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GOING STRAIGHT TO THE SOURCE: STUDENTS WITH READING
DIFFICULTIES TALK ABOUT READING, SELF-EFFICACY AND READING
INSTRUCTION

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Going straight to the source: Students with reading difficulties talk about reading, self-efficacy and reading instruction

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The consequences of lack of reading and poor reading skills are disastrous for all students, regardless of background; however, because of the poverty and lack of economic opportunities in urban areas, readers of low-ability from marginalized ethnic and economic backgrounds may face more barriers than their economically advantaged peers. As these readers progress through school, their reading problems become more challenging for teachers to alleviate, and they fall further behind their peers, often losing motivation to engage with text (Alvermann, 2005). Research suggests that the instructional environment plays a critical role in students' views on reading, reading abilities and reading instruction. Currently, only a small body of research has addressed the problems of urban middle grade readers with reading difficulties from the students' perspectives. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the small volume of existing literature that highlights the voices of these readers by using their perspectives to examine three fundamental aspects of reading: the act of reading, reading self-efficacy and reading instruction.

This study used qualitative and quantitative data in the forms of interviews, surveys and observations to investigate the three areas. The major finding of this study resonates with previous research on the importance of contexts (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Contextual features played a crucial role in the students' feelings of competence in reading. Most students in the study viewed themselves as good readers; however, students of lower reading ability had lower self-efficacy in reading than students of higher reading ability. In addition, almost all of the students viewed the reading process and good reading similarly, regardless of grade or ability level. Students viewed teacher and tool assistance as critical to effective reading instruction. They also emphasized the importance of a variety of reading materials that are interesting and powerful. These findings have the potential to provide teachers with better insight about the needs of readers experiencing reading difficulties and inform instructional strategies and materials.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

As a teacher, my biggest success stories rarely involved struggling readers. Not because I did not teach many struggling readers; in fact, during my first year of teaching in rural Virginia, three-quarters of my fifth graders had reading difficulties. It was because I did not have adequate knowledge about the nature of these readers to effectively help them catch up with their peers. Once in a long while, a struggling student and I would work diligently and make great strides. Whether this was due to good rapport, teaching strategies or the student's persistence, I do not know. However, most of the students who excelled in my classes were students who had mastered fundamental reading strategies, understood that one reads for meaning and were able to employ standard forms of literacy that ensured success on assignments and standardized tests. While I was proud of these students, I continued to be baffled by my poorest readers. What did I need to know about their reading in order to teach them successfully?

I consulted other teachers who also were frustrated by their struggling readers. We went to conferences and picked out materials that we thought might peak their interest. In the end, however, little progress was made, and those students who struggled in my fifth grade were still struggling when I taught them in a summer remedial reading class for high school students a few years later. Adding to an already unfortunate situation was the fact that many of these students were African-American and caught in

the vicious cycle of poverty that had plagued their communities for generations. Unless they were able to learn how to read well, they would be destined to take up poorly paid jobs and endure a standard of living that was below a living wage.

Looking back, I did everything I could to help them with the exception of one thing: I did not ask them about their thoughts on literacy and literacy instruction. Rather, I continued to use test scores and colleagues' feedback as a gauge for my teaching. When nearly 90% of my students passed the state literacy exam, I took that as a sign that I was on the right track with my instruction. My administrators were thrilled, and I was invited to give workshops around the region.

But what about the 10% of the students who did not pass? These were students in special education resource programs or students that had learning and behavioral difficulties since entering school. Why I did not sit down with them individually and talk to them about their feelings, I will never know. Perhaps part of me did not want to know the truth about their school careers thus far and another part of me would not know what to do with the information once garnered. Yet, had I had the courage to ask them, I might have been able to make a difference for some, if not all of them.

Upon entering graduate school, the conundrum of my poorest readers still plagued me. I had no idea what it felt like to have reading difficulties; moreover, I was unaware of the research that spoke to these issues until my qualitative research methods professor suggested that I read "You Gotta BE the book" by Jeff Wilhelm (1997). "I think you will really find that helpful," she told me. I immediately ordered the book and when it came, I sat down at the local coffee shop to read it. Indeed, the book did speak to me; so much so, that I found myself crying tears of joy for the opportunities Dr. Wilhelm gave his students

and tears of sorrow for the opportunities I had missed with mine. It was amazing how he garnered his students' views on reading and how he then used those ideas to construct classroom activities that helped other readers become involved.

That book inspired me to read more about readers and how they come to terms with literacy. I read Rosenblatt (1978) and learned how readers involve themselves with texts. I interviewed adult readers about their pleasure reading and learned how literacy is a social phenomenon among readers, authors, and characters. Because I was interested in the voices of marginalized groups, I read Heath (1983) and Delpit (1995) who taught me to recognize the disconnects between students' home cultures and the dominant school cultures. Finally, I read "Reading Don't Fix No Chevys" (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) and realized that students' feelings of competence are critical to task engagement, and those feelings can only be created by appropriate contextual opportunities.

During this time, I also was assisting on a major research grant that was examining fluency instruction. My work on this grant allowed me to witness instruction that helped or hindered students' progress in reading. It also made me aware that students, especially those with reading difficulties, need specific reading strategies instruction in an environment where they feel confident enough to attempt reading. When I put my knowledge of the research together with what I was observing in classroom settings, I realized that effective reading instruction for *all* students, regardless of ethnic or economic status, can only be created when every aspect of the instructional context is considered. It was not enough just to give my students choices in texts in hopes that they would become engaged readers. Rather, numerous instructional components needed to be in place in order for students to learn how to read well. Furthermore, the formation of

these contextual aspects should have been established using the ideas of the students.

After all, who better to tell me how to help them than the students themselves? Upon leaving my teaching post, I promised my students that I would do something that would help them, or students like them, in the future. Therefore, the study undertaken in this dissertation is for them and all of the students in similar situations forgotten by mainstream society.

Statement of the Problem

I was not alone in my need to understand readers with reading difficulties. Since the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act coupled with state-wide programs to implement rigorous standardized assessment protocols, greater attention is being focused on students who fall behind national averages in academic subjects, especially in reading, which is a prerequisite to success in other subjects. While a barrage of ideas has been implemented to increase both the skills and motivation of readers with reading difficulties, many students continue to be unsuccessful in school reading. This leads to failure in multiple subjects and on state standardized assessments, often causing many of these students to drop out of school altogether. Without a high school diploma and proficient reading skills, these learners cannot secure jobs and often end up in the justice system. In fact, a 1992 survey revealed lower levels of literacy and higher rates of learning disabilities among prison inmates compared to the general population (Haigler, Harlow, O'Connor & Campbell (n.d.) *1992 Adult Literacy Products*. Retrieved January 3, 2007 from <http://nces.ed.gov/naal>).

The consequences of poor reading skills are disastrous for all students, regardless of background; however, because of the poverty and lack of economic opportunities in

urban areas, readers with reading difficulties from marginalized ethnic and economic backgrounds face more barriers than their economically advantaged peers. While the 2005 NAEP Reading Scores show that some progress has been made by African-American and Latino students, these learners continue to lag behind their White peers in reading (Perie, Grigg & Donahue, 2005. *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2005*. Retrieved January 3, 2007 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid+2006451>). The drop-out rates for these populations are also significantly higher than for White students (Kozol, 2005).

Heath (1983), in her seminal work on language, class and culture, showed how children from two poor Southern communities were marginalized in their local schools because their oral literacy practices did not fit those of the local school culture. At the same time, she was able to show the success experienced by children from a near-by middle-class community was built upon the similarity of their home and school literacy practices. The greater the variation between the children's English dialect and discourse structures, and their use of written language and those of the mainstream, the more likely they were to fail in school. Unfortunately, the children in this community were either African-American or economically disadvantaged European-Americans. Heath's work made an important point about literacy and success, both in school and the workplace. Those who are disfluent in mainstream oral and written language are unlikely to be successful not only in school, but also in securing the kinds of jobs that provide opportunities to earn promotions and better wages.

Without proficient literacy skills, these students cannot advocate for change in their communities as they sit on the margins of society in economic deprivation. In fact,

Delpit (1995) argues that the economically disadvantaged can only effect change by achieving the status of those who enjoy social and economic privileges. However, if the lack of significant progress in the literacy skills of the nation's most disadvantaged students continues, then social and economic change in the nation's poorest communities will be slow to materialize. It is therefore critical that the reading achievement of non-White students improves so that it is on par with that of White students in wealthier communities. This goal is especially challenging enough for teachers who teach in low economic status schools without proper avenues of professional development or materials; how to help readers with reading difficulties in these situations often seems to be an overwhelming or impossible task, as I discovered in my own teaching experiences.

On the positive side, research is rich with ideas of how to reform instructional programs and raise the reading achievement of marginalized students with reading difficulties. Yet, most of the research and program funding concerning these readers are aimed at young children in hopes of eradicating these difficulties before the students begin reading to learn from informational texts (Chall, 1997; McCormack & Paratore, 2003). However, Alvermann (2005) stresses the need to focus on these readers beyond the primary grades. She suggests that as these readers mature, their reading difficulties are dealt with less effectively:

As students with a history of reading difficulties move up through the grades, they present more and harder challenges to their teachers. For example, because they read so infrequently, they typically will not have acquired the requisite background knowledge, skills, and specialized vocabulary needed for comprehending the texts they are assigned as a part of the regular school curriculum. Teachers understandingly become frustrated when this occurs and sometimes resort to what Finn (1999) calls a "domesticating" education. That is, they expect less of these students in exchange for the students' good will and reasonable effort in completing class assignments that typically require little, if any, reading (Alvermann, 2005, pp.8-9).

However, only a small amount of research has addressed the problems of economically disadvantaged, struggling middle grade readers in special education programs from their own perspectives. We know very little about how these students conceptualize either the task of reading or themselves as readers because they are rarely ever asked. Research conducted along these lines has focused mainly on what students read out of school and the socio-cultural influences that contribute to their out-of-school literate lives. We have had little opportunity to hear from these students with regard to how they construct the act of reading, their reading instruction, and themselves as readers. This knowledge would provide teachers with better insight regarding the needs of individual students and may help to inform instructional strategies and materials. The purpose of this study is to contribute to the small volume of existing literature that highlights the voices of readers with reading difficulties by examining how these readers from disadvantaged backgrounds view the reading act, reading instruction and themselves as readers.

Research suggests that talking to students can help educators improve their instructional programs. For example, Oldfather (1995) suggests that talking to students can help educators find ways to increase student engagement:

Students are a rich but often untapped resource for teachers who want to find ways to support them in becoming more engaged in literacy learning. They have remarkable insights that can inform teachers' efforts to help them over the hump when they are not feeling motivated. In fact, the very act of consulting students about their ideas on motivational problems can help dissipate the conflicts that so easily result when students are not meeting a teacher's (or their own) expectations (p. 14).

The small volume of research using students' perspectives, such as the work of Wray and Medwell (2005) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002), has suggested that students' feelings

about literacy tasks are not always what adults perceive them to be. For example, Wray and Medwell (2005) in the U.K. found that the perspectives students had about literacy instruction in schools can confirm or not confirm widely held beliefs by teachers about students' participation, enjoyment and achievement in literacy. Similarly, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) also used interviews with adolescent boys to suggest that engagement with literacy tasks is increased when factors such as challenge, social interaction, immediate feedback and feelings of competence are created within specific contexts.

Most importantly, the students tell us how they really feel and are not influenced by pedagogical debates taking place among teachers and administrators (Kozol, 2005).

Jonathan Kozol writes:

...children are a great deal more reliable in telling us what actually goes on in public school than many of the adult experts who develop policies that shape their destinies. Unlike these powerful grown-ups, children have no ideologies to reinforce, no superstructure of political opinion to promote, no civic equanimity or image to defend. They may err sometimes on the miniscule particulars but on the big things children rarely have much reason to mislead us (p. 12).

Therefore, if we are to truly tailor our reading instruction to meet the needs of our readers with reading difficulties, then we must hear from them about the nature of reading.

What are struggling readers and their difficulties?

Educators may differ slightly in their definition of struggling readers depending on the composition of their class. Simply put, Lapp and Flood (2003) define struggling readers "as students who are not reading grade-level material with fluency and comprehension" (p. 14). Spache (1981) recommends that the following criteria be used to determine whether a student has a severe reading problem: fourth, fifth and sixth grade students reading two years below grade level and seventh grade students and above reading three years below grade level. Many factors contribute to the difficulties that

struggling readers experience with the grade-level reading required of them throughout their academic careers. According to Richek, Caldwell, Jennings, and Lerner (2002), reading problems stem from both individual and environmental factors. They state, “Reading problems are rooted in factors within the individual; factors within the home, social and cultural environments; and factors in the school environment. At times, all of these factors may play a role in any one student’s reading problem” (Richek et al, 2002, p. 6). The school environment plays a critical role in the failure or success of readers with reading difficulties because it is the context in which many students most frequently engage with large quantities of reading material. In a comprehensive review, Stanovich (1986) indicated that a “Matthew effect” occurs in the reading achievement of more skilled readers and their struggling peers. That is, the better readers engage more with print and, as a result, experience progress, while the poorer readers engage with print less and therefore experience more limited progress. Stanovich cites research that suggests difficulty in reading occurs very early in school for a variety of reasons:

The combination of lack of practice, deficient decoding skills, and difficult materials results in unrewarding early reading experiences that lead to less involvement in reading-related activities. Lack of exposure and practice on the part of the less-skilled reader delays the development of automaticity and speed at the word recognition level. Slow, capacity-draining word-recognition processes require cognitive resources that should be allocated to higher-level processes of text integration and comprehension (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Perfetti, 1985; Stanovich, 1980). Thus, reading for meaning is hindered, unrewarding reading experiences multiply, and practice is avoided or merely tolerated without real cognitive involvement. The downward spiral continues—and has further consequences (p. 364).

In sum, readers with reading difficulties not only battle individual disabilities, but often participate in disjointed and meaningless reading instruction that escalates their reading

problems rather than alleviating them. As a result, these students lose the willingness to engage with texts and never achieve proficient reading levels.

Research Questions

How students construct the act of reading and how they view themselves as readers is knowledge that is critical to designing effective reading instruction for readers with reading difficulties. According to Michel (1994), early studies that focus on students' perceptions of reading suggest that beginning readers are often confused about the nature of reading. However, she further argues that by understanding reading from the students' perspectives, rather than trying to fit their perspectives in an adult model, educators will be better able to formulate their reading instruction. Because reading is a complex act, we must discover what students know about the process so that we can build on their knowledge and help them become aware of the complex processes involved in reading. In addition, it is important to take into account their feelings about their reading abilities and to create contexts that will enhance their self-efficacy in this area. Without the students' perspectives, these two goals will be more difficult to accomplish. Therefore, this study seeks to gain the perspectives of readers with reading difficulties by examining the following questions:

1. How do readers with reading difficulties construct the act of reading?
 - a. What skills do readers with reading difficulties view as important or not important to the act of reading?
2. What factors contribute to their constructions of themselves as readers?
 - a. How do readers with reading difficulties rate their capabilities with regard to specific reading skills?

b. What role does supplemental technology play in their constructions of themselves as readers?

3. How do they construct effective instruction?

Significance of the study

By contributing to the small volume of literature using the voices of readers with reading difficulties, this study has the potential to inform several aspects of reading instruction for this population. First, by understanding how readers with reading difficulties construct reading, teachers can evaluate their curricula to focus more on reading processes that students may not fully understand or apply while reading. Secondly, once teachers understand how these students view themselves as readers, they can enhance the self-efficacy of their readers by providing the type of support that will help these learners feel competent. Third, by viewing reading instruction through the eyes of the students, teachers can evaluate their how they teach and materials so that they can effectively tailor their programs to meet the needs of the students.

Chapter 2

Introduction

Because the research questions that frame this study address multiple aspects of reading, it is necessary to review the existing literature that considers students' perspectives on reading and instruction. In addition, because the participants in this study have been classified as having learning disabilities, it is important to understand the literature on reading difficulties, especially in terms of the ways that instructional contexts can contribute to this problem. Finally, the literature on instructional technology must be considered in terms of the contribution it makes to the classroom context and how the students might perceive it. The research highlighted in this chapter provides a basis for this study by constructing a framework that considers students' development as a result of their experiences with literacy in various contexts.

The cause and nature of reading difficulties have been the centers of significant debates within the reading research community (Spear-Swerling, 2004). Within this discussion, three aspects of reading difficulties have been examined. First, what are the causes of reading difficulties? Are they innate in nature, a product of poor instruction or both? Research has argued for each of these cases, and, in the process, a knowledge base that provides educators with insights about reading problems has been established (Spear-Swerling, 2004). Recent literature on reading disabilities, in particular, has taken on a new view: the interactive perspective (Wixson & Lipson, 1996). According to Wixson and Lipson:

An interactive perspective recognizes the need for a more complete theory of reading disability that encompasses factors both internal and external to the reader...An interactive view suggests that reading ability and disability are not absolute properties of the reader, but rather are relative properties of the

interaction among the specific reader, text, and contextual factors (Wixson & Lipson, 1986) (p. 561).

It is important to understand that not all reading problems should be diagnosed as reading disabilities and that reading problems vary in nature. For example, Spear-Swerling (2004), drawing on the research of past theoreticians, distinguishes between three profiles of poor readers: reading disabled (RD), garden-variety poor reading (GVPR) and specific comprehension deficit (SCD). Within the RD label, students may be labeled as having a specific word recognition deficit (SWRD). The RD label differs from the GVPR and SCD labels in that the latter two may involve having a generalized language comprehension problem, whereas students labeled with RD do not exhibit this problem (Spear-Swerling, 2004).

The second issue that has sparked great controversy involves how students are diagnosed and labeled as reading disabled or poor readers. Under current educational laws, students labeled as RD fall into the broader learning-disabled category in which they must meet the criteria for psychological processing disorders (Spear-Swerling, 2004). These criteria exclude factors such as physical or emotional disabilities, sociocultural influences, poor instruction or limited English skills (Spear-Swerling, 2004). Furthermore, a student who is at risk for being labeled RD must be tested in order to verify a discrepancy between I.Q. and achievement in word recognition or comprehension (Spear-Swerling, 2004). According to Spear-Swerling, research has been highly critical of the manner in which RD students are identified:

These criticisms include concerns about (a) IQ tests being used as measures of overall “potential” for learning, (b) children who lack discrepancies being excluded from educational services, (c) psychometric problems such as regression effects, (d) lack of consistency in methods of determining discrepancy across districts and states, and (e) the fact that discrepancy criteria make early

identification of reading problems difficult. Poor readers who fail to meet the discrepancy criteria may be viewed erroneously as lacking the capacity for improvement. Perhaps most important, the discrepancy approach provides little insight into the best way to help children with reading difficulties (p. 519).

Spear-Swerling suggests that research is currently favoring “the concept of treatment resistance” (p. 519) as a way to diagnose RD. “This view suggests that children with RD are those who are relatively unresponsive to well-designed, research-based interventions—that is, those who experience persistent reading difficulties over time, despite intervention that is generally effective with most children (Spear-Swerling, 2004, p. 519). However, it is important to note that, despite the progress being made in RD identification, Spear-Swerling admits that it is extremely difficult to identify true RD students from students experiencing other reading difficulties.

The third and, for me, the most important issue concerns the nature of the instruction and whether instruction can contribute to RD or poor reading. Allington (1983) stated, “...*good and poor readers differ in their reading ability as much because of differences in instruction as variations in individual learning styles or aptitudes*” (p. 548, italics in original). Reviewing his own research and that of others, he argues that more proficient readers engage in instruction that is more often focused on the meaning of texts, while poor readers are more often limited to word accuracy and are less likely taught to monitor their own progress. Allington and Johnston (1996) argue that remedial reading programs are needed because regular instruction has failed to teach an entire population of children to read, but that these remediation programs have had little success in alleviating the problems of poor readers.

Johnston and Allington (1996) reviewed research that focused on the remedial instructional environment. They noted that little teacher involvement occurs and that

students spend most of their time doing skill-based worksheets without social interaction. More importantly, this means little time is spent actually engaged in reading and discussing meaningful text. They contend that all of these factors discourage the students from becoming involved readers:

By involvement we do not mean simply “on-task behavior”. Rather, we intend what Csikszentmihalyi (1977) calls *flow experiences*: the experience of “losing oneself in the activity.” This state is mostly likely to occur during *aesthetic* (Rosenblatt, 1978) *reading*—that is, reading that is done for the experience of reading itself rather than for what is remembered being read. Aesthetic reading is least likely to occur in remedial reading because of the focus on skills, the lack of independence and choice on the part of the readers; the use of reading material prepared specifically for the conveying of skills, the lack of diversity in allowable response; and where comprehension is considered, the oppressive concern for accurate recall (Johnston & Allington, 1996, p. 994).

To further complicate matters of instruction for students experiencing reading difficulties, one must understand that these instructional venues have become wards of a bureaucratic funding system that periodically changes the programs in which these children are served (Johnston & Allington, 1996).

Although vast amounts of experimental research have been conducted in the area of reading difficulties, only a small body of literature has used the students’ perspectives to advance our thinking about their knowledge of reading. This study is informed by the work using students’ perspectives on various aspects of reading. The following sections will review studies that have used students’ ideas about aspects of reading as well as important theoretical concepts that illuminate their knowledge.

Students’ constructions of reading

Why ask students how they conceptualize reading? Using students’ knowledge allows the teacher to build on or revise based on what the students already know (Michel, 1994). Michel states, “Through observing children and listening to their perceptions of

reading, teachers can create students' literacy experiences from a framework that the child already understands, increasing the probability of reading success" (p. 8).

Additionally, Michel points out that students' ideas about the reading act are significantly influenced by the school context. Michel studied the reading perceptions of first graders and found that when students' ideas about reading do not match those of teachers, it is because the instructional context shaped those ideas by incorporating certain kinds of literacy activities. She states:

It is important that educators recognize that many children come to school with perceptions of reading congruent with the desired educational outcome, assuming educators want children to equate reading with meaning. This study suggests that the "confusion" children exhibit is an outgrowth of the instruction they have received at school. When tasks such as "Stand up/sit down" or "Circle and underline the word" become part and parcel of reading instruction, children's perceptions of reading are colored or even formed by those tasks. From the perspective of an adult, *these perceptions can be misconstrued as confused or immature, when actually they are very logical conclusions drawn from the circumstances in which children find themselves* (Michel, 1994, p. 46, italics added).

Based on her interviews, Michel suggests that students actually have deep knowledge of the reading act and that teachers must tap into that knowledge in order to find a common ground on which to develop literacy skills. Because students' conceptions of reading are formed through interactions in the classroom, understanding students' conceptions of reading provides educators with a framework on which they can create effective instructional practices (Rasinski & DeFord, 1988; Bondy, 1990, Michel, 1994).

Stage model of reading. Because students with RD develop reading skills at a different pace than their peers, this study assumes a stage model of reading development (Chall, 1983). According to Stahl and Heubach (2005):

Stage models assume that reading is qualitatively different at different stages of development. That is, a child who is at one stage will have different skills,

knowledge, and beliefs about reading than a child at a higher stage or a lower stage. At each stage, the knowledge and skills needed for the next stage are developed (p. 26).

According to Chall (1983), readers pass through six stages of development that include emergent thinking about print, decoding, fluency, extracting information, synthesizing information and, finally, using text to weigh information for incorporation into their own views. This stage model is important in understanding why readers, especially those experiencing difficulties, may think about the act of reading in certain ways. For example, Stahl and Heubach argue that holding students in a particular stage may slow their reading progress:

Although each stage builds upon concepts developed in the previous stage, keeping children at a stage for too long can also be detrimental to their growth. Holding children to the standard of word-perfect oral reading, which might be appropriate for a child in the Decoding stage, may retard their use of context clues typical of the next stage. For example, if students are corrected for each deviation from the text whether it makes sense or not, they may not develop the risk-taking abilities needed to use context and may concentrate on saying the words “right” and not the construction of meaning (Allington, 1984) (p. 28).

Because students’ constructions of literacy acts are based on their instructional experiences (Rasinski & DeFord, 1988; Bondy, 1990; Michel, 1994; Jimenez, 1997), students who are kept too long in a stage may construct the act of reading in those terms, rather than conceptualizing reading as an act of meaning-making.

The role of ability and development in constructions of reading. It is difficult to isolate one’s reading development from one’s reading instruction. This is due, in part, to the fact that development of knowledge occurs through interaction within an environment; in other words, students and their ideas do not exist in a vacuum. This view of development was espoused by Vygotsky (1978) who believed that social mediation,

interaction that involves the use of speech, is the primary means through which a person developed knowledge.

Research has looked at the relationship between the development of reading conceptions and instructional approaches. For example, Jimenez (1997) studied the reading abilities of three learning-disabled Latino/a readers in a seventh grade special education classroom. In addition to the main focus on reading abilities, he also inquired about the students' conceptions of reading. Jimenez taught the students to use strategies during reading using cognitive strategy instruction. Data was collected through think-aloud protocols, observations and interviews. Prior to the instruction, Jimenez states:

Their overall perceptions of literacy were that reading is almost a complete mystery...The students did seem to understand that that learning to read requires effort (Sara) and that the ability to read is a desirable goal (Gabi and Felix), but their comments also suggest that they viewed reading as a rather mysterious process (p. 235).

Jimenez found that students had much better understandings of reading processes after participating in the instruction. They were able to explain the strategies and realized that "reading requires thinking" (p. 239).

Rasinski and DeFord (1988) also studied the congruence of first graders' conceptions of reading and the conceptions espoused in the literacy curricula. They examined three classrooms using different approaches and found that the instructional environment plays an important role in the students' ideas about reading and writing.

They state:

This study suggests that the manner in which children are taught to read and write is related to the conceptions children hold and take into subsequent literacy experiences. If they are taught to read and write in a way that emphasizes decoding or encoding small units of language, they tend to view reading and writing as a process of saying the words in texts correctly or spelling the words correctly with little regard for meaning. Conversely, if children are taught to read

and write in a way that emphasizes the apprehension and use of meaning, they tend to see reading and writing as purposeful and meaningful activities (Rasinski & DeFord, 1988, p. 60).

Rasinski and DeFord argue that teachers play a crucial role in children's conceptions of literacy and must consider using approaches that place value on "the underlying notions of the nature of reading and writing" (p. 60).

Another way of linking development and instruction is to trace the growth of students' knowledge over time. Johnson (2005) used a questionnaire to study how fourth graders define good reading. She found that as students progressed throughout the year, they were able to name more strategies that good readers use. In the beginning of the year, the students had 47 responses in 11 categories, while in January, they had 72 responses in 16 categories. They were also able to identify comprehension-related strategies that poor readers do not use on the January questionnaire. Johnson states that the students' conceptions of good reading developed within the course of four months. Because students did not mention important aspects of reading such as inferencing and vocabulary, it was found that the questionnaire was helpful in enabling the teacher to form a more balanced literacy curriculum.

There has been little research that examines students' perspectives on the reading act using participants in different grade levels. However, if one espouses the Vygotskian perspective that knowledge develops through social interactions, it follows that students' ideas about reading would develop as a result of their encounters with social contexts as they progress through grade levels. Dahlgren and Olsson (1986) examined the conceptions of reading among preschool and first graders. Critical of earlier studies that suggest that young students have no conceptions about reading, they found that preschool

children are quite able to express ideas about the reading act in various ways. They also found differences between the conceptualizations of the preschool children and the first graders. In addition, it was noted that preschoolers' conceptualizations of reading were related to their first grade reading performance as measured on standardized tests.

Dahlgren and Olsson suggest that it is important for young students to be engaged in metacognitive conversations about the nature and uses of reading before actually beginning the reading process.

Because of the complexities of teasing out students' constructions of reading from their instructional environments, students' constructions of reading are studied more often by comparing readers of differing ability. Early studies by Johns (1972, 1974) found that fourth and fifth graders' reading achievement is positively correlated with their conceptions of reading. Students experiencing high achievement held more complex views of the reading process. Johns classified students' responses into five categories. The responses ranged from vague conceptions to conceptions that reading involves both understanding and word recognition strategies.

Long, Manning and Manning (1985) examined perceptions of the reading process by high and low achieving first graders. The differences in responses to interview questions (based on the Burke reading interview, 1977) did not vary greatly between the two groups. However, more low achieving children indicated that a parent helped them learn how to read, while high achieving children indicated that a teacher taught them how to read. Interestingly, "almost as many low achieving as high achieving readers said they were good readers" (p. 11).

Bondy (1990) also studied constructions of reading by first graders of differing abilities. Using a Vygotskian perspective, she examined the responses of students within the framework of the instructional environment. She found that students' ideas about the nature of the reading act could be identified six different ways:

The first three definitions of reading—reading is saying words correctly, reading is schoolwork, reading is a source of status—were common among low-group children... The next three definitions—reading is a way to learn to things, reading is a private pleasure, reading is a social activity—were used almost exclusively by the high-group girls (Bondy, 1990, p. 35).

However, Bondy also found that some high achieving children constructed reading similarly to the low achieving group and some low achieving readers articulated ideas similar those found in the high achieving group. More importantly, Bondy observed that the teacher modeled the different definitions when she worked with the two groups of students, but that the teacher's practices were not enough to account for the students' ideas. Therefore, Bondy concluded that the ideas that the children held about reading were "the result of interaction between their prior knowledge about reading and the reading experiences they had in the classroom" (p.33).

Differences have also been found in older students. Osburn and Maddux (1983) examined university students' conceptions about good reading. Using an interview protocol, they asked the students about reading strategies that they use and that good readers they know use. They found that the better readers understood the reading act differently from the less skilled readers. The better readers focused on comprehension and meaning, and had a sense of what strategies to employ when they were having difficulty reading material. The poor readers, on the other hand, were focused mainly on

decoding words and could only name a couple of strategies that may or may not help them when reading.

The above studies consider students' conceptualizations of reading primarily through participants within the same grade level or age group and from a single classroom. This study differs from previous studies in two key ways. First, it considers the ideas of readers across five grade levels and three instructional settings. Second, it considers the views of students with reading difficulties without comparing their views to more able peers. Rather than seeing their ideas about reading as impoverished or unclear, it seeks to frame their ideas in within the context of their reading disabilities, instructional settings and social backgrounds.

Students' constructions of their reading abilities

Self-efficacy, or the belief that individuals have in their own capabilities within a domain, is critical in assessing their ability to engage in a task (Bandura, 1993).

Following this argument, in order to view oneself as a reader within a particular context, one must have feelings of competence about his or her reading abilities. However, teachers often overlook struggling readers' feelings of self-efficacy as playing a part of their willingness, or lack thereof, to engage in reading activities and become frustrated when these students refuse to accomplish a task. Because feelings of self-efficacy are domain-specific, students experiencing reading difficulties may not feel competent when asked to perform school-based literacy tasks, but may feel comfortable using a computer or reading magazines at home.

Self-efficacy differs from self-esteem; self-esteem is more generalized while self-efficacy is specific to the task at hand (Gaskill & Hoy, 2002). For example, a student

could have high levels of self-efficacy in art class, but low levels of self-efficacy in a math class. Bandura (1993) considers self-efficacy to be the key factor in an individual's task performance: people with high levels of self-efficacy are more successful at performing a task than people of the same ability with low levels of self-efficacy.

Alvermann (2005) also acknowledges the importance of self-efficacy in reading:

It probably comes as no surprise to learn that self-efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to perform a certain task (e.g., read a book, design a Web page, write a poem), makes a significant difference in how competent one feels in approaching that task. In fact, there is substantial research to suggest that motivation to complete certain literacy tasks is heightened (or lowered) by the perceptions we have about our own competencies in relation to those tasks (Alexander, 2005). All of us experience different degrees of self-efficacy, no matter what our age or reading "level" (p. 9).

A person's perception of their competence or incompetence is a result of the socially created context in which he or she participates (Langer and Park, 1990). The abstract features of a given context develop feelings of competence and keep a person engaged in the task at hand. For example, the research of Smith and Wilhelm (2004) suggests that when adolescent boys engaged in activities within various contexts, aspects of the environment, such as the opportunity for improvement and social interaction, influenced their feelings of competence and kept them engaged. They used the characteristics of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) to understand the literacy engagement of young men:

During flow experience, the participant (a) has a feeling of competence, (b) experiences a challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill, (c) has clear goals and feedback, and (d) focuses on the immediate experience. We believe that the linchpin of these four principles is competence because the other principles depend on it. For instance, an appropriate challenge is one that requires work to be competent but not impossible. Clear goals and feedback indicate the standard for competence and one's progress toward it; the power of the immediate is in the pleasurable experience of competence (Smith & Wilhelm, 2004, p. 455)

Similarly, Walker (2003) argues that self-efficacy in literacy contexts are created by specific instructional practices such as teaching reading strategies, self-evaluation opportunities, using alternative assessments and providing students with choices. The instructional contexts created by teachers are critical to developing perceived competence. For example, Colvin & Schlosser (1997) interviewed students about their self-efficacy and literacy learning. They found that students who held high levels of self-efficacy used a range of strategies successfully during literacy tasks. Students who did not feel competent used fewer strategies and were less successful. The students' self-efficacy beliefs were greatly influenced by teacher-student interactions and prior experiences. Bandura (1993) makes it clear that environmental feedback, which includes social comparison, influences self-efficacy beliefs. For example, students who are labeled by an educational institution as learning disabled may experience feelings of low self-efficacy just by the nature of the social comparison between "mainstream" and "special education" students. Therefore, it is important that a student's self-efficacy, or perceptions of competence, in reading be viewed through the contexts in which those beliefs are evolving.

Self-efficacy may be related to other important constructs such as interest, which may also play a major role in students' engagement with text. For instance, the work of Hidi, Berndorff, and Ainley (2002) suggests that the relationship between interest and self-efficacy may play a role in students' academic engagement. Hidi, et al suggest that, because interest and self-efficacy are domain specific, the two may mutually support one another (p. 433). Citing their own work and the work of self-efficacy researchers (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Pajares & Johnson, 1994; Renninger, 2000; Renninger &

Leckrone, 1991; Zimmerman, 2000), the authors suggest that interesting tasks may provide positive feedback which increases self-efficacy or, alternatively, that feelings of competence may increase engagement in the task which helps make the task seem more interesting (Hidi et al, 2002, p. 433). In their study of students' argument writing, interest, and self-efficacy, Hidi, et al. found that interest in writing and self-efficacy are closely interrelated.

In fact, self-efficacy, contexts and interest appear to marry the individual psychological states of a person and the environmental features that influence these states. These three dimensions are essential to reading, yet, rarely are they put in dialogue with each other in research that uses the voices of the readers themselves. While the literature on contexts and literacy is rich with students' voices, the majority of research on self-efficacy is quantitative. Very few studies have qualitatively examined the feelings of competence of readers; most studies measure self-efficacy using quantitative methods. Additionally, few studies have taken into account the context of special education classrooms when considering how students view their own competence. Unlike previous studies, this work incorporates the perspectives of participants who have been socially identified as special education students in order to garner their views of self-efficacy and of themselves as readers.

Constructing Effective Instruction

Finally, it is important to garner these students' perspectives on effective instruction, yet only a small body of literature has devoted itself to this topic. Research by Wray and Medwell (2005) found that students' perspectives about literacy instruction in schools can confirm or dispel widely held beliefs by teachers about students' participation,

enjoyment and achievement in literacy. Oldfather (1993) interviewed students and found that the most important parts of a literacy curriculum for a group of fifth graders were the opportunities for self-expression through writing and art, meaningful assignments, freedom of choice in literacy tasks, and a responsive, understanding teacher. McCabe (1996) interviewed a diverse group of teenagers attending high school in New York City about their experiences in English classes and found that students held negative views of instruction. Students reported little or no reading of lengthy novels, reading texts that are too difficult and lack relevancy in today's multicultural classrooms, reading too many short stories and too much teacher lecturing.

McCray, Vaughn and Neal (2001) found that students with reading disabilities felt that they were not given enough time to practice reading and were not provided with reading strategies that would improve their overall reading abilities. The students in McCray, Vaughn and Neal's (2001) study wanted more help from the teachers in acquiring strategies that would improve their reading. Their comments regarding teacher assistance raise a critical theoretical issue when examining how students construct effective instruction.

Theoretically, the role of social mediation in assisting student learning is critical to understanding effective instruction. Researchers have started to focus on the types of social mediation used in literacy instruction (e.g., Mariage, Englert & Garmon, 2000). Stone and Werstch (1984) studied adult-child interactions in remediation sessions. Using both a Vygotskian perspective and self-regulation theory, they contend that learning disabled children cannot self-regulate their learning without first having dialogic interaction. In the session they observed, the learning disabled child was asked to perform

a task in sequence concerning a card with the word “penny” written on it. When the child had difficulty using strategies to perform the task, the adult would intervene and re-direct the child’s efforts by questioning or commenting on what the child was doing. According to Wertsch and Stone (1984):

The clinician never completely carried out a step; rather, whenever necessary, he used speech to direct the child through the appropriate steps in the task. In these cases the child was not functioning through *self-regulation*. Instead, his strategic behavior was possible because of the *other-regulation* provided by the clinician’s directives (p. 196).

Wertsch and Stone argue that the child was successful because he or she received the appropriate verbal assistance needed to guide them through the task successfully. “In Vygotsky’s terms, when a clinician is interacting with a child in such a situation, the reasoning needed to carry out the task is being carried out in a social system (interpsychologically) rather than by an individual (intrapsychologically)” (Wertsch & Stone, 1984, p. 196). Speech played the critical role in the success of the student.

It is important to understand that not all practices aimed at assisting students are effective. Some research suggests that certain instructional practices may put readers with reading problems at a disadvantage when learning how to read. For example, Ash and Kuhn (2006) argue that “round robin reading”, a widely used practice in which students take turns reading aloud, contributes to reading difficulties. This type of reading, when performed by disfluent readers, provides a poor model of reading for other students and decreases engagement by embarrassing the struggling student in front of his or her peers. However, according to Wray and Medwell (2005), one student may perceive a practice, for example Reader’s Theatre, as being effective and engaging, while another student may perceive that same practice as ineffective. Because of this, it is important to

incorporate the views of students to evaluate practices, especially for those students for whom instruction has the potential to ameliorate years of reading difficulties. As with previous research, this study seeks to inform instructional practices in special education settings through the views of students; where it differs from previous studies is in the participants who, while classified in special education, are in multiple grade levels in different instructional settings. Further, previous studies (McCabe, 1993; McCray, Vaughn & Neal, 2001) use a small sample size and a single time point. This study garners the views of forty-five students at three different points throughout an academic year in order to account for changes in feelings about reading and instruction.

The role of assistive technology in effective classroom instruction. As the use of technology in classroom instruction continues to increase, it becomes increasingly important to garner the students' views on this aspect of the curriculum as well. As some of the participants in this study used audiobook technology to help them read their textbooks, I am briefly reviewing the literature on this form of assistive technology (AT), in relation to LWR (listening-while-reading). According to Boone and Higgins (2007):

The focus of AT often has centered on the artifacts of various technologies such as audiobooks, Braille books, computers, accessibility switches, augmentative communication appliances (e.g., speech board that provide synthesized speech), and dynamic Braille display devices. More recently, however, issues of accessibility to Web-based and other digital content have received much attention (e.g., Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1998) (p. 135).

Research has begun to examine the ways in which individuals use AT to benefit their literacy learning. For example, Anderson-Inman, Knox-Quinn and Horney (1996) examined the differences among learning disabled students using computers to assist them with study strategies. They found that students fell into one of three categories: “power users, prompted users, and reluctant users” (p. 461). The power users were highly

skilled, independent computer users who were able to solve problems and develop a successful repertoire of strategies. The prompted users were skilled, but still required the assistance of an adult periodically. The reluctant users had some skills, but could not use them to their advantage and tended to disengage easily. They suggest that ample instruction in the use of computers is a critical part of using technology in the classroom.

The use of audiobooks, a sub-category of the listening-while-reading (LWR) literature, has also been the focus of research. In the LWR approach, students listen to a recording of a competent reader as they read a passage while following along with the printed version of the text. Research on LWR usually involves a comparison of this approach and alternative reading strategies. Results have varied regarding the effectiveness of LWR.

Reitsma (1988) compared the word recognition rate and accuracy of students using LWR, guided reading or reading with computer-generated speech feedback software. He reported that students using guided reading and independent reading with computer-generated speech feedback made more gains than students using LWR. He notes two major problems with the approach. First, the readers are not compelled to look at the text while listening. Second, poor readers or readers faced with difficult texts may not be able to associate the spoken word with the printed word because of the speed of the recording. However, he did report that students were motivated to use both forms of technology.

Rasinski (1990) compared the effectiveness of LWR and repeated readings approaches in building the reading fluency of third graders. He found that both methods were effective in helping the students improve their fluency, and that neither method was

more effective than the other. Winn, Skinner, Oliver, Hale and Zeigler also (2006) studied the effects of LWR and repeated reading on adults with reading difficulties. Their study also confirmed that neither practice is more effective, but that both practices improved the fluency of these adult readers.

Theoretically, the use of tools to assist in tasks is not new to the field of psychology. Vygotsky (1978) examined how tools and signs mediate human interactions with their environments. According to Vygotsky, signs and tools mediate activity. He believed that humans' use of signs distinguished their behavior from that of animals, and that their use is a product of social and cultural interactions (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). In Vygotsky's view, however, signs and tools are distinct from one another. He states:

A most essential difference between sign and tool, and the basis for the real divergence of the two lines, is the different ways that they orient human behavior. The tool's function is to serve as the conductor of human influence on the object of activity; it is externally oriented; it must lead to changes in objects. It is a means by which human external activity is aimed at mastering, and triumphing over nature. The sign, on the other hand, changes nothing in the object of a psychological operation. It is a means of internal activity aimed at mastering oneself; the sign is internally oriented (Vygotsky, 1978).

According to Vygotsky (1978), who drew on the research of his contemporaries, animals, such as apes, are capable of using tools. Vygotsky terms this kind of activity as "practical activity." A sign, on the other hand, establishes a mental link that enables a human to think in complex ways about the situation at hand. Therefore, a sign could be, among others, a word, a number, or a picture. Action that involves the use of signs is termed "symbolic activity." Vygotsky believed that the use of signs and tools in combination with each other is what makes humans function on a higher level than animals; in other

words, the fact that we use combinations of tools and signs simultaneously is what makes us behave like humans.

However, technologies that influence mental processes are more problematic in terms of being defined as signs or tools. Werstch (2002) suggests that computers can be viewed through the Vygotskian perspective as a “cultural” and “psychological” tool (p. 105) since they have the potential to “alter the entire flow and structure of mental functions” (p. 106). While audiobook technology does not provide the same types of mediation as computer-based technology, it mediates the psychological processing of language and print. However, research on audiobook technology has been limited to the examination of its affect on reading skills, such as fluency, and reading achievement. It has not addressed the ways in which audiobook technology mediates one’s reading from the perspectives of the students using that intervention. This study incorporates the ideas of students’ using an audiobook program to examine how it affects their views of themselves as readers and their reading.

Studies of multiple aspects of reading

This study seeks to examine multiple aspects of reading from the students’ perspectives. Only a small body of literature has assumed this task thus far. For example, Ivey (1999) examined reading performance, experiences and dispositions of three middle school readers using case studies. She found that students’ performance and dispositions were influenced by their experiences in the instructional context. Furthermore, she used a variety of data collection methods and students’ voices to come to her conclusions. Ivey’s work informs this study because she considers the instructional context and materials critical to middle grade readers’ successful experiences. However, her conclusions are

based on data from three students of differing abilities in a primarily European-American school. It is uncertain whether her conclusions would be applicable to learning disabled, under-served middle grade readers in urban classrooms such as the participants in this study.

Miller and Yochum (1991) examined how students in multiple grade levels with reading difficulties viewed themselves as readers with regard to the specific skills and strategies they used when they have difficulty reading. In addition, they talked with the students about how their reading might be improved and what a good reader does when reading. Most of the students stated that they had difficulties with word recognition. These perceptions were confirmed by measuring the students' word recognition abilities. These students were able to demonstrate how they figured out a word, but used decoding strategies that were unhelpful and caused confusion. Students who reported having comprehension difficulties were unable to demonstrate how they approached the task of trying to understand a text. The students said that they could improve their reading by practicing more; yet observational data showed that most students tended to give up on reading when encountering difficulties. This study is valuable within the framework of this proposal because it suggests that students with reading difficulties are aware of their difficulties, but have problems using strategies that improve their reading skills. It also demonstrates that these readers conceptualize the reading process primarily as an act of word recognition, rather than comprehension. According to the authors, a limitation of this study was that it took place in a reading clinic outside of the students' normal instructional setting in schools. This study differs in that it is conducted in the students'

regular classroom settings and seeks to incorporate their ideas about that setting within the framework of reading difficulties.

Conclusion

The act of reading, mediated instructional contexts and perceptions of competence are married together through their dependency on social contexts. A child cannot learn to read without some form of mediation, and whether they engage in the act depends on their feelings of competence that are socially determined. Their views on the reading act are also dependent on the instructional foci and their abilities as a reader. However, very few studies have examined these concepts from the students' perspectives. Most studies using student perspectives examine aspects of reading in isolation and are not situated in complex social-cultural theory.

In addition, it is rare that studies use the voices of students with reading difficulties to examine these concepts. However, if more effective reading instruction for this population is to occur, we must understand what students know about the act of reading itself, how they view themselves as readers and how they conceptualize effective reading instruction. These questions have been less researched, but are important to reforming reading instruction, especially for struggling readers, because they provide educators with a basis for understanding the needs of their students. According to Knapp (2002), past research has been able to link students' constructions of these three aspects of reading (or reading components) with reading success, yet more research is needed in order to increase educators' awareness of the problems students face in the classroom. This study seeks to gain the perspective of readers with reading difficulties in the hopes of informing instructional practices and contributing to these readers' engagement with texts. It differs

from the studies reviewed in this section in several ways: It examines a large number of students labeled as learning disabled; it selects students across different grade levels and instructional interventions; the students represent ethnic minority groups from an economically disadvantaged urban area; the study incorporates the concept of self-efficacy, a critical factor in the willingness to learn; and the study takes into account the mediation of reading through assistive technology. Using a social lens, this study will examine the reading act, reading abilities and effective instruction through the eyes of the readers themselves.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The research reviewed in chapter 2 provides us with a basis for a study that considers multiple aspects of reading. However, much of this research lacked the voices of those who are most disenfranchised by society: struggling students of minority ethnic backgrounds, socially identified as having learning disabilities. Given that very little research has been dedicated to the voices of these readers in urban classrooms, a study of how these students view aspects of reading and reading instruction has the potential to enhance our understanding of these students and their struggles to become readers. Their perspectives can contribute to the dialogue on effective reading instruction for struggling readers. The following research questions guide the present study:

1. How do readers with reading difficulties construct the act of reading?
2. What factors contribute to their constructions of themselves as readers?
 - a. How do readers with reading difficulties rate their capabilities with regard to specific reading skills?
 - b. What role does supplemental technology play in their constructions of themselves as readers?
3. How do they construct effective instruction?

Background of Study

This study was a sub-study of a larger, quantitative study, “Evaluating the effectiveness of RFBD’s (Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic®) *Learning-through-Listening*® Program.” RFBD (www.rfbd.org), a non-profit organization based in

Princeton, New Jersey, provides recordings of books to visually impaired and reading disabled individuals who purchase a membership to order materials. The organization provided the funding to conduct a research study examining the effectiveness of their program in classroom settings.

This study took place in three K-8 schools in an urban district in New Jersey. The larger research project compared the word recognition, comprehension and fluency development of learning disabled students using audiobook technology with students who did not use the technology. Students in the intervention group listened to recordings of texts on enhanced cd players while following along with the text. Results of the broader study suggest that students using the technology in inclusion classrooms surpassed students in the control group in reading accuracy and rate; however, no differences were found among intervention and control students in resource and self-contained classrooms (Swan, Kuhn, Groff, & Roca, submitted).

The broader study also required several researchers, including the author, to be present on a daily basis at one of three urban New Jersey schools participating in the audio-book study in order to interact with the teachers and students. As part of this research, I would occasionally assist teachers with lesson plans or work one-on-one with a student. I was therefore able to develop a rapport with the students as I was a constant presence in their classrooms. This rapport enabled me to create a friendly conversational atmosphere with the students during data collection for the sub-study. The other two data collectors had similar experiences when dialoguing with the students.

I felt that the audio-book study should include a piece on students' perspectives of the technology and reading. Their ideas had the potential to inform the RFB&D

organization about ways they could enhance the design of the program in schools. In addition, I thought it was important to understand how these students conceptualized various aspects of reading beyond the use of the technology program. Therefore, I designed a sub-study that not only took into account students' ideas about the audio-book technology, but their ideas about multiple aspects of reading.

Although these data were collected as a sub-study of the audio-book evaluation study, my measures and the plan for the analyses were original as the purposes of the two studies were different. Furthermore, the results of the audiobook study relied on the quantitative data from reading assessments, while this study relied on variety of data sources, including student interviews, survey questions and classroom observations.

Design of the Study

Rationale for Research Methods The proposed study relied on complementary qualitative and quantitative data. According to Creswell (1998), research questions that ask about the “how” or the “what” of an experience call for qualitative methods:

In a qualitative study, the research question often starts with a *how* or a *what* so that initial forays into the topic describe what is going on. This is in contrast to quantitative questions that ask *why* and look for a comparison of groups (e.g., Is Group 1 better at something than Group 2?) or a relationship between variables, with the intent of establishing an association, relationship, or cause and effect (e.g., Did Variable X explain what happened in Variable Y?) (p. 17).

Furthermore, qualitative research methods are used when the researcher wants to gain personal perspectives from participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). These viewpoints would be difficult to gather by employing only quantitative methods because the participants would not have the opportunity to explain their perspectives. Marshall and Rossman (1999) state that:

Increasingly, there are calls for including children's perspectives as relevant and insightful in learning more about aspects of their worlds. This is especially true in education where all too often those most affected by educational policy and programmatic decisions—the students—are absent from inquiry (p. 115).

In order to gain struggling readers' perspectives on reading, it was important to collect data during different points in the school year because students' perspectives may become more well-defined or modified over the course of their experiences across an academic year. Additionally, a variety of data allows for more complete examination of the issues posed in the research questions. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), complementary qualitative and quantitative data sources enhance the richness of the findings.

The quantitative component allowed me to collect a large amount of data across three sites for comparison among the ability and grade-level sub-groups. The statistical analysis of this data allowed me to see if there were differences in responses among sub-groups' within and across data collection periods. This data helped support students' ideas about aspects of reading that they discussed in their interviews.

Three methods were used to collect data for this component of the research: student interviews, student surveys, and classroom observations. Each of these methods will be detailed in the following section. The following chart shows how each method relates to the research question.

Table 1.

Relationship of Research Question to Method

Research Question	Interview	Survey	Observations
1. How do struggling readers construct the act of reading?	X	X	
2. What factors contribute to their constructions of themselves as readers?	X		
a. How do struggling readers rate their capabilities with regard to specific reading skills?		X	
b. What role does supplemental technology play in their constructions of themselves as readers?	X	X	X
3. How do they construct effective instruction?	X		X

Setting The setting and participants were chosen for reasons of access. The setting for this research study took place in three K-8 schools in an East Coast urban school district. The district's students are predominantly African-American and Hispanic from low economic status backgrounds. The district consists of approximately 7500 students, and is considered by the state to be an Abbott District. The formation of Abbott districts resulted from a court case that sought to provide more equitable educational opportunities for the state's most disadvantaged children. In order to ensure that this occurred, the state is required to provide these school systems additional funding to so that their per-student allowance approximates that of a wealthier district (<http://www.nj.gov/njded/>)

[abbots/about/](#) accessed June 15, 2006).

The three schools are neighborhood schools are within walking distance from the students' homes or apartment complexes. The buildings are experiencing overcrowding, and, as a result, some of the classes take place in make-shift spaces such as large closets, teachers' lounges or mobile trailers. The classrooms involved in this study were special education resource room classes, special education self-contained classes and inclusion classes in which learning disabled students receive instruction alongside peers who do not have a learning disability.

Instructional Context At the three schools, all of the participants received literacy instruction in resource rooms, self-contained special education classrooms, or inclusion classrooms. All literacy instruction periods were 90 minutes as per a district mandate. The resource room students received instruction in other subjects either in inclusion classrooms or other resource rooms; therefore, they spent a great deal of time traveling from room to room and saw several teachers during the day. The self-contained students received all subject instruction in that classroom and had one main teacher.

The students' IEP's (Individualized Education Plans) heavily influenced the instructional program. The IEP's mandated that students participate in instruction on their achievement level and also receive exposure to grade-level material. In addition, teachers were required to teach and assess a litany of literacy standards in preparation for the yearly state assessments. However, despite the uniform requirements, the instructional contexts varied greatly from teacher to teacher. The variation in quantity and quality of teacher interaction, materials, instructional foci and student participation was formally observed at different points during the year. The observation notes were based on the

CIERA Classroom Observation Scheme (Taylor & Pearson, 2000). This scheme is meant to cover the major aspects of literacy lessons by noting the classroom grouping, the major instructional foci, the major activities, the materials used, the types of teacher-student interactions, and the type of student participation.

There were three factors that contributed to the variation in instructional contexts. The first factor was the preferences of teachers in terms of interaction, materials and grouping. Three of the teachers preferred to have the entire class work on the same material as a group so as to maximize teacher involvement; one teacher preferred a combination of whole class instruction and small group or individualized instruction; and one teacher preferred that students work independently. The second factor that impacted the instructional settings was the students' behavior. Often, one or more students displayed negative behavior that would completely disrupt instruction for long periods of time. These disruptions affected the quality and quantity of literacy instruction provided.

Finally, the introduction of the audiobook technology was a factor to which the teachers had to adjust. The audiobook technology provided by RFBD® was meant to enhance the literacy curricula by enabling students to access texts that were too difficult to read independently. The program was designed so that students could read without teacher guidance, yet still receive a source of support or scaffolding. It was also meant to help students develop their word recognition and comprehension skills since the students were meant to follow along with the printed versions of the texts while listening to the recordings. The cd player, called a Victor® machine, was equipped with special features that enabled students to speed up or slow down the recording, navigate by paragraph or page, and bookmark pages. Teachers were encouraged to use the audiobook technology

as a daily part of their curricula; this was made possible because they were able to request cd's of any book they wished to include in their lessons. Every student in the intervention group was provided with a machine for their own use, along with a set of headphones and recordings of the text that was currently being covered in class.

Participants. The students who took part in this study were also participants in a large quantitative study evaluating the effectiveness of a reading intervention program that used AT in their special education classrooms. This larger study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and all participants had parental consent. The selection criteria for participants in this proposed study were the following:

1. The participant must be in fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh or eighth grade
2. The participant must be classified as learning disabled in reading and language, and receive support from special education teachers as indicated in the students' IEPs (Individual Education Plans).

Each student meeting the above criteria was given a parental consent form written in both English and Spanish. Those students who returned the form were allowed to participate in the study. Across the three sites, 77 students were given permission to participate in the study. The population demographics are displayed in the following table:

Table 2.

Participants in audio-book study = 77

Male	Female	African-American	Latino/ Latina	Other Ethnicity	Resource Room	Self-contained SPED	Inclusion
48	31	28	50	1	39	29	11

(continued)

Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Not graded	Ages
14	23	17	13	10	2	10-14 years old

Participant selection. Participant selection for this study began by grouping the students according to Fall TOWRE scores and grade levels. The TOWRE assessment was scored according to the procedures outlined by the authors of the test to determine a score for each student. Once determined, the scores were sorted into three student achievement groups: these students fell into approximately the bottom 25%, the middle 50% and upper 25%. Next, the students were sorted by grade levels: fourth grade group, fifth and sixth grade group, seventh and eighth grade group. The fourth grade students were grouped separately because they had less experience reading various kinds of texts than the other

participants. Because of the small total numbers of fourth graders, I used relative standings to group students into high, medium and low ability groups based on their standard scores from the TOWRE. For the combined grade levels (fifth/sixth and seventh/eighth), I rank-ordered the data and randomly selected five students for each sub-group with replacement. The total number of randomly selected participants for this study was 45. Thus, a matrix was created in which sub-groups responses to survey questions were compared during the data analysis phase:

Table 3.

Student sub-groups for data analysis

GRADE	Fourth Grade	Fifth/Sixth Grade	Seventh/Eighth Grade
TOWRE SCORE			
Highest 25%			
Middle 25-50%			
Lowest 25%			

Data Collection

Interview and Survey Questions. Past research shows that the best way to gain students' insights is by speaking with them (e.g., Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Patton (1990) explains how interviews contribute to research on people's perceptions, conceptions and constructions:

The purpose of interviewing is to find out what is in and on someone else's mind. The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind (for example, the interviewer's preconceived categories for organizing the world) but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed. We interview people to find out from them those things which we cannot directly observe... We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time... We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meaning they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit (p. 278).

Interviews have been employed as a successful means of data collection in previous studies of students' perspectives on literacy issues (e.g. Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The use of interviews has specific benefits. First, it allows each student to express his or her ideas or opinions without being forced to choose from pre-set categories. Second, interviews allow a researcher to explore students' ideas in-depth by asking follow-up questions or by asking the student to clarify his or her ideas. Interviews also allow the participants to elaborate on and clarify their thoughts about particular topics in ways that observations and document analysis do not because they enable the researcher to have face-to-face conversations with the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

In this study, interviews were conducted three times during the fall, winter and spring of the academic year. These interviews were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed. The interviews either took place in classrooms that were unoccupied or in the cafeteria. The length of the interview varied because I, along with the other data collectors, was operating under three constraints. First, some teachers were reluctant to allow their students to miss large amounts of class time. Because the schools' special education programs were being audited, the teachers were held accountable for ensuring that each student received the amount of instruction time mandated in their IEP. As a

result, some teachers requested that the student only miss a part of their class. Second, some students spoke English as a second language or had speech and oral expression difficulties which led to problems expressing themselves fully. Often, I and the other interviewers had to clarify or re-phrase a question in order to elicit a response. Third, some students were less than fully cooperative at times during the interview session. Several students experienced emotional difficulties in addition to their learning disabilities. These students experienced difficulties keeping focused during the interviews.

The three interview protocols (see Appendixes A, B and C) were based on previously developed reading interviews (e.g. Burke, 1987; Ewoldt, 1986; McCray, Vaughn & Neal, 2001; Johnson, 2005; McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995; Miller & Yochum, 1991) and relevant themes in the literature that relate to students' self-perceived competence and feelings about the instructional components. The interview protocols consisted of sets of open-ended questions that provided the students with the opportunity to elaborate or initiate new topics. Students were asked questions related to the following topics:

- Activities they enjoy and activities they feel they perform well
- Out-of-school and in-school reading preferences
- How their feelings about reading have changed
- Favorite books and reading materials
- Reading habits
- How they learned to read
- What a good reader does when reading

- How they would help another reader
- How teachers/parents could help them become better readers
- How teachers/parents could make reading more enjoyable

In addition, students participating in the technology-based reading intervention program were asked to describe their feelings about the program.

During the interview, the individuals interviewing the students took the liberty to ask follow-up questions that are not on the protocol and pursue lines of thought initiated by the student. The interviewers also re-worded the standard questions in the event that a student did not understand what was being asked. Therefore, the interview protocols also served as an interview guide:

The interview guide is a list of questions or issues that are to be explored in the course of an interview. An interview guide is prepared in order to make sure that basically the same information is obtained from a number of people by covering the same material. The interview guide provides topics or subject areas within which the interviewer is free to explore, probe or ask questions that will elucidate and illuminate that particular subject. Thus the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style—but with the focus on a particular subject that has been predetermined (Patton, 1990, p. 283).

This interview format allowed me to accomplish four goals. First, in asking a standard set of questions, similar information was collected from the students at all three sites (Patton, 1990). Second, in allowing for spontaneous follow-up questions and conversations around a topic, we were able to probe deeper into relevant issues that will enrich the data. Third, we were able to follow up on previously discussed topics by including questions on the winter and spring protocols that ask about improvement in and enjoyment of reading. Finally, we built rapport with the students by creating a friendly atmosphere in which students felt comfortable expressing themselves.

During the winter and spring interviews, students were asked to respond to a question in which they had to rank specific reading skills. On the winter protocol, the students ranked the following skills in terms of how well they felt they were able to perform each: reading aloud, sounding out words, figuring out what new words mean, understanding the story, and imagining the story. On the spring protocol, the students ranked these same skills in terms of their importance to the act of reading.

In addition to the qualitative interview questions, participants were asked to respond to survey questions on the fall, spring and winter protocols. Because many of the students were not able to proficiently read the survey questions independently, the survey questions were read to them and they orally stated their choice. Questions for this survey were based on previously developed reading survey questions (Burke, 1987; Ewoldt, 1986; McCray, Vaughn & Neal, 2001; Johnson, 2005; McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995; Miller & Yochum, 1991).

In order to follow a student's line of thinking throughout the course of the year, the survey questions appeared on both the fall and spring protocols. According to Alvermann (2005), "research has been less clear...on the shifts that occur in students' motivation to read over time, especially when they have experienced years of struggling to read school-assigned texts" (p.9). In addition, research has shown that when a person experiences feelings of competence within a domain, she or he may enjoy doing that particular activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Therefore, by asking struggling readers if they like reading in or out of school and to label their reading abilities, we can look for connections among readers in terms of how they view their abilities and their enjoyment

of reading. In particular, the following three survey questions appeared on both the fall and spring protocols:

1. How do you like reading in school?
2. How much do you like reading on your own?
3. What kind of reader do you think you are?

These questions appeared on both protocols because research has shown that the instructional context can have a profound effect on students' views of their abilities (Bandura, 1993; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) and how much they enjoy reading (Oldfather, 1995) over the course of an academic year.

Classroom Observations In order to get a sense of the day-to-day literacy instruction experienced by the students, classroom observations were conducted in all three schools. Observing is a widely used method in qualitative educational research (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). According to Marshall and Rossman (1999):

Observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, and artifacts (objects) in the social setting chosen for the study. The observational record is frequently referred to as *field notes*—detailed, non-judgmental, concrete descriptions of what has been observed...Classroom observational studies are one example often found in education. Through observation, the researcher documents and describes complex actions and interactions (p. 107).

The observations enriched students' interview responses because they allowed us to witness any instructional activities, or lack thereof, that a student may mention during an interview, as well as observing the nature of the student's reading difficulties in the classroom context. Because I used a structured scheme for coding the observations, field notes focused on student-teacher interactions, materials used during the lesson, the instructional focus, and students' responses. Additionally, I focused on the students' use of the audiobook technology.

The observations took place during the students' literacy block on days and times that were convenient for the teachers. Each teacher in two of the schools was observed five times for a minimum of 45 minutes; the observations were occasionally longer if the teacher permitted the researcher or data collectors to stay in the class. The number of observations for the teachers at the third school varied from one to five because the researchers had difficulty scheduling observations with these teachers. These teachers were less receptive to using the audiobook program and were not always willing to accommodate visits from the researchers. Field notes were taken by hand or typed on a computer. During these sessions, our primary role was to observe rather than interact with the teacher and students; however, field notes also reflected any participation by us in the event that a teacher needed help assisting students. While observing, we noted the time in the field notes in five minute increments in order to create a structure for data analysis.

Reading Assessments In addition to the three primary sources of data, a reading assessment was administered to each participant during the three interview sessions. The TOWRE (Test of Word Recognition Efficiency) tests a reader's ability to decode sight words and non-words. This assessment consists of two-sub tests. In the first sub-test, the participant is asked to read a list of sight words for 45 seconds. The number of correctly read words is recorded. In the second sub-test, the participant is asked to decode non-words from a list. The number of non-words correctly decoded in 45 seconds is recorded. While these data did not directly answer a research question, this assessment enhanced the data in three ways. Because the TOWRE can be scored using grade and age level norms, the scores allowed me to gauge how much students were struggling in terms of

their ability to recognize and decode words compared to a norm. Second, the scores provided insight regarding a student's sense of competence. For example, if a student considered him or herself to be a very good reader, but only recognized five words on the TOWRE, then I could try to understand the discrepancy between their feelings of competence in reading and their evaluation as struggling. Lastly, using the TOWRE scores, I was able to better analyze the survey responses by comparing students of differing reading ability and grade levels. In addition to the TOWRE, the students were also administered the QRI-III, which tests both word accuracy and comprehension, so that we did not give the impression to the students that only word recognition is important. However, only the TOWRE was used to select participants because the scoring does not allow for subjectivity, while answers on the QRI-III could be subject to interpretation.

Data Analysis

The primary reason for the creation of student sub-groups during participant selection was based on previous literature: some studies (Johns, 1972, 1974; Dahlgren & Olsson, 1986; Bondy, 1990) suggest that reading ability and development may play a role in students' constructions of the reading act. Therefore, a framework for analyses that takes into account students' differing abilities and development was needed in order to compare responses. This grouping also served to frame the analysis of the interviews by enabling me to sample interviews of students representing different ability groups and grade levels.

Interviews The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews of 45 students were analyzed for a total of 135 interviews. To assist in the analyses, a computer

software program, NVivo, was used. Qualitative data analysis software programs are beneficial in that they allow a researcher to analyze large volumes of data and display analytical relationships as they are being formed (Creswell, 1998). The interviews were analyzed across the three data collection periods for each student. There were two reasons for this. First, in order to examine feelings of self-efficacy, the interviews for an individual must be examined together to account for changes in those feelings. Secondly, the analysis per individual enabled me to explore the development of ideas about the act of reading and reading instruction by reading across the interviews.

Rather than analyzing each transcript by the interview question, the transcript was divided into conversational episodes: a series of turns relating to a single topic. This was necessary because we allowed for follow-up questions not written on the protocols. First, I established the unit of analysis by parsing the interviews into conversation episodes, a collection of turns related to a single conversational topic. An episode occurred in one of three ways. First, and most frequently, it occurred when we asked the next interview question on the protocol. Secondly, a new episode happened when we shifted the conversation by asking a major question unrelated to the last answer given by the student. For example, here is a piece of an interview with a student, Andre¹. Here, we are discussing why he likes reading gaming magazines, when I shift the conversation to discuss school reading:

Andre: Cause I get into the gaming magazines. I read them almost every day.

Carolyn: So you read them every day. (New episode) So when I visited your class that day, and you guys were reading Bridge to Terabithia, it seems like [other student] was doing the most talking.

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

Less frequently, a student will change the direction of the conversation by making an unexpected comment. In the following example, I asked Robert, who does not like reading, if he had read any books that he liked:

C: So you don't like it. Do you ever pick up any books you do like?

R: Not really. I like to write my own books.

Since Robert initiated a new line of dialogue about writing his own books, the conversation shifted to focus on that topic.

For each conversational episode, a microanalysis was conducted using NVivo. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), the microanalysis procedure allows the researcher to analyze interview data by examining paragraphs, sentences, or words. When the researcher feels that the data reveals important information relevant to the research questions, he or she labels the data with a code (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that invokes the essence of the word, phrase, sentence or group of sentences spoken by the participants. For the purposes of this study, the codes were derived from major concepts in the literature and the actual words of the students. For example, in the following episode Sara explains why she likes reading non-fiction better than fiction:

Carolyn: You like it more than fiction?

*Sara: Yeah because it's **real**. Code from literature: the reality principle (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002)*

Carolyn: How do you feel about that?

*Sara: Well I like fiction and non-fiction but non fiction is **kind of better because it actually happened**.*

Carolyn: And you like learning about it or...

*Sara: Yeah I like learning about **new things** that happen. Code from student's word: "new things"*

In order to form relationships among data, codes must be collapsed into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998):

Eventually, the analyst realizes that certain concepts can be grouped under a more abstract higher order concept, based on its ability to explain what it going on... Grouping concepts into categories is important because it enables the analyst to reduce the number of units with which she or he is working. In addition, categories have analytic power because they have the potential to explain and predict (p. 113).

Finally, categories were collapsed into major themes which are then used to answer each research question. In coding, I noted, with the assistance of NVivo, how often a particular code or category appeared across each student's interviews as well as in the interviews of the entire sample. This was done in order to reveal the significance of certain issues as well as the absence of issues that may be important to struggling readers and instruction. The data was represented according to the major themes in relationship to the major research questions. Examples of the students' actual words that represent aspects of themes are featured significantly in chapter four.

The process of analyzing the students' words is not linear (Creswell, 1998). After reading through an individual's collection of interviews, categories began to emerge from the open coding process. These categories influenced the coding process of the next collection of interviews; I found that the categories caused me to look for instances of data that represent those categories, while remaining open to forming new categories based on the ideas of the student. Therefore, throughout the process, students' ideas were compared; however, this was not done to form a grounded theory about the concepts under examination. Rather, the comparisons were used to illuminate how different students think about the same concepts. Comparisons of multiple perspectives also allowed me to account for differences in instructional contexts, ability and grade level, all of which have been shown to play a role in students' conceptions about various aspects of reading (Bondy, 1990).

Analyses of survey questions

Using the Friedman test, analyses of the following two survey questions were conducted:

Can you rank the following reading skills in order: which skill are you the best at doing when you read?

- _ Sounding out words
- _ Reading out loud
- _ Understanding what you read
- _ Imagining the story
- _ Figuring out what new words mean

What is the most important reading skill a reader should know how to do when they read?

- _____ Understand what they read
- _____ Sound out the words
- _____ Figure out what new words mean
- _____ Imagine the story as they read
- _____ Read out loud

The responses to these questions were analyzed in two different ways: by student achievement groups (based on the fall TOWRE scores) within grade level and by achievement groups (based on the fall TOWRE scores) across three developmental grade level groups: fourth grade, fifth-sixth grade, and seventh-eighth grade. Because the data was ranked data, significance can only be determined within a sub-group; however, the mean rank for each skill was compared descriptively across groups in order to determine response differences.

In addition, responses to the following survey questions were analyzed:

1. How do you like reading in school?
2. How much do you like reading on your own?
3. What kind of reader do you think you are?

Responses within a data collection period were analyzed using ANOVA for the student achievement groups within grade level and across grade level groups. In addition, the

paired survey questions were analyzed from the fall and spring data collection periods using paired T-tests in order to compare changes in responses within and across sub-groups.

Classroom Observations In order to look for instructional patterns across observations, it was essential that the observational data be coded in systematic manner using an established observational scheme from the literature that can be modified to fit the intricacies of special education and resource classrooms. The CIERA observation scheme (Taylor & Pearson, 2000) was developed to assist teachers with evaluating and improving their literacy instruction. The observation scheme is divided into seven levels, as follows:

- Level 1: Who
- Level 2: Grouping
- Level 3: Major Focus
- Level 4: Activity
- Level 5: Material
- Level 6: Teacher Interaction
- Level 7: Expected Pupil Response

The observers divided the observation period into five minute segments, noting the times in the field notes. The field notes were then translated into tally marks on the observation scheme. Within each of these levels, the observers chose from pre-determined options based on the field notes taken during the class and placed a tally mark by that option in corresponding segment column. If none of the options fit, we marked “other/NA” within a level or created a new option under that category. Once all the segments contained tally

marks within each level, we totaled the number of tally marks by each option both for the entire observation and across the observations.

Once the observation data had been tallied, I determined percentages in each category for each teacher and across all of the teachers. I began to look for instructional patterns that may or may not have confirmed the students' feelings about the literacy instruction in which they participate. This analysis also allowed me to compare differing instructional patterns across classrooms and speculate as to how those differences might contribute to the students' feelings about literacy instruction. The analyses of classroom observations were used to support student data and also were discussed in a section devoted to the instructional contexts.

Validity and Limitations

This study seeks to gain validity in three ways. First, selection criteria were used to ensure that the participants could be classified as struggling readers. In addition to the selection criteria, the TOWRE reading assessment scores confirm that the participants were not meeting grade level expectations in reading. While TOWRE scores do not fully equate with reading ability, the scores correlate highly and are a good measure of reading achievement. Second, interviews were conducted three times so that students could modify or elaborate their views of reading while allowing me to pursue issues that were discussed in the previous interview. Third, survey questions were repeated in order to track changes in responses over the course of an academic year. In addition, a substantial sample representative of three sites was used to collect survey data. However, it is important to stress that this study is specific to the contexts and population in which it is

conducted. Because contexts are created by specific social interactions, it may not be possible to generalize the all of these findings to similar populations.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

In the following chapter, you will hear the students in this study talk about multiple aspects of reading that relate to the research concepts addressed in this study. The majority of these students were not verbal; in other words, their replies to interview questions only consisted of one or two sentences. A handful of students, however, were very eager to talk to the interviewers and offered interesting insights on various ideas about reading. Both the less verbal students and the more talkative students are featured in this chapter; however, the reader will hear from the talkative students frequently. I believe that what all of the students had to say was important, and I attempt to do justice to their ideas by incorporating as many comments as possible in this chapter.

In order to introduce some of the important ideas that will be discussed in this chapter, I would like to begin by highlighting part of a conversation I had with one of the participants in this study, Rasheem. Rasheem, an eighth grader, loved basketball. Not only did he love it, he was quite good at it. Rasheem was captain of the school's basketball team, which made him very popular, especially with the eighth grade girls. I asked Rasheem why he thought basketball was the activity he performed the best:

Carolyn: *Why would you say you're the best at basketball?*

Rasheem: *Because I can shoot, dribble, pass, everything.*

Having acquired the skills needed to play the game, he was able to evaluate his improvement in those skills:

Carolyn: *How do you know when you get better in basketball?*

Rasheem: *Because one time, when I shoot, my hand turned this way so it will go in, so now instead of going straight, it goes this way (he shows me the turn on his hand).*

Carolyn: *So now you have a new bend on your hand. So how did you get to this point where you can do these kinds of things?*

Rasheem: *I've been practicing with my friends.*

Practicing was a key part of the basketball game for Rasheem. When I asked him to compare his basketball playing with reading, he did not hesitate to answer:

Carolyn: *Alright, so let's compare basketball and reading. Which one do you think you are better at?*

Rasheem: *Basketball.*

Carolyn: *You think you're better at basketball. Why would you say this?*

Rasheem: *Because I'm good at basketball.*

Carolyn: *How do you know you're good at it?*

Rasheem: *Practice every day.*

Rasheem, however, was less articulate about his school reading. He mentioned that reading was boring and that he did not like reading to himself or reading out loud. Nor did he read every day in school. Unlike his basketball playing, he was not able to assess his reading improvement:

Carolyn: *So do you think your reading has changed since the beginning of the year?*

Rasheem: *I don't remember.*

Carolyn: *What about since last year? Do you feel the same way about reading this year as you did last year?*

Rasheem: *I don't know.*

Carolyn: *Alright, do you think your reading has improved since seventh grade?*

Rasheem: *I don't really read.*

Yet, Rasheem was still a reader. He read about his favorite NBA teams every day on websites:

Rasheem: *I go on the computer and read about basketball.*

Carolyn: *Now, wait a minute, if you go on the computer and read about basketball, that counts as reading. So where would you read about basketball?*

Rasheem: *The Lakers and some other teams.*

Carolyn: *So there are team sites? Or is it like ESPN?*

Rasheem: *Teams.*

Carolyn: *Is that reading hard or easy?*

Rasheem: *It's easy.*

Carolyn: *How come?*

Rasheem: *I like it. I like some of the teams. I mostly read about the Lakers.*

Carolyn: *Would you say that you are good at it?*

Rasheem: *Yeah.*

Carolyn: *How do you know you're good at it?*

Rasheem: *'Cause I always read it.*

Carolyn: *How often do you read it?*

Rasheem: *Every time I get a chance, I go on the computer.*

Reading about sports was a different kind of reading for Rasheem. It was enjoyable and sustained his interest:

Rasheem: *If I'm reading sports, I'll read it to myself.*

Carolyn: *Okay, so wait, if you're reading sports you read it to yourself and do you get tired after a while of reading it?*

Rasheem: *No.*

Carolyn: *How come? Why is that?*

Rasheem: *Cause it's players that are in the NBA, everybody's famous in the NBA, the players in the NBA are in the book.*

It could be that Rasheem's sense of competence in basketball carried over to his reading about basketball. He understood what he was reading because he knew how to play the game. The frequency in which he engaged in that type of reading also increased his sense of competence because it enabled him to practice reading that kind of material every day. While Rasheem was not able to articulate what kind of instructional strategies would help him become a better reader, he felt that reading about his interest in school would help him enjoy reading more. His ideas about skills, practice and reading interests were also mentioned frequently by the other participants in this study. Rasheem's insights about why he was so good at basketball, why he liked reading about basketball and his ambivalence about school reading provides a foundation for examining the concepts addressed in this study. In reading the following chapter, I hope that readers will keep Rasheem's insights in mind as they listen to the readers talk about their perspectives on various aspects of reading.

Constructing the Act of Reading

The Importance of Skills

Reading processes, such as word recognition and comprehension skills, text involvement and strategy use are central to the act of meaning-making. Moreover, we

want our students to recognize the facets that constitute good reading in order to make them aware of their own reading acts. Past research suggests that students with reading difficulties in word recognition and comprehension may lack the mental energy to focus on meaning-making because they become bogged down trying to decode words (Spear-Swerling, 2004). After watching most of the students struggle to decode words on the TOWRE assessment, I was prepared for students to lack emphasis on comprehension when asked about the importance of skills to good reading. We asked students to rank a set of skills (“understanding what they read”, “figuring out what new words mean”, “sounding out words”, imagining the story” and “reading out loud”) in order of importance to the act of good reading. Quantitative analysis of the skill rankings supports the students’ emphases on understanding text. Analysis showed that the entire sample ranked comprehension-related skills, “understanding the story” and “figuring out what new words mean” as the most important skills to the act of good reading when asked to choose from among these five skills.

Using the Friedman test, mean ranks for each skill were determined within each grade-ability level sub-group, as well as for the grade level groups and the relative ability level groups. In some cases, the differences among the skill rankings within a sub-group were found to be statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level, which means that those students felt that the highest ranked skill was significantly more important to the act of good reading than other skills. For example, seventh and eighth grade students in the grade level group felt that “understanding what they read” was significantly more important than “reading out loud”, which they ranked as the least important skill to reading. This evidence is found in the difference between the mean ranks of those skills

(1.83, 4.27, respectively). The mean ranks of the highest ranked skill by sub-group are indicated in tables and 5:

Table 4.

Most important skill to the act of good reading

Grade	4 th Grade	5 th -6 th grade	7 th -8 th Grade
	Understanding what they read	Understanding what they read	Understanding what they read
Ability Group	2.14 (N=14)	1.67* (N=15)	1.83* (N=15)
High (relatively)	Understanding what they read	Understanding what they read	Understanding what they read
Understanding what they read	2.00 (N=5)	2.00 (N=5)	1.30* (N=5)
1.77* (N=15)			
Middle	Figure out what new words mean	Understanding what they read	Understanding what they read
Understanding what they read	1.88 (N=4)	1.50 (N=5)	1.50* (N=5)
1.71* (N=14)			
Low (relatively)	Understanding what they read	Understanding what they read	Figure out what new words mean
Understanding what they read	2.20 (N=5)	1.50 (N=5)	2.10 (N=5)
2.13 (N=15)			

*p < .01

Note. A fourth-grade student in the middle ability group was suspended from school during the May data collection period and his interview was incomplete; however, this does not affect the validity of the Friedman test.

Table 5.

Understanding what they read

Grade	Rank	Mean Rank
4th	1	2.14
Low group	1	2.20
Middle group	2	2.25
High Group	1	2.00
5 th -6th	1	1.67*

Low group	1	1.50
Middle group	1	1.50
High group	1	2.00
7 th -8 th	1	1.83*
Low group	3	2.70
Middle group	1	1.50*
High group	1	1.30*

* $p < .01$

Note. The reader should keep in mind that the ability groupings are based on relative scores when examining the tables in this chapter. The students in high group still experienced reading difficulties and read below grade level.

Understanding what they read. The research reviewed in chapter two has suggested that grade and ability levels may play a role in students' understanding about reading; in other words, students' understandings become more comprehensive as they develop in ability or progress through grade levels. These rankings do not show a conclusive developmental trend because two of the 4th grade groups and two of the relatively low ability groups ranked "understanding what they read" first (see Table 6). Although the mean ranks increase if one looks at the overall relative ability groups and grade groups, this is not enough evidence to support the conclusion that the students of relatively low ability in the study did not place high priority on comprehension because the relatively low ability group (N=15) ranked "understanding what they read" first. In addition, the combined subgroups within the grade and relative ability groups ranked "understanding what they read" first.

In the process of the rankings, we also asked some students to tell us why they ranked the skills the way they did. Andre was the most verbal about the need to understand what is being read. In previous interviews, Andre had focused on what he termed the "pronouncement" of words so I figured that he would choose "sounding out the words" as being the most important skill to reading. However, he surprised me and

picked “understanding what they read” as the most important. I asked why he chose this answer, and his reply sparked the following exchange:

Andre: Because if they read it and they don't know what they're saying, then what's the point in reading it?

Carolyn: What if a reader can say all the words perfectly but they don't know what it means; what do you think about that?

Andre: It's nothing, some people can do that and some people can't. As long as you can understand the story in your mind then that's good.

Andre, whose reading ability placed him in the top twenty-five percent of the sample, was one of the more articulate students in the study regarding reading and understood that the goal of print engagement is to make meaning.

This is what some of the other students had to say about “understanding what they read” as they ranked their choices:

Sara: Understand what they read- 'cause if you don't understand what you're reading then there's no point in reading the book, because you're gonna be, like, puzzled (middle group, ranked “understanding” second).

Jasmine: 'Cause in order for you to know what an author is trying to say to you is by you understanding the book (high group, ranked “understanding” first).

Kendall: Understand what they read- if you understand then the book will be good (low group, ranked “understanding” third).

Antonio: Understand what you read- because if you don't understand what you read then what's the point of reading that story (middle group, ranked “understanding” first).

Shanice: Because if you understand what you read you can get into the book (high group, ranked “understanding” first).

What was interesting about a few of the responses concerning meaning-making was that reasons were based on the need to perform in school, rather than the intrinsic need to make meaning from text:

Damian: *Because when you're done with the story you never know if they're going to ask you questions (high group)*

Corinne: *Because you need to always understand what you're reading so if you have to, like, give a book report or something, then you'll understand the assignment (middle group)*

Briana: *Because if the teacher asks what was the story based on, we're gonna have to answer. Now if we didn't pay attention, then we're not gonna get it right (low group)*

The students' comments were not particularly articulate; more importantly, however, little mention of understanding text was made by students when discussing various ideas about reading. Therefore, while students may have ranked "understanding what you read" first, many of them may not have fully comprehended the meaning of the phrase or they only think of textual understanding as a process of lower-level literal meaning-making, rather than a transactional process (Rosenblatt, 1978) that invites critical and complex thinking. There are two reasons why this may be true. First, as we will see in a later section, students did not mention comprehension when asked what makes a person a good reader. Second, when asked about strategies they used when having difficulties, most students' comments were limited to word-level strategies (such as "sounding out") or were unclear. In general, students' ideas were often focused on sounding out or learning words, rather than reading for meaning. I do believe that they understood that the goal of reading was to understand text; however, I think their definition of understanding may be limited to literal recall of text ideas.

Sounding out the words. Groups were also in agreement about the importance of "sounding out the words". In general, most groups ranked "sounding out the words" second to the importance of good reading and there did not seem to be any evidence across sub-groups to suggest developmental trends as indicated by the tables 6 and 7:

Table 6.

<i>Sounding out the words</i>		
Grade	Rank	Mean Rank
4th	2	2.68
Low group	3	2.80
Middle group	3	3.13
High Group	2	2.20
5 th -6th	2	2.83
Low group	3	3.40
Middle group	2	1.90
High group	3	3.20
7 th -8th	2	2.33
Low group	2	2.40
Middle group	2	2.20
High group	2	2.40

Table 7.

<i>Relative Ability group rankings: Sounding out words</i>		
Ability Group	Rank	Mean Rank
Low	2	2.87
Middle	2	2.36
High	2	2.60

Students' comments reflected the fact that by sounding out a word, they will recognize the word when they encounter it again:

Sam: *Cause when you sound out the words, when you come to it again you will know it already* (middle group, ranked "sounding out" first)

Tomas: *Sound out the words- because what if you don't know a whole word, you just sound it* (low group, ranked "sounding out" first)

Kendall: *Sound out the words- because when you sound out the words you learn it on your own and then you sound it out right and you get it right* (low group, ranked "sounding out" first)

Francisco: *Because it helps you. It helps you read and the new words. How to sound it out. And then when they ask you again, you'll memorize it* (low group, ranked "sounding out" first)

None of these students represented the relatively high ability group, and three of them represented the relatively low ability group. However, a couple of students representing the middle and relatively high groups knew that one must decode a word in order to read for meaning:

Tiffany: *Because some people actually don't know how to sound the words. So you have to actually sound the words.*

Interviewer: *Okay. How come you have to sound the words out?*

Tiffany: *So you can know what the words mean* (high group).

Sara: *Sound out the words- because it helps you pronounce the words and if you don't know the words, you could try to pronounce it and it might help you get a glimpse of what it means and not just skip it, like if you don't know a word like 'remember' you pronounce it. It's better to sound out the word than to just ask another person* (middle group).

The emphasis on sounding out words may have arisen from the fact that these students were burdened by the task of decoding as they read, making them aware of the importance of the skill to the overall reading process. The importance placed on comprehension and word recognition by the majority of the groups shows that these readers understood that the act of reading is comprised of two major processes: comprehending and word recognition. They understood that the goal of reading is to make meaning, most likely at a basic level, but to achieve that goal, one must be able to recognize individual words. Of the two skills, students mentioned aspects of reading relating to decoding, recognizing and “pronouncing” words more frequently during the interview sessions.

Other reading skills. With regard to the other skills: “figuring out what new words mean”, “imagining the story” and “reading out loud”, there were less agreement among

the groups. The following tables indicate that groups felt differently about the importance of these skills (tables 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13):

Table 8.

Figure out what new words mean

Grade	Rank	Mean Rank
4th	3	3.07
Low group	3	3.70
Middle group	1	1.88
High Group	4	3.40
5 th -6th	4	3.50
Low group	5	3.70
Middle group	4	3.80
High group	3	3.00
7 th -8th	3	2.93
Low group	1	2.10
Middle group	3	3.10
High group	4	3.60

Table 9.

Relative Ability Group rankings: Figure out what new words mean

Ability Group	Rank	Mean Rank
Low	4	3.17
Middle	3	3.00
High	3	3.33

Table 10.

Imagining the story

Grade	Rank	Mean Rank
4th	4	3.32
Low group	2	2.30

Middle group	4	3.50
High Group	5	4.20
5 th -6 th	3	3.47
Low group	2	2.80
Middle group	3	3.60
High group	4	4.00
7 th -8 th	4	3.63
Low group	5	4.20
Middle group	4	3.20
High group	3	3.50

Table 11.

Relative Ability group rankings: Imagining the story

Ability Group	Rank	Mean Rank
Low	3	3.10
Middle	4	3.43
High	5	3.90

Table 12.

Reading out loud

Grade	Rank	Mean Rank
4 th	5	3.79
Low group	5	4.00
Middle group	5	4.25
High Group	3	3.20
5 th -6 th	5	3.53
Low group	4	3.06
Middle group	5	4.20
High group	2	2.80
7 th -8 th	5	4.27
Low group	4	3.60
Middle group	5	5.00
High group	5	4.20

Table 13.

Relative Ability group rankings: Reading out loud

Ability Group	Rank	Mean Rank
Low	5	3.73
Middle	5	4.50

High

4

3.40

Whereas students were articulate about the need for comprehension and word recognition, they did not have much to say about the other skills. A couple of students pointed out that the skills are hierarchical; in other words, you need one skill in order to proceed with the next. For example, Antonio, who ranked “understanding what they read” first, “imagining the story” second and “reading out loud” third had this to say about his choices, “‘Cause first you have to understand the story, imagine what you are reading, then you can read it out loud so you don’t mess up.”

In order for Antonio to read aloud fluently, he had to understand and imagine what he was reading. Sara also felt that reading aloud accurately required the rest of skills. She mentioned in our interviews that she enjoyed reading aloud to other people, although she ranked it last in importance:

Carolyn: *But you like reading out loud though.*

Sara: *Yeah, but sounding out words is kind of better.*

Carolyn: *It’s more important?*

Sara: *Yeah, it’s more important than reading out loud, and if you do all those things, you could read out loud without making any mistakes and trying not to embarrass yourself.*

A few students remarked that they did not like reading aloud as they ranked their choices. It follows, then, that the low mean ranks “reading out loud” earned could be related to the students’ dislike of that skill.

In sum, students seemed primarily concerned with the importance of understanding text, most likely at the literal level, and decoding words. According to the observations, on average, the majority of the instructional time was spent, when not reading, on orally answering low-level comprehension questions about texts. Higher-

level discussions or writing about texts, which would lead to students' using their imagination, were conducted less frequently than lower-level comprehension instruction. This resonates with research on remedial reading instruction that suggests it is primarily focused on accurate remembering of text and word recognition, rather than text engagement (Johnston & Allington, 1996). While some teachers devoted time to vocabulary instruction, I could find little evidence of word recognition strategy instruction, other than the teachers assisting students in decoding words. In fact, on average, less than one percent of instructional time was devoted to word recognition or phonemic awareness instruction. In addition, students read aloud frequently, often in round-robin formats. Therefore, the students' emphasis on lower-level comprehension and word recognition was, perhaps in part, due to the emphasis on comprehension in class, as well as the lack of word recognition instruction. This left them struggling with decoding and might have made them more aware of the importance of word recognition.

Perspectives on the act of reading

In addition to skills, students offered ideas about other aspects of reading and the characteristics of good readers that contributed to their constructions of reading. Their ideas encompassed the following: text involvement, cognitive energy, practice, effort, and the vehicular nature of reading. I will highlight these ideas in the following section.

Text Involvement. Beyond the cognitive processes of comprehension and word recognition, the act of reading is also comprised of transactional processes in which a reader becomes involved with a text (e.g., Rosenblatt, 1978). Allington and Johnston (1996) suggest that students experiencing reading difficulties may lack text involvement because of the instructional emphasis on skills. While a few students equated liking

reading with being a good reader, none of the students mentioned getting involved with the text as an aspect of good reading. However, this does not mean that all of the students lacked involvement or did not enjoy reading. Throughout the interviews, I found several instances in which students talked about getting involved with texts. For example,

Antonio enjoyed getting involved with the characters:

Carolyn: *What do you enjoy about reading?*

Antonio: *Reading other people's imagination.*

Carolyn: *Oh, can you tell me a little more about that?*

Antonio: *Like in the "Series of Unfortunate Events", the guy, he was kind of crazy, but he thought he was okay, and the other people thought he was crazy, and he's thinking like, "Oh, I'm so perfect", and other people think he's crazy.*

Carolyn: *And how does this make reading fun?*

Antonio: *Because sometimes their imagination is funny.*

Maurice enjoyed using his imagination to predict what characters might do or look like:

I have a good imagination. You can talk about the "Lost Lake", nobody found it yet, but I think about that. Same is for "Dragon Ball Z", kind of, you can guess what they're gonna do. Or if you read a chapter book like "The Legends of Zelda", and you know Zelda is an elf so you think of what he's gonna look like, but then when you get a book or see a cover, sometimes I can predict and I'm right.

Shanice likes getting into mysteries for the suspense:

Carolyn: *And you also like mysteries right?*

Shanice: *Yeah because it keeps you into the book.*

Carolyn: *How does it keep you into the book?*

Shanice: *'Cause, like, when you think you're getting close to the end of the book and you're about to find out who did it, if you're reading like a killing book, you think you find out who did it, but you really didn't, you just keep reading until you find out.*

Andre felt that his reading had improved because he was able to become involved with the text. He did not want to read just for the sake of going through the motions of reading, he wanted to become involved:

Carolyn: *How do you know you have improved in reading this year?*

Andre: *'Cause when I read, I read like I want to get into it.*

Carolyn: *Now explain to me what that is, when you get into a story, because that's very interesting.*

Andre: *When you get into a story that means that you like it and you want to keep on reading it to find out what's going to happen later on in the story.*

Carolyn: *So you're reading to get into the story, not just to read the words.*

Andre: *It's to read both, and to see what's gonna happen at the beginning, the end, and the middle.*

Carolyn: *So what else makes reading fun?*

Andre: *Like the way you read it.*

Carolyn: *What do you mean?*

Andre: *Like if you read it with emotion.*

Carolyn: *So it's more fun to read it with emotion?*

Andre: *Yeah like you want to read it, not just to read.*

Jada, who really enjoyed reading, spoke about her ability to imagine:

Because I love to read and when I read I have imagination. And I am a very good imaginationer.

The students who made these comments were representative of the middle and relatively high ability groups. What is note-worthy about these students is that they actually seemed to enjoy reading, despite having to overcome significant reading impairments. However, students with very little word recognition skills may not have a chance to become

involved with a text because they are unable to get past the basic stages of decoding (Spear-Swerling, 2004). When I asked Sophia, one of the lowest readers in the study, what would make her enjoy reading more, she answered, “Learn how to read the words.” Sophia wanted to read, but lacked the skills to needed to do so. She even admitted to making up words in the book when she tried to read to her younger brother:

Carolyn: *And how do you feel when you read to him?*

Sophia: *Well sometimes I get annoyed so I just invent the words.*

Carolyn: *Does he like it when you read to him?*

Sophia: *Yeah, sometimes he says, “Are you reading the words that it says in the book?” and I tell him, “Okay, yes.”*

The more advanced readers in the study were involved with their texts because they had better word recognition skills and were able to read more meaningful texts such as “The Outsiders” and “Bridge to Terabithia”, whereas students like Sophia and Robert, who were very low ability readers, had to read primer-level texts or else were placed in texts that were much too difficult for them and did not allow for the same level of involvement as their more skilled peers.

Reading Takes Mental Energy. As we saw in some of the students’ comments about sounding out words, trying to perform that skill oneself is important to the students’ acquisition of new words. I also noticed that some students using the audiobook technology thought of reading as a cognitive process that needs to be performed by the reader. When asked about the preferences for reading with or without the technology, four students offered the following responses:

Shanice: *Because if I don’t feel like reading, all I have to do is read along with the book, I don’t have to read it to myself. I think it’s the laziest thing to do so far, let someone else*

read for you. You just press play, turn to the page you're going to, sit there and read along, flip the page.

Terrell: *The machine is just telling you what the words are, and I like reading better.*

Maria: *I don't really like doing the machines because I like reading to myself, I want to learn more.*

Francisco: *Because if somebody reads to you, it won't help you, like, learn.*

Interviewer: *Won't help you learn?*

Francisco: *How to read by yourself.*

These comments relate to a larger issue that will be discussed in the chapter: that of practice. Despite the struggle to painstakingly decode words, many of these students felt that practice and being able to try reading on one's own was critical to the reading process.

Reading as a Vehicle. Some students also viewed the act of reading as important and purposeful in the sense that it was a vehicle through which an objective can be achieved. For example, Andre felt that the purpose of reading is to enable him to do something, learn about something or to achieve a goal. His sense of competence in reading was caught up with the fact that he wants to be a professional basketball player:

Carolyn: *So you still feel that you are better at reading than you are at playing basketball, even though you practice basketball every single day. How come you still feel like that?*

Andre: *Because reading, it gives you a way to be whatever you want. If you aren't reading, how are you going to have a contract to play basketball?*

Carolyn: *I don't know, you better read that contract!*

Andre: *See? That's what I mean.*

Two students also echoed Andre's sentiments about needing to read for the future:

Guy: *It was very fun because when, uh, like, the reading can help you with anything because there's a lot of people and they can teach you like math and things, you've gotta read too.*

Interviewer: *You've gotta read for lots of things.*

Guy: *To understand what they're saying, and saying to you in the paper, you've gotta sign this, and if you don't understand and you signed it, it could be something bad.*

Sophia: *Because it helps you learn to be a teacher, the best thing you need to do is know how to read and write because maybe when you grow up you want to be a lawyer.*

Some students saw reading as a vehicle for immediate enjoyment. These students remarked that they read video game manuals, cheat code books for video games, cookbooks, and drawing books to help them enjoy an activity. For these students, they viewed this kind of non-academic reading as a means that would facilitate their engagement in enjoyable activities.

Taken together, these perspectives show that students were able to think about the reading process in meaningful ways that make sense to them. The students seemed to understand that reading involves doing some kind of cognitive work, be it sounding out words or making meaning from the text. This is important because it shows that these students, despite having reading difficulties, came to the instructional context with definite ideas about the process of reading that were further shaped by their current experiences, such as those involving audiobook technology. Bondy's (1990) research also found that students' ideas about reading were socially constructed through past and current instructional experiences.

Constructing Good Readers

While students had definite opinions about the importance of certain skills to good reading, they did not necessarily equate those skills with being a good reader. When asked what makes a person they knew a good reader, they gave a variety of reasons that focused on word recognition, effort, speed and accuracy, oral reading, practice, quantity

and liking to read. For example, students who focused on word recognition gave comments like the following:

Andre: *Because she can pronounce all the words very well* (high group).

Destiny: *She knows words* (low group).

Students who equated good reading with effort gave these responses:

Robert: *If they don't know a word they try to sound it out* (high group).

Darius: *Because they went to school and they never gave up* (low group).

Andre: *She keeps on trying to read it over and over* (high group).

Some students felt that liking to read constitutes being a good reader:

Jada: *My sister. She's a very good reader. She likes to read* (high group).

Kendall: *Nothing really, he's just like me, he likes to read. That's where I got my reading skills from* (low group).

Nancy: *He likes reading. He goes to comic book stores* (middle group).

Other students focused on oral reading:

Courtney: *Someone who speaks clearly, they have good posture when they read, and they don't cover their face when they read* (middle group).

Interviewer: *Who is a good reader?*

Dom: *Mrs. (Teacher's name).*

Interviewer: *Why?*

Dom: *Her voice.*

Interviewer: *What about it?*

Dom: *She changes it a little* (low group).

Often students would combine reasons for good reading:

Sam: *They practice a lot. They read without making a mistake on a word* (middle group).

Mercedes: *Because she reads fast. And she knows big words* (high group).

Maria: *He, like, doesn't make mistakes, he's always checking over what he reads* (high group).

Guy: *She reads fast and she always likes to read, she always reads* (low group).

There are two interesting aspects about the students' ideas concerning good readers. First, the students' comments were similar across the grade-ability groups; in other words, students in one group did not seem to think differently about good readers than students from another group. Second, they lacked emphasis on understanding and text involvement. Despite the fact that students, as a whole, felt that comprehension was important to the act of reading and were articulate about the need to understand text when asked to rank reading skills, these ideas did not present themselves when asked about good readers. I was not able to discern how or why the students distinguished being a good reader from the act of good reading. Word recognition was important to both, but comprehension was not. Perhaps the students assumed that comprehension was inherent to being a good reader, or, as research (Spear-Swerling, 2004) suggests, they are focused heavily on decoding and the amount of effort the process of reading takes.

In summary, there were little differences among students' views of reading. Students' views of the act of reading encompassed the following: an act of understanding and word recognition, a cognitive act that takes practice and effort, and a vehicle through which other objectives are achieved. While a few relatively higher ability students made more articulate comments than those of their relatively lower ability peers, this did not occur frequently enough to support claims that students of relatively higher ability conceptualize reading differently. However, even the relatively higher ability readers are still struggling readers. The quantitative data also suggests similarities in students' thinking. However, students in the middle and relatively high ability groups were more articulate about text involvement, while relatively low ability students had more to say

about decoding words. As these relatively higher ability students continue to make progress, they may start to conceptualize reading as more complex process.

Students Construct Themselves as Readers

How do the students rate themselves?

Most of the students in the study viewed themselves as good readers. When asked to rate themselves as readers, students' reasons for their choices were strikingly similar to the reasons students gave when asked why someone is a good reader. Again, students mentioned frequency and practice, reading speed, reading accuracy, liking to read, effort and word recognition. Those students who viewed themselves to be "not so good" or "not good at all" said they had trouble with reading in general. In several cases, students could not give a reason for their choice. The following tables (18-21) indicate students' choices by sub-group:

Table 14.

What kind of reader do you think you are?

4th Grade Groups

	Fall				Spring			
	Very good	Good	Not so good	Not good at all	Very good	Good	Not so good	Not good at all
High	1	3	1	0	2	3	0	0
Middle	0	3	2	0	0	2	2	0
Low	0	3	2	0	0	3	2	0

Table 15.

What kind of reader do you think you are?

5th-6th Grade Groups

	Fall				Spring			
	Very good	Good	Not so good	Not good at all	Very good	Good	Not so good	Not good at all
High	3	2	0	0	3	2	0	0
Middle	0	2	1	2	0	5	0	0
Low	1	1	2	1	1	3	0	1

Table 16.

What kind of reader do you think you are?
7th-8th Grade Groups

	Fall				Spring			
	Very good	Good	Not so good	Not good at all	Very good	Good	Not so good	Not good at all
High	1	4	0	0	2	3	0	0
Middle	0	5	0	0	0	4	1	0
Low	1	2	2	0	1	1	3	0

Table 17.

What kind of reader do you think you are?
Ability groups

	Fall				Spring			
	Very good	Good	Not so good	Not good at all	Very good	Good	Not so good	Not good at all
High	5	9	1	0	7	8	0	0
Middle	0	10	3	2	0	11	3	0
Low	2	6	6	1	2	7	5	1

A paired t-test indicated that there were no significant differences in mean responses on the fall and spring protocols across all groups. However, an ANOVA of the fall responses by ability group (N=45) revealed that the differences in response among relative ability groups was significant at $p = .015$. An ANOVA of the spring responses (N=44) by relative ability groups also revealed significant differences in responses at $p = .002$. The

students in the relatively high ability group viewed themselves, on average, as good or very good readers, while the middle and relatively low ability groups were less consistent in their views. Post-hoc tests revealed differences between the relatively high and middle groups, and the relatively high and the low groups. More low-ability readers ranked themselves as “not so good” or “not good at all” more often than the middle or high ability groups. While no students in the high ability group chose “not good” or “not good at all”, some students in the low group chose these answers on both the fall and spring protocols. Surprisingly, none of the students in the middle group chose “very good” on either the fall or spring protocols.

The results are consistent with the literature on self-efficacy, which argues that the less often one experiences success in a domain, the less he or she will think of his or her capabilities within that domain. For example, the one student in the relatively low ability who ranked himself as being “not good at all” in reading, admitted he could not read. Before I could even begin an interview with him, he told me how he hated reading because he could not do it:

Carolyn: *Okay, I am going to ask you a few questions about reading---* (cuts interviewer off)

Robert: *I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.*

Carolyn: *Okay, so you told me you don't like reading.*

Robert: *I just hate it.*

Carolyn: *Why do you feel that way about reading?*

Robert: *Because I can't do it. And when I tried to sound out the words my head starts hurting, and I don't like it.*

Unfortunately, Robert did not change his opinion about his reading over the course of the year. He lacked the specific word recognition skills that would enable him to access texts and eventually help him to understand and enjoy them. In general, basic word recognition and decoding skills were very important to these students, especially students in the

relatively low ability group. Despite my witnessing their tremendous struggles to painfully decode words at a slow pace, many students felt that this was their best skill. Table 22 indicates how students ranked their ability to perform specific skills (“understanding the story”, “figure out what new words mean”, “sounding out words”, “imagining the story”, “reading out loud”) when reading:

Table 18.

Best performed skill by grade and ability levels

Grade	4 th Grade	5 th -6 th grade	7 th -8 th Grade
	Sounding out words 2.33 (N=15)	Imagining the story 2.47 (N=15)	Sounding out the words 2.73 (N=15)
Ability Group			
High	Imagining the story 2.40 (N=5)	Figure out what new words mean 2.20 (N=5)	Understanding the story 2.20 (N=5)
Reading out loud 2.60 (N=15)			
Medium	Sounding out words 2.40 (N=5)	Imagining the story 1.80 (N=5)	Imagining the story 2.40 (N=5)
Imagining the story 2.23 (N=15)			
Low	Sounding out words 1.20 (N=5)	Imagining the story 2.00 (N=5)	Imagining the story Sounding out the words (tie) 2.40 (N=5)
Sounding out the words 2.33 (N=15)			

Using the Friedman test, mean ranks were determined for each of the skills within each group. None of the rankings were found to be statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level, which means that students with a group did not feel strongly about their abilities to perform a particular skill much better than other skills. Only two high-ability groups felt they performed the comprehension-related skills best. This is in agreement with research (Spear-Swerling, 2004) that suggests students who do not have to devote all of their mental capacities to decoding have resources left for comprehension. Although students

felt that understanding what is being read was the most important skill to the act of reading, most did not feel that this was their strongest skill. This could be that many of the students used most of their cognitive energy decoding words and devoted little energy to comprehension processes (Spear-Swerling, 2004). Consistent with their emphasis on decoding as important to good reading, six sub-groups ranked “sounding out the words” as their best skill. Furthermore, “imagining the story” was not considered as important to good reading as comprehension and word recognition skills, yet seven sub-groups ranked it as their best skill. With the exception of decoding, students’ ideas about practicing, reading speed and accuracy, effort and liking to read were more important to their views of themselves as good readers and to good reading in general, rather than being able to perform specific skills.

Strategies

The strategies mentioned by the relative ability groups also support the data revealing differences in how the groups viewed themselves as readers. Allington’s (1983) work has shown that readers of lower ability receive instruction that is different from their more capable peers. It follows, then, that students with reading difficulties may not have a large repertoire of strategies to use when they encounter difficult text. The students in this study were asked what they did when they had trouble with their reading. While all of the students, regardless of ability, were receiving remediated instruction, the students of relatively higher ability were able to name more strategies than the other students. The following tables (15-17) show the strategies named by each group:

Table 19.

Strategies mentioned by students in relatively high ability group

Strategy	Number of Students
Ask for help	7
Sound out	2
Break down or tap out word	2
Use dictionary	2
Skip and return to word	2
Write the word and practice it	2
Ignore difficult passages	1

Table 20.

Strategies mentioned by students in middle ability group

Strategy	Number of Students
Ask for help	9
Sound out	9
Use dictionary	2

Table 21.

Strategies mentioned by students in relatively low ability group

Strategy	Number of Students
Ask for help	9
Sound out	3
Skip and return to word	1

Most students overwhelmingly asked for help, regardless of their reading ability. It is worth mentioning that some students named a second strategy in addition to asking for help. For example, these students mentioned two strategies:

Julio: *I ask for help or sometimes skip it and then go back to it.* (low group)

Nancy: *Ask for help or look in the dictionary.* (middle group)

Robert: *Sometimes I try to sound it out and then when I don't know it, I'll ask my mom or a teacher.* (low group)

Courtney: *I usually ask the teacher or I try to pronounce it.* (middle group)

Corinne: *Sound it out or ask for help.* (middle group)

The middle and relatively high groups had students who mentioned using the dictionary, while the relatively low group did not. However, the relatively low group had a student who mentioned skipping the word and going back to it, while the middle group did not. The relatively high group also had students who mentioned breaking down or “tapping out” the word. While some students seem to think that trying to read on one’s own was important, the students’ primary choice was to ask for help when having difficulty. This idea of assistance was a sensitive issue with the students in this study. These data show how students of relatively higher ability may have a larger repertoire of strategies that allow them more access to texts. In addition, the strategies they named were mostly concerned with word recognition, which supports their emphases on “sounding out words” during the interviews.

In sum, most students felt they were good readers; the relatively high students were the most consistent in their ratings. Their reasons for their choices had to do with practicing, effort, accuracy and word recognition, rather than comprehension and text involvement. Students did not feel they performed one reading skill significantly better than others. Again, the lack of emphasis on text comprehension was revealed in the skill rankings and in the naming of strategies.

Contextual Aspects and Self-Efficacy in Reading

Inside or Outside of School. It is important to understand that the students’ views of themselves as readers and their reading ability did not exist in a vacuum; rather, it was subject to change depending on the nature of the context. These contextual features complicated their views of their reading. Past research (e.g., Alvermann, 2001) has

suggested that middle-grade students, including those with reading difficulties, have complex literate lives that include engaging in multiple forms of literacy outside of school. This research argues that students' reasons for engaging in different forms of reading go beyond the simplistic view that school reading is boring and out-of-school reading is fun. Consonant with this research, I found that that, as a whole, many of the students liked reading both in and out of school for a variety of reasons. When we asked the students about their liking of in-school or out-of-school reading, many students responded positively to both. A paired t-test revealed that there were no significant changes in mean responses from the fall to the spring for all groups. Most students reported liking to read both in and out of school, regardless of their grade level or relative reading ability (see Tables 22-25).

Table 22.

Grade level groups: How do you like reading in school?

Response	Fall				Spring			
	Like it a lot	Like it	Not really	Not at all	Like it a lot	Like it	Not really	Not at all
Grade								
4th	6	4	5	0	6	7	1	0
5 th -6th	5	7	2	1	3	8	3	1
7 th -8th	5	8	1	1	4	9	2	0

Table 23.

Grade level groups: How do you like reading on your own?

Response	Fall				Spring			
	Like it a lot	Like it	Not really	Not at all	Like it a lot	Like it	Not really	Not at all
Grade								
4th	6	8	1	0	5	7	1	1
5 th -6th	8	4	3	0	5	6	3	1
7 th -8th	8	3	3	1	4	6	4	1

Table 24.

Relative ability Groups: How do you like reading in school?

Response	Fall				Spring			
	Like it a lot	Like it	Not really	Not at all	Like it a lot	Like it	Not really	Not at all
Ability Group								
High	4	6	4	1	5	9	1	0
Middle	4	9	2	0	4	8	2	0
Low	8	4	2	1	4	7	3	1

Table 25.

Relative ability Groups: How do you like reading on your own?

Response	Fall				Spring			
	Like it a lot	Like it	Not really	Not at all	Like it a lot	Like it	Not really	Not at all
Ability Group								
High	7	5	2	1	5	7	3	0
Middle	8	5	2	0	4	7	2	1
Low	7	5	3	0	5	5	3	2

I was surprised that so many students reported liking to read in school. The research on self-efficacy and out-of-school literacies of struggling middle grade students (Alvermann, 2001; 2005), which suggests that many of these students are not inclined toward school reading, led me to believe these students would significantly favor reading out of school.

However, as Alvermann and Smith and Wilhelm (2002) point out, students respond to the contextual features that enable the students to engage with reading, regardless of the physical location. Throughout the study, the students would talk about aspects of contexts that contributed to their views on reading and senses of competence in reading. Their views were not as simple as being in one physical environment over the other, or the fact that they were able to engage in non-academic literacies such as Japanese anime or role-playing games. Rather, it was the opportunities that a context offered that influenced ideas about reading and themselves as readers. Students emphasized that when they read out of school, they were able to do so without fear of humiliation or interruption, and had their choice of a wide variety of materials to read whenever they chose. On the other hand, some students felt that they received the assistance they needed to read when they read in school.

The nuances in the students' liking or disliking of reading arose from contextual features that were created in or out of school, or in both. The students mentioned the following abstract contextual features that contributed to their willingness to engage with text: challenge, practice, improvement, learning new things, social opportunities, nurturing environments and choice and control. These ideas will be discussed in this section. It is important to note that not all of the students mentioned all of these features during the interviews. The following table shows how many students mentioned each of these contextual features during the interviews:

Table 26.

Contextual features mentioned by students

Contextual feature	Number of students
Challenge	11
Practice, quantity and frequency	15
Improvement	18
Learning new things	13 (ideas), 12 (words)
Social opportunities	13
Nurturing environments	15
Choice and control	10

The importance of challenge. I was surprised that students wanted to be challenged in their reading because it was such a difficult process for them. However, being challenged was nothing new for these students as they are challenged by their hobbies every day. For example, Darius explains when asked why he liked playing on-line video games so much:

Interviewer: *Why is that your favorite?*

Darius: *There's always new challenges. On my PS2, I already beat everything I had because it's easy. And tune-town online is a challenge, it's never ending. With online people.*

In the same way, some students felt that challenging them would help them become better readers. For example, listen to what students had to say when they were asked how someone could help them improve their reading:

Amber: *Read more books. Hard books.*

Max: *Well, more challenging books.*

Dom: *Give some new, bigger words to understand.*

Shanice thought challenging books were fun:

I got better because I can read harder books. I like to read challenging books because they're fun.

Max likes being challenged when using the audiobook machine:

I like it a lot because it's challenging, if I put up the speed, I can race through the book and still comprehend it. Or I can go slower, or I can go normal.

He also enjoys reading for the challenge it brings:

Max: *Why do I like to read? I like to read because it keeps me busy.*

Interviewer: *And how does that make reading fun for you?*

Max: *Does it make reading fun for me? Well, it makes it fun because I like to read a lot and it kind of gets challenging, and it helps raise my stats for reading.*

Most of the students wanted to be challenged through more difficult texts. Yet, this is a conundrum for teachers: how can we give students with reading problems difficult texts when many of them cannot decode basic sight words? However, Kendall did not find this to be a problem at all. Despite having extreme reading and language difficulties, he wanted to read difficult texts, but only if the teacher could help him read the words so that he would remember them later:

Kendall: *I read better now.*

Carolyn: *So do you feel better about your reading now?*

Kendall: *Yeah.*

Carolyn: *And what makes you read better?*

Kendall: *Reading hard books because when you need help and you ask a teacher they tell you it, and you say the word and then you know it.*

During a lengthy interview with Andre, he discussed the importance of “hard” books.

Andre valued challenging books because he could learn from them. Andre’s idea of hard books was a matter of word difficulty, length or content, or a combination of these two or three elements:

Carolyn: *Okay, so let's talk about easy and hard books. Which ones do you like better?*

Andre: *Hard books.*

Carolyn: *How come?*

Andre: *It's just better 'cause you learn more in hard books. And easy books, you read it faster. And hard books, you gotta take your time and pronounce the words. It's just better... Because my cousin, she reads Harry Potter books. She's good. And she read it like in two days. She had nothing to do so she read like five chapters a day.*

Carolyn: *That's like an 800 page book.*

Andre: *Yeah. Those books are like that and she read it. And she bought the whole collection of Harry Potter books, since the beginning, since it started the movies. And she read all the books already. She read a whole book in one day, like 500 pages.*

Carolyn: *Do you think those books are challenging?*

Andre: *Yes.*

Carolyn: *Why?*

Andre: *Cause they are long. The chapters are long too.*

(In a later episode)

Carolyn: *So what are some things your teacher could do to help you become a better reader?*

Andre: *Bring in hard books.*

Carolyn: *Why do you think you would like reading hard books?*

Andre: *It helps my reading get better.*

Carolyn: *And why else?*

Andre: *The hard books are better because they got stories that are about true life or non-fiction good stories.*

Like the boys in Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) study, these students wanted to be

challenged, but only in a comfortable context that offered assistance when they needed it.

Surprisingly, students wanted to be challenged regardless of their reading ability; some of

the poorest readers in the study wanted to read difficult books and learn difficult vocabulary.

The importance of practice, quantity and frequency. As we saw in Rasheem's story at the beginning of this chapter, the students practiced enjoyable activities on a regular basis. For example, this is what Max had to say about being good at a new video game:

Interviewer: *Why are you the best at that?*

Max: *Because I beat the new Halo game in, like, two days.*

Interviewer: *Wait, you said you beat it in two days?*

Max: *Yeah.*

Interviewer: *Wow.*

Max: *I played that for, like, two days straight, two days straight drinking Red Bull and eating popcorn.*

Interviewer: *Ha, ha, thanks to the Red Bull. Oh man, how many hours were you awake?*

Max: *48 hours.*

While Max's story is amusing, he has a good point: the amount of time spent doing an activity is related to the result, which, in this case, was winning at a game. Other students also commented about activities and practice when they were asked what favorite activity they performed the best:

Julio: *Video games. Because I play it a lot. And baseball I don't play much.*

Maurice: *Playing video games because I keep practicing until I get it right, like until I beat the person or move up a level.*

Courtney: *Coloring, I like to do my name in bubble letters. Some of my friends taught me and I practiced.*

Shawn: *I'm good at playing games 'cause I play them everyday.*

Kendall: *Play station because I play it a lot.*

Some students were aware that the practice and quantity also were factors in learning to read and reading improvement:

Interviewer: *Do you think you have improved in your school reading this year?*

Mike: *I've been reading a lot and I've been getting better.*

Interviewer: *Why do you think you've gotten better [at reading]?*

Crystal: *I practice a lot.*

Interviewer: *Who taught you how to read?*

Elena: *My mom and my sisters.*

Interviewer: *How did they help you?*

Elena: *My mom she helped me because she tells me to write them more than once. And my sisters kept on reading to me, and if I don't understand then they do it again.*

Interviewer: *What do you when you have trouble with your reading?*

Maria: *I write it down and keep reading it over until I get it correct.*

Interviewer: *Do you think your reading has changed since the beginning of the school year?*

Tyrone: *Mmm-mm.*

Interviewer: *How?*

Tyrone: *I read every day and get better at it.*

The students that we spoke with did not seem to mind the fact that they needed to practice reading. Practice and the quantity of books read was one of the reasons that, for some students, constituted good reading. They mentioned that a person they knew was a good reader because they practiced a lot or read a lot books. In fact, a few students believed they were good readers or had the potential to become very good readers because they practiced a lot:

Interviewer: *Why do you say you're a good reader?*

Corinne: *Because I do it sometimes. And I practice a lot.*

Carolyn: *Which book are you better at reading (referring to two books student read in class)?*

Sam: *Mostly all of them because every time we read a book in class I'll raise my hand and read almost every page.*

Carolyn: *And what makes you good at reading them?*

Sam: *I get to practice a lot.*

Some students spoke about the need to practice reading more often or a greater quantity of print:

Andre: *I would like to practice everyday until I get very good at it.*

Courtney: *I don't think I'm very good, not yet, but I think I will become if I keep practicing, but for right now I think I'm just good.*

Sam: *I need to keep on practicing.*

Carolyn: *What could someone do to help you get better at reading?*

Antonio: *Give me longer books.*

Carolyn: *How will that help you?*

Antonio: *It will take longer and I'll get better at reading, because a long book will take a little while, and a longer book will help me learn new words.*

Because they were used to the fact that practice was a natural and necessary part of doing other activities that they enjoyed, they did not seem to mind that practice was an essential part of becoming a reader. For Andre the amount of time he spent on an activity or the number of times he did an activity was very important to him because it gave him the feeling that he was making progress:

Carolyn: *So the school reading makes you get better at reading?*

Andre: *Yeah, 'cause I read every day.*

Carolyn: *So which one do you better at: school reading or the video game reading?*

Andre: *Both.*

Carolyn: *Both? Can you choose?*

Andre: *School reading.*

Carolyn: *School reading? How come?*

Andre: *Because I'm reading every day. Sometime I like to read. And that way I'm better at it, the school reading.*

Carolyn: *So for you reading every day makes you better at it?*

Andre: *Yes.*

Students often spoke about getting better at reading, often in conjunction with practice.

The students' views on practice are consistent with research (Stanovich, 1986; Allington, 2007) that suggests that poor readers should get as much practice, if not more, in reading as good readers, but may lack the opportunities to do so on a regular basis.

The importance of improvement. In order for these students to view themselves as becoming good readers, the opportunity for improvement was essential. According to the TOWRE scores, the students did not make significant gains in their word recognition skills over the course of the year. The mean score for the real-word sub-test in the fall was 82.31, while the mean score in the spring was 85.31. However, the fact that they had the potential to become better readers was more important to them than a general stagnant labeling of their reading abilities. Often in the interviews, students would use the word, "better". They would use it to refer to activities they liked to do or in talking about the progress they were making in reading. The fact they had improved in some aspect of their reading, or had the potential to improve was important to them. Some students knew what aspects of reading needed improvement:

Courtney: *I need to study more on how to be a good reader and go to the library more and get good books to read. I think I'm stumbling over too many words. Sometimes I'll mix my words up.*

Max: *I want to improve in not skipping spaces when I read. Like sometimes I read one line and skip like two lines without even noticing it.*

However, others were not able to assess their own improvement. Will, who had very poor reading skills, relied on his teacher to tell him that he improved:

Carolyn: *And how do you feel about it this year (referring to his reading)?*

Will: *Happy because I got better.*

Carolyn: *And how do you know when you get better?*

Will: *My teacher tells me.*

Kendall, who had low reading ability, also relied on his teacher and report card to assess his improvement:

Carolyn: *Do you think you have improved in your school reading this year?*

Kendall: *Yes, 'cause my teacher told my mom and my mom was proud.*

Carolyn: *How do you know that you improved?*

Kendall: *I got my report card.*

The inability to assess one's improvement was not limited to the students in the relatively low group. Jada, in the relatively high ability group, was not able to tell whether or not she had improved:

Interviewer: *Do you think you have improved in your school reading this year?*

Jada: *I don't know. I can't really answer that because have been doing the same. So I don't really know.*

Other students also had difficulty evaluating their reading improvement or articulating how they could improve and the type of assistance they might need, even when prompted during the interviews. Of the students who could express why they had improved in reading, most gave reasons that had to do with being able to read more in general or becoming more accurate in reading:

Guy: *I read a bit faster. I don't spend my time on only one word.*

Josh: *I read more than I used to.*

Cindy: *Because, mm, I read more better now. Because, last year I didn't read, some of the big words and now I do.*

Maria: *Because I didn't know how to read a lot and now I do.*

Destiny: *Because before I didn't know to read that much and now I know how a little bit more.*

Jasmine: *It changed a lot because last year I stumbled a lot on words, and this year, I don't.*

Terrell: *Uh, 'cause last year, I couldn't read some of the words I can read now.*

Only Max, who was a very enthusiastic reader, mentioned improvement in comprehension:

I'm becoming a little bit more of a fast reader, and it's helping me comprehend my reading more.

The opportunity for improvement goes hand-in-hand with opportunities to practice reading large quantities of text. Most of the students with whom we spoke were not adverse to the idea of reading more in school and practicing as long as they had some control over how and what they practiced.

The importance of learning new things. Often students mentioned learning new words or learning new things. Smith & Wilhelm (2002) reported that the boys in their study did not like the routine of school. While a couple of students mentioned that school could be more fun, most of them did not seem to mind the routine; what they did want was to learn new things within that routine. Thirteen students liked learning new ideas and twelve students liked learning new words. Of those students, Mercedes was the most articulate about this aspect:

Mercedes: *I like reading a lot better now.*

Carolyn: *Okay, so you like reading better. How come you think you like reading better?*

Mercedes: *I really don't know.*

Carolyn: *Yeah?*

Mercedes: *But this year I noticed that reading is fun.*

Carolyn: *It is?*

Mercedes: *Yeah, cause we discover a lot of things.*

Later in the interview, she returned to this topic:

Carolyn: *What makes reading fun for you?*

Mercedes: *Discovering new things.*

Carolyn: *Discovering new things?*

Mercedes: *Discovering new things, like what kinds of new things? Mmm, like pretend I'm reading a book about the southwest, I was discovering things from the southwest.*

Carolyn: *Oh, okay. And how do you think this makes reading so fun? What's so fun about discovering new things or new places that are far away?*

Mercedes: *You get to talk about what you learned.*

Carolyn: *Okay. You mean like with your classmates or your teacher or something?*

Mercedes: *My friends.*

Carolyn: *Oh, with your friends.*

Mercedes: *And then I tell my nephews and nieces.*

Other students offered similar ideas:

Max: *When I first read a story, I felt excited because I got to learn, like new words.*

Josh: *I don't like to read like, books that are, like, talking about the same things. I want more adventurous kinds of books.*

Interviewer: *What makes reading fun for you?*

Jasmine: *Learning new things.*

Interviewer: *Why do you feel this way?*

Jasmine: *'Cause everyday a person is supposed to learn something different from reading a lot of things that you don't know.*

Students repeatedly emphasized the need for the instructional content, whether it was words or ideas in books, to be “new”. They enjoyed learning new vocabulary words, being transported to new places or historical events via a text. They stressed that teachers could make reading more enjoyable by teaching them new words or new ideas.

The importance of social opportunities. When Mercedes was talking about learning new things, she mentioned that it was fun to share those new ideas with others. Thirteen students mentioned a social aspect of reading that contributed to their willingness to read. Some students talked about being social in activities that required literacy outside of school. Francisco, who did not like reading that much, enjoyed chatting online, which required both reading and writing:

Interviewer: *Of all the activities, which one do you like the best?*

Francisco: *The library. I get to go on the computer and go on the internet and talk to friends. There's this website. You make your own character and talk to friends.*

Listen to what Shanice had to say about her social reading outside of school with her best friend.

Shanice: *We have library cards. So we check our stuff out of the library. We read certain books together. We check the same books out.*

Carolyn: *So when you check the same book out, do you read it together?*

Shanice: *No.*

Carolyn: *Or you just read them separately and talk about it?*

Shanice: *Read it separate. We also see who could read the book and finish it first. And we have different points of view about the book. Sometimes I'll find her point of view boring. And she thinks its boring, too, because she doesn't get all the good facts because she scans through the book.*

Some students enjoyed reading to other people:

Sara: *I'm really good at reading to people.*

Carolyn: *Who do you like to read to?*

Sara: *Little kids, like for Read Across America, me and my friend are going to read to the little kids.*

Dom: *I read stories to other people who don't know how to read.*

Andre: *When I was in this other school, we went to this daycare and we read to them for that Dr. Seuss thing.*

Carolyn: *How did you feel about that?*

Andre: *It was cool.*

Carolyn: *How come?*

Andre: *'Cause I met this little kid, and he was cool. And he just kept on bein' cool with me, and we just kept reading to them.*

Students also mentioned they enjoyed helping other students having difficulties while reading. While students talked about social aspects of reading, they did not mention instructional activities that included the opportunity to be social. This may be due, in part, to the fact that most students did not interact with one another during reading time; rather, they only interacted with the teacher. The observation data suggest that students worked individually most of the time and engaged in discussions less than three percent of the

time. However, students engaged in social activities with friends, such as playing video or on-line role-playing games and looking at magazines or comics that required literacy skills. Furthermore, students' desire for assistance while reading suggests that they recognized that social mediation is part and partial of learning to read.

The importance of nurturing environments. Social environments, like classrooms, have the potential to boost or diminish students' senses of competence by nature of social comparison (Bandura, 1993). Outside of school, students are constantly comparing themselves to their peers in sports, video games and other activities. For example, Will knew he played sports well:

Carolyn: *What activity are you the best at doing?*

Will: *Football and basketball because I get the ball every time, and I'm the fastest on the team.*

Sam realized he was good at riding bikes:

Riding bikes because when my friends are racing me, I beat them.

Social comparison also happens in reading. The idea of how well one reads in relation to another was one that Mercedes discussed a lot in her interviews. She felt that she read well, but at the same time, was concerned that other students did not think she was good at reading because she had to use the audiobook technology:

Mercedes: *I'm not being mean, but I'm the one that reads the most in my class in reading class.*

Carolyn: *Okay.*

Mercedes: *Because my classmate, she don't know how to read.*

(Later episode)

Mercedes: *I don't like the victor machine. I like reading without the victor machine.*

Carolyn: *Why?*

Mercedes: *Because I used to get embarrassed after it.*

Carolyn: *Okay.*

Mercedes: *I used to get embarrassed after it because I thought the other students would think I didn't know how to read. So, the machine would have to read it for me.*

And I didn't like that. But then I saw other students reading it, so I got used to it. But I still don't like it.

(Later episode)

Carolyn: *But were you embarrassed to use the Victor machines at first?*

Mercedes: *Mm hmm.*

Carolyn: *You were? How come?*

Mercedes: *Because that made me look stupid. I thought it made me look stupid.*

Mercedes admitted that the audiobook technology was really helping her, but her feelings of improvement were overridden by the need to look like a good reader in front of her peers.

While some students mentioned enjoying reading with or to others, other students mentioned the frequently used method of reading out loud to the class. While “round robin” reading may seem like a social practice, it is not; there is very little interaction occurring among teachers and students while one student is called upon to read a passage to the class. Yet, it is full of opportunities for students to be negatively compared in reading ability because it highlights students’ mistakes and lack of fluency (Ash & Kuhn, 2006). Fourteen students did not like this aspect of class, as it took away feelings of

control and made them vulnerable targets to be humiliated. Antonio said that students used to laugh at him when he read:

Antonio: *I used to hate reading, but now I'm starting to like it a little bit more.*

Carolyn: *Wait a minute, could you tell me more about it? You used to hate reading, how come?*

Antonio: *Because sometimes I couldn't pronounce the words and people would make fun of me.*

Carolyn: *Oh, that wasn't very nice. So now you're starting to like it a little bit?*

Antonio: *'Cause I can read better and they don't make fun of me.*

Rasheem, who had his basketball image to uphold, did not like reading out loud when he is in the regular inclusion classroom for content area instruction:

Rasheem: *I like to read everything, but I don't like to read out loud. In the 7th grade I was always with my class, I got used to it. But with 8th grade stuff, like when I read with my science class I would get stuck on words.*

Carolyn: *So in your science class you would read out loud and get stuck?*

Rasheem: *Yeah, I would get stuck on easy words.*

Other students, like Courtney, preferred to read outside of school not because of materials, but because they did not have to read out loud:

When I read on my own, nobody can hear me because I read to myself, and when I read to myself, you're supposed to read quietly. Like its better when I just read by myself because if I mess up, I can just correct it myself without anyone hearing me or laughing at me.

Some students, like Maurice, emphasized the fact that reading out loud is embarrassing because when they incorrectly read a word, other students will laugh at them:

Maurice: *When you read outside of school, you can make mistakes and all you have to do is ask somebody, but when you make mistakes in school, you can still ask somebody but people will laugh at you. But when you're alone and make mistakes, nobody can laugh at you, you're just more calm.*

Not only is it embarrassing, the students found it rather annoying because of the constant barrage of corrections that occur every time they read a word incorrectly, which, for most of these students, was a frequent occurrence:

Kendall: *I don't like when people read with me because if I mess up on a word, they'll be like uh, that's the right word, and I don't like when people correct me a lot*

Antonio: *I like reading on my own.*

Carolyn: *Yeah, how come?*

Antonio: *Because I don't have nobody messing up and stuff, I don't got nobody messing up so I can mess up on my own and then correct my problems.*

Carolyn: *Do you prefer to read by yourself or in a group?*

Shanice: *By myself.*

Carolyn: *How come?*

Shanice: *Because it seems more peaceful.*

Carolyn: *So do you like reading out loud?*

Shanice: *No, because everybody be trying to tell you that you got words wrong when they don't be paying attention.*

Carolyn: *Oh, so they're not even paying attention to you and they're still telling you that you messed up.*

Shanice: *They're not paying attention and they're always the people telling you that you messed up or you didn't say this, or you didn't say that.*

Of all the ideas discussed in the interviews, reading out loud was the one aspect to which students reacted passionately. After years of struggling to read out loud in an inhospitable environment, students felt that the practice affected them in a negative manner. The students' aversions to reading out loud echo the research on "round robin" reading. Ash and Kuhn (2006) reported that some teachers are reluctant or embarrassed to admit that they use the practice, or have the students call on each other to read, rather than the teacher. Based on their own research and that of others, Ash and Kuhn suggest that round robin reading harms students' self-efficacy in reading by embarrassing them and discourages disfluent reading by interrupting the flow of the text.

The importance of choice and control. Finally, some students wanted a say in where, when, how and what they read. This is not surprising because choice offers students control over their reading activities and performance (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Terrell preferred to read outside of school so he could choose when to read:

Interviewer: *Why do you prefer to read outside of school?*

Terrell: *Because you have all the time you want.*

Interviewer: *Why is that important for you?*

Terrell: *Because you don't have to read it, like immediately.*

Interviewer: *Okay. Do you feel that you have to read it immediately in school?*

Terrell: *Yeah.*

Corinne offered a word of advice for teachers:

Make the reading fun, like books like I want to read. Not books that I have to read.

Courtney offered that sentiment, as well, when asked why she liked reading better outside of school:

Courtney: *Outside because I don't know, I just like reading outside of school better.*

Carolyn: *Do you think it's better because the books are better that you read outside or the magazines?*

Courtney: *Yeah, because you can read anything you want to outside, but in school you have to read what the teacher gives you.*

She also wanted more control over when she read during the school day:

Carolyn: *So what are some things your teacher could do to help you become even a better reader than you are now?*

Courtney: *Instead of us not wanting to read, when we want to read, she'd let us read. When we don't want to read, she makes us read, when we want to read, she don't let us. Like I like to read every day when I had the Tears of a Tiger book, but like she wouldn't let us read. She wants to make us read when she wants us to read.*

Robert liked picking his own books because the school books were “baby books”, probably chosen for him because he lacks the ability to decode basic words:

I can pick what book, not little kid books.

What is interesting about Robert is that he liked writing his own books because he was able to choose the words and genre despite his hatred of reading:

Carolyn: *Is there anything about reading that you do like? Do you ever pick up any books you do like?*

Robert: *Not really. I like to write my own books.*

Carolyn: *So you like to write your own books. Tell me about that.*

Robert: *It's fun.*

Carolyn: *How come?*

Robert: *Because I can express how I feel in them.*

Carolyn: *And what else?*

Robert: *I get to make my own book and make it like full of action, put a lot of action.*

In fact, two other low ability students also mentioned writing their own books or stories as an activity that they really liked to do. Writing gives students opportunities to perform at a comfortable level and experiment with genres and ideas in a way that a teacher-chosen book may not, especially if that text is too difficult. Choice of materials and activities also relates to other important contextual features, control and challenge, in that it allows the students to regulate those features by choosing the appropriate level of difficulty.

In sum, these contextual opportunities were critical to the students' willingness to engage with reading and forming a view of themselves as readers or students who had the potential to become readers. These features mediated the relationship between students and the reading process, either paving the way for students to acquire skills and become involved, or discouraging them from reading by creating conditions that took away their self-agencies.

The contextual opportunities that the students mentioned had the potential to create effective and engaging instructional environments for the students. In addition to these features, two other aspects of instruction, assistance and materials, were considered a necessary part of an effective instructional environment. These ideas will be explored in the following section.

Assistance

From the Vygotskian perspective, assistance from another person or a tool is critical when one is performing or learning a task (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky suggests that processes involved in learning are realized because of the dialogic interaction that occurs when a person is being assisted by another; in fact, without that interaction, learning is hindered because the exchange of ideas is not able to take place. How the assistance is provided and under what circumstances are essential components of reading instruction.

Most of the students in the study remember learning to read with some kind of assistance, especially from family members:

Guy: Oh yeah, my dad always, when I had homework, my dad taught me to read it. What is this word, if I didn't know, he makes me read by letters. I started a lot at home.

Kendall: I have a sister and she's a good reader. And they used to make me and my little sister have a contest reading a book. I just started to get how to read and how to sound words out.

Max enthusiastically and vividly remembers learning to read from his older brother:

Max: A time when it was really, really fun was when my brother taught me how to read when I was four.

Interviewer: *That was fun?*

Max: Mm-hm. We were back in Florida back then so it was hot outside. We were all in the air conditioning; there was nothing good on TV. My brother was trying to read a

bigger book like one of those dictionaries right over there, and he read about the first five pages, and then he started teaching me how to read with some smaller books. Then, I started on my own, reading bigger and bigger and bigger books, books about the size of my new “Mostly Ghostly” books.

On the other hand, some of the Latino/a students assisted their family members with reading. When I asked Mercedes about the things she read outside of school, she told me that she read documents for her mom who speaks no English:

Carolyn: *What kinds of things do you read at home?*

Mercedes: *Letters for my mom*

Carolyn: *For your mom?*

Mercedes: *They come in the mail.*

Carolyn: *Okay.*

Mercedes: *Since she don't know English.*

Carolyn: *Oh. So do you translate?*

Mercedes: *Mm hmm. And I translate when I go to my uncle's. They be taking me to their apartment and then they give me money because like last time they went to report something, um, their wallet. And when they got it back, he gave me fifty dollars.*

Antonio, who had a change of heart about reading over the course of the year, also helped his mom read English:

Carolyn: *So why else are you starting to like it [reading] better?*

Antonio: *Because it helps me a lot, and while it helps me I help my mom reading too because she doesn't know English, so I try to help her read English too.*

However some students mentioned learning to read in school. The following students actually remembered what the teacher specifically did to help them:

Interviewer: *Who taught you how to read?*

Alex: *My first grade teacher.*

Interviewer: *What did she do?*

Alex: *She helped me divide a word and sound out.*

Tiffany: *My teacher Miss (Teacher's name) helped me read English.*

Interviewer: *How? What did she do?*

Tiffany: *Actually I would sit right next to her and she would tell me what is the word and I would say it, like that.*

Assistance in school was very important to these students. Darius also received help from his friends when his class did partner reading, "If we're reading the books and the teacher says a partner can help you out, and you're stuck on a word, I could just ask my partner what the word says." Some students even preferred to read in school because they received assistance with their reading:

Interviewer: *Which do you like doing better: reading outside of school or reading inside of school?*

Dom: *Inside of school.*

Interviewer: *How come?*

Dom: *Because if I don't know a word, maybe my teacher knows. And my teacher doesn't, I just find it out at that audio book.*

Destiny likes school because she does not speak English at home:

Interviewer: *And why do you like that better? (referring to reading inside of school)*

Destiny: *Because then I can... tell the teacher, maybe ask questions, and at home, there's nobody to speak English, only my brother and my sister.*

Carolyn: *Do you like reading in school better than reading on your own? You do? How come?*

Sam: *Because I need help with some of the words.*

In fact, when asked how someone could help them become a better reader, students emphasized their need for help with a specific skill or the presence of another person as they read:

Sara: *Give me harder books and help me pronounce the words a little bit better.*

Kendall: *Help a lot with words, giving me hard books, so I have to sound out the words.*

Shanice: *Try to help me understand the words.*

Tonya: *Teaching you new words.*

Tim: *Help me for pronouncement.*

Sam: *Help me to sound out harder words and bigger words.*

Ashley: *Sit with me and help me read it.*

Darius: *Um, maybe they can help me out by helping me understanding the words. And not saying, "Don't be stupid" And help me sound it out!*

Briana: *Sit there and read a book with us. Like help us with the right word sounding.*

Jada: *Help me sound out words that I don't understand.*

Corinne: *Mm, sitting down at night before I go to bed and reading a story and seeing if I can read it back to them, like a short little paragraph. Or reading me a story every day, but not a baby story.*

I was surprised that some of the students preferred to read in school because of the lack of choice in materials and activities that comes with mandated curricula. However in these cases, assistance was more important than being able to read anything at any time. Corinne even remarked that she was better at the reading she does inside of school for that very reason:

Interviewer: *Which kind of reading are you better at? The reading you do outside of school or the reading you do inside of school? Why?*

Corinne: *Mm, I think inside.*

Interviewer: *How come?*

Corinne: *Because I guess it's just because there's people to help me learn how to read.*

However, not every student welcomed assistance from a teacher. I found this out while talking with Robert who, in his words, was "twelve years old and can't read." Robert related the following narrative to me each time I spoke with him.

Like when that other teacher was teachin' us, and I was try to sound out the words, and every time I try to sound out the words, she'd be sayin' it to me, and I

be keep on saying can you let, can you please let me try it by myself, and she wouldn't listen to me. Which made me mad. And then I didn't want to read no more, she's just going keep on telling me, without giving me a chance to say I need help, can you help me? I didn't even say that. She just gonna blurt out the words.

Robert, who already “hated” reading, was resentful of the assistance the teacher was trying to give him. While the teacher might have been well-intended in giving him each word, he lost his sense of control over his reading when he was denied the opportunity to try decoding before asking for assistance. Robert’s situation places teachers in a catch-22: on the one hand, Robert’s lack of even basic decoding skills requires that he have a great deal of assistance; on the other hand, he wants to be independent especially at an age in which social status is becoming increasingly important.

If Robert’s story is an example of inappropriate assistance, then what kind of teacher assistance is welcome? Andre gave me a good example of appropriate assistance that contributed to his reading performance:

Carolyn: *Do you think you have improved in your school reading this year?*

Andre: *Yes because I read more this year than last year.*

Carolyn: *Can you explain what you mean by that?*

Andre: *‘Cause with Ms. (Teacher’s name) we read one book and then we finish it, and we read another one after.*

Carolyn: *So you just keep reading books right, in language arts and literacy. And last year you didn’t keep reading a book when you finished it, you didn’t keep going on?*

Andre: *Last year was almost like this, but I didn’t read as much as this year.*

Carolyn: *Really, how come, why do you think that is?*

Andre: *'Cause last year we'd read like a chapter, then we read another. This year we do it like that but it's just different.*

Carolyn: *Oh, it's just different. So which do you like better this year or last year?*

Andre: *This year.*

Carolyn: *How come?*

Andre: *Because language arts is better than last year.*

Carolyn: *It is? Can you give me a couple of reasons why?*

Andre: *'Cause Ms. (Teacher's name) picks the books that we like.*

Carolyn: *Aha, so Ms. (Teacher's name) might have something to do with it; she knows how to pick the books you like. And what else?*

Andre: *She's a nice teacher.*

Carolyn: *Can you give me some examples of some of the things she does in her teaching that make her seem nice or make the class fun, or make reading fun?*

Andre: *She lets us all take a turn. She stops and asks what you read in the paragraph, like what were they saying.*

Carolyn: *Oh, so she stops and asks you questions about what you just read?*

Andre: *Yeah, she stops at almost every paragraph and then she's like, "What were they saying in the paragraph? What was happening?"*

Carolyn: *So when she stops after every paragraph and asks you questions, how does that help you in your reading?*

Andre: *It helps me a lot 'cause I understand the story as I read when I explain it.*

Carolyn: *Oh, so when you explain to her the answer to her questions, it helps you to understand the story.*

Andre: *It means I understand the part that I read.*

Andre's teacher provided him with the assistance that he needed to maintain control over his reading. Rather than telling him the answers, she made Andre accountable for his knowledge through the use of questions and breaking the text into smaller units for understanding. Andre's story resonates with the Vygotskian perspective that argues students must receive assistance through social mediation in order for learning to take place. Not only must the teacher talk to the student, the student must explain ideas to the teacher as well. Andre's teacher made him articulate the ideas in the text while prompting his understanding with questions. The difference in Robert's and Andre's accounts of teacher assistance is striking and shows that the type of assistance a teacher chooses to give is a powerful factor in the way students view their reading.

Time and again during the study, we witnessed missed opportunities for assistance. In fact, on average, teachers spent most of the time giving information (38%) engaging students in recitation (25%), listening to or watching students (21%), checking work (11%) or doing something unrelated to the instruction at hand (23%). Modeling, discussion, coaching or scaffolding only accounted for a combined 11% percent of the time. In one observation, two Spanish-speaking students in need of much help asked the teacher if they could help each other because the teacher was sorting worksheets at the desk. When the teacher finally came over to check their work, she just gave them the answers, rather than asking the students for their answers and discussing their work. Often the researchers would sit would individual students and assist them with word recognition strategies or comprehension. The lack of assistance in some of these students' classrooms or the appropriate assistance that students like Andre received most likely

helped the students realize how important assistance was in learning to read, which is why they emphasized it so often during the interviews.

Tool Assistance

The other type of assistance that students discussed was the assistance that they received from the audiobook technology. Most of the students using the audiobook machine felt that the technology contributed to their reading in positive ways. For example, the following comments show that students' senses of competence were bolstered because of the assistance the audiobook provided in terms of word recognition skills:

Sara: It made me read a little bit better, because they pronounce the words for you and then you say it back; and it helps if you don't know a word, they say it for you and it helps you out than just skipping the word; you kind of understand what they're saying.

Rasheem: Because if I'm reading a book and I don't know the word, the audio tape will say the word for me so now it's in my head, so if it's in there and I have to read out loud, I know how to say it.

Maria: Because it has taught me how to pronounce words and how to read it, how to read more. Because I don't like to read, and now I like it.

Corinne: It's like, um, it's like I don't have to keep stumbling over the same words, for like five, ten, fifteen minutes until I finally get it. So then after the person says the word, I get it.

In addition, students made comments that indicated that the technology assistance gave them the opportunities to be more independent and confident:

Josh: I can read on my own. Not so much better, but I can read on my own now.

Destiny: I stop it so I can pronounce that word or I can read the sentence by myself.

Courtney: Yes, it made me better because now I am able to read out loud and be confident in how I read.

Courtney also liked the technology because she no longer had to read in front of the class, and she came to the realization that making mistakes while one reads is part and partial of the reading process:

Courtney: It's better for me because if I have the audio book machine the teacher won't make me read out loud.

Carolyn: Do you think that listening to the stories on the victor machine can help a person get better at reading out loud?

Courtney: Yes.

Carolyn: How come?

Courtney: Because like I think it gives me confidence, because something that I realized when I was using the victor machine was that they messed up, too when they were reading the story.

Perhaps by alleviating some of the struggles that students with reading difficulties face, the audiobook technology also increased the willingness to engage with text:

Interviewer: How, if at all, has the audio-book affected your reading?

Destiny: Well it's been helping me read faster, that's what I've been noticing.

Interviewer: Oh okay. Has it changed the way you feel about your reading?

Destiny: Yeah.

Interviewer: How so?

Destiny: Well, it makes me want to read more.

Rasheem: Like when I first started to read I wasn't good, I didn't read for a long time, but then when I started to read with the audiobook, it got me into it so now I start reading.

The audiobook technology contributed to some students' self-efficacy in reading by offering support and the opportunity to become independent. This technology offered the students the same type of assistance that Andre's teacher offered when she had him

explain each paragraph, yet not making them feel belittled by the lack of challenge.

However, the technology received mixed reviews from students who thought that learning to read was a process that needed to be performed by the reader or did not want to be seen using it, like Mercedes. For example, Antonio only wanted the audiobook assistance some of the time. He relished the opportunity to attempt to read on his own:

Carolyn: *Do you prefer to read with or without the victor machine?*

Antonio: *Sometimes with it and sometimes without it, it depends; with it, I don't have any chance to pronounce the words and without it, I get to read it by myself.*

The observations indicate that, on average, the audiobook technology was used 30% of the time in the classrooms. However, often the machines would break or there would be a problem with the recordings. In addition, the teachers had to attend to the students who were not using the technology and were not able to monitor their use consistently. Yet, students like Shanice and Courtney were able to enjoy young adult literature with the technology, which they would not have been able to do on their own.

Materials

Students often emphasized preferences for reading materials, both in and out of school. These students, despite their struggles to read, *did* read outside of school; most just did not read school-like texts or novels. Outside of school, students read gaming manuals, magazines, newspapers, comic books; in short, they read anything that had to do with a specific interest or hobby of theirs, and teen culture in general. Listen to what Andre has to say about his reading choices outside of school:

Carolyn: *You like those things more than you like books at school? How come?* (referring to magazines)

Andre: *Because they're more interesting.*

Carolyn: *What makes them more interesting?*

Andre: *Well, 'cause I like cars, I like them X Box magazines, those are all the things I like, and when I see things like that, it interests me to read about it.*

Carolyn: *Oh so they're about things you already like.*

Andre: *Yeah.*

When it came to school reading materials, students' preferences encompassed a wide range of genres including humor, action and adventure, non-fiction, and scary stories.

However, I found that students did not mind the genre if the text contained meaningful or poignant ideas. Listen to what some of the students had to say about their favorite books or books in general:

Carolyn: *So tell me about "Charlotte's Web". You read it three times.*

Mercedes: *My first time reading it was in fourth grade.*

Carolyn: *So you read it in fourth grade for the first time.*

Mercedes: *My teacher read it for me.*

Carolyn: *And did you like it when she read to you?*

Mercedes: *Mm hmm.*

Carolyn: *Yeah? What did you like about it?*

Mercedes: *How Charlotte gets to be friends with Wilbur.*

Carolyn: *How Charlotte gets to be friends with Wilbur? Yeah? And why do you like that so much?*

Mercedes: *Because I think friendships are very important.*

Nia liked the combination of powerful themes in her favorite book:

Interviewer: *What is your favorite book?*

Nia: *"Castle in the Attic". It tells me about having bravery and courage, and at the same time it's adventurous, too.*

Courtney liked a young adult literature book:

Carolyn: *What was your favorite one (referring to a young adult trilogy by Sharon Draper)?*

Courtney: *I liked "Forged by Fire".*

Carolyn: *Why did you like that book so much?*

Courtney: *Because Gerald and his sister Angel stick together through the whole thing.*

Carolyn: *They do? Does he try to help her?*

Courtney: *Yeah, he helps her, he takes care of her because their mom was on drugs. And Angel's father, they don't have the same father, he used to abuse them and when he would want to hit Angel, Gerald used to jump in front of Angel and take the punch for her.*

Andre mentioned that he liked reading class much better than his class from the previous year because he read "mysterious" books and a variety of books. When I interviewed him the first time, he was reading "Bridge to Terabithia" in class. I asked him to compare that book with the book the class had just finished:

Carolyn: *So what book did you read before this book?*

Andre: *"Sleeping Dogs Awaken".*

Carolyn: *So what book do you like more?*

Andre: *"Sleeping Dogs".*

Carolyn: *Really? How come?*

Andre: *It's better. Because it's about this man that they killed. And "Bridge to Terabithia" is about this kid who wants to be the fastest runner. And "Sleeping Dogs", there's this son and he's looking for the murderer who killed his dad.*

Carolyn: *It's a mystery or something?*

Andre: *Yeah, and he thinks it's his step-dad, but it's really the boss of the man.*

Carolyn: *So how did you feel about it?*

Andre: *I felt surprised because it's a surprise ending.*

In our second interview, I asked Andre to tell me about reading “Bridge to Terabithia” which they had just finished.

Andre: *It was good only at the end.*

Carolyn: *How come?*

Andre: *It was a surprising ending. Cause that girl, she drowns.*

Carolyn: *Were you expecting her to die?*

Andre: *No, it was surprising. Because they liked each other a lot.*

Carolyn: *How did you feel about the end?*

Andre: *It was good. I like it a lot, the ending.*

Although Andre only enjoyed the ending of “Bridge to Terabithia”, both of the books he read were able to peak his interest through the element of surprise. Courtney also liked reading mysteries:

Carolyn: *You like mysteries, how come you like mysteries so much?*

Courtney: *Because I like having to think hard about stuff.*

Carolyn: *Do you like waiting all the way to the end of the book to find out?*

Courtney: *Yeah.*

Carolyn: *You do? You must have a lot of patience.*

Courtney: *It's surprising at the end because you think of something, and it'll be something different.*

Students wanted to connect with the texts they read. They did not want to read, in the words of Robert, “baby books”. Students’ interests in texts could be defined as situational

interest (Hidi, 2001) in which the interest in the text is a result of the text features. For example, some students connected with the text because the story reminded them of their own situations. Courtney also loved “Tears of a Tiger”:

I liked this story because it's about today, like teenage kids of today and how they go through different experiences and their life...I just loved that book, it's nice. It has poems in it, it talks the way we talk today.

Nancy liked “Nobody’s Perfect” for the same reason:

Nancy: *I got “Nobody’s Perfect”.*

Carolyn: *Oh yeah, that’s a good book, do you ever read it over and over again?*

Nancy: *Yeah.*

Carolyn: *Yeah, you do?*

Nancy: *Yeah, sometimes I just read it and it makes me feel better, some people have the same thing like me.*

Carolyn: *Oh okay, so how does it make you feel better you think?*

Nancy: *It makes me feel better because other people have the same kind of problems.*

Kendall liked a story in which the character acquired the same things he wanted in life:

Carolyn: *And how come you like it so much?*

Kendall: *Because it was nice, it was about his birthday and his family surprised him and got a new house. He always wanted his own room and he got his own room, and it’s kind of like my own story, what I want.*

Often, students used the word “interesting” when speaking about texts. For example, Sara could not articulate all of the features that make a text interesting, but she knew that reading interesting texts was important to her reading enjoyment:

Sara: *I really like all books.*

Carolyn: *You really like everything, yeah?*

Sara: *Not everything, not all books, but most of the books I like.*

Carolyn: *What makes a book good for you?*

Sara: *Well, it has to be a chapter book, it has to be interesting.*

Carolyn: *Interesting, what makes a book interesting?*

Sara: *Like you really get into the characters and stuff like that.*

Carolyn: *So you get into the characters.*

Sara: *Mainly you see what the story is about, and you can read one chapter at a time and it improves your reading.*

Carolyn: *When you read one chapter at a time...*

Sara: *It gets you more to want to read the book and stuff like that.*

Shanice, who enjoyed going to the public library near her house, warned against reading a book just because it has a good title:

Carolyn: *Is there anything you don't like about reading?*

Shanice: *When the first three chapters are good and then it stops being good, like it doesn't get interesting no more. Just because you find a book with a good title, you could think it's a good book, but you judge it by its cover and it could be boring.*

Carolyn: *So just because a book has a good title doesn't mean it's necessarily going to be good, right? What if a book has a boring title?*

Shanice: *It could still be good to read because if it's interesting, you'll get into the book.*

It was difficult to garner an exact definition of “interesting” material because each student had their own unique preferences. Some students, like Rasheem, only found one subject interesting, regardless of the format. Rasheem only wanted to read about sports, both in and out of school, whereas other students, like Sara and Shanice, were more open to different kinds of materials as long as it peaked their interest. Research (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Fisher, Flood & Lapp, 2003; Allington, 2007) agrees that students, including those with reading difficulties, need to read a variety of high-quality,

interesting texts. These students wanted to engage with meaningful texts that spoke to powerful and interesting topics, especially on the human condition.

In addition, however, to the content, was the role that the material played in how some of the students judged their reading. Rather than the skills that they possessed to judge how well they read certain texts, some students emphasized the readability of the text. When students were asked to compare how well they read two different texts, several students chose a text because it had words they recognized. For example, when asked what book she was good at reading, Tiffany replied, “*The Chocolate Touch* because it doesn’t have hard words like the Harry Potter books.” The students’ feelings about being successful at reading appropriate level texts resonates with Allington’s (2007) research that struggling readers need to experience high levels of success when reading. Overall, both the content and the accessibility of texts were important to these students.

Contextual Features

Finally, the contextual opportunities that the students spoke about should not be seen as critical to their feelings of competence, but also necessary to effective instruction. These contextual opportunities are important instructional components over which teachers have control. Students wanted the teachers to challenge them with difficult books and vocabulary, give them the opportunities to practice skills and learn new things, and use practices that strengthened their self-efficacy and enjoyment of reading. They also wanted to experience improvement while having choice and control over their reading. The desire to experiences these opportunities in instructional contexts cut across ability, grade level and gender lines; the students considered them a central part of

reading and becoming readers. In sum, students viewed effective instruction as a delicate balance among assistance, contextual features and reading materials. Reading difficult texts without assistance and practice was overwhelming; too much assistance and lack of choice or control took away their self-agency.

Instructional Contexts

While reading through the interviews of one student in the relatively high ability group, I noticed that during the winter interview, she mentioned that she no longer liked reading, but did not know why:

Maria: Like I don't like reading any more.

Interviewer: You don't like reading any more?

Maria: No. I used to like reading a lot of stories, but I don't know what happened, I don't want to read no more.

While a causal relationship can not be made between the student's classroom environment and her loss of reading enjoyment, it became clear to me through reading the observations of her classroom that she was not in a context that promoted engagement and provided assistance in reading. For example, one observation of this resource classroom begins like this:

1:40 P.M.-1:54 P.M.: Teacher is making students watch "Cold Case File" on the library television because he wanted to see the second half of the episode he had been watching.

In fact, the observer documented that this teacher was not interacting with the students in a meaningful way 83% of the time and that there was no major instructional focus 30% of the time.

Some of the observational data seems to support what the students had to say about aspects of reading. For example, Robert, who hated reading and did not appreciate the assistance during oral reading, was in a classroom that did round-robin reading over

20% of the time. Andre, who reported that his teacher assisted him by having him explain the text, was in a classroom in which the teacher engaged the students in talk about the text 61% of the time. In other cases, some students began to feel positively about reading, although the observations lacked evidence of an engaging environment. For example, Antonio reported that he started to like reading over the course of the year despite being in a classroom that filled out worksheets 60% of the time and only engaged with print 24% of the time.

The students in the study often expressed a desire to practice reading with assistance. On average, the classrooms observed in this study engaged students with print 38% of the time. Only six out of eighteen classrooms spent more than 50% of their time engaged with print. On the other hand, two of these six classrooms had teachers who spent less than 50% of the time interacting with students and supporting them as they read; the students were left to fend for themselves. Francisco, a student in one these two classrooms, said bluntly, “You can read all kinds of books and you don’t get no help.” In these cases, the students’ desire for assistance was not being met, despite the opportunity to engage with print. By comparison, Shanice and Courtney’s class read 50% of the time, but were engaged in discussing and writing about the text with teacher support the other 50% of the time. The majority of the teachers interacted with the students by telling them information and engaging students in question and answer recitations. Very little discussion, in which students control the conversation, or coaching, in which teachers help students work toward independence or elaboration of answers (Taylor & Pearson, 2000) took place. In addition, students felt that assistance with word recognition strategies was important. However, an average of less than 1% of classroom instruction

was spent on these strategies. The following tables show the most common instructional activities, most common teacher interactions, most common pupil responses and most commonly used materials, respectively:

Table 27.

Most common instructional activities

Activity	Percent of class time (averaged across all teachers)
Reading connected text	39%
Listening to text	32%
Talking about text at lower level	16%
Non-instruction related	15%
Writing (does <i>not</i> include filling out worksheets)	14%

Table 28.

Most common teacher interactions

Teacher interactions	Percent of class time (averaged across all teachers)
Tell/give information	39%
Recitation	26%
Non-instruction related	23%
Listening/watching	21%
Checking work	11%

Table 29.

Most common pupil response

Pupil response	Percent of class time (averaged across all teachers)
Listening (to teacher or text)	40%
Reading	38%
Writing	24%
Manipulating (includes filling out worksheets)	22%
Orally responding	12%

Table 30.

Most commonly used materials

Material	Percent of class time (averaged across all teachers)
Victor (audiobook) machines	29%
Narrative basal text	25%
Narrative trade book	22%
Worksheets	20%
Student work	16%

In sum, the classroom contexts shared many of the same characteristics. Basal textbooks and narrative trade books were the most common materials. Worksheets were also used on a regular basis. Teachers usually practiced recitation formats after having the students read aloud or with the audiobook technology. Our observations were consistent with the work of Johnston and Allington (1996) on remedial classroom contexts. They state that students do not often have the opportunities to experience “flow”, in which they become deeply involved with the literacy activity, because the foci on correct word recognition and basic level comprehension is so restrictive to their engagement. This type of deep engagement can only occur when all of the contextual features that the students mentioned are in place (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Most importantly, we witnessed teachers having to spend a great deal of time dealing with discipline and task enforcement issues. This took away valuable instructional time that could have been used to involve students with reading. For example, the following excerpts from an observation show how often a teacher had to stop and reprimand students in her class:

1:29 P.M.: Students get ready to take test. Teacher has to reprimand student again. Students begin taking test. Teacher monitors and helps students. Student “X” gets out of his seat and wanders around. Teacher reprimands two students, “X” and “Z” for being off task.

1:35 P.M.: Teacher helps a student with test. Student “X” is still off task. Teacher goes over to help him. Teacher continues to monitor. Student “X” repeatedly gets off task and is reprimanded. A student finishes and brings test to teacher to get it checked.

1:40 P.M.: Five students continue to take test. A student finishes and brings work up to get checked. Students continue to do or correct tests. Teacher asks student one of the test questions out loud again, but has to stop to reprimand student “X”.

1:45 P.M.: Teacher is reprimanding two students “X” and “Z”. Students continue to work on test. Teacher continues to help students with test. Now some students have a new worksheet about the “Lost Lake”. Teacher tells them to finish it. Teacher goes around and helps the students.

1:50 P.M.: Teacher has to keep reprimanding two students, “X” and “Z”. Stephanie leaves the room. Three other students work on worksheet that describes the lake in the story. Teacher tries to help students who are working, but the two students’ behavior is too severe.

Often, teachers would complain about the lack of resources and administrative support. One participating classroom was moved three times during the year; their final space being the teachers’ lounge where the tables were covered with crumbs and smelled of garbage. However, we also documented some wonderful instructional moments in which students and teachers were deeply involved with reading and discussions. I witnessed a powerful discussion among Shanice, Courtney and their teacher about racism, and I also was able to lead a discussion in Antonio’s class about the book, *Shiloh*, which was embraced by the students. As past research as found (Rasinski & DeFord, 1988), these classroom contexts seem to be powerful factors in the way students thought about aspects of literacy. These students were quite capable of experiencing the power of

literacy and the enjoyment that reading brings; moreover, I believe that they were motivated to do so when suitable contexts were provided.

Chapter 5

Discussion

What these students had to say about various aspects of reading is not novel by itself; rather, it is the fact that what the students had to say resonates, almost exactly, with research about effective reading instruction that has existed for several decades. For example, these students felt strongly that more practice with a greater quantity of texts would contribute to their reading improvement. Stanovich (1986) argued the same point: the quantity and frequency of print engagement is the critical factor in learning to read well. The students' ideas are evidence that their voices count in the discourse on reading education. In the sections that follow, I will discuss the research questions that define this study and show how reading instruction can become more beneficial by using the ideas of students.

How do readers with reading difficulties construct the act of reading?

In general, the students in the study recognized that making meaning is the goal of reading, as evidenced by their rankings. Moreover, their conceptions of reading did not vary significantly by grade and ability group, although the lower ability students were more focused on decoding. The only clear difference in responses among ability groups concerned itself with the strategies used to read, rather than reading itself. This is in contrast to studies by Johns (1972, 1974) who found that students' conceptions of reading were correlated with their reading achievement. However, this finding is similar to other studies (Long, Manning & Manning, 1985; Bondy, 1990) that found children of differing abilities have little variance in their understandings of the reading act. Like Bondy

(1990), I found that one factor, such as word recognition ability or the type of classroom instruction, was not sufficient to account for the ideas the students had about reading. There are two possibilities why there were little differences among the students' conceptions. First, students may not have made sufficient changes in their reading abilities to view the act of reading differently. Secondly, although students were receiving instruction in various types of classrooms, there may have not been enough variance in the specifics of the reading instruction to play a role in student's constructions. Therefore, I will conclude, as Bondy had, that their constructions were socially formed through various experiences with reading over the years. Evidence of this comes from the students' stories about learning to read and reading in and out of school, as well as their mentioning of their different levels of literacy involvement and purposes for using reading.

What is interesting is that, although the students seem to realize that reading is a cognitive task that involves understanding, they did not mention meaning making when they were asked to describe why someone is a good reader. Rather, their reasons for good reading had to do with skills proficiencies in reading accuracy or word recognition, or with aspects that contribute to reading proficiency such as time, effort, quantity and liking to read. These reasons were similar to the reasons given for their reading improvement over the course of the year. It seems that the students viewed the act of reading as not only a set of skills, but as an act that required cognitive energy in terms of effort and practice.

Some of the ideas the students held about the act of reading are consistent with more complex constructions that adults may hold. However, the characteristics of good

readers that the students named may not be congruent with what educators believe to constitute good readers. For example, I think a good reader makes meaning from the text and transacts with the text at a level of involvement that allows him or her to read critically. Michel (1994) argues that the primary reason educators must understand students' conceptions of reading is to discover how those conceptions differ from the ones held by adults.

In addition to the mental processes of reading, students also talked about the act of reading with regard to purposes and involvement. Some students used reading as a vehicle to help them achieve objectives such as winning video games, chatting on-line with friends, helping their family members complete tasks that required knowledge of English, or as an avenue through which career goals could be accomplished. These students viewed reading as a purposeful and necessary action needed in day-to-day life. Other students focused on reading involvement and social aspects of reading, like Shanice, who goes to the library with her friend, or Maurice, who loves to imagine the stories. Andre, who viewed reading as necessary to having a basketball career, also did not want to read for the sake of just reading, he wanted to become involved. The purposeful and enjoyment aspects of reading that the students mentioned are similar to the ideas that the adolescent boys held in Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) study, showing that these ideas are not confined to gender, age and ability groups.

What factors contribute to the students' constructions of themselves as readers?

How students viewed themselves as readers depended on a number of factors. First, in general, most students viewed themselves as good readers; although more students in the low ability groups across all grades tended to rate themselves lower than

students from the middle and high groups. This is not surprising as the literature on self-efficacy states that the less success one experiences in doing a task, the lower his or her self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993). The matter of whether or not they had the ability to perform necessary skills contributed to many students' views of themselves as readers. For example, Robert, who admittedly hated reading, said that he was unable to sound out words which prevented him from making progress. Other students mentioned that they had good imaginations when reading. In general, students ranked imagining the story and sounding out words as the reading skills they were best able to perform. The high ability group ranked reading out loud as their best skill, and the high ability groups in seventh-eighth grades and fifth-sixth grades focused on meaning-related skills, choosing understanding the story and figuring out what new words mean, respectively. However, no significant statistical differences were found among the mean rankings within the groups, indicating that the students did feel particularly strongly about their ability to perform one skill over the others.

Additionally, students seem to improve in their views of reading ability over the course of the year. The issue of improvement was critical for these students. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) also found that the boys in their study thrived in contexts that allowed them to improve their skills in a domain. The students' reasons for improvement mostly had to do with increased quantity and frequency of reading, as well as knowing how to read more accurately in general. However, a couple of poorer readers were not able to assess their reading improvement, relying on teachers, parents and grades to inform them of their progress.

The use of audiobook technology helped some readers view themselves as better readers when they read with it because it assisted them with specific reading skills such as word recognition. The technology decreased their need for constant teacher assistance and gave them more control over their reading. Some of the students also gained the needed confidence to attempt reading the texts on their own once they finished reading with the machines. However, one student noted that, although the machine helped her with her reading, she was embarrassed to use it in front of her friends; in this case, the technology boosted her view of her reading ability while contributing negatively to her identity as a reader. In addition, some students noted that, while the technology was helpful in terms of text accessibility, they were not truly reading because they were not performing the cognitive act of decoding on their own. Therefore, I do not think that the technology was as powerful a factor in students' reading self-efficacy as other contextual factors were.

Overall, the students' varied in their identities as readers. For example, there were students like Shanice, who enjoyed sharing books with her friends. Her classmate, Courtney, felt that she had the potential to become a reader with more practice. Robert, of course, hated reading and did not view himself as a reader at all, yet he viewed himself as a writer, which was equally as difficult for him, but offered him more task control. Andre viewed himself as a reader out of necessity for his future and to enable him to read about his favorite hobbies. Other students, like Rasheem, were interest-specific readers; they only read materials related to sports or video games, but nothing more. This recognition of the various reader identities within classrooms is a critical component of creating

contexts in which students can negotiate their identities with one another and the required classroom texts.

How did students construct effective instruction?

The students' comments about effective instruction echoed those made by McCray's special education students. The basis of the students' construction of effective reading instruction was assistance. The students made it very clear that they required an appropriate level of assistance that still enabled them to have some control over their learning. The student's construction of reading as a cognitive act that should be performed by the reader contributed to the issue of assistance and independence, which, in turn contributed to how they viewed themselves as readers. Robert's story about the teacher telling him the words during an oral reading session and Andre's story about his teacher, who stopped after every paragraph, asked him to explain the ideas in the text are strong cases for finding the balance between assistance and independence.

Their two contrasting stories resonate with the Vygotskian perspective on social mediation. This perspective states that students make progress in learning when interacting with an adult or a peer who holds more knowledge through the assistance that person provides in dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978). Through this dialogue, students receive feedback about their engagement in a task. This continuous feedback provides a framework through which students acquire knowledge and eventually become independent in performing a task. In Robert's story, although a teacher was present, she did not use social mediation in a way that would enhance his ability to decode words because she did not give Robert an opportunity to utilize his knowledge while providing feedback. Robert was not able to acquire knowledge about word recognition and could

not become independent in his decoding skills. In contrast, Andre's teacher gave him feedback about his ideas concerning the text at regular intervals. This not only helped Andre learn new knowledge about the text, but also gave him the confidence he needed to maintain engagement that can eventually lead to independent reading. Therefore this issue of assistance impacted the students' views of their reading; with appropriate assistance, Andre felt like he was a good reader, whereas Randy's self-efficacy was lowered in defeat.

Contextual opportunities were an essential part of the students' ideas about instruction. Students who spoke positively about these opportunities seem to want to learn more and get better at reading, although they had already faced insurmountable obstacles in their education thus far. Students wanted to be challenged, improve in a comfortable environment, have control and choice in their learning and learn new things. Surprisingly absent from the discussions were social opportunities in school, although many students mentioned that they shared books and magazines with friends and family members outside of school, and engaged in social activities like role-playing and video games that involve literacy skills. The observations show that very little partner and cooperative learning group work was done in these classrooms, which may explain why the contextual features of a social environment did not transfer from their out-of-school literate activities to their in-school ones.

Moreover, the students mentioned the same contextual features that the boys in Smith and Wilhelm's (2002) mentioned. The students in this study and Smith and Wilhelm's students did not share the same grade levels, reading abilities, and the same demographic characteristics as they included European-American students in their study

and these students were from ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, the fact that these contextual opportunities are shared regardless of background, ability or gender is evidence that these opportunities are universal to effective instruction and should part and partial of curricula for every student.

Many of the contextual features hinged on assistance. For example, students wanted to read hard books, but they also wanted more help with sounding out the difficult words in those books. Students wanted opportunities to practice often, but in an environment that would provide assistance leading to independence. Almost all of the students viewed assistance as essential, regardless of their grade and reading ability and some remarked that they enjoyed assisting others.

Finally, students remarked on the materials they enjoy reading or would like to read in school. Surprisingly, it was not so much the genre that was important to these students, as it was the text features such as powerful messages. Students enjoyed many genres such as humor, mystery, adventure and realistic fiction. In addition, it was important that students read texts that were accessible to them in terms of vocabulary and ideas.

The role of this study in future research

The multiple aspects of reading discussed in this study are difficult to isolate one from one another. Reading research, such as research on students' book preferences, often examines single strands of reading. As important as this is, these students have shown that aspects of reading are woven together in complex ways that must be examined as related issues using context as a framework.

This study could be refined and aspects of this study could be examined in future independent studies. The interview protocols should be revised to include questions that elicit metacognitive understandings about the reading act by asking students about the processes and strategies they use while reading various texts in varying contexts. In order to look more closely at the roles of ability and self-efficacy in students' ideas about reading, this study should be conducted in inclusion classrooms that contain readers of varying abilities. In addition, the roles that audiobooks and computer technology play in both students' constructions of reading and their reading self-efficacy should be examined in a separate study using observations and interview protocols tailored specifically to those issues. To this end, the protocol questions should focus on students' actions and mental processes during technology use, in addition to enjoyment and degree of utility. The students' comments regarding the fact that they are not really reading when they read with the audiobook invites to examine more closely the nature of psychological tool mediation and how it changes learning for the students. As where the use of psychological tools, such as computers, gain prominence as instructional modes, understanding how students view tool assistance is essential to effective implementation of these tools in the classroom.

The ideas that these students held about reading instruction raised issues that should be examined more comprehensively in future research using the perspectives of students. In my opinion, one of the strongest ideas that arose from this study is the issue of practice. We know that students enjoy practicing activities and want more practice in reading. We also know that practice with substantial quantities of print is necessary for readers with reading difficulties (Stanovich, 1986). However, what is still unclear is how

students define practice. Do they mean repeated readings of the same text, practicing individual words, or just increased time with larger quantities of a variety of texts? Therefore, a study should be devoted to the issue of practice in order to assess what students mean by practice and what kind of practice motivates their willingness to engage with print.

Secondly, as just as important, what teacher interactions do students perceive as effective in their learning to read and their reading self-efficacy? For example, Andre felt that when his teacher stopped him after every paragraph and asked him to explain the text ideas, his reading greatly benefited. Using a Vygotskian lens and past research on teachers' interactions (Roehler & Duffy, 1996), a study, which includes students' interviews and classroom observations, could be developed to examine these related issues.

Furthermore, the contextual opportunities that the students mentioned warrant a study of the relationship between these opportunities, the students' engagement and self-efficacy. While similar studies (e.g., Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) have been conducted, studies that use students in urban special education programs as participants are rare. An observation scheme that takes into account these abstract contextual features should be designed so that teachers and administrators can use the scheme to evaluate their own programs. For example, my evaluations during my teaching career never noted whether I was allowing students ample social interaction, choice or challenging them. If these aspects are so important to students, then we should consider them as important to our reflective practice as the strategies and assessments we use to teach literacy skills. The

teachers and administrators should ensure that remedial and special education students are participating in the same type of engaging contexts as the mainstream students.

Most importantly, it is imperative that future research based on this study examine these issues through the eyes of students. If what they say parallels what we know about good instruction, then future research must do more to mesh theories of practice with students' ideas. Incorporating their perspectives ensures that accurate portraits of instruction are painted by providing the views of the actual beneficiaries of instruction. Furthermore, these participants from disenfranchised cultural and economic groups can help us reconceptualize our educational values and goals.

Implications for practice

The students' ideas stretch across four aspects of reading instruction that are critical to effective practice. First, the role of social mediation and assistance was an important part of these students' reading experiences. Past research (Wertsch & Stone, 1984; Mariage, Englert & Garmon, 2000) has shown that when student learning is socially mediated by a teacher using various forms of assistance, the students make significant gains in their understandings of concepts. However, given that many students want control and independence, while being assisted at the same time, choosing the proper forms of assistance can be a dodging task for a teacher. It is therefore incumbent on the teacher to assess the particular difficulty the student is having with a task and assess the progress a student has made in the task at regular intervals. Once a difficulty is assessed, the goal is to guide the student in the use of strategies that so that he or she becomes aware of the learning processes (Wertsch & Stone, 1984; Mariage, Englert & Garmon, 2000). In the Vygotskian perspective, the student becomes more adept in using

strategies and the teacher can reduce the amount of assistance, allowing the student to become independent (Vygotsky, 1978). To add to the complexity of assisting, teachers must choose, in the moment, from a vast array of instructional practices that range from modeling to specific types of questioning that awaken metacognitive processes in the learner. (Roehler & Duffy, 1996).

What, then, might a teacher do to help a student such as Robert who is unable to decode words and has become, at best, disgruntled with reading and teacher assistance? First, a teacher might model a think-aloud in which she or he shows Robert the thinking they do when they encounter a word they are unable to decode (Roehler & Duffy, 1996). Secondly, they might ask Robert questions that activate his knowledge of letter sounds or patterns, similar words and the context in which the word is being used (Roehler & Duffy, 1996). Finally, if Robert is still having difficulty, the teacher may actually have to model the sound of the onset or rime of that particular word. Of course, this is an extremely time-consuming task for a teacher, especially when the student has acquired no sight word vocabulary. However, as Allington and Johnston (1996) point out, a struggling student who is repeatedly told the word without receiving instruction in how to decode or self-correct, falls deeper into the crevasse of reading difficulties due to the lack of opportunities to develop skills. As such, both in-service and pre-service teachers need to become aware of the types of assistance and social mediation that they use in their classrooms. Many teachers may not realize how often they tell students words or fail to recognize the type of assistance that would enable a student to gradually become independent in skills and strategies. Both teacher education and professional development programs must do more to help teachers realize the role that socially

mediated assistance plays in the instructional context. Teacher educators must teach their candidates and practitioners to become metacognitively aware of their thinking as they socially mediate learning with students. They must be taught to assess their interaction in the moment and reflect on their actions afterward. In other words, it is not enough just to understand Vygotskian theory; they must be able to identify and practice socially mediated interactions that are appropriate for the individual student and concepts being taught.

The second aspect is the creation and maintenance of contextual features that not only impact student learning, but their self-efficacy as well. Teachers who teach students with reading difficulties are faced with a challenge: how do they teach the prerequisite phonological and word recognition skills, while maintaining an engaging environment? One student in this study, Antonio, was in a classroom that spent at least sixty percent of their time doing unrelated skill worksheets without teacher input. While skill practice is needed by struggling students, worksheet after worksheet does not give them the opportunity to use their skills in the context of reading and writing texts.

Research on best practices has documented instructional practices that take into consideration both skill practice and contextual opportunities that foster engagement. These practices are well-suited to special education, resource and mainstream classrooms. For example, repeated readings, part of fluency-oriented reading instruction (Stahl et al, 2003) enable students to have repeated exposure to words, while reading a text that they may not be able to access independently with the assistance of a teacher. During this process, the teacher models a reading of the text, and then the students read the text repeatedly over the week with the teacher and partners. This type of reading increases the

quantity and frequency of reading which is needed to make gains (Stanovich, 1986). In addition, the teacher discusses the text with the students to promote comprehension (Kuhn et al, 2006). More importantly, this type of instruction eliminates the round-robin reading to which poor readers are so adverse (Ash & Kuhn, 2006).

Morrow (2003) suggests devoting physical portions of the classroom to centers in which students have the opportunity to read and write materials of their own choosing with their peers. These centers provide multiple contextual opportunities for control, choice, challenge, practice, and social connections. It also enables teachers working in special education settings to meet with students on an individual basis.

Inquiry-based learning encompasses multiple contextual opportunities by placing the student at the center of the dialogic environment (Freire, 2002). Based on the work of Dewey (1916) and Freire, whose educational models posit that true learning occurs when students formulate their own knowledge through dialogic inquiry, this practice encompasses all of the ideas that the students had about instructional contexts in this study. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) suggest that in order to incorporate all of these elements in a literacy class, a teacher should use an inquiry framework to structure the lessons:

Through inquiry—the process of gathering and developing information, analyzing it, and organizing it in an effort to “figure out” or deepen understanding about a contested issue—reading can become the means through which students converse with authors about the vital human concerns we all (adolescent boys included) share (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002, p.189).

Students like Max, who stayed awake for two days trying to beat his video game, would enjoy an inquiry-based classroom because they like getting involved in their activities, especially those in which they are challenged to solve a problem. Placing Max in an inquiry-based class is like putting him in the middle of his video game in which he must figure out ways to solve problems and overcome challenges in order to feel a sense of accomplishment. In video and on-line games, the parameters are constantly changing and keeping the player on his or her toes. Inquiry-based literacy classes are the same: the readers keep challenging and are challenged by the text in order to resolve issues that are personally and collectively meaningful. In working with special education students, teachers using an inquiry-based structure would have to take special care that they choose appropriate level texts and assist students with word recognition, vocabulary and comprehension strategies so that the students do not become frustrated in the process.

Inquiry-based learning in today's classrooms encompasses the use of computer technology. During this study, I had the pleasure of assisting Courtney and Shanice's teacher in designing an inquiry-based unit about the themes present in the young adult literature the students were reading. The students worked together on the computer to research issues such as domestic abuse and drunk-driving, and then created informational pamphlets that could be distributed to their peers. Not only did Shanice and Courtney get practice reading, interpreting and writing informational texts, but it was a pleasure to see how motivated they were to do the work and how their self-efficacy was increased as they used the computer to research, write and perfect their projects independently.

McKenna, Labbo and Reinking (2003) state that collaborative computer use and the use

of word-processing programs by students during the writing process benefits students socially by sharing their work and enables them to better focus on ideas.

Teacher candidates and in-service teachers must be equipped with a substantial repertoire of instructional strategies to facilitate learners' development and create engaging contexts. We cannot expect our teachers to create contexts that promote reading achievement and engagement if they do not have concrete models on which to design their lessons. For example, what does an inquiry-based lesson look like? How does a teacher manage choral reading during FORI instruction? Teacher educators have documented these models in research; however, we must become more diligent in the dissemination of practical strategies. In addition, we must allow teachers more freedom to use a variety of research-based strategies, rather than binding them to a few.

Third, educators must assess what students already know about the act of reading in order to build on their knowledge (Michel, 1994). Fortunately, most of the readers in this study understood that meaning-making is the central aim of the reading act; however, this can not be automatically assumed for all readers, especially those students who have not had much exposure to print. Yet, these students did not include comprehension processes in their ideas about good reading. Past research (Dahlgren & Olsson, 1996; Jimenez, 1997) suggests that when students become metacognitively aware of multiple facets involved in reading, they are better equipped to explain and use the strategies involved in reading. Furthermore, if students' ideas about reading are partly based on instructional experiences (Rasinski & DeFord, 1988; Bondy, 1990, Michel, 1994), having regular conversations about reading will help teachers better evaluate their instructional programs. In special education classrooms, teachers should ask the students to orally state

their ideas about reading using questions from short interview protocols because students may not have the skills to write their ideas on a questionnaire or proficiently read the questions to themselves. This can be done individually or as group activity in which the teacher acts as scribe while categorizing student's ideas on a board for discussion.

Finally, we must understand how students view their own capabilities in reading and consider issues of self-efficacy when examining student engagement. It is critical that teachers talk to the students about their feelings of competence before assigning a challenging task or text (Colvin & Schlosser, 1997; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002).

Furthermore, teaching children to assess their improvement on a regular basis rather than teaching them to rely on grades (Walker, 2003) or social comparison builds students confidence as they see how much progress they have made. Teachers need to eliminate practices such as round-robin reading that make struggling students feel embarrassed and incompetent in front of their peers (Ash & Kuhn, 2006). Rather, teachers need to provide ample time to practice reading substantial quantities of text so that students have the opportunity to improve their skills.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of strategies and contextual features will be determined by the students. Their verbal feedback, as well as their levels of engagement or resistance, should be the gauge of good instruction. However, I cannot recall participating, as a teacher candidate or in-service teacher, in professional development that focused on using students' feedback to reflect on teaching. In my opinion, teacher education and professional developments do not emphasize this aspect enough and should do more to make teachers recognize the importance of talking with their students.

Reflecting on my own experiences as teacher, the students in this study made me aware of several aspects of my teaching to which I should have given more attention. First, I attributed various students' lack of engagement in reading and writing to disliking of books and genres, when, in retrospect, these poor readers had low self-efficacy and did not feel capable doing the tasks at hand. Even when I offered them the choice of reading and writing a variety of materials and genres, they refused to do the assignments. Understanding their self-efficacy and talking to the students about their competence before we began a task would have helped me to better assist them during the task and increased their persistence. I also would have been more aware of the balance among comfort, challenge, assistance and independence. Secondly, although many of my students were poor readers, I believe that they could have been challenged more often, not only by materials, but during task engagement by asking them to rely on their own funds of knowledge to solve problems before I rushed to their aid. Finally, I would have assessed their knowledge of literacy acts and gained an understanding of how they used literacy in their own lives. Their knowledge would have become the foundations of my literacy lessons as relying on assumed knowledge often resulted in several children failing to understand the concepts, even after much assistance. In short, by constantly garnering feedback from the students, I could have created an atmosphere that provided multiple contextual opportunities to promote increased engagement and higher achievement.

None of these suggestions is novel; they are widely written about in research, and many former colleagues of mine use these strategies in their classrooms. However, they are worth mentioning because more teachers of readers experiencing difficulties need to

use a wider repertoire of strategies to help students engage with reading. There is a fine line between over-assisting the students and leaving them to fend for themselves. Yet before we attempt to create the ideal instructional context, we actually have to talk to the students in order to harvest the ideas that they know will work best for themselves.

Limitations and Significance

This study is limited in that the findings are specific to a particular school district and population. Many of the students in this study had a difficult time expressing their ideas or were reluctant to do so because they had never been interviewed previously. Several students at each site were limited by their English proficiency; others had oral language disabilities or emotional difficulties that hindered the interview process. Some students also may not have been completely honest in their answers; in other words, they wanted to please the interviewers. In addition, several of the teachers were not receptive to researchers' visits or allowing their students to leave class for lengthy interviews. Therefore, the ideas represented may be incomplete. While these students share similar characteristics with many poor, urban youth across the nation, their ideas have been shaped by their particular home and contexts, and may not be representative of other students in their situations.

Given that these students most likely will continue to overcome reading difficulties, the most important idea that emerged from these interviews was how important it is to listen to the students when they spoke about their reading. In talking to these students, I found that gender, grade and ability level do not play a major role in students' ideas about reading and their desire for effective instructional contexts. Ability, assistance and contextual opportunities were factors in their reading self-efficacy. The

students wanted to read in environments that advanced their reading skills and sustained involvement. They were well aware of why they enjoy or do not enjoy reading, what kinds of materials they like to read, the contextual features that support their reading, and their self-efficacy levels. If, as teachers, we take the time to talk to each student individually about their ideas, we may be able to cater more to their needs, whether it is choosing appropriate texts, giving appropriate levels of assistance, or creating instructional contexts that support and challenge each learner. Reflective practice is the very foundation of good instruction. We should insist that student input become a part of this reflective process in order that teachers compose accurate and complete portraits of their instructional programs.

It is my greatest hope that this study will not only help educators think about aspects of reading instruction in meaningful ways, but that it will encourage them to seek out the voices of students, especially those who are disenfranchised from mainstream society. In doing so, we give marginalized students a stake in their future and alter the fabric of society by including their voices in the dominant discourse. I believe they are counting on us to make their voices heard.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol for October Interviews

Name	Class
Date	Interviewer

1. How do you like reading in school?
 1. I like it a lot
 2. I like it
 3. Not really
 4. Not at all

2. How much do you like reading on your own?
 1. I like it a lot
 2. I like it
 3. Not really
 4. Not at all

3. How much do you like to read fiction? (Stories, science fiction)
 1. I like it a lot
 2. I like it
 3. Not really
 4. Not at all

4. How much do you like to read non-fiction books? (Biographies, factual stories, science, history)
 1. I like it a lot
 2. I like it
 3. Not really
 4. Not at all

5. Do you ever read anything other than books?

What kinds of things (newspapers, instructions for gaming, comic books, magazines)?

How much do you like to read these things?

 1. I like it a lot
 2. I like it
 3. Not really
 4. Not at all

6. Do you have a favorite book? What is it?
7. What kinds of things do you enjoy reading?
8. What kind of reader do you think you are? Good—Poor?
 1. Very good
 2. Good
 3. Not so good
 4. Not good at all
9. Who do you know who is a good reader?

What makes them a good reader?

What do you think they do when they have trouble with their reading?

10. Do you read outside of school?

How many days a week?

For about how long?

11. Do you read for fun?

How many days a week? (Give hints if students don't know: 1 day, two days, three days...every day)

For about how long? (Give hints if students don't know: 15 minutes, _ hour, 1 hour, 2 hours)

12. Do your parents ask you to read?

How often?

13. Have you ever used books on tape before? (If a student says yes, then ask, "How many times?" and give hints: 1 time, 2 times, every day)

What for? (If students don't know, hint: to help with schoolwork, to help with reading, to hear a story?)

Did you read along with them or just listen?

14. Do you feel the audio-books will help with your schoolwork?

How?

Do you feel the audio-books will help with your reading?

How?

15. How did you learn to read?

Who helped you?

How did they help you?

16. When you are reading and you come to something you don't know, what do you do?

Do you ever do anything else?

17. If someone was having difficulty reading, how would you help them

What would the teacher do to help them?

18. What would you like to do better as a reader?

Appendix B

Interview Protocol for February Interviews

Student's Name:

ID Number

School/Class

Grade

Date

Interviewer

All students:

Question 1

What activities do you like to do outside of school?

Question 2

Of all of those activities which one do you *like* the best? Why?

Question 3

Which one of the activities do you think you *do* the best? (Follow-up: Why would you say this?)

Question 4

Do any of those activities involve reading? (Follow-up "yes": what kind of reading—game manuals, sports books, etc)

(If "yes" to question 4 then ask the following)

Question 4A

How does that kind of reading you do for "activity x/activities x, y, z" compare with the reading you do while you in school? (Hint: it is more fun or less fun, is it harder or easier)

Question 4B

Which kind of reading are you better at? The reading you do outside of school (for the activities you just named) or the reading you do inside of school? Why?

Question 5

Let's talk about the reading you've been doing in reading and language arts class. I see that you are reading "book x"? How do you like reading this book?

Question 6

What book did you read before this book?

Question 7

Which book do you like more: book z or book x? Why?

Question 8

Which book are you better at reading? Why?

For audio-book students: (the control students were not asked these questions)

Question 9AB

Do you like reading with the audio-book machine or without it? Why would you say this?

Question 10AB

How, if at all, has the audio-book affected your reading? Has it changed the way you feel about your reading?

For Control (non-audio-book) students (audiobook students may also be asked these questions)

Question 9C

Do you think your reading has changed since the beginning of the school year? Why would you say this?

Question 10C

How do you feel about reading now compared to how you felt about it last year?

All students:

Question 11

Can you rank the following reading skills in order: which skill are you the best at doing when you read?

- _ Sounding out words
- _ Reading out loud
- _ Understanding what you read
- _ Imagining the story
- _ Figuring out what new words mean

Question 12

What things could someone like your teacher, parent, or me do to help you become a better reader?

Question 12A

What things could we do to help you enjoy reading more?

Appendix C

Interview Protocol for May Interview

Student's Name:

ID Number

Grade

Date

Interviewer

Question 1

How do you like reading in school?

1. I like it a lot
2. I like it
3. Not really
4. Not at all

Question 2

How much do you like reading on your own?

1. I like it a lot
2. I like it
3. Not really
4. Not at all

Question 3

How much do you like to read fiction (stories, science fiction...give examples as needed)?

1. I like it a lot
2. I like it
3. Not really
4. Not at all

Question 4

How much do you like to read non-fiction books (give examples as needed)?

1. I like it a lot
2. I like it
3. Not really
4. Not at all

Question 5

Do you ever read anything other than books?

Question 5A

How much do you like reading these things?

1. I like it a lot
2. I like it

- 3. Not really
- 4. Not at all

Question 6

What kind of reader do you think you are?

- 1. Very good
- 2. good
- 3. not so good
- 4. Not good at all

Question 6A

Why did you pick (insert whatever the choice was)?

Question 7

What is the most important reading skill a reader should know how to do when they read? (Place a “1” by their first choice, then continue with what is the second most important thing a reader should know how to do when they read and place a “2” by the choice and so on and so forth)

- _____ Understand what they read
- _____ Sound out the words
- _____ Figure out what new words mean
- _____ Imagine the story as they read
- _____ Read out loud

Question 7A

Why did you pick (#1—whatever their choice was) as your first choice? Section II:

Audio students only

For Audio-book students:

Question 1AB.

How did you like using the audio-book machines this year—and I need you to be very honest with me!

- 1. I like it a lot
- 2. I like it
- 3. Not really
- 4. Not at all

Why do you feel this way?

2AB. Do you think the audio-book machines had an effect on your reading?

Why do you feel this way?

3AB. Do you prefer to read with the audio-book machine or without it?

Why?

4AB. How helpful were the audio-book machines in helping you read your books?

1. Very helpful
2. Helpful
3. Not that helpful
4. Not helpful at all

Why do you feel this way?

Section III: All students

Question 8

Do you think you have improved in your school reading this year?

Why (yes or no)?

Question 8A

How do you know that you improved?

Question 9

What do you enjoy about reading?

Question 9A

Why do you feel this way?

Question 9B

How does this make reading enjoyable for you?

Question 10

Is there anything you don't like about reading?

Question 10A

Why do you feel this way?

Question 11

Which do you like doing better: reading outside of school or reading inside of school?

Why?

Question 12

Can you tell me something else about your reading or reading in general? It can be anything you want...how you feel about reading; things you like to read or don't like to read...

Appendix D

Major Coding Categories

Importance of Competence

- “Getting better”/Improvement
- Social comparison
- Practice/quantity/frequency
- Knowing how to do something
- Having skills

Importance of Text involvement

- “Getting into the book”
- Powerful messages
- Interest-specific
- Related to self
- Surprise
- Genre-specific
- Accessible texts

Importance of Contextual Features

- Challenge
- Being social
- Feeling comfortable
- Choice
- Control
- Independence
- “New things”

Importance of Assistance

- Teacher interactions
- Tool assistance

Good reading

- Skills
- Non-skill related

Reading

- Importance of understanding
- Importance of sounding out words
- Purpose of reading
- Reading as a vehicle
- Reading out loud

Curriculum Vita

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Education

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Professional Experience

- 2001-2006 Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Learning and Teaching,
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Publications

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