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Joanne L. Previts, Ph.D., Editor
Georgia College
Milledgeville, Georgia

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

by Leah K. Moreau
Glanford Middle School
Victoria, BC Canada

Abstract

This study explored middle school teachers' perceptions of struggling readers, including influences such as: understandings of components and factors relating to reading difficulties; views of struggling readers' behaviours and affect; classroom implications of their difficulties; and feelings of both competency and responsibility in the teaching of struggling readers. Using a phenomenological case study approach, survey data from 35 respondents, and interview data from ten participants across three different school districts were analyzed using both a within-case and cross-case analysis method. Identified common themes included teachers' difficulty defining and assessing students who struggle with reading, and tending to attribute the difficulties to factors beyond their control. Teachers realized the correlation between reading difficulties and motivation, but were unsure how to mitigate the ensuing behaviours in their classrooms. Participants believed that middle school students should be competent grade level readers and did not believe it their job to teach specific reading skills in content area classes, as they were constrained by both a lack of knowledge and time. The findings suggest that teachers, both pre-service and in-service, need more education about reading difficulties, classroom strategies and practice. The research indicates a need for more optimal use of specialist teacher time, professional development and literacy coaching.

"The kid just can't read. I don't know what to do with him. When does the resource room open so he can come to you?" As a former middle school resource teacher, responsible for teaching struggling readers with and without official designations, I frequently heard this type of statement from classroom teachers, frustrated, confused and surprised by pre-teen and teenage students arriving in their classes with reading skills well below what might be expected. As someone who also teaches mainstream classes, I also understand the multiple demands on a teacher's time, resources and expected skillset, and can empathize with the frustration. A teacher's relationship with struggling readers has many complicating factors, not the least of which is an inability to work from a textbook. Along with discussions of practice and strategies, the complexity of this relationship evokes issues of teacher and student identity, roles and responsibilities, and attitudes and beliefs.

Whether officially designated or not, the fact is that students who struggle with any or many aspects of reading are commonplace in today's middle school classroom. Although most people would assume that by middle school, students would be capable readers, the face of middle school classrooms is changing. In classrooms across Canada and the US, there has been a disproportionate increase in the number of students designated with reading disabilities (Learning

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Disabilities Association of Canada, 2007; Lyon et. al, 2001). However, current classification systems used for LD do not identify *all* children who are falling well below grade level standards in reading, as up to 30% of students in any given classroom require more focused intervention to meet grade level standards (Vaughn, Wanzek, Woodruff, & Linan-Thompson, 2007 as cited in Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007, p. 57). As such, general education middle school teachers must be adequately prepared for the realities of struggling readers (whether designated or not) in their classrooms. Thus, the necessity of informed teaching and reflective pedagogy by middle years' teachers, and, realistically, all teachers, gains great currency.

As there are still vast differences between formal and operational definitions of reading disabilities, part of this informed teaching may be to re-examine our understanding of reading difficulties, not only as individual professionals, but also on a larger scale, as members of the educational community. Perhaps introspection and clarification will help eradicate misconceptions (Phillips, Hayward, & Norris, 2011; Wren, 2002), particularly those that breed the attitude that students with reading disabilities are someone else's problem (Jobling & Moni, 2004; Jordan, Schwartz, & McGhie-Richmond, 2009) and cannot effectively be helped, managed and supported in a regular classroom environment.

As inclusion becomes the norm, a paradigm shift is imminent, requiring teachers to look more closely at how they design instruction in consideration of diverse learners in their classrooms and individual learning needs. With advances in understanding of the cognitive bases of reading ability and disability, teachers should be not only able, but willing, to provide skillful, high-quality instruction for students with diverse literacy needs.

Previous Research

There is little more highly debated in the field of learning disabilities than the discussion of the causes of reading failure. Particularly in the field of learning disabilities, it is important to differentiate between the notions of cause and correlation, as it is easy for the differences to become cloudy. Although much effort has been put into researching the "medical model" of diagnosis, and many defined correlates uncovered, there has thus far been no delineation of a specific biological cause in the search for pathology (Kibby, 2009; Vellutino, Fletcher, Snowling, & Scanlon, 2004). Although all current definitions of LD exclude those struggling with reading due to extrinsic factors, it is nevertheless crucial to examine them. Not only are more researchers pointing to heavier contribution from external causes (Catts & Kamhi, 2005; Lyon et al., 2001), but many intrinsic risk factors are in jeopardy of amplification as a result of environment, literacy history and instruction.

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

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

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

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

"Adequate instruction" is used as exclusionary criteria for an official designation, though the term often infers only that a child is at an age-appropriate

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grade, which leaves a high degree of variability in both quality and quantity (Catts & Kamhi, 2005; Scanlon, 2011). Often, instruction is still represented more in whole-class applications, although evidence points towards the need for multilevel, flexible, small-group instruction (Allington, 2000; Riddle Buly & Valencia, 2002).

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Current Study

A focus on the teachers and their realities is significant as Cook (2002), Silverman (2007), and Rohl and Greaves (2005) suggest that beliefs are predictors of behaviours, specifically mentioning attitude as a factor in adapting classroom strategies and persistence. Sharma, Forlin and Loreman (2008) concur, stating "teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusion more readily change and adapt the ways they work in order to benefit students with a range of learning needs" (p. 773). As perceptions

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play a key role in practice and can be difficult to alter once formed (Briscoe, 1991), the primary goal of this research was to investigate: *What are the perceptions of struggling readers held by middle school teachers?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Method

In order to uncover the underlying perceptions, insights and attitudes of middle school teachers toward struggling readers, I opted to use a qualitative case study method. Due to the nature of my research questions, and the fact that I believed an exploration of multiple cases would "lead to a better understanding and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases" (Stake, 2005, p. 443), I based my research design on Stake's (1995) "collective case study model," which compiles several cases in order to examine a "phenomenon, population, or general condition" (p. 437). While case study methodology was the foundation of my research, phenomenological elements were present in my data analysis. Particularly while completing cross-case analysis, I focused less on individual ideas and meanings, and more on interpreting the collective understanding and experience.

Participants

The participants for my study were recruited from generalist teachers (those with no subject-specific specialty who may be asked to teach any subject to their classes) from 16 middle schools across three different districts in British Columbia.

- The first district is a public urban K-12 district, the 6th largest in BC, with 10 middle schools

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(each with an average of approximately 340 students).
- Serving a mix of five small urban and rural municipalities, the second district has 8,500 students, and 26 schools, four of which are middle schools.
- The third is a very small rural district made up of 11 schools (two middle) on five separate island communities.

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

Procedures

Thirty-four participants completed a survey which consisted of non-identifying demographic questions (such as number of years of teaching, current and previous positions) and four open-ended survey questions:

1. Why might some middle school students struggle with reading?
2. How would you define a struggling reader? What might "struggling readers" in middle school have difficulty with?
3. What can be done to help struggling readers in middle school?
4. Whose responsibility is helping struggling readers?

At the end of the survey, participants were given the option to be contacted to participate in further interviews. Twenty-one of the respondents agreed, and in total, 10 individual interviews were completed (each taking about an hour), with participants selected based on availability, and a representative mix of teaching experience, including grade levels and current subjects taught (as many generalist teachers decide to team with others so they might focus on preferred subjects to multiple classes). The majority of the questions in the interview were open ended, and discussed the participants' previous and current experience with struggling readers, practice towards them, as well as feelings and perceptions (e.g "If you have struggling readers in your classroom, with what might they have difficulties? Why do you think there are students in middle school who struggle with reading? If you had unlimited resources at your disposal, what could be done to help struggling readers?").

The Analysis

Due to the nature of my data and my research questions, I used a thematic analysis approach (Sivensend, 1999). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as "searching across a data set, be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts, to find repeated patterns of meaning" (p. 86).

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

Cross-case Analysis

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

I began my initial coding using *in vivo* codes, which are often used in grounded theory applications in order to stay true to respondents' language (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This type of coding was not only appropriate but practical at this phase of the analysis, as many of the same phrases and ideas appeared throughout the entire survey. For example, as also presented in Table 1, I used a code for "learning disability" for respondents one, two and four, and a code for "home/parents" for respondents two, three and four.

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Table 1
Horizontal Approach to Coding

Survey Question #1: Why might a middle school student struggle with reading?

Respondent #	Response
1	Learning disability (diagnosed or undiagnosed) — missing some of the "building blocks" so to speak — may be able to decode but not actually comprehend what they've read — self-fulfilling prophecy — student has struggled in the past so now thinks they can't do it
2	There are many reasons why a middle school student could struggle with reading including the following: — student did not master the basics in earlier grades, — student is efficient at decoding but has little or no comprehension, — student has a learning disability, — student has had negative experiences with literacy or perceives self as "not good" at reading so is reluctant to read — literacy is not valued or practiced at home so student does not have access to printed material at home.
3	— Lack of exposure to oral and written language at home - Did not learn basic reading skills as their peers did and as their peers began to move forward, they too were given more difficult text to read when they were not ready. — Not enough explicit reading instruction - Teachers not trained well enough in the area of reading instruction
4	I'm not sure that there is a single reason that can be pinpointed. I think it depends on the circumstances of each student. They may not have been provided the support they needed to develop reading skills in elementary school. Perhaps they did not have support in developing strong pre-reading skills in their preschool days. They may have a learning disability such as dyslexia or a decoding problem that may not have been properly identified or supported early in their learning. They may have had little interest in reading, or have become discouraged due to previous difficulties and not have been encouraged to build their skills by reading level-appropriate reading materials at home and at school. It's possible that a part of it may be due to a lack of modelling for reading at home, or parents who did not read to their preschoolers or encourage them to develop a love/appreciation for reading at an early age.

Once all data were initially coded, I had 80 different codes with which to begin the next phase of analysis, grouping related ideas into six major categories of data:

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

In order to complete my analysis, and fulfill Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis, I asked myself the questions, "What does this theme mean? What are the assumptions underpinning it? What are the implications of this theme? What conditions are likely to have given rise to it? Why do people talk about this thing in this particular way? What is the overall story the different themes reveal about the topic?" (p. 94).

Results

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

Teachers have difficulty clearly assessing and defining what it means to struggle with reading. In order to understand and represent a concept, we must

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first have defining characteristics in mind. During my entire research process, I deliberately did not provide a definition of the term "struggling reader," as one of my objectives was to discover what generalist middle school teachers thought of when they heard the term, and how they might define it for themselves in terms of students and student abilities. Only one interviewee asked for a clarification of whether I was meaning designated or non-designated students (to which I replied that they simply needed to have difficulties with reading).

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

There was a strong tendency in the data for mentions of problems with "decoding" and "comprehension," often without much explanation or elaboration about specific skills. Without an assessment tool such as a running record or educational achievement tests (normally administered by a trained specialist teacher), classroom teachers can do little more than estimate the reading levels of their students. One respondent mentioned, *"being below grade level"* as the main definitional criteria in his survey answer. In his interview, he discussed his ability to assess the weaknesses of a struggling reader as follows: *"I can probably recognize when I get the kids, but I cannot say what level they are. [...] just that they struggle."* In this study, participants seemed to be driven by a focus on decoding/reading words correctly and *"understanding what they read."* Thus, perhaps although the term "grade level" was mentioned in many of the responses and definitions, this term may be often used as a vague "catchall" description for someone who doesn't read as well as might be expected. What teachers fail to realize perhaps, as Allington (2002) posits, is that given that grade level is determined psychometrically to be the average, it is a mathematical impossibility to have every child at "grade level."

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

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

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

Much less emphasis was placed on literacy skills inacademic subjects other than Language Arts. Despite an awareness of an increased need for reading in middle school, along with increasingly difficult texts, respondents naturally focused more on curricular content than on teaching content area reading:

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

Or, from another respondent:

> *I find the biggest thing I'm looking at is 'Do they actually know anything about the science?' You know, because I feel if I'm evaluating the science AND the language art part, then, I'll be failing so many kids who actually know the science part, but they can't communicate it very well necessarily. [...] I think if I was teaching ALL*

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> *subjects, it might be different, cause then you could blend it all together.*

There was an overall lack of teacher understanding towards the importance of teaching specific reading skills in subjects other than Language Arts (one respondent even said she was *"not a trained English teacher"*), and a lack of sentiment that "every teacher is a teacher of reading" (Fisher & Ivey, 2005, p. 3). As in the last quotation above, there were other indications that these teachers found it difficult to incorporate "language arts"/literacy skills if teachers did not teach all subjects. Although it can certainly be understood that a subject area teacher's main focus is to teach the content, these types of responses perhaps indicate a lack of understanding of the relation between content and the discipline-appropriate literacy found therein, such as Draper's (2008) notion of teaching students to think and interact with the appropriate content area texts.

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

Teachers attribute struggles with reading to many aspects, tending to shy away from assertions of ineffective teaching in favour of internal issues (such as learning disability) and other external factors (such as parents, or "the system"). Most of the survey respondents made some mention of "possible learning disability" in their response to the question, "Why might a middle school student struggle with reading?" Interestingly, any attempt to elaborate on the term learning disability was made by adding mention of either dyslexia, or decoding problems, possibly indicating a lack of realization that learning disabilities can affect reading comprehension either on its own, or in combination with decoding issues (Riddle Buly & Valencia, 2002).

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

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

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

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

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

As much as respondents identified parent responsibility in the development of the problem, the teachers also felt that the parents should assume some responsibility in dealing with the issue once it appears. However, there is an interesting juxtaposition in this area, in thinking that a home that does not place a high value on early literacy, or does not practice or have the tools to support it, could be engaged in working to support later reading difficulties, as one would assume that these values and/or lack of resources would continue as the child ages.

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

> *Even kids that we get that are weak, there's been no flag of them being weak, and you're wondering what's going on on that end...how are they passing through?*
>
> *They have 'fallen through the cracks' in their educational past – they haven't received the tools that they need in order to be successful.*
>
> *The system is set up so children just get pushed from grade to grade regardless of abilities.*
>
> *Because everyone passes the buck on to someone else. [...] In some schools you have a large number of struggling students and the teachers can sometimes only deal with the most extreme and so the middle crowd gets lost.*

While some definite frustrations were expressed with *"the system,"* or previous schooling, respondents seemed to have more empathy for elementary school teachers, often mentioning that they might struggle with the same barriers and issues that middle school teachers do. Notably absent in the responses (with few possible exceptions – *"inadequate literacy training at elementary level"* or more explicitly *"poorly taught in lower grades"*) were mentions of how a student may not have been properly taught, or taught in the way he or she needed in order to succeed. While there were many mentions of not learning various specific skills, the language used by respondents seemed to focus on the student not mastering the skills, rather than an awareness that inadequate teaching could be a contributing factor.

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

> *I have an EA* [educational assistant –a paraprofessional] *in my classroom as well, and she often helps with the struggling readers by reading it aloud to them. But they still become quite avoidant of the task, or defiant to her while she's helping them, because they feel singled out I think?*

While the data contained many references to students feeling inadequate, self-conscious, ashamed, embarrassed, discouraged or dumb, and acknowledgement of the side effects and coping skills manifested by those feelings, teaching styles, or even necessary support mechanisms mentioned may be unintentionally detrimental to the self-efficacy of the students. Although middle school students understand the importance of reading, and want to become better, they want to do it in a way that does not embarrass them in front of their peers, and single out the very thing they may have been trying to hide or avoid (Hall, 2006; McCray, Vaughn, & Neal, 2001). Brozo (1990) argues that "teachers who focus on effective instruction from only their perspectives fail to appreciate the needs of unsuccessful readers and may inadvertently reinforce students' reading failures" (p. 324).

The correlation between reading difficulties and motivation can often yield a stereotypical portrait and negative associations towards students who struggle with reading. As Beers (2003) remarks:

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

One of the main ideas addressed by the respondents was that of interest and enjoyment, both in definitions of struggling readers (*"they might not enjoy reading"*), and as a reason why they struggle (*"some don't enjoy reading, which means that they don't read enough and so fall behind"*). While there was much focus by the respondents on reasons why interest may be low, and therefore result in a lack of skill, such as *"not being introduced to the right novel," "they have not been 'turned on' by books," "boring, irrelevant reading resources in the classroom,"* or *"no connection to text – lack of experience that allows them to make connections,"* less emphasis was placed on the fact that a lack of skills starts to cause lack of interest. This association was well described using the following analogy by one of the participants:

> *You don't like to do something and the process of something is not enjoyable, and there's no reward at the end. Let me relate that to running, which I'm currently learning. I strongly dislike the process of it – while I do it, I hate it, and I will say that out loud as I'm doing it. I'm not very good at it. I'm slow. I know this because I run with other people, I see my times compared to theirs. But, when I'm done, I have a reward. I feel good. I'm proud of myself. If you think about a reader who does not enjoy the process, then they have to write something about it, for which they get no reward, because the teacher's saying "This isn't very good sweetheart" [...], they're not going to be motivated to do it again, because there IS no reward and, so I think it's one of those big cycles, over, over, over. We need to break the cycle.*

Struggling readers, with accompanying low motivation or low engagement evoked descriptions from the respondents ranging in severity from words like *"reluctant," "frustrated," "resistant,"* or *"non-responsive"* to more judgment-filled terms such as "lazy" and "passive aggressive." Conduct and demeanors that may start out as a coping mechanism for a student might soon determine behavior patterns, and in turn outside judgments, which start to impact the student more profoundly.

Middle school teachers believe that their students should be competent grade level readers, and while it is their job to adapt the curriculum for their needs, it is not their job to improve reading skills. Possibly the most important factor uncovered in this research concerning teacher attitude toward struggling readers was the overwhelming pervasive opinion that students should be able to read by the time they get to middle school, which is of course a curricular expectation and hope. Although the teachers were also quick to point out that that was not the reality, this assumption may affect all of their interactions with the student. As one teacher said:

> *I think at the middle school level, a lot of people assume that the kids should be able to read at a significant level, that that shouldn't be a problem anymore. That, you know, maybe they should be struggling with math, or maybe they don't quite understand the science topic, but that it's not our 'job' to help them learn how to read.*

This sentiment was echoed by several others:

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

> *It's almost a feeling of 'Well they should have learned that already. They should have learned that in Grade 1, Grade 2.' What am I supposed to do with a kid who is now in Grade 8, 14 years old, bad reader, or can't read, or whatever it happens to be?*

This sentiment, expressed in some interviews, seemed to be at odds with an overwhelming majority of survey respondents who mentioned that struggling readers were partly the classroom teacher's responsibility. When pressed for further information during the interviews, the notion of "responsibility" became more defined – the teachers saw their responsibility as finding ways to teach the students the curriculum, not necessarily helping to improve their reading skills. While on the surface these opinions may seem somewhat callous, whenever this sentiment was mentioned by these teachers, it

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was coupled with a sense of regret and helplessness, exemplified by these three responses:

> *"I think for most people, I think it's that 'I'm sorry' kinda feeling."*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Comments such as these reflect the difficult challenge teachers face as they are often called upon to teach not only middle school level curriculum, but skills which should seemingly have been mastered at earlier grades.

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

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

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

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

The major constraint for teachers in terms of adequately meeting the needs of their struggling readers is time. Perhaps one of the reasons for the trend towards assigning responsibility for struggling readers to specialists is the aspect of time, indicated

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by almost every single respondent. Although many stated that they would like to be able to do one-on-one instruction with every student, they found it unrealistic, such as the following two respondents: *"It's just unfortunately with class sizes of 28 and 30, it's hard to dedicate one-on-one time to those kids."*

> *You have 25 kids, and there are two, three, four, five, whatever that have problems; there's no time for them. You need the help – EAs or a resource teacher to come and do that. If I look after those kids, then I cannot look after the other 25.*

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

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

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

Teachers have a desire to know more about helping their struggling readers, as they feel they do not have adequate knowledge and understanding of appropriate strategies. When teachers were asked during the interviews what they might do with a fictional situation of unlimited time and resources, noticeably, respondents felt unsure about their qualifications and knowledge base when it came to struggling readers: *"Unlimited resources? Awesome. [...] But I guess for me personally I would need someone to say 'Hey, this would be a good thing to do with your kids.'"* Although many of the teachers agreed that they would be able to identify a struggling reader, every teacher interview admitted that they did not have the knowledge to diagnose such a reader, or felt otherwise qualified to help with basic reading skills, described by these three respondents: *"I think I can identify when a student is having struggles, but I don't know what to do from there."*

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

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

Of the teachers who admitted they felt a lack of skills in the area, all said they would be very interested in further professional development: *"Whether that's going to a couple workshops or watching what someone else is doing, or going to the learning resource teacher. And then obviously you get better and there's more room to grow."* Several teachers (particularly the teachers with less than five years of experience) also mentioned a need for more instruction at the pre-service level: *"In my recollection, it was never discussed. Struggling readers at the middle school level or beyond were not discussed whatsoever."*

Discussion

In using a socioecological framework as a backdrop for the themes identified in the data, it is evident that many factors, both internal and external, influence middle school teacher perception towards struggling readers. Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that each person is significantly affected by interactions among overlapping systems. He describes microsystems as individual beliefs, attitudes and identities, while mesosystems represent the norm-forming interaction between different individual microsystems (for instance, between teacher and student). The exosystem includes all external networks, communities and institutional structures, while the macrosystem comprises all cultural values and political philosophies.

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As revealed in the study, a lack of understanding of reading disability, and an inability to define specific reading skills and characteristics may lead to a misconstruction of a student's perceived needs, and the resulting behaviours. The teachers also attributed reading difficulties to "the system." In that respect, it is intriguing to think of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bi-directional influences, and how the teachers' beliefs and practices are both influenced by "the system," and in turn influence and become the system.

Sleegers and Kelcherman (1999 cited in Day, 2011) state that teacher identities are constructed not only from the technical and emotional aspects of teaching and their personal lives, but also "as the result of an interaction between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural and institutional environment in which they function on a daily basis" (p. 579).

Day (2011) pinpoints what he calls "clusters of influence" (p. 63) which create professional identity: socio-cultural/policy influences (such as teacher ambition, increased workload, or external policies on assessment); workplace influences (such as teamwork with colleagues, parental support, in-school communication, support from leadership, and pupil relationships); and personal influences (major events in a teacher's personal life). Much like in Hall's (2006) research, the teachers in my study had a tendency to not identify themselves as skilled teachers for those struggling with reading, and as such, forced students to either assume alternate reading identities or coping skills. Hall et al. (2010) suggest "the teachers' identification of students as 'good readers,' 'poor readers,' or those who were 'becoming good readers' had significant consequences for the kinds of instruction and support students received" (p. 239). Teachers in my study mentioned issues of student motivation, engagement and laziness, when as Hall (2006) suggests, these behaviours could be due to incompatible identities as a reader and as a teacher.

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

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

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

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

Implications

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

Although a shift in the feelings of responsibility may be difficult, seeing that most of the teachers in this study acknowledged feeling ill-equipped to properly support struggling readers, I argue that a first step in that shift is to empower teachers in their practice toward that end. High quality

professional development is of particular importance, as it significantly affects teacher quality which is positively related to student achievement (Hairrell et al., 2011). Reio (2011) cautions that although teachers are the cornerstone to reform, “unless the time is taken to allow teachers ample opportunity for meaning making related to a change effort, its successful implementation is far less likely” (p. 108). Gusky (2003) agrees, suggesting that in order to avoid negative emotions and the ensuing reduced motivation for teaching, teachers need reasonable time to increase their knowledge and ultimately improve instruction. While it may be a truism that generalist teachers need more opportunities to see specific strategies in use, or to explore different teaching methods, the implementation of this kind of professional development in the average middle school is often difficult, due to a variety of factors. Reio (2011) states “teachers’ professional development is one key means of implementing reform where teachers are provided time to make sense of a dizzying array of discrepant information from administrators and colleagues for the purpose of learning” (p. 113). Thus, I would recommend an increased focus on literacy coaching, defined as a form of highly targeted, intensive professional development, collaboratively grounded in inquiry and reflection (IRA, 2006).

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

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

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

Although reading research has made great strides over the last several decades, there still exists much uncertainty in the classroom, which is translating into substantial numbers of adolescents with literacy difficulties (Allington, 2000). In an age where the notion of literacy is rapidly expanding, it is crucial to provide generalist classroom teachers with the knowledge, time, support and resources in order to effectively implement literacy in its many forms throughout the curriculum. It is also important to examine perceptions, beliefs and attitudes and how they shape and inform instructional practices, both positive and negative. Jordan et al. (2009) effectively sum up the importance as follows:

> The difference between effective and ineffective inclusion may lie in teachers’ beliefs about who has primary responsibility for students with special education needs. Beliefs in the locus of responsibility as belonging to the classroom teacher may be prerequisite to teachers’ development of effective instructional techniques for all their students. (p. 541)

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

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