Schleppegrell, 2004). The social status of families reflects the types of reading interaction caregivers and children engage in (Schleppegrell, 2004). The meanings that result from these interactions prepare some children more readily for similar activities at school (Schleppegrell, 2004). The purpose for reading established at home by parents also correlates with reading abilities at school. Middle-income families tend to maintain an entertainment perspective on the acquisition of reading, such as trips to the library and plays (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984), as opposed to lower-income homes where reading is emphasized as a set of skills that need to be acquired (Baker, 2003). Students from homes with middle-income parents that value reading as a source of entertainment are shown to be more advanced in their reading abilities than students from families where parents

with less education and low income place more emphasis on reading skills and drills practice (Baker, 2003). In a study done by Lareau (1987), the parents from a working-class community relinquished the responsibility of educating their children and left it to the teacher. In the same study, parents from a middle-class community viewed education as a shared experience with school and in turn, enhanced the education of their children at home (Lareau, 1987). However, in other research, socioeconomic status in relation to literacy was seen as more of a “mental attitude” than anything else (Harste, et al., 1984, p.42). Regardless of residence, if parents perceive themselves to be of middle-class stature then they will provide middle-class literacy experiences for their children (Harste, et al., 1984). Even more recent research suggests that socioeconomic status (SES) or residential location, when viewed as an individual factor, is not a strong predictor of a child’s literacy achievement (McTavish, 2007; Purcell-Gates, 2000).

Home Support

Home support is seen as, “...the availability of reading materials in the home, parental reading behavior, and the frequency of reading to the child” (Baker, 2003, p. 89). Some argue that parents have a direct influence in student motivation for reading (Baker, 2003) and regardless of income, children that participate in frequent joint book reading at home achieve better in school (Schleppegrell, 2004). While others find that even though parental support and involvement may be present, lack of experience and knowledge from the parents to provide assistance in instruction at home have been viewed as barriers (McCray, 2001). A common thread between arguments is that income level and parental education are correlated with the quality of home literacy experiences (Baker, 2003). Parents with higher literacy levels place more importance on modeling effective literacy behaviours in comparison to lower literate parents who focus on the type of literacy artifacts, preferably those being more skills based

(Purcell-Gates, 2000). Acknowledging the various perspectives, there is an obvious disconnect between home and school-based practices, and a number of varying perspectives and research on home and school literacy programs.

Apart from parental income and literacy levels, family support has a significant and positive impact on adolescent development in terms of motivation, self-esteem, and increased student achievement (Wiseman, 2009). The frequency with which others in the home read is another contributor to the impact of literacy learning (Purcell-Gates, 2000). Parental expertise also offers insight for educators on struggling readers and a collective involvement between both parties is mutually beneficial (Baker, 2003). A number of conclusions can be drawn based on research conducted on family literacy programs. Concepts, attitudes, skills and behaviours are learned in relation to the naturally occurring literacy learning events in homes (Purcell-Gates, 2000). The skills acquired appear to be a positive influence when beginning school and when progressing through the grades (Purcell-Gates, 2000). However, the optimal age for beginning family involvement in literacy programs is not as well established (Purcell-Gates, 2000). It has been maintained though that despite the positive influence of a supportive adult, the family involvement reduces as students reach the higher grades in school (Wiseman, 2009).

Transiency

Some low socioeconomic status families are forced to move more frequently and therefore the student attends different schools within the range of elementary years. Should the student attend a number of schools within several years, a variety of instructional environments would have been introduced, but not necessarily reinforced. There may be some correlation between transiency and the instructional environment as each school has a different philosophy. For instance, in British Columbia, schools in many districts target literacy as an area for

improvement and focus specifically on writing or reading skills as part of their Accountability Contracts (Rogers, et al., 2006). Other districts and their schools may place precedence on behaviour or Fine Arts as their goals. Even though the school goals follow the provincial curriculum, the emphasis may be on an area that may not otherwise be a goal at a neighbouring school. Therefore, reading strategies introduced in one school may not be reinforced at another school that the student would attend. Students who have reading difficulties do not use effective reading strategies as it is (Ivey, 1999; McCray, 2001) so, although the students may be aware of a variety of reading strategies, a gap may be created when they are not consistently reinforced.

Implications from the research

Many struggling readers exhibit telltale characteristics such as comprehension difficulties, poor or weak fluency and decoding skills as well as problems with vocabulary recognition (Alvermann, 2009). Other students, struggling or otherwise, have mastered fake reading and have been perfecting their skills since the primary grades. Fake reading is where students can decode words and read fluently and yet struggle with reading comprehension (Tovani, 2000). Typically, these types of readers are compliant in the class and often will be the ones to slip through the system unrecognized (Ivey, 2008). However, not all students that exhibit the characteristics of a struggling reader should be identified as one because it may simply be the lack of experience in independent reading that may be the cause (Ivey, 2008). For intervention purposes, providing opportunities for students to read literature of their choice from a varied collection of reading materials is a fundamental starting point (Ivey, 2008). In order to better understand where each deemed struggling reader is having difficulty, then informal reading assessments will be more informative than a one score standardized test (Ivey, 2008). Using an informal reading assessment, such as the IRIS or the Jerry Johns, will provide insight into

understanding students' reading abilities as well as guide teachers in their instructional choices (Rogers et al., 2006). Struggling, older readers who receive intervention grounded in research should progress to grade level reading in one to two years (Moats, 2001).

Conclusion

Assuming at the beginning of the year that each student in the class knows and understands the fundamentals of reading is a mistake and an injustice to each individual student. Many students enter middle school without the necessary tools for comprehension of text and reading fluently (McCray, 2001). The gap between ability and grade level only widens as each struggling reader progresses to the next grade. Quality research and effective intervention methods have been established and are progressively becoming more widely known. Yet a vast majority of adolescents are still struggling with reading. The factors that contribute to adolescent reading struggles need to be highlighted and addressed early on in their scholastic journey to prevent the literacy gap from widening even further and help avoid the innate feelings of hopelessness that accompany struggling readers and the underlying negative attitudes towards reading. The question that first needs to be addressed in order to assist our struggling readers is: What specific factors contribute to different individual intermediate students becoming struggling readers?

Method

Research Design

Each school year, I encounter students in my intermediate classroom who struggle with grade level reading. Struggling readers are viewed as those students, "who for whatever reason, are thought to be achieving below their 'full potential' as readers" (Alvermann, 2001, p. 195). Even though research has been previously conducted to determine varying factors contributing to

struggling readers, the voices of students in my immediate surroundings was deemed to be more powerful as it was relative to my teaching and more personal in nature. As such, this is a qualitative teacher research study using a case study design. Struggling, or “Grey Area”, readers highlight a problem in teaching and learning which warrants reflective inquiry to carry out meaningful change (Brighton, 2009).

Research Site

The school for the study was located in a small urban school district in an area near the west coast of British Columbia. At the time of selection, the multiethnic school had high numbers of students with Indo-Canadian backgrounds with the remainder of children predominantly coming from diverse multicultural homes and speaking up to fifty different languages. The school for the study was located in a combined status neighbourhood of both lower and middle class. Within the area, there were lower socio-economic families that resided in substandard rental basement suites or apartments where transiency was common. Often, these families had recently immigrated to Canada from diverse countries. Many other families shared the house with their extended family. The average combined income for a family ranged between \$55-\$60 000 per year. This school had a high population of students that consisted of approximately 450 students and had a large number of classes ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 7. The school was involved with the community and provided a number of services for families in need such as Family Place Drop-In as well as a breakfast program before school commenced. There was an on-site preschool that was utilized by parents who have employment outside of school hours. The school offered a number of programs, most of which focused on language development such as Kindergarten Readiness, Starting With Stories, Language Enhancement and a Strong Start Program. The site was a typical school wherein approximately

20-25% of the student population was not yet meeting in Reading ability, approximately 50-60% were meeting and approximately 10% were exceeding expectations as per the 2009/2010 FSA Fraser Institute comparison. Within the school, the Learning Support Team (LST) supported students in all grades. The team, which consisted of the school counselor, psychologist, principal, speech pathologist, primary and intermediate Learning Support Teachers as well as a Learning Support Teacher who fulfilled the role of providing support to students with learning disabilities in addition to providing mainstream assistance, met weekly to discuss students that were referred by the classroom teachers. Appropriate assistance for referred students was determined in collaboration with the LST and the classroom teacher. Learning specialists pulled out students with special needs for individual or group instruction and assistance.

Participants

The sample was from a fifth grade class (ages 9-10). The data collection was conducted during the third term of the school year. The rationale for timing was based on the researcher returning from a leave in January and awaiting approval from the Research Ethics Board before commencing the data collection. At the time, there were two teachers in the classroom. The first teacher had been in the class since the start of the year, in the month of September, and changed to teaching on Thursdays and Fridays at the beginning of January. The second teacher, the researcher of this study, returned to the class at the beginning of January in the same school year to teach Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. There was special care taken to ensure that all participation was voluntary and in no way affected the students' standing in the classroom.

There was a maximum of eight participants selected out of a class of twenty-six. They were selected based on their struggles with grade level reading as indicated by their previous report card marks as well as by the judgment of the co-teacher, the principal and a member of the

Learning Resource Team (LST). None of the identified students had any discernible learning disabilities. The participants were either first or second language learners as long as they were not tagged in an ELL category at the time of the study. Although some research demonstrates that SES has been linked to reading abilities with students, this study does not examine this area due to the personal nature and privacy of the participant. From the students that were selected, six participated, five female students and one male. Although typically the struggling readers in my previous years of teaching are predominantly male, this study does not differentiate between genders. The students that participated in the study granted permission. A member of the LST met with the identified students individually and explained the project to them. During the meeting, those who were interested were given a package of material (parent and student consent and assent forms) to take home. They were given one week to respond with permission.

Data Sources and Collection

Data sources consisted of an informal reading assessment, student interviews as well as field notes and teacher anecdotal records.

Informal Reading Assessment

To begin the study, each student was given an informal reading assessment (IRA) that took approximately 30 minutes to administer. The selected IRA for the study was the Jerry Johns, which determined the area(s) of reading that each student struggled in. The Jerry Johns was selected due to the range of testing as well as its accessibility. I began each series of tests at the Grade 3 level as it was two grades below the participants' current grade. For most of the tests I stopped at the Grade 6 level, as this was sufficient performance information, however there were a couple of instances where I continued on to the Grade 9 level. One set of questioning, the Word Recognition Isolation (word lists), in some cases, I tested up to a Grade 8

level. Each participant was audio-taped using a hand-held voice recorder during the IRA. The recorded and assessed student responses for the IRA are used in the data analysis process. I implemented the data collection process in a quiet location away from the classroom in the school during the Language Arts period on the days that the co-teacher was in the classroom. This was during the morning periods on Thursdays and Fridays in the third term. For all students that consented, the principal provided data in the areas of school attendance history. A total of 1.5 hours in assessment and interview time was projected for each participant. The actual average time spent with each student was between 1 and 1.5 hours.

Interview Protocol

The students were also asked to participate in an interview protocol (Appendix) to further explore areas where the reading difficulties may have occurred. The questions were formatted into three areas: attitude, home reading support and instructional environment. The interview questions were formed after the Student Interview Protocol by McCray et al, (2001). During the interview, the students were again audio-taped using a hand-held voice recorder. The interview took approximately 30 minutes to complete. As the IRA was given to the students before the interview, it appeared as though the students were more at ease to talk rather than be assessed. Also, due to having established a rapport with the students involved in the study previously as their classroom teacher, most of the students did not appear to be reticent when responding to the questions. However, many of the students needed additional questions to further expand their responses. A second interview, using the same questions in the initial interview, was conducted two weeks after the initial interview to confirm or provide additional information to the original responses. Similar to the first interview, the second interview took approximately 30 minutes to complete and the student responses were audio taped using the hand-held voice recorder while I

took field notes. The students were expecting the questions in this interview and many elaborated on or confirmed their initial responses from the first interview. All of the interviews were transcribed in full.

Field notes and Teacher Anecdotal Records

The field notes comprised of those taken throughout the interview process in order to capture the tone and non-verbal communication that could not be conveyed with transcriptions alone. The teacher anecdotal records are those that were taken throughout everyday teaching activities as well as during parent/teacher conferences. The anecdotal records were taken at various times throughout the second and third term of the school year and they were pertaining to the student participants.

Data Analysis

The interview protocol that each student participated in provided some insight for identifying factors contributing to the struggles intermediate students face with grade level reading. In addition, I drew on the factors outlined in the aforementioned research to analyze the contributing factors of each individual student in conjunction with the case study data accrued from the interviews and other sources. All of the students participating in the study had difficulty with the Instructional Environment questions from the interviews. They needed a great deal of prompting to recognize the difference between the books they selected and those that their teacher, past and present, had asked them to read. Also, due to the fact that I was both the researcher and their teacher, they assumed I was aware of their instructional environment and did not comment on their current grade during the interviews. As a result, the section on Instructional Environment will not be outlined in the results apart from the number and types of books read as a class.

Due to the number of students participating in the study and the length of the twelve interviews, all of the case studies cannot be reported here. Rather, a selection of three descriptive case studies were developed that outline a variety of contributing factors to struggles in reading. A pseudonym has been provided for each of the students in the selected case studies to respect their confidentiality. I selected three students to pursue case studies whereby two cases confirmed the research outlined. The third individual case disconfirmed all previous research as to the origin of reading difficulties, apart from one key factor. Much of the information provided for the analysis was in the interview information; however, the Jerry Johns results provided a foundation for their reading abilities. In addition to the interview data and Jerry Johns Basic Reading Inventory results, I delve into the individual student's, age, ethnicity, schooling history and primary and/or secondary language spoken.

Results

Case Studies

Tanya.

From the case studies, I selected Tanya to analyze and discuss as her case was confirmed by the research. Her case highlighted a number of potential factors that could be the cause for her struggles in reading. Tanya, a Caucasian female, was 10 years and 6 months at the beginning of this study. The primary and only language spoken at home was English. She was first registered at the school when she entered kindergarten 6 years before the time of the study. As noted in anecdotal records, Tanya was able to learn concepts quickly in a small group setting or individually. She was then able to retain knowledge and transfer the skill to other curricular areas. The Jerry Johns Basic Reading Inventory indicated that she was performing at an Instructional level at Grade 8 or beyond for Word Recognition in isolation (Word lists). Her

Oral Reading Comprehension showed that she was at an Instructional/Frustration level at Grades 4-6. The Listening Level tests indicated that she was at a Grade 4 Instructional/Frustration level. My field notes documented that by the end of the second test from this section her body language was different and she verbally stated that she did not want to continue on with this format of questioning when asked to carry on to a third passage. The last series of tests I performed on her were for her Silent Reading Comprehension. Her test results placed her performing at a Grade 5 Instructional/Frustration level.

After analyzing these results it was evident that Tanya's cognitive ability was within normal range and that she was performing at or above grade level in recognizing words in isolation and also in comprehending oral and silent reading. She was performing at a Grade 3 instructional level when testing her listening level of comprehension. Her first and second term Reading grades on her report card indicated that she was below average for Grade 5 and it was evident in everyday classroom activities that she appeared to struggle with reading comprehension.

What is also curious is that both Tanya and her family stated, at parent/teacher conferencing, that she learns best when another person reads out loud to her. However, this is not supported with her listening level test whereby she was visibly uncomfortable and verbally declining to continue on with the questioning.

While conducting the interviews with Tanya, several factors that may be potential contributors to her struggles in reading became present. The first factor was within the realm of attitude, in that Tanya may not have had sufficient opportunities to read on a daily basis. Tanya confirmed in interviews that she read once a week. She stated that she sometimes enjoyed reading and readily volunteered her enjoyment of books with unicorns. With some prompting, it

was determined that Tanya was also partial to the genre of fantasy and a series of books in the realistic fiction genre, but there were few other selections that she seemed to enjoy. The books that were mentioned in the interview revealed that Tanya was reading books that were below her grade level. It was also noted that Tanya would read an unlikely book choice only after it was introduced to her first in a class read aloud. In the area of home support Tanya revealed that she read for approximately 40 to 60 minutes per week at home by herself as she didn't really read with anyone else in her family. Tanya stated that she saw her parents reading the newspaper over breakfast and her older sister reading her level books. She was aware of the kinds of books her brother read, but didn't actually see him reading. Evidently, Tanya did not receive the necessary support when reading at home. The instructional environment topic questions revealed that Tanya could only recollect one book that her class read together in Grade 4. Seemingly, the instructional environments that Tanya encountered were not motivating enough for her to recall the kinds of books that were read in class.

Gurjeet.

I also chose Gurjeet as a confirming case study to analyze because of the evident possible reasons for her struggles with reading. Gurjeet, an Indo-Canadian female, was 10 years and 4 months at the beginning of the study. The primary language spoken at home was Punjabi and the secondary language was English. She was first registered at the school in the beginning of September, the same school year as the time of the study. She then transferred out to her previous school, where she was a student since first being enrolled for Kindergarten. Two weeks later she transferred back to the school site where the research was conducted. The reasons for the sudden enrollment and re-enrollment are unclear. As found in her school history record, Gurjeet received Resource Team support for literacy in Kindergarten and in Grade 3. She was

also a participant in the English as a Second Language program from Kindergarten through to Grade four. As documented in anecdotal records, Gurjeet was quiet and reserved. It was also noted that she demonstrated a difficulty completing tasks assigned, but often appeared to be concentrating and on task. The Jerry Johns Basic Reading Inventory indicated that she was performing at an Instructional level for Grades 4-6 for Word Recognition in isolation (Word lists). Her Oral Reading Comprehension indicated that she was performing at an Instructional/Frustration level at Grade 4 and a Frustration level at Grade 5. The Listening level tests indicated that she was performing at a Grade 4 Frustration level. The Silent Reading comprehension tests were the last to be administered whereby only one test was given from the series. She was scored at performing a Grade 3 Frustration level.

The analysis of these test results recognize that Gurjeet was performing at two to three grade levels below in her listening level as well as her oral reading and silent reading comprehension. Her recognition for isolated words was one or more grade levels above Grade 5. The Jerry Johns results were reflected in her first and second term grades on her report card which showed that she was below grade level average in Reading.

The data collected while conducting the interviews with Gurjeet revealed several potential causes for her apparent struggles with reading. The first cause, although one not stated as a factor by the outlined research, is that Gurjeet is an English Language Learner (ELL) or English as a Second Language learner (ESL), despite her cap in the ESL program. ELLs are sometimes viewed as struggling readers due to their lack of success in school literacy tasks (Alvermann, 2001). As Punjabi was a dominant language spoken concurrently in the home with English, it is understandable that Gurjeet would have struggles in reading in English. Her

experiences at home and/or school may not offer the opportunities to delve into both languages to the depths that are required for mastery.

The questions asked within the area of attitude discovered that Gurjeet read every day and liked to read. She liked the illustrations and writing in bubbles in cartoons and comic books. She typically read chapter books with pictures and found enjoyment in solving mysteries while reading. The data collected from the home support area revealed that she read for approximately 20 minutes at home usually by herself, but sometimes with her mother. The types of reading material that were read in her home by her parents were primarily newspapers, magazines and fliers. It was also noted that the newspapers were printed in Punjabi. The other reading material found in her home was from her younger sister that read her grade one level books. Presumably, this information would lend itself to signifying the factors that Gurjeet may not have sufficient opportunities to read daily, wasn't subjected to appropriate grade level reading material, and also lacked a strong literacy advocate at home.

Within the instructional environment area of questioning, Gurjeet recalled three separate years where she read books as a class and was able to recount the name or the topic of each book. Although the type of instructional environment that Gurjeet received in the past wasn't clearly established due to the misunderstanding of the interview questions in this area, based on the fact that Gurjeet recollected a number of names and/or topics of books that she read as a class in the previous years, it is determined that the environment must have had some positive influence on her reading. It is also noteworthy that Gurjeet transferred schools twice within the same year. This does not identify a high transiency rate as she was a student at her original school for the five years before the study; however, changing schools in the intermediate grades does have an impact on students.

Ravneet.

The third student selected was somewhat of a disconfirming case as the factors contributing to her struggles in reading were not fully exposed by the data collected. Ravneet, an Indo-Canadian female, was 10 years and 9 months at the beginning of this study. The primary language spoken at home was English with Hindi being a secondary language. She was first registered at the school when she entered Kindergarten 6 years before the time of the study. As found in her school history record, Ravneet received Learning Assistance in Grades 1, 3, 4, and 5. She was also a participant in the English as a Second Language program in Grade 2. The Jerry Johns Basic Reading Inventory indicated that she was performing at an Instructional level at Grade 9 or beyond for Word Recognition in isolation (Word lists). Her Oral Reading Comprehension demonstrated that she was at an Instructional/Frustration level at Grades 6-7. The Listening Level tests indicated that she was at a Grade 7 Independent/Instructional level. The last series of tests for Silent Reading Comprehension revealed that Ravneet was performing at an Instructional/Frustration level for Grades 6-7.

It is evident after analyzing Ravneet's data that she was capable of performing above grade level in comprehending oral and silent reading. Her isolated word recognition far surpassed grade level and her listening level ability exceeded her current level by two grades. However, her first and second term Reading grades on her report card did not indicate her potential capabilities. It is also inquisitive that she received Learning Assistance for four out of her six years of education while demonstrating such high performances on the Jerry Johns Inventory.

The data collected from the interview questions revealed one key factor and also a potential factor that may have contributed to Ravneet's struggles with reading. Ravneet revealed

that she read almost every day, in the attitude section of questions, and that she liked to read. It was made clear that the types of fiction books she liked to read were about animals. In the home support area of questioning, Ravneet claimed that on average she read for 2 to 3 hours at a time. She sometimes read with her four year old sister and the types of reading material in her home varied. Her mother occasionally read chapter books, but mostly magazines, where her younger sister read fairy tales and other fiction books. Similar to the other case studies mentioned, Ravneet did not receive adult support when reading at home. Clearly, Ravneet read for a significant amount of time; however she simply did not have the opportunities to share her thoughts about her reading with an adult while at home.

Within the instructional environment line of questioning in this case, Ravneet was able to recall the novel read as a class in her current grade, but she couldn't remember any other grade. The reasoning behind the lack of recollection could be indicative of the instructional environment that she was exposed to in the years prior to the study.

Discussion

This study revealed a number of potential factors to be the cause for the three selected case studies. Although Grade five students would not necessarily be classified as adolescents due to their age being ten years old at the end of the school year, the causes for struggles in their reading could also be potential signifiers for older, middle school students' reading struggles. This age is nevertheless a time when families typically are not as involved in their children's literacy activities at home. As such, for all three participants, the common potential factor was the lack of strong literacy home support. The amount of time spent reading with a family member varied across the three case studies. For the most part however, the three participants did not have regular reading time with an adult in their home. The information revealed that the

types of reading material found in the home also varied. The parental reading behaviour and the frequency with which the participants were read to were likely to be influences in the participants' literacy learning (Baker, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 2000).

Another commonality amongst two of the participants was the low levels of time allocated for needed daily reading opportunities. Based on the school's reading goal and further outlined in the school's reading program, students in the intermediate grades were expected to be reading outside of school, on average, forty minutes every day. The amount of time spent on reading books outside of school is related to reading proficiency (Anderson et al., 1988). We can speculate, therefore, that the amount of time spent on out of school reading could be related to the instructional environment with which the participants were exposed to. As Anderson et al., stated, "...teachers have an important influence on how much time children spend reading books during after-school hours" (Anderson et al., 1988, p.296).

Lack of reading time and lack of exposure to a range of books could also contribute to reading difficulties. For instance, Tanya was clearly a "Resistive reader" (Tovani, 2000, p.14) as she was very selective in her book choices. This could be due to not being exposed to an assortment of genres and limited book choices (McCray, 2001). Although the data collected from the Instructional Environment area was not included in the study, it can be determined that it was a factor in the participants' attitudes and reading performance (Ivey, 1999) as many of the participants could not even recall the books read in the previous years, but could readily recall books selected themselves.

An area to be considered within the instructional environment as a factor in contributing to the struggles students face with reading is the teaching approach made by educators. Instructional approaches involving individual students, pairs, groups or class are encouraged to

help the diverse learners. A variety of teaching strategies used within the classroom is beneficial for all learners, struggling readers included. What a student, parent, or teacher may perceive to be a suitable learning method may be a hindrance to the learning process. As discovered in Tanya's case, she was in fact not an auditory learner, but rather one that was better suited to reading the material on her own, either out loud or to herself. This would imply then that the instructional approach did not necessarily match Tanya's learning abilities.

Transiency did not appear to be a factor for the majority of the participants apart from Gurjeet. Although she changed schools during her fifth school year, this could still be a potential factor in her literacy development.

In sum, the fundamental supposition of this study is that the two most prevalent factors, which are home support and instructional environment, are found to contribute to struggles in intermediate reading. Home support is defined as the frequency of shared book reading, parental reading behaviour, and types of reading material found in the home; while instructional environment is the daily individual reading opportunities, independent selection of books and meaningful reading instruction. These factors are significant precursors to success in literacy achievement.

Implications

This study offers a brief insight into the reading history of a handful of intermediate students to determine their struggles with reading. While there was no clear indication of why Ravneet was struggling in relation to grades, the other two cases reveal a weakness related to reading comprehension. The findings from this study suggest the need for educators to examine the type of instructional environment established in their classrooms. Intermediate students

require positive modeling of age appropriate, motivational, teaching instruction as well as time to read books of their choice on a daily basis.

There are a number of strategies struggling readers should use to make sense of their reading (Tovani, 2000). Teaching students to use these comprehension strategies while teaching curriculum content is beneficial, particularly if woven together rather than separately in order to create a purpose (Tovani, 2000). Teaching students to make connections while reading repairs confusion, prevents boredom, allows readers to relate with the characters as well as promotes active reading and visualization (Tovani, 2000). Another strategy that promotes readers to engage with the text is asking questions (Tovani, 2000). Questioning allows readers to improve their comprehension and have more control over their learning, which is especially beneficial for the struggling readers. Questioning and using background knowledge will also lead students to ask about what is not written, but that which is between the lines. To infer, readers need to use a necessary amount of background knowledge with substantiation from the text (Tovani, 2000). Appropriate modeling and practice of these strategies is an effective way to teach adolescents to establish patterns and to make sense of what they are reading.

The child as informant has been used as an instructional practice for early literacy by Harste et al. (1984) so it should be used by teachers of intermediate students. At this age group adolescents are able to understand what motivates them to learn and, "Choice is an integral part of the language process" (Harste et al., 1984, p.205). Multiliteracies, such as drawing, acting, and digital texts (wikis, blogs, pod casts, etc.) are effective tools for students to utilize and incorporate in their literacy learning. Having time to just read books of their own choice at school is a necessity not only because it contributes to the time spent in daily reading, but it also correlates with motivation for reading outside of school (Anderson et al., 1988).

The results from this study also draw attention to the need for educators to be cognizant of the quality and quantity of home support that intermediate students receive. It is necessary that school and home are a collaborative team in students' literacy learning. A school based literacy program needs to be meaningful and achievable for all parties involved. Incorporating family participation in literacy programs has the ability to cultivate literacy learning for adolescent students (Wiseman, 2009). As such it is necessary that home and family support is maintained with adolescents not only for the reason that it positively influences motivation and literacy development, but also because it contributes to the overall developmental process. Significant factors should be present in a literacy program to ensure family involvement. Programs that are imposed on parents will not achieve the desired results (Cairney, 1995). Rather, mutual agreement on goals, ability and comfort level of participation and selection of activities are required to achieve success (Cairney, 1995; Wiseman, 2009).

Limitations

I am cognizant of a number of limitations for this study. The first limitation is that of timing for the study as the research should have been conducted at the beginning of the school year. As stated earlier, being that I was both the classroom teacher and researcher, I was familiar with the students by the third term in the school year. The participants assumed that I knew of their instructional environment, as their current teacher, and therefore did not report accurately on their current grade during the interviews. Also, due to the timing of the ethics board approval for the study, there was little time remaining in the school year to alter classroom instruction in order to assist the participants in learning reading strategies as originally planned.

The second limitation found is the types of questions asked in the interview protocol. I found them to be highly structured to the point where the participants often became confused,

particularly in the Instructional Environment line of the interview. The interview questions did not lend themselves well to eliciting open-ended information from the participants. As the interview questions were previously approved by the ethics board, it was difficult to sway far from the original format. A third limitation for this study is the impact of the ELL factor that has been loosely addressed. As the research site is ethnically diverse, students with varying language backgrounds were prevalent in the classroom makeup and with the students participating in the study. Over half of the participants were in an ESL language program before the time of the study, where conceivably this could be another contributing factor to their struggles with reading. A final limitation is the inability to acquire the family income levels from the participants in the study. Had that information been available, it would be interesting to analyze and determine if SES was another potential contributing factor to the participants' struggles in reading.

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Appendix***Student Interview Protocol*****Attitude**

- How often do you read fiction books outside of school?
- Do you like to read fiction books?
- What types of fiction books do you like to read?

Home Support

- How long do you read at home?
- Do you read with anyone in your family?
- What types of reading material are read in your home by your parents or siblings?

Instructional Environment

- What fiction books have you read at school?
- Did you enjoy reading any of the fiction books?
- In your class, how did you read the books?
 - i) Did you read as a class, a group or by yourself?
 - ii) Did the teacher assign pages to read on your own?
 - iii) Did you discuss what was read as a class?