How and in What Ways Does Homogeneous Small Group Instruction in Reading Influence Struggling Middle School Readers and Their Attitudes toward Reading

by

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Abstract

The study of how homogeneous small group instruction influences struggling middle school readers and their attitudes toward reading was a twelve-week mixed ANOVA study that examined the affects small group instruction for struggling middle school readers. Participants in this study were seven sixth-grade students considered to be struggling readers.

The homogeneous small group instruction often correlated with the weekly skills outlined in the lesson plans of a regular classroom teacher with current reading materials including, but not limited to, short stories, novels, magazines, newspaper current events, recipes, response journals, and internet resources. Activities included oral reading, vocabulary exploration, group activities, presentations, research, internet exploration, reader's theatre, and creative writing.

Results of this mixed ANOVA study indicated that the struggling readers involved in homogeneous instruction demonstrated slight gains in both motivation and reading ability. A re-examination of the study identified social acceptance from peers in regular classrooms, understanding and higher expectations from their teacher, and a smaller, more personable environment as being significant catalysts to recharging their motivation of becoming engaged, active, and more independent readers.

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Rationale for Study

Middle school is an age of transition where students have emerged from an elementary

school environment that is relatively child-centered to an environment that promotes content-

centered practices. As a result of this transition, many changes such as new friends, more

classes, new neighborhoods, being a transient student from another school or district, and riding

the bus for the first time may occur. Change, whether it is large or small, is easier for some

students than others. Associated with this change, academic, social, and even behavioral hurdles

will become higher for a student that has difficulty staying organized, managing his/her time

well, or retaining previously acquired knowledge. The environment of middle schools often

expects these students to learn complex content with little help in reading and comprehending

difficult texts. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2007), over a million of the

students who enter ninth grade each fall (year) fail to graduate with their peers four years later,

and in fact, about seven thousand students drop out every school day.

Decades of research show that when students get off to a poor start in reading, they rarely

catch up (McMaster & Van den Broek, 2008). The National Adult Literacy Survey found that

about 44 million adults lack sufficient literacy skills to function successfully in American society

(Phi Kappa Phi, 2004). Many of these adults have difficulty finding and keeping living-wage

jobs, supporting their children's education, and participating actively in civic life. According to

McMaster and Van den Broek (2001) "… once kids get beyond eighth grade, it becomes very unlikely that their reading will improve" (p. 2).

The researcher asks, "How can a reading intervention strategy that supports explicit and guided instruction for *all* readers, but with a clearer focal point on those with tendencies to struggle be implemented for struggling middle school readers?" The purpose of this study is to document and describe the impact and pedagogical practices of homogeneous small group instruction on struggling middle school readers during the implementation of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). Further exploration of this study seeks to describe the affects and influences of homogeneous small group instruction in reading among struggling middle school students and to gain greater understanding of the many axioms of how these struggling readers see themselves as readers and to quantitatively measure their successes and academic improvement.

Available evidence clearly suggests that a substantial number of our middle and high school-age students do not read well (Bracey, 1997). National and international assessment results confirm observations made by business and post-secondary institutions over the past several years that many high-school graduates cannot comprehend complex written information (Weinstein & Walberg, 1993).

Hopkins (2006) quoted an excerpt from President Bill Clinton's 1997 State of the Union Address:

> It is essential that our students master the basics of reading English by the end of third grade. At fourth grade, students are expected to read so they can learn science, history, literature, and mathematics. If they can read by then, they can read to learn for a lifetime. Students who fail to read well by fourth grade often have a greater likelihood of dropping

out and a lifetime of diminished success. (http://www.educationworld.com/
admin/admin/admin012.shtml)

Hopkins contends the essentialness that students master the basics of reading English by the end of third grade because at fourth grade they are expected to read so they can read to learn for a lifetime to. Students who fail to read well by fourth grade often have a greater likelihood of dropping out and a lifetime of diminished success. Over time, learning becomes more complex, with heightened demands on students to use reading skills to analyze or to solve problems. Good reading skills are required to study geography, do math, use computers, and conduct experiments. Even motivated, hard-working students are severely hampered in their schoolwork if they cannot read well by the end of third grade (U.S. Department of Education, 1999), and statistically speaking, Tilson (2006) stated that children who can't read in 4th grade account for nearly all of the high school dropouts.

As students move through the grades, the gap between good readers and poor readers widens even further. According to Stanovich (1986) the "Matthew Effect," is a term used to describe a phenomenon that has been observed in research on how new readers acquire the skills to read: Early success in acquiring reading skills usually leads to later successes in reading as the learner grows, while failing to learn to read before the third or fourth year of schooling may be indicative of life-long problems in learning new skills. In other words the "Matthew Effect" helps good readers become better readers and poor readers become more frustrated and fall further behind. Walberg and Tsai (1983) first coined the term the "Matthew Effect" to describe the fact that, without intervention, some students rapidly develop and build upon strong literacy foundations, and other students languish behind their more fortunate peers. This pattern usually continues for many children who are considered struggling or at-risk readers. Children are

expected to learn to read in the primary grades, when most reading instruction is given, then by fourth grade, they are expected to read to learn and gather information for life purposes, but fail to do so when their foundations have not been strengthened. This downward spiraling is further evident when struggling readers reach middle school and reading instruction is upstaged by content area reading.

Adolescents who struggle to read in subject area classrooms deserve instruction that is developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive to their needs (Alvermann, 2001). There must be some immediate connection and benefit to the student's life. In many cases the struggling reader is overwhelmed with the quantity of materials requiring attention. Without a useful connection, he or she may reject the obligation, fall further behind academically, and eventually renounce education entirely. Students decide to quit coming to school because they cease to feel connected to their school, their teachers, and their peers. When the school environment invites them to participate, students want to remain a part of the community, thereby achieving academic and personal goals benefiting their present and future successes (Alvermann, 2001). The general question then becomes "How could time during SSR generate or provide an environment for small group instruction for struggling middle school readers?"

By establishing a homogeneous small group environment for these struggling readers, a deeper, more focused examination of obstacles encountered by struggling middle school readers can take place, and the initiation of a complete intervention program can began. According to researchers from Texas Education Agency (2002), the answer may lie in providing students with instruction that both teaches them comprehension strategies that work well for good readers and helps them to develop the necessary metacognitive awareness of how and when to use these strategies. Struggling readers typically have difficulty mastering the basic skills established by

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curriculum guides. Content material presented to them is even more laborious because of a seemingly disconnected fashion, disconnected from their lives and to their prior knowledge. For those who struggle, it is vital that a foundation of strong and well-formed skills of understanding, application, and reasoning is constructed, such as reading, comprehending, critical thinking, and evaluating (Stringer, 2002). Students will be able to use these skills not only in classrooms, but also in daily situations outside the academic setting. For example, using texts such as advertisements and billboards, instructions for games, letters, magazines, newspapers, recipes, job applications, television, video, and others items used for day-to-day operation.

In meeting the literacy demands of subject-area learning, it is useful to emphasize the centrality of teaching students to comprehend and to think critically about different kinds of print and non-print texts, including those that are student generated, visual, oral, or digital in nature (Alverman, 2001).

To better serve struggling readers, Richard Allington (2001) recommends redesigning reader support programs, and offers several solutions to the need for increased instructional time: add a second daily reading lesson, extend the school day, take advantage of summer school, and accelerate literacy development. Allington also cautions that reading support should not focus purely on the early grades, because substantial gains can also be made in the upper grades, where students have access to intensive, expert instruction (Witherell, 2001).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to use SSR as an unofficial intervention period for students who were characterized as struggling readers and was based on the implementation of Harvey Daniel and Marilyn Bizar's Best Practice structures taken from *Teaching the Best Practice Way: Methods That Matter* and the possible academic impacts homogeneous small group instruction

might have on struggling middle school readers. The affects and influences of homogeneous small group instruction in reading among struggling middle school students allowed further exploration of the success and academic improvement revealed how the student participants in this study viewed themselves as readers.

The research participants included seven sixth-grade struggling readers from similar cultural/socioeconomic backgrounds and attended a prominent southeastern suburban school system. Data from this study was collected over a 12-week period. Students were indirectly introduced to Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar's (1998) best practice structures: reading-as-thinking, integrative units of study, classroom workshop, representing-to-learn, authentic experiences, and reflective assessment. The findings from this research study indicated that many of the participants had very little interactions associated with reading and text at home. Primary sources of data were one-on-one student conferences, anecdotal notes from the reading sessions, and observations of students' behaviors about reading, students' written journal responses, small group rotations, and formative and summative assessments.

Research question one: "How does homogeneous small group instruction positively affect/increase reading achievement for struggling middle school readers?" Research question two: How will implementing instruction for a homogeneous small group of struggling middle school readers impact reading motivation of the participating students?" These questions will be addressed in chapter three of this study. Chapter four of this study will present the results from the data collected and analyzed from the Student Reading Survey and standardized tests: ThinkLink, SAT 10, and ARMT. Chapter five ties chapters three and four together and presents the conclusions of how the implementation of Sustained Silent Reading as an intervention

instrument to provide an environment for homogeneous small group instruction for struggling middle school readers.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited in that it is reflective research from a small percentage of sixth grade middle school students from one school in one school system. The participants represented less than 10% of the school's population. The surveys used in the study were developed and administered by the researcher and may not be appropriate for other similar studies.

The researcher was also the Language Arts, Reading, and Writing teacher for these students. It was assumed that the behaviors and attitudes of these students were not influenced by the multiple roles of the researcher especially since there were no grades assigned.

Finally, a limited measurement of motivation for the student participants was provided. This study followed these student participants during the first three months of the 2008 school year. This limited the scope of results and additional research is needed to determine long term effects of instruction of the homogeneous small group instruction and environment.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study contained three components. First, the study explores the academic and attitudinal effects of implementing homogeneous small group instruction on struggling middle school readers and exposes the critical need for effective reading intervention in middle school.

Secondly, this study enabled struggling readers the opportunity to voice how they viewed themselves as readers and learners. Three times a week, during Sustained Silent Reading, these students gathered in an environment they felt was academically non-threatening. This setting allowed these students to learn reading strategies that would help them in other content area

classes. The homogeneous small group also served as a support group for the students where they were able to feel confident and actually perform better in their regular classes.

Finally, this study can be beneficial in that middle school teachers may gain a better understanding of how effective instruction can successfully be differentiated so that all students benefit. This information can help teachers and school administrators research, develop, and implement effective intervention/enrichment environments beneficial to all reading students.

Definition of Terms

The following terms will be used consistently throughout this study. It is my intention to clarify them with definitions that best fit the context of this study, but not limit other definitions that could be applicable to these same terms.

Aliterate — able to read but choosing not to.

Accommodations — changes in the way tests are designed or administered to respond to the special needs of students with disabilities and English learners (Schoolwisepress, 2010).

Adolescent — Adolescence is the transitional stage of development between childhood and full adulthood, representing the period of time during which a person is biologically adult but emotionally not at full maturity. The time is identified with dramatic changes in the body, along with developments in a person's psychology and academic career. In the onset of adolescence, children usually complete elementary school and enter secondary education as middle school or high school (WordiQ.com, 2010).

At-Risk Student — students may be labeled at risk if they are not succeeding in school based on information gathered from test scores, attendance, or discipline problems (Schoolwisepress, 2010).

Criterion-Referenced Test — a test that measures how well a student has learned a specific body of knowledge and skills. The goal is typically to have every student attain a passing mark, not to compare students to each other (Schoolwisepress, 2010).

Dropout — a grade seven through twelve student who left school prior to completing the school year and had not returned by Information Day (a day in October when students throughout the state and are counted and enrollment is determined) (Schoolwisepress, 2010).

Developmentally Appropriate — This term is used frequently in discussions about middle school to refer to programs and practices that match the developmental needs of students. These needs include physical, cognitive, social and emotional needs.

Early Adolescence — There is some controversy over when adolescence begins, and depending on the writer, early adolescents can be anywhere from nine to fifteen years old. Scales (1996) "uses ages ten to fifteen because those ages roughly mark the beginning and end of a set of physical, socioemotional, and cognitive changes" (p. 7).

Homogeneous Grouping — refers to the placement of students of similar abilities into one group, classroom, or environment.

Middle School — a school between elementary school and high school, usually having three or four grades, variously including grades 5 through 8.

Motivation — is a theoretical construct used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity, persistence, and quality of behavior, especially goal-related behavior (Maehr & Meyer, 1997).

Norm-referenced Test — an assessment in which an individual student's performance is compared to a norm or average of performances by other, similar students (Kurbiszyn & Borich, 2003).

Struggling Readers — struggling readers have traditionally been depicted as low achievers; lacking cognitive competencies which may include reading comprehension, study skills, word recognition, and reading fluency, and quite often, they pose a significant challenge for educators (Vacca & Vacca, 1999).

Student Motivation — student motivation refers to a student's interest, desire, compulsion, and need to participate in and be successful in the learning process which is influenced by both internal and external factors that can start, sustain, intensify, or discourage behavior (Reeve, 1996).

Transient Students — any student who moves during or between academic years.

Underachievers — one who fails to achieve a performance appropriate to one's age or talents (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/underachiever).

CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Literature for this review was obtained by accessing the Educational Research

Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) and other research databases at the Ralph Brown Draughon

Library located on the campus of Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama. Journal searches were

completed at Auburn Public Library, Auburn, Alabama. Reading, adolescent literacy, middle

school, homogeneous groups, and struggling readers were successful descriptors. All articles,

books, and other publications were chosen based on the relevancy to this study. Using

references and related bibliographies in publication provided further studies of relevance to this

topic.

Review of this related research and literature includes studies from 1965 to the present.

Specific studies regarding reading at the middle school level is from 1982 to 2001. The most

pertinent areas of focus determined in this study are: defining who middle school students are;

identifying characteristics of struggling readers; understanding the pros and cons of

homogeneous and ability groups; and recognizing motivation and self-efficacy among struggling

readers.

Middle School Students

Who are middle school students, and what is known about them behaviorally,

intellectually, and socially? The onset of adolescence occurs between the ages of 10 and 11 and

is a particularly difficult period of development. Middle school students experience dramatic

changes in their physical development such as height, weight, and even their body chemistry, and the rates at which these rapid changes occur vary for individuals. For example, some middle school students experience fluctuations in basal metabolism which can cause extreme restlessness at times and equally extreme listlessness at other moments (California Department of Education, p. 142). The changes also include psychological changes such as erratic and inconsistency in their behavior; anxiety and fear are contrasted with shifting feelings of superiority and inferiority. Chemical and hormonal imbalances can often trigger emotions that are frightening and poorly understood. Middle school students may even regress to more childish behavior patterns and become easily offended, sensitive to criticisms of their personal shortcomings, and often feel self-conscious, alienated, and lack self-esteem.

How beneficial is this information to this study? Any typical middle school student could display a wide range of individual intellectually, socially, and behaviorally developmental characteristics as their minds transition from concrete-manipulatory stages to the capacity for abstract thought (Family and Relationship Center, 2010). World renowned Erik Erikson (1968) noted in the eight stages of man, if one or more of the earlier psychosocial crises have not been resolved; man may view himself and his life with disgust and despair. This holds true for any child or adolescent. In other words, a child must successfully complete stages one through three or four - industry versus inferiority (as defined in the eight stages of man) by the time he or she reaches middle school. During this stage, a child learns to master the more formal skills of life such as relating with peers according to rules, progressing from free play to play that may be elaborately structured by rules and may demand formal teamwork, and skills necessary in mastering subjects such as social studies, reading, and arithmetic. The child who, because of his successive and successful resolutions of earlier psychosocial crisis, is trusting, autonomous, and

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full of initiative will learn easily enough to be industrious. However, the mistrusting child will doubt the future. The shame and guilt-filled child will experience defeat and inferiority. This is also a very social stage of development and if unresolved feelings of inadequacy and inferiority are experienced among ones peers, serious problems in terms of competence and self-esteem can evolve.

Erikson's stage four (industry versus inferiority) and possibly stage five (learning identity versus identity diffusion) could render possible explanations for middle school students' chemical and hormonal imbalances which often trigger emotions that are frightening and poorly understood. It may also explain the social aspect of middle school students that encompasses a variety of behaviors such as becoming rebellious towards their parents and/or teachers and the regression to more childish behavior patterns (Family and Relationship Center, 2010).

Many middle school students want to make their own decisions and have conflicting views with authority. They may even challenge authority figures and test limits of acceptable behavior. Many have been known to exhibit unusual or drastic behaviors that can be aggressive, daring, boisterous, and even argumentative; but still they are strongly depending on guidance and values from those they feel genuinely care about them. They need constant affirmation and can sense negativity from parents and teachers. Middle school students realize the thin edge between tolerance and rejection and these feelings of adult rejection often drive the middle school student into the relatively secure social environment of a peer group. They want to choose their own friends to whom they become fiercely loyal; sometimes being cruel and insensitive to those outside their peer group. Adapting to new and large settings can often seem overwhelming, impersonal, frightening or confusing to most middle school students.

Socialization of Middle School Students

Traditional elementary schools are typically organized into self-contained classrooms as opposed to middle schools that are largely departmentalized. This difference in organization frequently results in obstacles to learning for students transitioning from elementary to middle school (Harris, 1996). According to research information provided by the administration at Smedberg Middle School, Sacramento, California (Scholastic Administrator Partners), this transition ultimately makes possible the ability to project thought into the future, to anticipate, and to formulate future goals, as well as, providing middle school students the insight into sources of previously unquestioned attitudes, behaviors, and values.

Transitioning from self-contained elementary school to the departmentalized classrooms of middle school involves a different type of transitioning. Among the obstacles created by elementary to middle school transitioning, the most significant appear to be social in nature (Blum, 2005; Pope & Simon, 2005; Tomlinson & Doubet, 2005). Pre-adolescents' psychological needs encompass a range of emotions, reflecting the most basic followed by higher level, increasingly complex needs. Among them is the need to feel secure, accepted, safe, connected, and validated (Maslow, 1968). These concerns are heightened for students transitioning from elementary to middle school (Scholastic Administrator Partners, 2004). Meeting social needs during the transition from an elementary to a middle level school is a major consideration, because most programs focus more on academics and regulations.

In 1989, the California Department of Education published *Caught in the Middle,* a publication that depicted characteristics of middle grade students. According to this publication, middle school students considered academic goals as a secondary level of priority. Personal social concerns dominated their intellectual thought activities. Their intense curiosity directed

them to active learning over passive learning experiences. Middle school students greatly favored interaction with peers during learning sessions and activities.

Students' perceptions of the quality of school life decline as they progress from elementary to secondary school, with the largest decline occurring during the transition to a middle level school (Diemert, 1992). In Diemert's survey of twenty-three fifth-graders in a middle level school, of the top eleven (out of twenty-three possible) needs identified by boys, six were social, two were academic, two were procedural, and one was academic and procedural. Of the top ten needs identified by girls, five were social, two were academic, and three were procedural.

Middle School Students and Learning

Chan, Terry and Bessette (2004) note that educators need to acknowledge that pre-adolescents are wired differently — psychologically, physiologically, and, as a result, cognitively. The socialization and enculturation process during transitioning from elementary to middle school takes on increased importance. Pre-adolescent "hardwiring" sets the stage for future learning to occur. The environment of the school and its culture play a critical role in students' ability to connect to learning. Above all, students at this age need to feel connected to their peers, to their teachers, and to their school. A school environment that feels safe, supports students' autonomy, and includes them meaningfully has the potential to help pre-adolescents think critically, develop opinions, and engage more in their classes (Inlay, 2005).

According to Johnson and Johnson (1991), there are three basic ways students can interact with each other as they learn. They can compete to see who is "best"; they can work individualistically toward a goal without paying attention to other students; or they can work

cooperatively with a vested interest in each other's learning as well as their own. Of the three interaction patterns, competition is presently the most dominant.

In 1965, Ashley Montagu stated,

> Without the cooperation of its members, society cannot survive, and the society of man has survived because the cooperativeness of its members made survival possible.... It was not an advantageous individual here and there who did so, but the group. In human societies the individuals who are most likely to survive are those who are best enabled to do so by their group. (pg 109)

Teaching Middle School Students

Vygotsky (1978) claimed that learning is enhanced when interacting with a more knowledgeable other. Interaction makes learning powerful. Small group work, sometimes called cooperative learning, requires students to work together to exchange ideas, make plans and propose solutions. Teachers must give careful thought to how to manage the classroom during small group activities to ensure success. When students work in small groups, they think through an idea, present it to others so that they can understand, and often exchange alternative ideas and viewpoints. This:

- encourages positive attitudes toward diversity
- increases students' self-confidence
- promotes intellectual growth, and
- enhances social and personal development

Ability grouping is another term used where children in one classroom are placed into groups based on their ability. The classroom may contain children with a wide range of ability. Children can move in and out of groups as needed. For example, a child may be in the high

ability group in reading, but a middle level in math. If the child improves in math, he could be moved up to the high ability in math. In the same way, if the child begins to have problems in reading, he could be moved to a lower group. This flexibility of grouping allows the needs of children to be better met. Ability grouping is not the same as tracking, heterogeneous grouping, or cluster grouping.

Ability grouping for reading instruction has been in place since the early 1900s in the United States. It was first viewed simply as a way to break up large groups of students for instruction. One major benefit was that the students were in like ability groups so they were all working at the same level and same pace at the same time (Slavin, 1988). Thus, teachers were given the freedom to differentiate the lessons to suit the needs of each of the individual groups. There were two main types of ability grouping discussed. The first one was between classes ability grouping in which students were grouped homogeneously for certain subjects during the day. All the students in the class would be working at comparable ability/academic levels. Researchers argued that placing students in this type of ability grouping for reading was not a bad idea if the students were grouped heterogeneously for the remainder of the day. Other researchers advocated homogeneous ability grouping across grade levels and ages for certain subjects.

The second type of ability grouping is within-class ability grouping. When using this method of ability grouping, the teacher would group the individual classroom students into ability groups for certain subjects. This would allow the teachers to differentiate instruction for each ability group. Once again, the negative aspects of this would be: decreased instructional time with each student, teacher bias, and student self-esteem. Another part of within-class grouping is cooperative grouping in which the teacher groups the students into groups

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heterogeneously for certain parts of the day. The positive aspects of this include: students of mixed abilities would rely on each other for help and everyone would have a definite assignment in the completion of the task. In cooperative groups, the higher ability students would help the lower ability students and each student would be responsible for making sure the tasks were completed. The downfall of cooperative grouping is that often the higher ability students usurp most of the task in order to just get it completed and/or the higher ability students might feel pressured to bring the academic level of lower ability students up to his/her own level. There is a great burden placed on children in the cooperative learning group. The great burden is making them responsible for each other's learning apart from themselves. It is not only the smart students that suffer, "One study showed that in groups of mixed ability, low-achieving students become passive and do not focus on the task" (Johnson & Johnson, 1999, pg. 12).

According to "Guidelines for Teaching Middle and High School How to Read Well," Judith Langer states, "offering *separated* and *simulated* activities to individuals, groups, or the entire class as needed and providing overt, targeted instruction and review as models for peer and self-evaluation are excellent strategies that require students to use their skills or knowledge to complete a task or project that has meaning for them" (pg. 4). Researchers also suggested that teachers should actually spend more time with the poor readers' group to help maintain the equality of actual instruction time. Teachers' views of their poor readers were often much more harsh than those of their good readers. Teachers often viewed their poor readers as behavior problems (Allington, 1983). Of major importance, it was found that WHEN and IF the teacher made some differentiation in the reading instruction, then the end result was reading achievement gains.

Constructing a homogeneous group for reading in middle school will probably be of greatest value to the 5–10% of kids at the bottom; the ones reading more than two years below grade level. Schools definitely could, and often do, create an alternative reading class for such kids or in some cases, it is an additional class where the strugglers take both the regular language arts class and the special reading class.

Even when schools create such possibilities they often fail to provide the resources needed to make them work. They should keep in mind these students are academically far behind their peers. Adjusting the instructional level of the materials alone will probably not be sufficient to meet their needs. According to Deshler (2007), struggling readers have to make gains that will help close the learning gap with their peers which mean they need more than a year of learning for a year of teaching. Researchers Bondi, Fenwick, Lipsitz, Mergendollar, and Tye (cited in California Department of Education, 1987) also point out that middle school students exhibit a strong willingness to learn things they consider to be useful, and they enjoy using skills to solve real life problems.

Homogeneous grouping is the placement of students of similar abilities into one classroom. The practice of homogeneous grouping, which is quite widespread in the United States, uses a model that typically groups students together on ability or achievement as the deciding variable. At the high school level, this practice is most prevalent in mathematics, where students are placed in vocational, general, or college-preparatory mathematics courses (McPartland, Coldiron, & Braddock, 1987; Oakes, 1985, 1990a, 1990b; Slavin, 1990). It also occurs at the middle or junior high school level in those schools that offer algebra at the eighth grade (McPartland, Coldiron, & Braddock, 1987; Oakes, 1985, 1990a, 1990b; Slavin, 1990). According to the Second International Math Study (SIMS), ability grouping is more extensive in

the United States than any other country studied (Oakes, 1990a). Students at the elementary school level may also be tracked or grouped, although at this level students are more often grouped by general measures of ability or achievement rather than ability or achievement in mathematics (Oakes, 1985, 1990a, 1990b; Slavin 1987a, 1987b).

Homogeneous grouping often means that one teacher gets an overwhelming number of children with problems of one kind or another. Even when children are tracked there can be a range of ability of two years between the highest and lowest achievers in that class. Students who are tracked in this way can end up having several years of detrimental learning experiences (Bissur, 2009).

Grouping practices that are appropriate for one class may not meet the needs of another class (Sanacore, 1990; Wiesendanger & Bader, 1992). Whatever the grouping plans, it should be remembered that grouping children for reading instruction is a means for facilitating learning—it is not an end in itself.

Grouping for Specific Purposes

Classification of children in groups should frequently be determined by specific purposes; for example, groups may be organized for the purpose of providing instruction in developmental reading, and individual children should be regrouped as their performance requires. In other cases, a group may be devoted to the study of specific skills, regardless of the general proficiency of the members. Research groups may be formed for pupils who wish to investigate a similar problem. Other groups interested in the same theme—such as pets, airplanes, plants—may plan presentations to the whole class. In some instances, groups may be formed in which the better readers help the slower ones. Grouping within a single room has some limitations. The three-group plan, or any other plan for homogeneous grouping, may make

the children and their parents conscious of differences in achievement. Studies often show that the high groups receive the best instruction geared to critical thinking, while the lower groups receive instruction that is less stimulating. Some researchers have noted that many teachers give nonverbal clues to their students that they enjoy teaching, the higher groups more than the lower ones, and that many teachers expect less from the lower groups in the way of progress. This creates pressure on a child to measure up to the others in reading.

Regardless of the members in a group, individual differences remain within that specific group. If the teacher uses the same materials with all pupils, allowing only for a difference in the speed with which the groups are expected to read them, the problem of individual needs still remains unsolved. However, when teachers use different materials for the groups, the amount of preparation of work is greatly increased. Teachers must be willing to expend this extra energy to meet the needs of all the children in their classes. Educators must make many choices every year about grouping arrangements. Good teachers who provide supportive environments for their students and who are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of grouping will make the decisions that are right for themselves, for their classroom situation, and for their students.

Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is a period of uninterrupted silent reading. Many practitioners and researchers suggest that the primary purpose of SSR is to encourage students to read more and to increase their enjoyment of reading rather than to have a direct effect on reading achievement (Gardiner, 2001; Yoon, 2002). Gardiner, a teacher at Billings Senior High School in Montana, says his experience shows: "if students had time to read during class, they looked forward to reading" (p. 6). Yoon's meta-analytic study looked at the effect of SSR on attitudes toward reading. He determined that of seven studies examined, the effect size (0.12) is small but does provide empirical support for SSR having an impact on attitudes toward reading.

The concept of SSR is based upon a single simple principle: Reading is a skill. And like all skills, the more one uses the skill of reading it, the better one gets at it. Conversely, the less one uses it, the more difficult reading is. Like swimming, once you learn it, you never forget it. But in order to get better at either reading or swimming, you must jump into the book or the water and do it over and over. How much do students read? As reported in the excerpt from Jim Trelease's book, *The Read Aloud Handbook*, "students do not read very much". According to Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988), American students spend only an average of 18.4 minutes per day reading printed materials out of school. Unfortunately, there has been no significant increase in the amount of time American students spent reading either for pleasure or for learning (Campbell, Voelkl, & Donahue, 1997). In one reported study, 90% of the students studied devoted only 1% of their free time to reading and 30% to watching television. Additionally, 50% of the students read for an average of four minutes or less per day, 30% read two minutes per day, and 10% read nothing at all. In a comprehensive seven-year study conducted by John Goodlad, *A Place Called School*, it was reported that only 3% of class time is occupied by the act of reading in the middle school, and 2% percent in the high school. Sedita (2008) noted:

> One way that motivation and engagement are instilled and maintained is to provide students with opportunities to select for themselves the materials they read and topics they research. One of the easiest ways to build some choice into the students' school day is to incorporate independent reading time in which they can read whatever they choose. Yet this piece of the curriculum is often dropped after the primary grades. (p. 1)

Sedita also suggested that middle and high schools who have adopted SSR programs use the time that on-grade level readers are reading silently to also do some targeted, scaffold instruction with struggling readers.

Struggling Middle School Readers

According to Karen Grady (2002), in 1999 the International Reading Association issued a position statement on adolescent literacy which called for a renewed interest in and dedication to the rights and needs of adolescent readers:

> Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 99)

The U. S. Department of Education (2008) reported that 32 million adults in the United States lack basic literacy skills. Nationally, this amounts to one out of seven adults that lack basic literacy skills and one out of five adults who could not read, write, or do basic math. Where does the breakdown lie? Has the nation exclusively and primarily focused on our nation's youngest readers and in some ways neglected the increasing need of their older brothers and sisters?

Struggling readers at the middle level, grades 4–8, face complex challenges when compared to students in the primary grades, K–3. However, less attention has been paid to this

group of students. A number of reading researchers and theorists believe the reading process to be much more complex, including not only the cognitive dimension addressed by schema theory and many existing reading strategies, but including a social dimension as well (Bloome, 1986; Goodman, 1996; Greenleaf, et al., 2001; Harste, 1994). Researchers have found that students who discuss reading frequently with peers have higher scores on standardized reading achievement tests. Besides, collaborative social activities in meaningful literacy contexts also promote higher level thinking skills and the intrinsic desire to read and write, as well as helping to develop literacy skills. During social interactions, researchers have found differences in amount of talk, initiation patterns, volume of talk, and the use of questions among students from different cultural backgrounds.

For struggling adolescent readers, the key is to diagnose their difficulties, determine where their problems lie, and find techniques that solve those problems. Heller and Greenleaf (2007) suggest assessing reading skills as soon as students enter a school to identify those who are below grade and determine their specific learning needs. Curtis (2001) estimates that about 10 percent of adolescent readers struggle with word identification because they have difficulty deciphering letter-sound relationships. Students at this age make the problem worse, she adds, by guessing at words on the basis of context rather than trying to sound them out. But for most struggling adolescent readers, the problem is that although they can read words accurately, they do not comprehend what they have read (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Guthrie and Alvermann (1999) suggest that these comprehension problems may include having trouble figuring out the correct meaning of a word, being unable to make inferences from the text or link ideas in the text to their prior knowledge, and failing to ask themselves if they understand what they just read.

"The behaviors that are key to academic literacy include the abilities to provide sequenced explanations, logical arguments, grounded interpretations, and abstract analysis" (Jacobson, et al., 2001, p. 528). However, for many students, learning to read does not occur easily. As McCray (2001) confirmed:

> Reports at the national, state, and local levels indicated millions of youngsters at the intermediate and middle school levels read below a fourth-grade level and experience deficiencies in basic reading skills such as word recognition, decoding, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. (p. 298)

These students have come to be known as "struggling" readers. Struggling readers have traditionally been depicted as low achievers; lacking cognitive competencies which may include reading comprehension, study skills, word recognition, and reading fluency; and quite often, they pose a significant challenge for educators. Vacca and Vacca (1999) stated that these are indeed defining attributes of the struggling reader. Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore (2000) believe that the notion of struggling readers must be expanded to recognize the individual who is disengaged from literacy.

In earlier years, another title given to struggling readers was "at-risk" readers. An "at-risk" student is one who is in danger of failing to complete his or her education with an adequate level of skills (Slavin & Madden, 1989). Low achievement, retention in grade(s), behavior problems, poor attendance, and low socioeconomic status are risk factors associated with these students. Currently, the term struggling reader appears to be the preferred term among reading professionals for adolescents who, for whatever reason, are unable to keep up with the reading demands of the school curriculum" (Alvermann, 2001, p. 679). For these students, the key is to diagnose their difficulties, determine where their problems lie, and find techniques that solve

those problems. Heller and Greenleaf (2007) suggest assessing reading skills as soon as students enter a school to identify those who are below grade and determine their specific learning needs.

For most struggling adolescent readers, the problem is that although they can read words accurately, they do not comprehend what they have read (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Guthrie and Alvermann (1999) suggest that these comprehension problems may include having trouble figuring out the correct meaning of a word, being unable to make inferences from the text or link ideas in the text to their prior knowledge, thus missing the whole concept of meaning and comprehension.

How then must one gain a greater understanding of the characteristics of struggling readers? McDermott and Varenne (1995) argue that there are three categories in terms of their approach to explaining the struggle of unsuccessful readers: the deprivation approach, the difference approach, and the culture-*as*-disability approach. These constructs are the creation of "School" which includes not only the school personnel, but also all of stakeholders involved in developing the overarching assumptions about academic mastery. The deprivation approach is constructed on the foundational perspective that members of groups develop differently enough that they can be shown to be measurably different from other groups in terms of particular development milestones. In other words, some people have developed the skills to perform particular tasks, other people have not, and the presence and extent of those skills can be reliably measured. This is essentially the deficit model that explains the failure of minority children in school as a function of impoverished or impoverishing experiences at home. The difference approach focuses on the perspective that members of particular groups develop knowledge and skills that are well tuned to the requirements of their cultures (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). The third approach is the culture-as-disability approach. It suggests strugglers fail because they

are "acquired" as failures by rigid educational systems that focus on a predetermined set of competencies that these students almost invariably do not have (McDermott & Varenne, 1995 p. 324-348).

Struggling students, especially at the middle school level, are attempting to create identity cultures, and they desire to belong to the group. The process of adopting, transforming, and being transformed by those around them becomes the focal point and takes precedence over the individuality. Struggling readers seek to find a safe place to blend to remain unnoticed in instead of standing out amongst peers. The fear of not being accepted by a peer group is regarded higher than the risk of standing out in an adverse way.

Middle school students need extensive time set aside for them to read and respond to texts that they choose to read (Ivey, 1999a, 1999b; Worthy, 2000). This silent reading provides extended practice for students, practice that they themselves note as being an important part of their improvement as readers (Stewart, Paradiz, Ross & Lewis, 1996). Struggling readers in Stewart et al.'s study indicate quite clearly that if teachers would like readers to develop proficiency and fluency, "Give us time to read and let us pick other books" (p. 474).

Middle school students can also benefit from content area strategy instruction. Content area literacy skills are most effective when taught within the content area courses themselves, but can be taught effectively within a reading class. Content area literacy is often negated because of the reluctance of content area teachers to include literacy instruction in their classes and the difficulty of content area textbooks, particularly for students who struggle with reading (O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). Many strategies such as reciprocal teaching are effective with both narrative and expository texts. Between books in guided reading, perhaps in one-week blocks of time, whole class and small group instruction in comprehension strategies for the content areas

could be considered in the framework. This instruction could use the content area textbooks of

the students as well as their actual reading assignments and could provide students with

strategies they can use in their reading in language arts as well as their other content areas.

Connecting textual reading in science or social studies to the strategy instruction in reading and

language arts serves as part of an integrated unit on a middle school team, or as part of guided

reading groups, where multiple exposures to a variety of strategies can improve reading

strategies and independent use (Garner, 1990). An excellent description of possible procedures

for strategy instruction is provided in *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to*

Enhance Understanding (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). This published book also includes sample

lessons for introducing comprehension strategies on varied grade levels. Other sources for

comprehension strategy instruction include *I Read It, But I Don't Get It: Comprehension*

Strategies for Adolescent Readers (Tovani, 2000), and *Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to*

Lifelong Literacy (p. 6–12) (Wilhelm, Baker, & Dube, 2001). Strategy instruction grounded in

students' actual texts and assignments provides the best opportunities for students to use

strategies to accomplish authentic tasks. In fact, Roe (1992) argues that it is essential that

instruction in comprehension strategies be taught using the actual materials with which students

will be asked to use the strategies. With opportunities to practice these strategies and apply them

in actual classroom situations, students are more likely to internalize strategies and use them

appropriately on their road to becoming expert readers (Dole, Brown & Trathen, 1996), Pearson

et al., 1992).

Transient or Mobile Students

Public school systems are experiencing a high rate of student mobility because society

has become increasingly mobile. Each year students who change schools during that academic

year not only pose a great concern for teachers and administrators, but also a tremendous amount of pressure for themselves. Existing research finds that students can suffer psychologically, socially, and academically from mobility. Transient students face the psychological challenge of coping with a new school environment. Transient students also face the social adjustment to new peers and social expectations. They not only deal with the change of environment in their home lives, a change that can be similar to death and mourning for some (Neuman, 1988); they also encounter a change in schools, which is almost certain to create some disjuncture in their learning experience (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994; Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989; Kerbow, 1995b). Alexander, Entwisle and Dauber (1996) distinguished between students who move within a school system versus those who move out of the system. The researchers sought to identify if significant differences existed. They found that students who moved within the system often suffered more negative effects of mobility than students who moved out of the system.

In 1996, Bruno and Isken claimed:

Any disruption in the continuity of instructional programs can have a major impact on future academic attainment...what is not reported and lacking in the research data is the negative effect student transiency has on the nonmobile, or stable students, and the overall assessment of school growth. (p. 14)

As students move to upper grades, the percentage of transient students decreases, but a negative effect upon academic achievement can still occur. Carolyn Hofstetter (1999) found that mobile or transient high school students had significantly lower test scores after other classroom characteristics were controlled.

Motivation and Self-Efficacy of the Struggling Middle School Student

Motivation to learn is paramount to student success. Motivation can be defined as the internal drive directing behavior towards some end. Student motivation naturally has to do with students' desire to participate in the learning process. It also includes the reasons or goals that underlie a student's involvement or noninvolvement in academic activities. Although students may be equally motivated to perform a task, the sources of individual motivation may differ. According to researcher Barbara McCombs (1996), data has shown that for students to be optimally motivated to learn, they must:

- See schooling and education as personally relevant to their interests and goals.

- Believe that they possess the skills and competencies to successfully accomplish these learning goals.

- See themselves as responsible agents in the definition and accomplishment of personal goals.

- Understand the higher level thinking and self-regulation skills that lead to goal attainment.

- Call into play processes for effectively and efficiently encoding, processing, and recalling information.

- Control emotions and moods that can facilitate or interfere with learning and motivation.

- Produce the performance outcomes that signal successful goal attainment.

In middle level schools, it is important to emphasize mastery and improvement, rather than relative ability and social comparison. Empirical evidence suggests that middle schools tend to stress relative ability and competition among students more, and effort and improvement

less, leading to a decline in task goals, ability goals, and academic efficacy. Working in groups, focusing on effort and improvement, and being given choices all support a more positive task-focused goal structure (Anderman & Midgley, 1997).

Motivation to Learn

The term 'motivation to learn' has a slightly different meaning. It is defined by one author as "the meaningfulness, value, and benefits of academic tasks to the learner—regardless of whether or not they are intrinsically interesting" (Marshall, 1987, p. 135). Motivation to learn has also been characterized by long-term, quality involvement in learning and commitment to the process of learning (Ames, 1990). According to Jere Brophy (1987), motivation to learn is a competence acquired "through general experience but stimulated most directly through modeling, communication of expectations, and direct instruction or socialization" (p. 311).

Intrinsic Motivation versus Extrinsic Motivation

A student who is intrinsically motivated undertakes an activity "for its own sake, for the enjoyment it provides, the learning it permits, or the feelings of accomplishment it evokes". An extrinsically motivated student performs "in order to obtain some reward or avoid some punishment external to the activity itself," such as grades, stickers, or teacher approval (Lepper, 1988, p. 289). Students bring with them a variety of motivations, and tapping into them will promote better learning. As McCombs and Barton (1998) notes, "Motivating learning is largely dependent on helping to bring out and develop students' natural motivations and tendencies to learn rather than 'fixing them' or giving them something they lack." Motivation is complex, and according to Jere Brophy (1986), its "key is socialization. It is central to child rearing, and it is essential to child management in school."

At the middle school level, motivation is key for several reasons. For example, even students who are strong readers may find the more difficult reading assignments, particularly those in content areas, too challenging. Those students who already struggle with reading will have become more frustrated and could possibly try to avoid reading at all costs.

Lyon et al. (2001) explains that students with reading difficulties get caught in a negative cycle. Reading is not enjoyable to them and they don't learn from it, so their frustration leads them to avoid reading, and their vocabulary growth and learning in other subjects suffers as a result. This cycle typically erodes the self confidence of students and their motivation to learn. Students may be what Alvermann (2004) calls aliterate—able to read but choosing not to, often because they do not see a link between their everyday world and academic tasks. Gaskins, Gensemer, and Six (2003) suggest that some struggling readers have a faulty belief system. They believe they are not smart and nothing can help them. Perceived competence is a construct that has received much support in the empirical literature. Perceptions of incompetence (Phillips, 1984) have been found to be associated with impaired problem solving, dysfunctional causal inferences about achievement outcomes, and lessened achievement goals. Phillips also compared children whose self-perceptions were commensurate with their abilities to those with low perceived competence. Those who perceived themselves as low competence adopted lower standards and expectancies for success, perceived that teachers expected less from them (confirmed by the teachers), ranked unstable effort as a more important cause of high grades than ability, and were portrayed by teachers as lacking in persistence. Self-efficacy is strongly related to motivation; that is, the more competent one feels to address a specific task, the more likely one will attempt to complete or engage with that task. This applies to reading and writing just as it does to anything else (Alvermann, 2003; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997). And, of course, the

opposite is also true. Therefore, learning strategies that improve reading comprehension can be, in themselves, motivating and can lead to students wanting to engage more enthusiastically in reading and writing tasks that develop deeper content area understanding. However, Kamil and others stress, "Motivation and engagement are critical for adolescent readers. If students are not motivated to read, research shows that they will simply not benefit from reading instruction" (Kamil, 2003, p.8). In other words, adolescents will only take on the task of learning how to read or write better if they have a sufficiently compelling reason for doing so.

For Brophy (1987), the goal of socialization is to instill in students' expectations, habits and routines that will enable them to control themselves. "Whether you are talking about classroom rules or whether you are talking about general pro-social behavior," Brophy contends, "the idea is to try to help kids develop a set of values that must be taught through socialization" (p. 40–48). The socialization process helps students learn what to do and what not to do, but more so it becomes part of their self-control. They learn what to do and do it on their own. The ideas and values relate to peer-relations, and fundamental notions of justice, fairness, respect, and politeness. Under the right classroom conditions and at the right level for each student, motivation and energy can serve as positive essentials for a complete and productive academic school experience. As students delve more deeply into their subjects, texts and assignments of middle school students become more complex, and the goal becomes reading to learn, rather than learning to read. Laura Robb (2002) encourages teachers to rethink the way reading is taught to upper elementary students. In an article written for Scholastic Instructor, she writes,

> For many years many elementary and middle school teachers have shaped their teaching
> practices around the deeply rooted myth of learning to read—reading to learn … the myth
> and its practices are not working. What many researchers have shown is that learning to

read and read to learn must happen simultaneously and continuously from preschool

through middle school—and perhaps beyond. (p. 23)

Students tend to internalize beliefs that teachers may have about their ability. Generally, they "rise or fall" to the level of expectation of their teachers. When teachers believe in students, students believe in themselves. When those you respect think you can, you think you can (Raffini, 1993).

Teachers' Role in Motivating the Middle School Students

The literacy research about young adolescents points to three basic principles about how teachers can support all types of readers in the middle grades. First, teachers need to know students as readers. This includes not only collecting assessment information about individual student strengths and areas that need development, but also exploring personal interests with students and their background knowledge about different topics. Second, classroom and school resources should include a wide range of materials for independent and instructional reading, and reading instruction should include work with alternative text sources such as the Internet and informational pamphlets. Third, time spent reading must be a priority in classroom instruction, and teachers need to play an active role in guiding and supporting individual readers during silent reading time. Reading instruction should not only take into account content area goals, but also should include developmentally appropriate instruction in areas such as word knowledge and reading fluency (Broaddus & Ivey, 2002). Students have a range of reading ability, even if the class is homogeneously grouped.

Grouping for instruction by reading level is of the utmost importance. Students must receive instruction at their level in order for learning to take place. Small group instruction allows a teacher to know his/her students' strengths and weaknesses and address their individual

needs. One of the most important ways a teacher can get started is to assess the student's needs. Early identification of reading and language difficulties can be accomplished through listening to children talk and read. Individual conferencing centers on a shared piece of literature, running records, and guided reading groups can help you identify the students who are lagging as well as the specific areas of need. Professor of Education, Catherine Snow, Harvard Graduate School of Education states, "The presence of struggling readers in most U.S. classrooms leads to a simple proposition, teachers need to be teaching reading, not just in first through third grades but throughout all the grades, and not just in 'reading class' but in literature, science, math, and history classes as well" (Snow, 2007, p. 2). Heller and Greenleaf remind teachers to remember what it was like to be a new student in a discipline and "articulate and make concrete the skills, knowledge, and concepts they may take for granted but that many students need to be shown explicitly" (p. 14).

The beliefs teachers have about teaching and learning and the nature of the expectations they hold for students also exert a powerful influence (Raffini, 1993). As Deborah Stipek (1988) notes, "To a very large degree, students expect to learn if their teachers expect them to learn" (p. 125)

Teachers who are effective in socializing problem students employ principles that involve truly listening to the student, showing respect, trying to understand the child from the child's point of view, showing empathy, and avoiding clashes of will. According to Duffy (2002) teachers who produce the greatest gains in reading achievement adapt their instructional practices to meet individual student needs—a process known as differentiation. These teachers recognize that students have different ways of learning and respond best to different types of instruction.

Effective teachers modify their instructional techniques according to the varying needs of the students. However, before teachers can offer this flexible instruction and feedback, notes the Rand Reading Study Group (2002), they need lengthy and intensive preparation, and ongoing professional development. The struggling readers in their classes should not be excluded from reading, writing, and talking about the academic content of the texts. Instead, teachers need to find ways to engage these students in compelling issues and problems related to the particular academic discipline, rather than forcing them to do basic skills-focused reading exercises. It may take some effort, the researchers say, but finding interesting and relevant reading materials written at the student's level can help build comprehension and content knowledge. Because so much knowledge is conveyed through reading in the middle and high school years, teachers may assume that struggling readers cannot handle challenging or even grade-level work. But Heller and Greenleaf (2007) recommend that teachers look for the strengths students bring to school and find ways to build bridges between academic content and the everyday competencies students display. For example, Kamil (2003) notes, to learn the instructions for many computer games, students may use complex reading skills that are not evident in the classroom. Teachers should help students understand that reading with comprehension requires effort but can improve with practice (Snow, 2007). Students may think reading is an inherent skill that should come naturally; teachers can empathize with students by showing that they have struggled at times and still struggle to comprehend texts on unfamiliar subjects (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Another strategy implemented by teachers include choosing reading assignments or texts that are "moderately difficult" so students are challenged; tasks that are too easy—or too hard—decrease intrinsic motivation (Guthrie & Alvermann 1999).

Another effective strategy that teachers can practice is to explain the reason for a reading assignment and offer comprehension strategies matched to that assignment (Manzo 2005; Wade & Moje 2000). Otherwise, students may see reading as "busy work" or unimportant to learning. And finally, students enjoy a variety of tasks and activities that are linked to reading assignments, such as writing a song or jingle or illustrating key events from a text (Guthrie & Alvermann, 1999).

CHAPTER III. METHOD

Design of the Study

The research design consisted of mixed methods, both qualitative and quantitative to examine how and in what ways has small group instruction influenced or affected struggling middle school readers and their attitudes toward reading. The theoretical framework was based on the implementation of SSR as an intervention opportunity and the possible academic impact homogeneous small group instruction might have on struggling middle school readers. Further exploration of this mixed method study obtained information that could describe the affects and influences of homogeneous small group instruction in reading among struggling middle school students. The following questions were asked to guide my research:

1. "How does homogeneous small group instruction positively affect/increase reading achievement for struggling middle school readers?" explores the impact(s) homogeneous small group instruction has on the reading achievement of struggling middle school readers.

2. How will implementing instruction for a homogeneous small group of struggling middle school readers impact reading motivation of the participating students?" "How does homogeneous small group instruction positively affect/increase reading achievement for struggling middle school readers?" explores the impact(s) homogeneous small group instruction has on the reading achievement of struggling middle school readers.

The goal of this study was to gain greater understanding of the many axioms of how these struggling readers see themselves as readers and to qualitatively measure their successes and academic improvement.

A mixed-method approach was used for this study. A mixed-method study integrates both quantitative and qualitative research methods (Gay & Airasian, 2003). Much debate has occurred since the 1960s on the usefulness of combining qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in the same study (Creswell, 2003; Taskakkori & Teddlie, 1998; Thomas, 2003). As Stewart and Shields (cited in Thomas, 2003) state, "the debate was often viewed as a contest between innovative, socially responsible methods versus obstinately conservative and narrow-minded methods [others viewed the debate as between] precise, sophisticated techniques versus mere 'common sense'" (p. 6).

Curlette (2006) for instance, argues that "beliefs from the qualitative aspect of a mixed methods research design can be combined with data from the quantitative side of the research to reach a belief statement about the existence of a finding from the qualitative study" (p. 345). In other words, Curlette believes data collected using qualitative techniques can be used to support conclusions reached by performing tests on quantitative data and vice versa. One benefit of using a mixed-method study according to Frechtling, Sharp, and Westat (1997) is that combining the two approaches sharpens our understanding of the research findings.

According to Hanson, Creswell, Plano-Clark, Petska, and Creswell (2005), "using both forms of data allows researchers to simultaneously generalize results from a sample to a population and to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena of interest" (p. 224). For instance, a researcher can make generalizations from the sample to a population which is normally something done by a quantitative researcher. These generalizations can be further

supported and enhanced through thick descriptions of some aspects of the data, an approach normally taken by qualitative researchers.

In 1994, Stake, Denzin, and Lincoln stated, "how" and "why" questions are best suitable for case studies because the approach draws attention to what can be specifically learned from a single case. Merriam (1988) also added that a case study often builds upon tacit knowledge and provides a thick description of the case under investigation (p. 12). According to Yin (1990), the most significant condition for differentiating among the various research strategies is to identify the type of research questions being asked. Another reason the researcher prefers the case study for this study is because of the lack of control or manipulation of relevant behavioral events that may occur.

Data from this study was collected over a 12-week period. Students were indirectly introduced to Harvey Daniels Best Practice structures: reading-as-thinking, integrative units of study, classroom workshop, representing-to-learn, authentic experiences, and reflective assessment. The findings from this research study indicated that many of the participants had very little interactions associated with reading and text at home. Primary sources of data were one-on-one student conferences, anecdotal notes from the reading sessions, and observations of students' behaviors about reading, students' written journal responses, small group rotations, and formal and informal assessments. These students demonstrated some increase in their overall reading performances and demonstrated more positive attitudes about reading in general.

Setting

The setting of this study was on the campus of a prominent middle school located in an affluent suburban school system that supports a strong partnership with a large southeastern state university. It is the only middle school in the system serving only sixth and seventh grade

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students. During the 2008–2009 school year, the school population was nine hundred eighty-nine. The school has consecutively met adequate yearly progress (AYP) since the onset of the No Child Left Behind mandate, and all faculty members were considered highly qualified.

Participants

Appendix 1 provides evidence of approval granted by Human Subjects at Auburn University. Because the subjects were under the age of eighteen, parental permission was obtained in order to survey the students. Permission was granted from administration of the middle school and the curriculum coordinator from the central office of the local school district. The research participants in this study included seven sixth-grade struggling readers, both males and females, from similar cultural/ socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table 1 shows the demographics of the participants in the study. It reveals their age at the time the study was conducted and indicates if the student was a transient student to the school system. Three-fourths of the student participants were transient students who had moved into the school district within the first two weeks of that academic year.

Table 1

Demographic Chart of Participants Group 1

Participant	Gender	Age	Transient
STUDENT A1	FEMALE	12	YES
STUDENT A2	MALE	12	YES
STUDENT A3	MALE	12	NO
STUDENT A4	FEMALE	12	YES*
STUDENT A5	FEMALE	12	NO
STUDENT A6	MALE	12	NO
STUDENT A7	MALE	13	NO

Table 2 shows the demographics of the remaining students who entered sixth grade with similar academic proficiency levels as the participants.

Table 2

Demographic Chart of Comparison Group 2

Participant	Gender	Age	Transient
STUDENT B1	FEMALE	12	NO
STUDENT B2	FEMALE	11	NO
STUDENT B3	FEMALE	11	NO
STUDENT B4	FEMALE	11	NO
STUDENT B5	MALE	11	NO
STUDENT B6	FEMALE	12	Yes*
STUDENT B7	FEMALE	11	NO
STUDENT B8	MALE	12	NO
STUDENT B9	MALE	11	NO
STUDENT B10	FEMALE	11	NO
STUDENT B11	MALE	12	NO
STUDENT B12	MALE	12	NO
STUDENT B13	FEMALE	12	NO

* Attended more than one school system within an academic year

Data Collection

Researchers collect data in a mixed methods study to address the research questions or

hypotheses. The data collection procedure needs to fit the type of mixed methods design in the

study. This requires using procedures drawn from concurrent forms of data collection, in which

both the quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently, or from the sequential forms

of data collection, in which one type of data is collected and analyzed prior to a second data collection (Creswell, 2005, p. 110).

Research data was collected in the natural classroom environment during SSR. The primary sources of data for the study were students' surveys and researcher's observations. The Student Reading Survey was designed to make students more active participants in the research process. Using a Likert Scale format, the students responded to 26 items focusing on their engagement of reading, autonomy support of reading, reading in content areas, and their interests in various texts.

Yin (1994) describes six sources of data used in qualitative case study research: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. As part of observation, Merriam (1988) suggests completing accurate field notes, which include actual occurrences as well as the observer's comments or interpretations. Of the data collection sources mentioned, the following triangulation of data was gathered and used:

- Criterion-Referenced Tests
  - THINKLINK Assessment
  - Alabama Reading and Math Test (5th grade reporting)
- Norm-Referenced Tests
  - SAT 10
- Student Surveys

Observations of the participants in this study were conducted in a target classroom from August 2008 through December 2008. Data collection consisted largely of observations, interview questionnaire, surveys, and field notes, all of which were directly influenced by the

researcher. Being the primary instrument allowed the researcher a first-hand context within which the research phenomenon occurred.

The researcher was asked by the principal and assistant principal to disaggregate reading data on all students who entered in 6th grade as partially proficient or non-proficient reader based on student 5th Grade scores: SAT 10 and ARMT. Prior to analyzing any data from the students' national and state testing, a reading interest survey (Appendix 6) and the Student Reading Survey (Appendix 7) were given to all 110 students. Special attention was given to twenty-two students who had similar targeted characteristics of a struggling reader. After receiving the returned student reading surveys, the surveys completed by those students who had been identified as "watch" students were targeted. These students' surveys were then divided into two categories: partially proficient and non-proficient students. The surveys from the students who had been identified as all "A" students were analyzed more closely to determine what were the similarities and differences in their attitudes about reading. Field notes were gathered two mornings per week. Each session included observing, interacting, and assisting a small group of sixth grade struggling readers for 30 minutes. This allowed the researcher to become more familiar with the population of students and establish a routine of meeting with the student participants regularly. The following questions were used to further excavate data from the participants. This set of questions allowed freedom to clarify and summarize each student participant while collecting data and formulating new ideas and lines of thought about each student participant:

- What is their attitude toward SSR sessions?

- Do they come prepared?

- Do they read?

- Do they give up easily?

- What are their socialization habits among each student participant during the sessions? During regular classes?

- Do they learn from lessons, personal discoveries, and mistakes?

- How often do they stay on task?

- Are they reflective thinkers?

- What are major distractions for them?

- Do they need constant assistance?

- What do they read?

- Can they understand what they read?

- What do they do well?

- Do they set goals?

Data from the student participants' biographical questionnaires and anecdotal notes of weekly pull-out sessions (three days per week) were coded in order to determine recurring or similar themes. Initial coding categories consisted of significant reading habits, reading backgrounds, perception of reading and motivation to read. As more time was spent on the anecdotal notes about the students' lives and classroom performances, the coding categories were revised and labeled as student profiles. This was largely an intuitive process, but also, as Merriam (1988) stresses, "[this process] considered issues such as frequency of student reading, uniqueness as a reader, and previously unrecognized areas" (p. 283–285).

After overarching categories of the data had been identified, each category was sorted and other ways to break the data down into manageable pieces which fit together was necessary. Although the selected students have been identified as struggling middle school readers, each individual student profile is unique and requires that each section of this study be devoted to

uniqueness of each student. Stringer and Angelle (2003) noted that "although completing an inventory on each student does require some time and organization in the beginning, it allows for a greater awareness of what each student's present needs are."

Data Analysis

Research is the process of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data in order to understand a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). The research process is systematic in that defining the objective, managing the data, and communicating the findings occur within established frameworks and in accordance with existing guidelines. The mixed-method approach was used in an effort to capture both the practical and theoretical perspectives of this study. The quantitative data was gathered from the student participants' 5th grade Thinklink, SAT 10, and ARMT scores were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and Statistical Programs for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The scores from these assessments were used as predictive tools to determine how the student participants may perform in reading related classes during the first trimester of their 6th grade year. The scores were categorized according to proficiency levels and stanines then placed in an Excel spreadsheet that corresponded to the assessments from which they came. Data was imported into SPSS where the necessary calculations were given and descriptive analysis was provided.

According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the constant comparative method is implemented when the researcher searches for patterns, notes tentative categories, and compares new data to the previous data in order to refine meaning. This process of constant comparing includes identifying, coding, and categorizing the patterns in the data. The Student Reading Survey was the instrument used to determine the attitudes and influences of the student participants about reading. The constant comparison process quickly caused me to abandon my initial notion about

instruction for struggling middle school readers and redirected it to the many complex challenges middle school students have to conquer in addition to maintaining a successful academic life.

The Student Reading Survey (Appendix 7) consisted of twenty-six questions and was divided into the following four subscales categories: engaged reading, autonomy support, content area, and interesting text. Each question was assigned a numeric value. The survey contained four sections. The first section had six items asking students to rate their engagement of reading: students' attitude regarding if they liked to read, topics they like to read about, appreciation for the ways authors write, and projects that involve many different reading materials. The second section had six items asking students to rate their autonomy support. These items addressed students' perceptions about the support and encouragement provided by their teachers: expressing their own opinions, encouragements to learn new things, encouragement to read books that are hard for them to read, in science, being able to decide what topics to read and write about; in math, the importance of working on their own. The third section contained eight items asking students to rate their reading instruction in other content areas. These items focused on reading instruction that was integrated in content areas other than reading and language arts. The fourth section contained six items asking students to rate their interests in various kinds of texts. Two of the four scales were found to have acceptable reliability.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, focal points were the mixed-method approach used for this research design, the data collection, the participants and the setting in which the research took place. The mixed-method approach was used in an effort to capture both the practical and theoretical perspectives of this study. The participants were introduced to a more established routine for

SSR. A distinctive set of questions was used for the researcher as a generic guide that offered

additional insight on each student participant and his or her perceptions while participating in the

small homogeneous group.   Finally, the process of data collection and the description of the

procedures of the data analysis serve as segue to Chapter 4 where the results will be described.

CHAPTER IV. RESULTS

This chapter presents the results from both quantitative and qualitative data collected in August 2008 from a total of 110 students. This data includes, state criterion-referenced test results, national norm-referenced test results from the students' 5th and 6th grade reports, and survey instruments designed by the researcher. Of the 110 profiles created, twenty-two had recurring or similar targeted characteristics of struggling readers. Within those twenty-two students, seven students were chosen as the participants for this study. Based on a total of twenty students; seven in the participant group and thirteen in the comparison group, table 2 displays the demographics of the seven student participants and reveals the gender, ethnicity, and transiency of both the participant group and the comparison group. In the participant group, 42.9% were female compared to 61.5% in the comparison group. In the participant group 57.1% were male compared to 38.5% in the comparison group. When comparing the students' transiency, 42.9% of the participant group had moved into the school system within the first two weeks of the academic school year. Only 7.7% of the comparison group was considered transient.

Table 3

Student Participant Demographics

	Participant Group (n = 7)	Comparison Group (n = 13)
Gender		
Female	3 (42.9%)	8 (61.5%)
Male	4 (57.1%)	5 (38.5%)
Transient		
Yes	3 (42.9%)	1 (7.7%)
No	4 (57.1%)	12 (92.3%)
Ethnicity		
Black	7 (100%)	2 (18%)
White	0 (0%)	11 (82%)
Age	Mean = 12.14 years	Mean = 11.46 years

The purpose of this study was to examine attitudes and perceptions of the student participants in a homogeneous small group reading environment and how they perceived themselves as readers. This study addressed an intervention idea that attempted to meet the needs of middle school struggling readers. Consideration was given to time spent during Sustained Silent Reading periods as protected time for explicit instruction for the struggling readers. Two primary research questions were addressed:

1. How does homogeneous small group instruction positively affect/increase reading achievement for struggling middle school readers?

2. How will implementing instruction for a homogeneous small group of struggling middle school readers impact reading motivation of the participating students?

Throughout this chapter, both the quantitative and qualitative accounts of the seven participants are examined in an effort to honestly describe the academic progression and the personal perspective of each participant about reading.

Section One: Reading Achievement

The first section in this chapter is devoted to research question number one and seeks to answer "How does homogeneous small group instruction affect/increase reading achievement for struggling readers?" Using a mixed ANOVA, this question was when pre and post results from the THINKLINK, SAT 10, and ARMT were used to measure (change/affects/increases) over time.

THINKLINK

An administrative report provided overall academic performance results in reading, writing, and math for all middle school students. This report was based on Scholastic THINKLINK, a state-wide assessment used to evaluate the students' fifth grade academic performances in Reading/Language Arts and Math. The report coded the performance of each student within proficiency categories such as red if the student was not partially or non-proficient, yellow if the student was proficient or green if the student demonstrated advanced proficiency. Table 3 summarizes the change in Think Link scores from August to December for each group. Overall, all students significantly increased their scores over time ($F = 46.87$, $p < .001$). This change, however, did not depend upon which instructional group in which the student participated ($F = .498$, $p > .05$).

Table 4

Changes on Achievement over Time (ThinkLink)

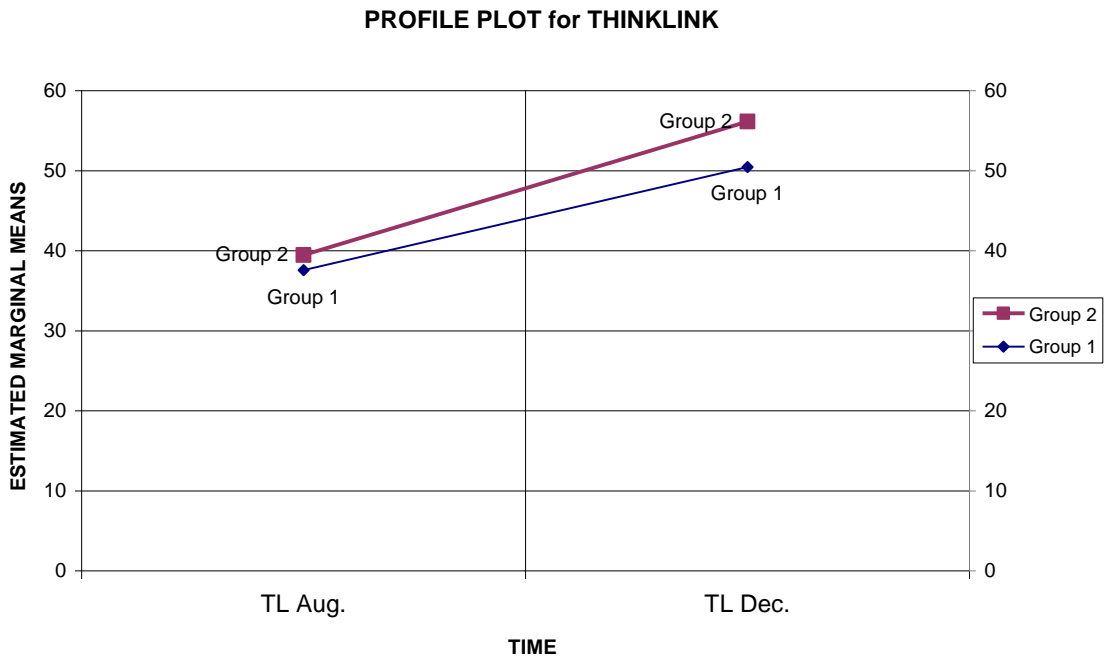|	ThinkLink – August	ThinkLink – December				
	Mean	Mean	Change	F (Group)	F (Time)	F (Interaction)
Group 1	37.57	50.43	+ 12.86	.498	46.87	.790
(n = 7)			+ 2.61			
Group 2	39.46	56.15	+ 16.69			
(n = 13)			- 1.52			

a - p < .001

Figure 1. ThinkLink scores from August to December for each group.

SAT 10

Overall, SAT scores declined slightly from grade 5 to 6. This change, however, was not statistically significant ($F = 1.33$, $p > .05$) and did not depend on the instructional group to which the students belonged ($F = .905$, $p > .05$). Results from the 5th and 6th grade SAT 10 are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Changes on Achievement Over Time (SAT Scores)

	SAT – Grade 5 Mean	SAT – Grade 6 Mean	Change	F (Group)	F (Time)	F (Interaction)
Group 1 (n=7)	29.14	19.43	-9.71 (-18.61)	2.59	1.33	.905
Group 2 (n=13)	34.69	33.77	-0.92 (8.68)			

PROFILE PLOT for SAT 10

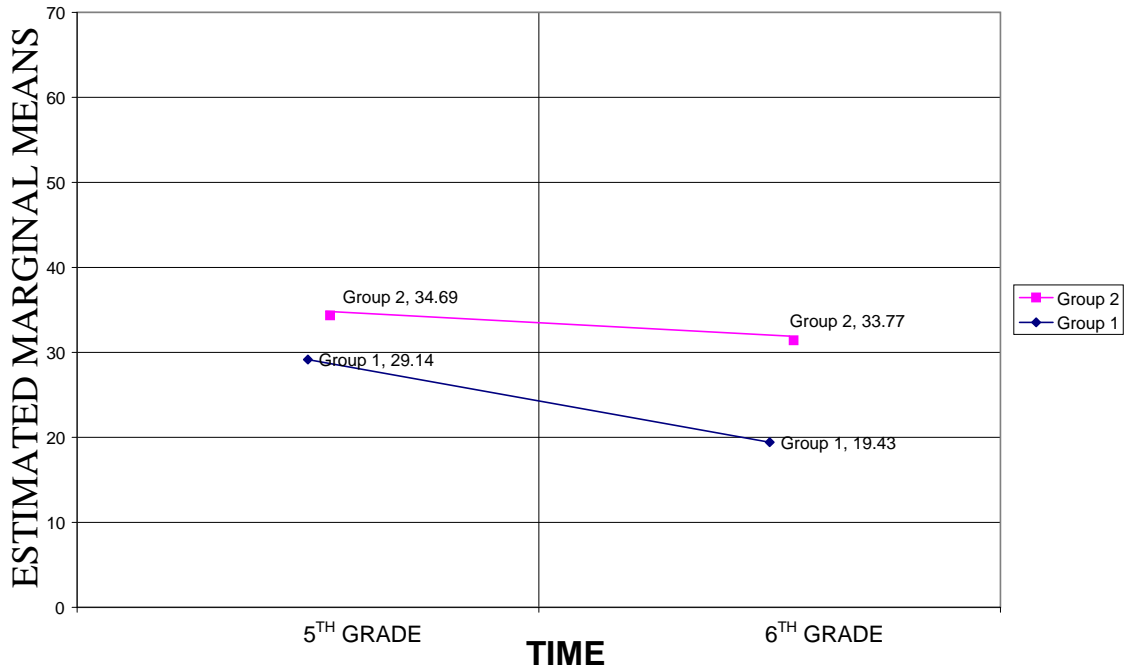*Figure 2*. SAT 10 Scores from 5th Grade and 6th Grade for each group

ARMT

Table 6 summarizes the results of both 5th and 6th grade ARMT scores.

Table 6

ARMT Levels

	Decreased by 1 Level	Stayed the Same	Increased by 1 Level
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Group 1 (n = 7)	1 (13.3%)	3 (42.9%)	3 (42.9%)
Group 2 (n = 13)	1 (7.7%)	8 (61.5%)	4 (30.8%)

Most students in the comparison group (61.5%) remained at the same level. When comparing students from the two groups, a greater percentage of students in the participant group (Group 1) increased their ARMT level (42.9% vs. 30.8%). Only one student from each group experienced a decline of 1 level.

Section Two: Student Motivation

The second section of this chapter is devoted to research question number two "How does implementing instruction for a homogeneous small group of struggling readers during SSR affect/increase reading motivation for the participating students?" To answer this question, four scales from the Student Reading Survey (engagement, autonomy, content area, and interesting text) were used. Items were coded such that the higher the score (closer to 4), the greater the academic increase. The Student Reading Survey was chosen for this study to facilitate hypotheses about the attitudes of students towards reading. Statements were rated on a four-point scale ranging from 1 = Never to 4 = A lot. Table 7 summarizes mean scores and standard deviations for each of the four scales based on the student responses.

Table 7

Student Reading Survey with Results

ENGAGED READING	**N**	**Mean**	**SD**
5. My teacher helps me appreciate the different ways that authors write.	7	3.71	.488
6. We do projects where I read many different materials.	7	3.00	1.00
1. I like to read.	7	2.43	.976
2. In Social Studies we discuss topics that I like to go home and read about.	7	2.29	1.113
4. I enjoy spending time reading interesting things in math.	7	2.29	1.113
3. I think reading is boring.	7	1.71	.487
			(table continues)

Table 7 (continued)

AUTONOMY SUPPORT	N	Mean	SD
12. In math my teacher thinks it's important for me to work on my own.	7	3.71	.488
7. My teacher wants me to express my own opinions about what I read in Social Studies.	7	3.14	.690
8. My teacher encourages me to learn new things about science by reading books.	7	3.14	.900
10. My teacher lets me decide what science topics I should read and write about.	7	2.57	.787
11. In my science work, my teacher lets me read what I am interested in.	7	2.57	.535
9. My teacher encourages me to read books that are hard for me to understand.	7	2.43	.976

READING INSTRUCTION in CONTENT AREAS	N	Mean	SD.
14. My teacher wants me to ask myself questions when I read about social studies topics.	7	3.29	.756
16. My teacher expects me to use what I already know to understand what I read about science topics	7	3.00	.577
20. My teacher tells me to re-read when I don't understand something in the math book.	7	3.00	1.291
17. In Science, my teacher helps me to find the main idea and supporting details in what I read.	7	2.86	1.069
13. My teacher encourages me to find the main idea when I read about social studies topics.	7	2.71	1.13
19. In math, my teacher asks questions that make me want to read and learn.	7	2.43	1.134
15. I am taught how to write good sentences in Social Studies and to punctuate them correctly.	7	2.14	.900
18. My teacher teaches me how to plan, organize my writing for science reports.	7	2.14	.900

Table 7 (continued)

INTERESTING TEXTS	N	Mean	SD
21. My teacher teaches me how to write poems, letters, stories, and reports.	7	3.71	.488
24. My teacher asks me to read different kinds of material to do independent research about Social Studies topics.	7	3.43	.787
26. We do projects where I have to read many different materials.	7	3.43	.787
25. My teacher helps me to appreciate the different ways that and author writes.	7	3.29	.756
23. My teacher helps me to read poems, stories, and informational text from many different books.	7	3.14	.690
22. My teacher helps me to enjoy books, such as mysteries or adventures.	7	2.71	.951

Table 8 summarizes the four measurement scales used to assess student motivation in this study. For each scale, the mane and standard deviation are presented along with the scale reliability. Furthermore, the results of the statistical comparison (oneway ANOVA) are summarized. These comparisons revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups on the Autonomy Scale. Further comparisons between the two groups are summarized for each item on the four scales in Table 8

Table 8

Scales ANOVA Table – Reliability

Scale	# of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Reliability	Group 1 (n = 7)		Group 2 (n = 12)		F
			X	SD	X	SD	
Engage	6	.645	2.57	.76	2.54	(.38)	.013
Autonomy	6	.259	2.93	.27	2.51	(.39)	6.072*
Content	8	.741	2.6964	.62	2.6146	(.58)	.083
Interesting Text	6	.460	3.2857	.41	3.0278	(.43)	1.650

a - p < .001

Section Three: Qualitative Findings

The third and final section of this study reports the qualitative view of how these student participants view themselves as readers and explores the influence of being in a homogeneous reading small group during SSR. Themes revealed reading beliefs, habits, and practices of the student participants.

Analysis of Qualitative Data

A constant comparative method of analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection (Merriam, 2002). Data were collected as field notes during three thirty-minute observations per week from August 2008 to December 2008 and from informal interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the following questions:

(a) Do they come prepared for instruction?

(b) Do they read?

(c) What do they like to read?

(d)   Do they give up easily?

(e)   What are their socialization habits among each other during the sessions…during regular classes?

(f)   Do they learn from lessons, personal discoveries, and mistakes?

(g)   How often do they stay on task?

(h)   Are they reflective thinkers?

(i)   What are major distractions for them?

(j)   Do they need constant assistance?

(k)   What do they read outside the school setting?

(l)   Can they understand what they read?

(m)   What do they do well?

(n)   Do they set goals?

Emergent Themes from Observations, Interviews, and Survey

Defined themes emerged among all of the participants. For example, answers from and attitudes of the participants during this study indicated that much of their needs were similar. Having no real purpose for reading, feelings of inferiority/inadequacy to peers who read at or above grade level, lack of expectations to read outside of the school setting, and how they see themselves as readers were all evident. These themes are detailed in the following paragraphs.

Theme 1 — Having no purpose to read. Research states that people read for many different purposes. Those purposes can be for entertainment, to get information, or to learn how to perform a task. Initially, the student participants were not told why they would be attending these sessions, and they were very reluctant to participate in the homogeneous small group SSR sessions. All of them revealed that there was no real purpose for reading in regular SSR and had

deduced that the sessions for this group would be no different. The students were asked to write down a few reasons why they thought they were chosen to come to this SSR session. The responses were varied.

Student 1 – "I don't know why I'm in here, but I know it's gonna be boring."

Student 2 – "I like the teacher class, and I can be with my friends more."

Student 3 – "I guess it's because I have a stuttering problem."

Student 4 – "I can read so I don't know why I'm in here."

Student 5 – "I'm in here 'cause my momma signed me up to be in here."

Student 6 – "I'm in this stupid class because I already owe money for some library books."

Student 7 – "I know this teacher from last year, and she picked me."

Five of the seven *student* participants were withdrawn and did not interact with each other at all. The other two students were heavily engaged in conversation among themselves and constantly wondered what was the real reason they had been selected for this SSR group. During this first session, there were no rules established about talking, no requirements to bring a book or other materials, nor were there expectations to keep behavior under control. On the board were multiple copies of two books. I pretended to busy myself with administrative tasks such as taking attendance, gathering pencils, stacking books, while the participants continued their written responses. A few minutes before the session ended one of the student participants asked, "Is this all we gonna do?" This was my opportunity to share the responses of why they thought they had been chosen for this group. Not a single student noticed the books against the board. The bell rang and the session ended.

Session two was a little different. A variety of text and printed materials was placed throughout the classroom. From fairy tale picture books to Wall Street magazines, there was an

influx of printed material. As soon as the students entered the classroom, all of them with the

exception of Student 2 sat down. Student 2 walked over to the table and began perusing the

printed material. As I took attendance, the other participants shouted and beckoned for Student 2

to sit down. The session promptly got underway when the question of "What are you reading

now in SSR and can you tell the rest of the group a little bit about your book?" was asked.

> Student 1 – "My friend gave me this book she got from Walmart. It's pretty good. It's about this group of friends and I can already tell which one of these girls is gonna get on my nerves..."

> Student 2 – My teacher don't care what I read as long as I am not bothering nobody so I read a lot of books...little picture books cause they don't take no time to read. But they sometimes get boring because I already know what's going to happen…I like reading Magic School Bus books."

> Student 3 – "I know, man, don't know nobody care 'bout that junk in that book."

> Student 4 – "Some book on my teacher's shelf. She always be shouting get a novel and read so I just get the first thing I see 'cause I don't want to hear her mouth every morning."

> Student 5 – (after the sessions) I read Junie B. Jones at home because I really like reading her books. At school I get Harry Potter even though I don't understand some of the things they talk about in the book.

> Student 6 – "I don't know 'cause I keep getting a different book everyday. I don't even know what's going on in any of the stories."

> Student 7 – "I try to catch up on my homework. Man, I be forgetting to do it at home."

For the last session of the first week, the students were assigned a specific place to sit.

This was done by placing their names on the bottom of chairs and they were given a few seconds

to find the chair that had their name on it and be seated. Although this strategy was implemented

to eliminate chaos, it had an adverse affect. The student participants were moving the chairs to

be closer to certain participants. It was if they had secretly met outside of the session to figure

out why they were chosen. There was also a great deal of loud talking and demanding attention

from each other before the session properly began. I immediately began taking attendance.

As I clicked on the smart board, the noise ceased and to their surprise, the sentence "you

are here because I need you to be here" appeared in big bold letters. These were two comments I

immediately heard from the group: 'What is that supposed to mean?' and 'What you need us

for?' The next slide presented on the smart board revealed the sentence "I need you to help me

to remember something." The next few slides contained individual words that created the

sentence: "you can read anything you want to." The process to establish a purpose for reading

had begun. In current literature on motivating struggling adolescent readers, Guthrie, Schafer,

Von Secker, and Alban (2000) stated that given the right environment, with an attractive text and

peer or teacher support, students who are otherwise considered struggling, can be seen reading

attentively and skillfully. Taking the advice of Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore (2000) who

recommend that educators need to "reshape secondary classrooms to offer literacies that connect

to students' lives and reposition marginalized youth in classrooms and schools" (p. 405), I asked

the student participants to share the kind of books they liked to read.

Student 1 – "hair magazines…they have a lot of pictures to show you the latest styles."

Student 2 – "My uncle bought me this magazine about video games. Me and my cousins
read it all the time."

Student 3 – "I don't like to read. It makes me mad."

Student 4 – "I don't have time to read. It takes too long."

Student 5 – "My momma buys me a lot of different books, but I don't really read that
much."

Student 6 – "I don't even have that many books at my house…besides, I always fall
asleep when I read long boring books."

Student 7 – "Shoot, I don't know what I like to read. Mostly stuff about somebody famous, I guess."

As an outside assignment, I invited the students to bring in any reading material from home that was of interest to them. This was risky because there were no regulations or restrictions as to what they could bring. It was important to know what types of reading materials were at their disposal and made readily available for them to read especially after seeing how disconnected they appeared to be from written print. Several weeks passed and the student participants were asked to bring novels they had been issued during their regular language arts class. Five of the seven students had biographies, one of seven had chosen a mystery, and the remaining student participant had chosen an autobiography. It was interesting that so many had chosen non-fiction books.

Theme 2 – Feeling inadequate/inferior to peers. Struggling readers are often compared with their peers—negatively—and are well aware of the differences in instruction and materials. This awareness often ignites feeling of inferiority and inadequacy. According to Dunston and Gambrell (2009), "In addition to changes in reading motivation … some students begin to lose self-confidence, become anxious about school and engage in activities that inhibit rather than facilitate literacy learning." Notions of shame and shyness have a powerful impact on children's willingness to participate in and even attend school. Myers (1986) observed the Aboriginal people of the Central Desert of Australia deliberately and with determined effort to protect the autonomy practice of their culture by hiding it. The children and the parents would go out of their way not to bring attention to themselves. They would avoid embarrassment, particularly in interaction with people other than close kin. Myers also revealed for many people in Aboriginal communities, school was not only an intellectual challenge, but a cultural one, too. In other words, lack of success in regular content area classes, especially those classes where

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students are expected to read-to-learn, created emotional social and emotional problems. For

most of the student participants (five of seven) this was true.

Student 2 admitted:

> "Everybody be calling me Dumbo when I read. I can't help it that the letters be looking
> crazy."

Student 1 confessed that she never wants anyone to ask her to read aloud in class.

> "I hardly speak even when somebody talks to me first. If I do talk to them, I like to say
> everything at one time so they can leave me alone. I want my teachers to think I am a
> good student and already know what she's talking about 'cause they (teachers) don't
> never call on the good students to read out loud."

Theme 3 – Autonomy among the participants. Autonomy is not something done to

students, and should not be considered or confused as another teaching method. Holec (1983)

defines autonomy in terms of the learner's willingness and capacity to control or oversee his or

her own learning. This can be thought of in terms of a departure from education as a social

process, as well as in terms of redistribution of power attending the construction of knowledge

and the roles of the participants in their own learning process. In 1998, Teel, Debruin-Parecki,

and Covington conducted research on struggling inner-city African American middle school

students. The data revealed the how the principle of autonomy support applies to all learners.

The data showed significant increases in engagement in school learning when they were

provided with responsibility and choice in their learning activities. Qualitative studies of

struggling middle school readers revealed that although students rarely choose school texts when

they are given the option, they frequently read magazines or other texts to follow their personal

interests out of school (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). Given the opportunity to read text they

have selected, even struggling readers will show effort and persistence in using and learning the

skills that will enable them to become more proficient. According to the research of Bartz and

Levine (1978), Harkness and Super (1995), and Kelley, Sanchez-Hucles, and Walker (1993) which focuses on behavioral approaches to autonomy, data confirms that in high-risk contexts, strategies emphasizing conformity and obedience are more likely to be used rather than those that promote independence and autonomy. Perhaps this further explains such prevalent deviation among the four scales on the reading survey of 6.072 in autonomy versus the mere scores of .013 in engagement, .083 in content, and 1.650 in interesting text (see Table 7).

Theme 4 – Lack of expectations to read outside school setting. Michigan Department of Education (2002) reported that school age children spend 70% of their waking hours (including weekends and holidays) outside the school setting. I asked the student participants, 'How many of you read with, to, or for your parents?' The responses were:

"My momma works at night, and so I don't see her until the morning."

"I don't like the same kind of stuff my folks like to read."

"The only thing I see my momma reading is the bills."

When schools encourage children to practice reading at home with parents, the children can make significant gains in reading achievement compared to those who only practice at school.

Theme 5 – Reading in school is boring. According to the National Reading Research Center (Baumann & Duffy 1997), children need to be motivated to read and use literacy to develop into fluent readers. Researchers assert that students cannot be simply classified as motivated or unmotivated, but rather motivated differently (Baker & Wigfield 1999; Ivey 1999).

In an excerpt from "Just Plain Reading: A Survey of What Makes Students Want to Read in Middle School Classrooms", students were used as primary informants about what motivates them to read in their middle school classrooms (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). The survey described how classroom environments motivated their reading through open-ended responses, short

answers, and checklist items. The survey also emphasized quality and diversity of reading

materials as motivation to read more. The student participants were asked what motivated them

to read. They responded:

"Books with a lot of pictures…the pictures really tell the story."

"If I think I know something about what we are gonna read about."

"I just like for somebody else to read out loud like they did in elementary school. I *read* a lot of books that way."

"Stuff I like."

In summary, the quantitative data revealed that being a part of a homogeneous small

group had no immediate affect on academic achievement for struggling middle school readers.

However, it did reveal that the student participants had very definite perspectives about how they

viewed themselves as both motivated and engaged or unmotivated and disengaged readers.

Theme 6 – How they see themselves as readers. Little is known about how struggling

readers make decisions about classroom reading tasks. Researchers have theorized that

struggling readers' decisions are tied to low motivation, poor self-efficacy, or limited cognitive

abilities. For example, Brophy (1987, p. 64) states that when self-efficacy perceptions are high,

people are likely to approach engagement situations with confidence, but if they doubt their

capabilities for success, then they are likely to avoid the situation. Such conceptualizations about

struggling readers suggest that if they developed the appropriate cognitive skills and experienced

an increase in motivation and self-efficacy, then they would make more positive decisions about

reading and likely improve their abilities. Interviews and observations suggested that the ways

in which each student used text to complete assignments was influenced to some extent by their

beliefs about themselves as readers. Other researchers, however, have posited that the ways

students identify themselves as readers, and the ways they want others to identify them, can

influence their decisions (Moje & Dillon, 2006; Tatum, 2006). Classrooms require students to enact specific identities in order to be successful, and struggling readers may not believe they can or should take on those identities (Moje & Dillon). If identity takes precedence in how students approach reading tasks, their decisions may focus on what they need to do in order to hide, maintain, or promote a specific identity amongst their peers, teachers, or family members. Therefore, the quality or amount of reading tasks and instruction they receive may have little influence on their actions unless it is responsive to issues of identity.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 4 provides an extensive data analysis of the performances and attitudes of the student participants and ended with notions of perceived identity that they or others created about them. Chapter 5 will allow the voice of the researcher to reflectively narrate this study based on observations and practices not only of the student participants, but also of the teacher. Chapter 5 will also provide the conclusion for this study where implications and recommendations for future studies are presented.

CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION

For twelve years I taught in what was considered to be a moderately diverse elementary school. The elementary school was located only two miles from one of Alabama's top universities, and often reaped several benefits from the collaborative partnerships with the university's College of Education's faculty and students. Community and parental support was second to none. On any given day, the halls of this elementary school could be filled with ladies from the Junior League nestled with tiny first graders and enthusiastically reading wonderful stories to them. You could also witness college volunteers in the media center playing literacy games with some of the older students. Almost monthly there was a reason to celebrate reading. A full ninety minutes of pure instructional time was allowed for just reading. Small groups, whole groups, leveled groups, gender groups, all manner of combinations were implemented at the elementary level so that each student would have success not only in their reading class, but to also be successful in any other content area class. Teachers would often carry chapter books around with them in case there was a spare moment to read a couple pages to the students. Student conferences between the students and the teachers occurred at least once a week. It was another strategy implemented for getting to know the twenty-two individual students and their interests. Classroom libraries would be color-coded, genre-coded, and even leveled so that no child would be left without an appropriate book for him or her to leisurely enjoy during D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything and Read). The time set aside for reading was highly regarded and preciously protected.

It is June 2008, and I have accepted a position to teach Language Arts, Reading, and Writing at the only middle school in this system. I was given a notebook containing the SAT 10 and ARMT scores of the upcoming sixth graders. They were indicative of all students. There were high scores, average scores, and low scores. According to the school's administration, these scores were lower than the scores of previous upcoming sixth grade students. What to do? What program or practice did this school already have in place to challenge those students who were above grade level; what was in place to extend those students who were on grade level; and what intervention or remedial plans were in place for the struggling students? There was nothing. The burden of this great feat fell solely on the language arts teachers. During a class period of 62 minutes, or less, language arts teachers found themselves struggling to meet the demands of authentically mastering three subjects and keep up with pacing guides. There was an overwhelming feeling of a lot of surface instruction and not a lot of depth in any of the three subjects expected to be taught. What this feeder school (to six elementary schools) did have was an established SSR period. This was protected time immediately after homeroom where students were expected to have a novel of their choice and enjoy the recreation of reading. The first 10 days of school was spent orienting these new sixth graders to their schedules; learning locker combinations; taking tours to make sure they get to their classes on time; and revisiting rules, regulations, and routines of the team. Some students would bring their own books, but most did not. Time that was supposed to be for recreational reading soon became time spent searching for a book, trying to catch up on homework, or simply doodling.

Being reminded of the notebook full of test scores and hearing the words of my principal and assistant principal that these students, as a whole, possessed lower test scores than previous

upcoming sixth graders, prompted me to try an unofficial intervention /enrichment group within

my team of 110 students.

For this mixed-method study, both quantitative and qualitative designs were used to

examine the affects/influences that a homogeneous small group instruction had on academic

performance and attitudes of the student participants. Data were collected thirty minutes per day,

three times a week over a 12-week period. The chapter will conclude with implications and

recommendations for future research.

Research Questions

1.   How will implementing instruction for a homogeneous small group of struggling

middle school readers impact reading motivation of the participating students?

2.   How does homogeneous small group instruction positively affect/increase reading

achievement for struggling middle school readers?

Summary of Findings

What was the purpose of this study and what motivated me to devote so much time and

energy to this topic? Ultimately, I asked myself how I would be able to answer the questions and

would there be enough sufficient data to examine and describe the affects and influences of

homogeneous small group instruction in reading among struggling middle school students. Here

I reflect on the origin of this journey. Each day a bell would sound signaling that homeroom was

over and SSR was beginning. The students were dismissed and remained in their homerooms to

read for what was supposed to be twenty-five to thirty minutes of uninterrupted time. The

notable problem was that the time was definitely interrupted. There was the morning broadcast

that provided a minimum of eight minutes of announcements. Daily, students would constantly

enter the classroom tardy due to late buses. The assemblies, orientations, mandatory fire drills,

and meetings implemented during this protected time was an all too familiar scenario for teachers who were consumed with morning duties and not aware that actual reading was not completely going on for many of their middle school students especially those that struggled which led to very little, if any, time to read for pleasure. 'What could be done?' or perhaps a better question was 'What must be done?' According to the administrator's reports, there were at least twenty-two students whose profiles indicated that they should have been engaged in some form of daily guided reading instruction. Did the results from the administrator support the data of their academic performances in my language arts and reading classes? A grade-level pretest was administered to all sixth grade students. This pretest assessed the basic comprehension knowledge of these students in reading and grammar, but not anything behavioral or social. The results revealed that of the twenty-two students characterized as at-risk, only twelve of them remained at-risk. Five of the twelve students were students who received special education services.

Increase Reading Achievement

Research question one asked, "How does homogeneous small group instruction positively affect/increase reading achievement for struggling middle school readers?" and explored the impact(s) homogeneous small group instruction has on the reading achievement of struggling middle school readers. After analyzing all of the data collected for this study, there was evidence that the participants of this study demonstrated similar characteristics to struggling adolescent readers in other related studies about struggling readers. Such characteristics were: they are almost always less fluent readers; they usually know the meanings of fewer words; they usually have less conceptual knowledge; they are almost always less skilled in using strategies to enhance comprehension or repair it when it breaks down; and will typically not enjoy reading

or choose to read for pleasure (Torgesen, 2006). I have spent much time reflecting about the participants and the processes of this study. At the heart of it all, my belief is that many struggling middle school students, as well as all students are simply being miseducated. Miseducated, in this sense, is likened to a patient being misdiagnosed and subsequently, prescribed the wrong medicine. There are so many factors that contribute to the academic success of students; many of which are yet to be discovered and many that are known, but are not treated. For example, I was keenly aware of the deficiencies in reading each of these students possessed. It was also apparent to me that (we) teachers were expecting these student participants to read independently and be able to actively participate in content classes without the adequately modeling instruction. So the medicine prescribed, which was to read more, was non-effective. As a matter of fact, without specific instructions how to read and for what purpose, it seemed to have had an adverse effect on these student participants. Just as a medical doctor knows the symptoms of certain diseases, I, too, as an educator saw the warning signs of unmotivated struggling students. They expressed a disdain for reading by offering, in many cases excuses that had been provided for them by their peers, their parents, and even their teachers. Just like no two patients are exactly alike, no two students are alike; similarities, yes, but not identical.

Statistics from many researchers validate the notion that the less a student reads, the poorer they become at reading (Beers, 1990). After just three sessions with these student participants, it was evident that they had already the spiraling effect of the poorer the reader, the harder reading is for them, which promoted and justified their negative attitudes for reading. All of the participants reported that they rarely read required assignments, and almost never read recreationally. In two surveys using self-report by subjects, McCoy et al. (1991) found a

decrease in recreational reading during middle school years. In one study, one hundred students in college-level developmental (remedial) reading courses reported a marked decrease in recreational reading during middle school. In a second survey, a majority of 159 seventh- and eighth-grade students reported reading independently up to seventh grade but practically ceasing to read anything not required or assigned after that. Recreational reading ranked lowest among their preferences for independent activities. However, light reading was prominent. Feitelson and Goldstein (1986) found that light reading provided motivation for more reading. Light reading became a stepping stone to further reading. Increased reading proficiency and fluency made it possible for students to read more complex material. They often chose light reading for independent reading because they enjoyed it, and they became more fluent readers in the process. The participants in this study demonstrated a similar behavior as they were very interested in series or sequel books written by the same author. Gaining this more insightful knowledge about the student participants and how they felt about reading led to what I thought was a seemingly simple task of just getting them to read. After all, many researchers support the ideology that the more a student reads, the better reader he or she becomes. What would be the bait and hook (strategy) to reel them in?

One effective strategy based on the needs of the student was through the implementation of an explicit vocabulary study. It was not a typical assignment of giving the student participants ten words and having them define each one. This strategy included breaking the meaningless words apart and looking at the origin of root words, adding and subtracting prefixes and suffixes, and determining the part of speech for a word. I had not originally planned for this kind of instruction to jump start this small group intervention, but there was not a specific program in place, and it was important for these students to utilize their SSR time constructively. What was

more important was the fact that the student participants recognized their own needs, to some degree. Student participants revealed that reading in content area classes such as social studies and science was very difficult because they had no knowledge of how to pronounce most vocabulary terms, let alone make sense of the meanings.

> "I stop reading when I come to them big words. Then I forget what I just read. I copy the words and looked them up in the dictionary, but I still don't know what they mean.   I always see the word over and over again *after* the teacher kept on talking about it. It's like when my momma bought a car. I didn't see nobody with a car like ours until she bought hers then I saw cars just like it everywhere. Now I search for new words we learned, and they are easy."

Reading Motivation

Research question two, "How will implementing instruction for a homogeneous small group of struggling middle school readers impact reading motivation of the participating students?", focused on the attitudes and ideology each participant has toward reading. Ultimately, the goal of this study was to gain greater understanding of the many axioms of how struggling middle school students see themselves as readers and to measure their success and academic improvement. More specifically, were the themes that emerged qualitatively and quantitatively from this study: marginal improvements on standardized tests; having no purpose for reading, experiencing feelings of inadequacy or inferiority to their peers; high level of autonomy in their SSR group; lack of expectation to read outside the school setting from students, teachers, and parents; and the participants' personal views of themselves as readers.

Sustained Silent Reading

SSR was an opportunity for me to create an unofficial intervention period for these struggling readers. The implementation of SSR was established based on the premises designed in *Are They Really Reading?: Expanding the SSR in the Middle Grades* by Jodi Crum Marshall. According to research, allowing students thirty minutes of uninterrupted time to read not only strengthens comprehension, increases vocabulary knowledge, but also fosters the natural love for reading. In Jan Pilgreen's *The Handbook for SSR*, there are eight factors for SSR success. They are:

1) Assess to Books — do not require the students to bring anything from home, have tradebooks, magazines, comics, etc. assessable to the students

2) Book Appeal — offer books and materials that are interesting, self-selection is crucial, have a variety of books at different reading levels, and make sure the display of books is attractive

3) Conducive Environment — make sure there is homey furnishing, there is quietness, and seating is not cramped

4) Encouragement to Read — Adult modeling reading, all staff support to encourage students in free reading, teacher read a-loud with time to share and discuss, and parent involvement

5) Staff Training — present students with current literature, develop guidelines for SSR, and teach strategies for linking students with books

6) Non-Accountability — no evaluative tasks associated with the reading; student is allowed to stop reading the book if they find it uninteresting and choose another, and the emphasis is reading for pleasure

7) Follow-up Activities — peer discussions, sharing ideas through peer read a-louds, selling book choices to others through art and technology

8) Distributed Time to Read — allow between 15–30 minutes of reading, allow a minimum of twice a week, and the habit of reading for pleasure will be formed.

Two of the eight factors were consistently met at this school. Those factors were Distributed Time to Read and Non-Accountability. All the students were provided a determined time to read and there was no accountability. SSR occurred each day from 7:50am until 8:10am. There was no evidence that journals, read a-louds, or peer sharing took place. The remaining six factors for SSR success were haphazardly met, if met at all.

Although many of the SSR sessions were spent dealing with social and behavioral issues of adolescent middle schoolers, there was evidence that some progress was being made even though the student participants created reluctance at first. There was no program implemented nor was there a prescribed pacing guide for which I had to follow. It was years of experience as an elementary teacher coupled with the newly gained knowledge about adolescent literacy that ignited my desire to intervene. I discovered that homogeneously grouping these student participants in a more instructional reading setting, during SSR, most encouraged their active oral and written participation. The participants' social interactions, within such an acceptable environment, helped them disregard feelings of low self-worth and focus more on understanding and remembering some of the skills and strategies necessary in areas other than just the SSR classroom setting. For the transient students, a since of belonging ensued and friendships formed. More importantly, I witnessed collaboration among the student participants when they were in other content area classes. They depended on each other for help and in some situations, held each other accountable. These social interactions also affected the participants' experiences

with reading, more specifically, their views of reading: the frequency and breadth of their reading and their views of themselves as readers.

Conclusions

There are several factors that contribute to the propelling or postponing of the growth of an individual. For example, children learn to read in a variety of ways. Researchers and reading specialists agree that as children develop the skill of reading, they go through a variety of developmental stages (Adams, 1990; Chall, 1983; Cooper & Kiger, 2001; Juel, 1991; Rupley, Wilson, & Nichols, 1998). As children progress from beginning reading to mature reading, there are many different strategies and skills that are learned and different tasks that are performed at each stage. Reading skills of children do not develop at an equal rate. Students' reading levels in an average middle school heterogeneous classroom span eight to ten years, with some students behind more than five reading levels. Students who fail or struggle or are at risk by middle school have little motivation to read because of unsuccessful reading experiences in the past. Yet, reading is exactly what they need to do to increase their skills.

Allington and Cunningham (1996) identified direct instruction of reading and time to read as important pedagogical issues for struggling readers. Time to read in class was also supported by Irwin (2002). In a research monograph on reading, Braunger and Lewis (1997) reported that "students get better at reading by simply reading, and that actual reading time is a crucial factor in becoming a successful reader" (p. 54). Lack of reading during the school day negatively affects reading development (Allington, 2001). Goodlad (1984) reported that less than 2 percent of each school day is devoted to actual reading. For example, the participants in this study rarely read at school. They heavily relied on peers, partners, or their teachers to read

information for them. They were then left with the task to interpret, in their own words, what had been read to them.

Implications

Data from the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading report that 69 percent of 8th grade students fall below the proficient level in their ability to comprehend the meaning of text at their grade level. Equally alarming, 26 percent of students read below the basic level, which means that they do not have sufficient reading ability to understand and learn from text at their grade level. When these data are coupled with reports showing that even high school students with average reading ability are currently unprepared for the literacy demands of many workplace and postsecondary educational settings, the need for improved literacy instruction of adolescents is apparent.

Several implications may be drawn from the findings of this study which may be helpful in the future planning, implementation, and management of an effective school climate and atmosphere for not only middle school struggling readers, but also for all readers. The following implications could be considered significant:

1. Assessing students early to determine their needs

2. Provided uninterrupted time where more explicit and intense instruction will be implemented

3. Professional development that trains content area teachers with knowledge of teaching reading

4. Middle school students' motivation to read should be varied for all students, including struggling readers

5.   Socio-cultural awareness is instrumental in determining what is valued to an individual

6.   Holding both students and their parents accountable for the roles they play in being educated

Implications resulting from these findings could be instrumental in improving student engagement in other content area classrooms. By knowing and understanding what motivates student to value their own learning, specifically in reading, educators can provide instruction interesting to the students, while simultaneously meeting and exceeding state-required curricular mandates.

Limitations of the Study

The study is limited in that it is reflective research from a small percentage of sixth grade middle school students in one school in one school system. The participants represented less than 10% of the school's population.

The surveys used in the study were developed by Guthrie and Davis (2003) and administered by the researcher and may not be appropriate for other similar studies. The researcher was also the Language Arts, Reading, and Writing teacher for these students. It was assumed that the behaviors and attitudes of the students' were not influenced by these multiple roles especially since there were no grades assigned. Finally, this study measured only a brief period in these students' academic school year. This limited the scope of results and additional research is needed to determine long term effects of instruction of the homogeneous small group instruction and environment.

Recommendations

The findings acknowledge that small group instruction is a viable reading instructional approach that will meet many of the needs of specific subgroups within the population that has been identified as struggling middle school readers. Assessment of students' skills, environmental, or socio-cultural risk factors at the earliest level and the establishment of a curriculum that accounts for instructional processes that is beneficial to all groups in the student population, increases the chances of student success.

The first recommendation is to encourage content-area teachers to teach the literacy skills distinctive to their field. Teachers need to recognize that most of the content in their field will be imparted through the written word, be it in print or online. The strategy of giving students explicit instruction in vocabulary helped them to recognize and learn the meanings of new words. This also strengthened their independent skills of constructing the meaning from assigned text.

Middle school struggling readers make up the majority of the nation's public school classrooms (National Assessment of Education Progress, 2007). Researchers have suggested that subject-matter teachers can improve students' reading abilities by providing: (a) skill and strategy instruction, and (b) opportunities to read and discuss texts in a variety of ways (Bakken, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 1997; Guastello, Beasley, & Sinatra, 2000; Hall, 2005a; Spence, Yore, & Williams, 1999; Yore, Bisanz, & Hand, 2003).

Because most upper-grade teachers have not been trained to help students develop advanced literacy skills, professional development on effective comprehension strategies should be provided. The school system should consider hiring reading specialists or literacy coaches. The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded, "If teachers changed their teaching as a result of

professional development," the panel found, "the reading achievement of their students improved." Specialists and coaches can relieve content-area teachers by helping struggling students with basic skills of decoding, comprehension, and fluency.

The second recommendation is to administer a diagnostic test to students as soon as they enter school to identify those who read below grade level, identify any difficulties or disabilities, and determine any specific learning needs they possess. In other words, administer a diagnostic test.

The third recommendation is for teachers to adjust their teaching styles. According to research conducted by Duffy (2003), teachers who produce the greatest gains in reading achievement adapted their instructional practices to meet individual student needs—a process known as differentiation. These teachers recognize that students have different ways of learning and respond best to different types of instruction. Effective teachers modify their instructional techniques according to students' varying needs. But before teachers can offer this flexible instruction and feedback, notes the Rand Reading Study Group (2002), they need lengthy and intensive preparation, and ongoing professional development.

The fourth recommendation is struggling readers should be engaged in compelling issues and problems relevant to the particular academic discipline, rather than simply assigned to do exercises focused on basic reading skills. When the student participants in this study revealed their book choices of biography and autobiography, the instructional strategies were centered on their assignments for their language arts class which resulted in far more productive SSR sessions and increased academic success in their language class.

The final recommendation is the need to encourage and actively promote reading outside of school. In a national survey conducted by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy

(2005), more than half of the secondary students said they spent one hour or less per week either reading/studying for class or reading for enjoyment. Just over 90 percent reported spending six hours or fewer reading for class on a weekly basis. The more students read, the more they gain in fluency, vocabulary, and knowledge. Research has shown that sustained silent reading in class is not as effective as more interactive programs that include discussion and debate.

Summary

In the 2007 article, Rx for Struggling Readers, Catherine Snow, a Harvard School of Education professor, writes:

> Every day in U.S. classrooms teachers are confronted by students who make errors in reading. They are described as 'struggling readers.' They do not live up to the expectations as successful students in the middle and secondary grades – that they can decode multisyllabic words accurately and figure out something about the meaning, that they pay enough attention to what they are reading to know if they have understood or not, that they can make inferences about characters, plot, and theme in literary texts, and acquire new knowledge and understandings from expository texts. (Snow, 2007, p. 24)

In most U.S. classrooms, the presence of struggling readers has led to the simple notion that teachers need to be teaching reading, not just in primary grades, but throughout all grades, and not just in an isolated reading class but in all subject areas such as literature, science, math, and history classes as well. Teachers must have access to knowledge about reading as it relates to their subjects, knowledge about how students learn to read and where they are likely to fail, knowledge for assessing students and pinpointing students' reading problems, and familiarity with effective instructional techniques (Snow, Griffin, Burns & the NAE Subcommittee, 2005).

The current trend in literacy is the notion and promotion of early intervention. This is based on the assumption that once a child is behind, he or she will always be behind.

According to Krachen (2008), there is no strong evidence there is a critical period for learning how to read and there is strong evidence that we can learn to read anytime. Once a poor reader, always a poor reader should be replaced with once a good reader, always a good reader. Depending on the material and the situation, are we all not ever-learning how to read?

Findings from this study aligned with researchers (Mishler, 1999; Ruddell & Unrau, 1994; Santa Barbara Discourse Group, 1994; Sarup, 1996) who support the theory that students will construct their beliefs about themselves as readers based on their interactions with text, their peers, and their teachers. Students whose interactions suggest that they comprehend text and do well on assignments may construct the belief that they are good readers and/or have few comprehension problems. They may also believe that they are learning the information that they read about in texts. Students who experience consistent problems in these areas may feel that they are poor readers and/or that they have been unable to learn from text. Providing more or better reading instruction does not mean that students will utilize it. Some researchers have suggested that both good and poor readers do not apply the reading skills they have been taught even when they understand how to do so and would like to learn information from texts (Dole, Brown, & Trathen, 1996; Hall, 2006; Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983). This study is left asking this question, at what level and to what degree are middle school students being instructed in reading?

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Appendix 1

Auburn University Human Subjects Approval

Mail Message

N

✕ Reply ▼ ▤ ▥ Read Later ☺ ◄ ▣ 🖨

Mail   Properties

From: Human Subjects   Monday - May 17, 2010 4:14 PM
To: Scaife, Silvia
CC: Barry, Nancy; McCormick, Theresa
Subject: Renewal request - approved, Protocol # 09-138 EP 0905

Dear Ms. Scaife,

Your request for renewal of your protocol entitled "How and In What Ways Does Homogeneous Small Group Instruction in Reading Influence Struggling Middle School Readers and Their Attitudes toward Reading?" was reviewed by the IRB. Your request has been approved.

Your approval letter will be mailed to your advisor's campus office shortly. Since you do not have to wait to for the return of any consent documents, consider this as official notice that your protocol is renewed. Please continue to conduct your study at your convenience.

Your protocol will now expire on May 26, 2011. Put that date on your calendar now. About three weeks before that time you will need to submit a final report or renewal request.

If you have any questions or concerns, please let us know.

Best wishes for success with your research!

Office of Research Compliance
307 Samford Hall
Auburn University, AL 36849
(334) 844-5966

Appendix 2

Student Consent Form

AUBURN
UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

CURRICULUM AND TEACHING

MINOR ASSENT
for a research study entitled

"How and What Ways Does Homogeneous Small Group Instruction in Reading Influence Struggling Middle School Readers and Their Attitudes toward Reading?"

I am willing to take part in the study called *"How and What Ways Does Homogeneous Small Group Instruction in Reading Influence Struggling Middle School Readers and Their Attitudes toward Reading?"*.

I understand that the researcher, *Silvia D. Scaife*, from Auburn University is studying the ways and environments in which middle school students read best. Language Arts surveys and assessments from your previous sixth grade year will be used. All names and identifying information will be removed.

I understand that I am taking part of this study because I want to. Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not affect your future relations with Auburn City Schools or Auburn University, the Department of Education or Curriculum and Teaching.

_____   _____
Child's Signature   Printed Name

_____   _____
Parent/Guardian's Signature   Printed Name

Date: _____

(Parent/Guardian must also sign Parent/Guardian Permission form!)

_____   _____
Investigator/Researcher obtaining consent   Printed Name

Page 1 of 1

5040 HALEY CENTER

AUBURN, AL 36849-5212

TELEPHONE:

334-844-4434

FAX:

334-844-6789

www.auburn.edu

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Appendix 3

Parental Consent Form

AUBURN

UNIVERSITY

(NOTE: DO NOT SIGN THIS DOCUMENT UNLESS AN IRB APPROVAL STAMP WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN APPLIED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

PARENTAL PERMISSION/CHILD ASSENT

for a Research Study entitled:

"How and in What Ways Does Homogeneous Small Group Instruction in Reading Influence Struggling Middle School Readers and Their Attitudes toward Reading?"

Your child is invited to be in a research study to help researchers understand how middle school students feel about and see themselves as readers and the ways and environments in which middle school students read best.

The study is being conducted by Silvia D. Scaife, doctoral candidate, under the direction of Dr. Theresa McCormick in the Auburn University Department of Curriculum and Teaching. Your child was selected as a possible participant because he or she was a sixth grade language arts student at JF Drake Middle School. Since your child is age 18 or younger we must have your permission to include his/her language arts surveys and assessments in the study.

I am requesting your permission to use your child's 6th grade language arts class work to analyze the effectiveness of the program and use that information in my doctoral dissertation.

Are there any risks or discomforts? There is a slight risk of breach of confidentiality.

To minimize these risks, I will protect your child's privacy by removing names and then will record your child's work anonymously. Also, data will be analyzed after students are officially out of school (May 22, 2009) and all grades have already been assigned.

Are there any benefits to your child or others? Although there are no personal benefits to your child's research participation, benefits for others may include the opportunity to improve reading instruction for future 6th grade students.

Will you or your child receive compensation for participating? There will not be any compensation for participating in this study.

5040 HALEY CENTER

AUBURN, AL 36849-5212

TELEPHONE:

334-844-4434

FAX:

334-844-6789

Parent/Guardian's Initials_____
Participant's Initials_____

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www.auburn.edu

If you (or your child) change your mind about your child's participation, your child can be withdrawn from the study at any time. Your child's participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw your child, your child's data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to allow your child's data to participate in this study will not affect your or your child's future relations with Auburn City Schools or Auburn University, the Department of Education or Curriculum and Teaching.

Your child's privacy will be protected. Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Information obtained by using your child's data may be used to fulfill an educational requirement and/or presented at professional meetings. No data that could personally identify your child will be presented.

If you (or your child) have questions about this study, contact Silvia D. Scaife at **sscaife@auburnschools.org**, 334-887-1940 or 334-707-0805 **or** Dr. Theresa McCormick at **mccortm@auburn.edu** , 334-844-6795. A copy of this document will be given to you to keep. You may contact the Auburn University Office of Human Subjects Research or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or email at **hsubjec@auburn.edu** or **IRBChair@auburn.edu**.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH FOR YOUR CHILD'S DATA TO BE USED. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO ALLOW YOUR CHILD'S DATA TO BE USED. YOUR CHILD'S SIGNATURE INDICATES HIS/HER WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE ALSO.

_____   _____   6/22/09
Participant's (Student) Signature   Investigator obtaining consent   Date

_____   Silvia D. Scaife
Printed Name   Printed Name

_____   _____
Parent/Guardian Signature   Date

_____
Printed Name

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Appendix 4

School Administrative Consent Form

Principal Consent Form

Debra S. Beebe
Principal

Sandy Resa
Assistant Principal

Duriel Barlow
Assistant Principal

May 15, 2009 (revised date)

Institutional Review Board
c/o Office of Human Subjects Research
307 Samford Hall
Auburn University, AL 36849

Dear IRB Members,

After reviewing the proposed study, *"How and in What Ways Does Homogeneous Small Group Instruction in Reading Influence Struggling Middle School Readers and Their Attitudes Toward Reading?"*, presented by Mrs. Scaife, an AU doctoral candidate, I have granted authorization for participants' data from JF Drake Middle School to be collected and analyzed.

The purpose of this study was to explore how the implementation of Harvey Daniel's seven best practice structures impacts the reading progress of a homogeneous group of struggling middle school readers. Specific aims of this investigation were to determine the following:
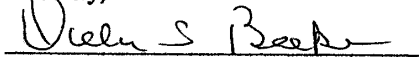
- Why is it important for these students read on or above grade-level?
- Does the creation of an environment specifically tailored for a homogeneous small group of struggling middle school readers support these students socially and behaviorally?
- What basic, yet effective methods/strategies can be used to increase these students progress in reading?
- Does the ability to successfully apply strategies acquired in the homogeneous small group setting improve their reading performance in other content area classes?

This study began August, 2008 and end no later than August, 2009. Mrs. Scaife collected data at J F Drake Middle School.

To ensure that the participants are protected, Mrs. Scaife has agreed to provide to me a copy of any Auburn University IRB-approved, stamped consent document before she recruits participants J F Drake Middle School. Mrs. Scaife has agreed to provide a copy of her study results, in aggregate, to our department.

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at the phone number or email listed above.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Debra S. Beebe, Principal
Drake Middle School 334.887-1940

Appendix 5

School Curriculum Coordinator Approval

ACS System Curriculum Coordinator Consent Form

May 15, 2009 (revised date)

Institutional Review Board
c/o Office of Human Subjects Research
307 Samford Hall
Auburn University, AL 36849

Dear IRB Members,

After reviewing the proposed study, *"How and in What Ways Does Homogeneous Small Group Instruction in Reading Influence Struggling Middle School Readers and Their Attitudes Toward Reading?"*, presented by Mrs. Scaife, an AU doctoral candidate, I have granted authorization for participants' data from JF Drake Middle School to be collected and analyzed.

The purpose of this study was to explore how the implementation of Harvey Daniel's seven best practice structures impacts the reading progress of a homogeneous group of struggling middle school readers. Specific aims of this investigation were to determine the following:
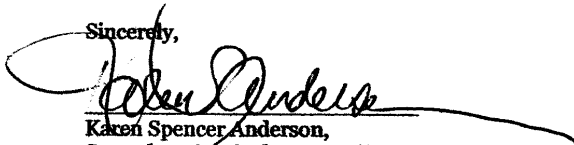
• Why is it important for these students read on or above grade-level?
• Does the creation of an environment specifically tailored for a homogeneous small group of struggling middle school readers support these students socially and behaviorally?
• What basic, yet effective methods/strategies can be used to increase these students progress in reading?
• Does the ability to successfully apply strategies acquired in the homogeneous small group setting improve their reading performance in other content area classes?

This study began August, 2008 and will end no later than August, 2009. Mrs. Scaife collected data at J F Drake Middle School.

To ensure that the participants are protected, Mrs. Scaife has agreed to provide the Central Office of Auburn City School System a copy of any Auburn University IRB-approved, stamped consent document before she recruits participants J F Drake Middle School. Mrs. Scaife has agreed to provide a copy of her study results, in aggregate, to our department.

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at the phone number or email listed above.

Sincerely,

Karen Spencer Anderson,
Secondary Curriculum Coordinator
Auburn City School System
334.887.2100

Appendix 6

Reading Interest Survey

READING SURVEY 2008-2009

1.   How you would describe your view of reading?

❑ Love reading - I enjoy reading for pleasure and for school

❑ Really enjoy reading - I enjoy reading for pleasure when I have the time

❑ Tolerate reading - I will read for school, but not for pleasure

❑ Hate reading - I will read only if had to

2.   How would you rate your own reading skills?

❑ Advanced - I like to read books meant for people in higher grade levels

❑ Above Average - I read some at my grade level and some above it

❑ Average - I am comfortable reading books for people at my grade level

❑ Below Average - I can read books at my grade level, but sometimes have trouble

❑ Poor - I have trouble reading most books at my grade level

3.   Outside of school, how many books did you read a month?
[ ]zero   [ ] 1-2   [ ] 3-5   [ ] 6-10   [ ] 11-15   [ ] 16-20   [ ] More than 20

4.   When do you read, what do you read most? PLEASE CHECK ONE
[ ]books   [ ]magazines   [ ] comic books   [ ] newspapers   [   ] web sites

5.   If you read books, what type of books? PLEASE CHECK ONE
[ ]fiction / stories   [ ]nonfiction / true stories   [   ] graphic novels

6.   In fiction, what THREE types of books do you like best?

[ ]Adventure	[ ]Historical	[ ]Fantasy	[ ]Science Fiction	[ ]Romance
[ ]Urban	[ ]Humor	[ ]Mystery/Suspense	[ ]Realistic	[ ]Horror
[ ]Other:				

7.   In non-fiction, what THREE types of books do you like best?

[ ]Biography	[ ]History	[ ]Health	[ ]True crime	[ ]Science
[ ]Sports	[ ]Humor	[ ]Music/TV/movies	[ ]Self-help	[ ]Poetry
[ ]Other:				

8.   In magazines, what types of magazine do you like best? Choose only ONE

[ ]Music	[ ]Sports	[ ]Fashion	[ ]Video game	[ ] TV/ Movies
[ ]Other:				

9. If you said you tolerated or hated reading, why? Check all that apply

❑ I like reading, just not reading books

❑ In books, I just can't get into the stories or relate to the characters

❑ Reading is boring compared to other things I could be doing with my time

❑ Reading makes me tired/causes headaches

❑ I'm not good at it

❑ Books take too much time

❑ Friends make fun of me

❑ Other

10. If you said you tolerated or hated reading now, when you were younger did you:
    [ ]love to read   [ ]enjoy reading   [ ] tolerated reading   [ ] hate reading

11. How old are you? [   ]   12. Are you? [   ]Male or [   ] Female

Appendix 7

Student Reading Survey

STUDENT READING SURVEY

ENGAGED READING	A lot	Sometimes	Almost Never	Never
1. I like to read.				
2. In Social Studies we discuss topics that I like to go home and read about.				
3. I think reading is boring.				
4. I enjoy spending time reading interesting things in math.				
5. My teacher helps me appreciate the different ways authors write.				
6. We do projects where I have to read many different materials.				
AUTONOMY SUPPORT	A lot	Sometimes	Almost Never	Never
7. My teacher wants me to express my own opinions about what I read in Social Studies.				
8. My teacher encourages me to learn new things about science by reading books.				
9. My teacher encourages me to read books that are hard for me to understand				
10. My teacher lets me decide what science topics I should read and write about.				
11. In my science work, my teacher lets me read what I am interested in.				
12. In math my teacher thinks it's important for me to work on my own.				

READING INSTRUCTION in CONTENT AREAS	A lot	Sometimes	Almost Never	Never
13. My teacher encourages me to find the main idea when I read about social studies topics.				
14. My teacher wants me to ask myself questions when I read about social studies topics				
15. I am taught how to write good sentences in social studies and to punctuate them correctly.				
16. My teacher expects me to use what I already know to understand what I read about science topics.				
17. In science, my teacher helps me to find the main idea and supporting details in what I read.				
18. My teacher teaches me how to plan, organize my writing for science reports.				
19. In math, my teacher asks questions that make me want to read and learn.				
20. My teacher tells me to re-read when I don't understand something in the math book.				
INTERESTING TEXT	A lot	Sometimes	Almost Never	Never
21. My teacher teaches me how to write poems, letters, stories, and reports.				
22. My teacher helps me to enjoy books, such as mysteries or adventures.				
23 My teacher helps me to read poems, stories, and informational text from many different books.				
24. My teacher asks me to read different kinds of material to do independent research about social studies topics.				
25. My teacher helps me to appreciate the different ways that authors write.				
26. We do projects where I have to read many different materials.				