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Reading strategies for struggling readers in the middle school

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Abstract

This literature review focuses on several strategies good readers use to understand and interpret different types of text, such as fiction, non-fiction, and expository. These strategies are ones that struggling readers are not aware of, or these readers do not have the knowledge and experience to utilize the strategies. Teachers need to provide direct instruction of these strategies, generate models of what they look like, demonstrate what the thought process is behind the strategies, and offer students practice in using them with the idea that students will add them to their repertoire of strategies and use them throughout the learning experience. It is hoped the students then will begin to use these research-based strategies automatically when any text becomes difficult for them to read.

READING STRATEGIES FOR STRUGGLING READERS

IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

A Graduate Literature Review

Submitted to the

Division of Middle Level Education

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

By

Kathleen Claeys

July 2007

This Literature Review by Kathleen Claeys

Titled: Reading Strategies for Struggling Readers in the Middle School

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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ABSTRACT

This literature review focuses on several strategies good readers use to understand and interpret different types of text, such as fiction, non-fiction, and expository. These strategies are ones that struggling readers are not aware of, or these readers do not have the knowledge and experience to utilize the strategies. Teachers need to provide direct instruction of these strategies, generate models of what they look like, demonstrate what the thought process is behind the strategies, and offer students practice in using them with the idea that students will add them to their repertoire of strategies and use them throughout the learning experience. It is hoped the students then will begin to use these research-based strategies automatically when any text becomes difficult for them to read.

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Chapter I

Introduction

"Am I supposed to do these strategy things consciously or unconsciously?
Because if I'm supposed to do them without thinking, I'm in trouble."

(Sarah, Grade 12, as cited in Tovani 2000, p. 107)

Many children make their way through the elementary years without

demonstrating much difficulty with reading (Salinger, 2003). In that time, the standard

literacy skills are taught, but a small group of children slip through the cracks. Their

inability to interpret text, much of which is expository, goes unnoticed. These students

seem academically successful on the surface, but as direct instruction of these strategies

begins to wane, so does these students' ability to follow teacher instruction. That very

instruction is based upon the assumption students can read, understand, and interpret text

independently. When these students falter, teachers have difficulty interpreting the

reasoning for it. Sometimes the elementary teachers are blamed. Other times the

students are to blame for laziness, lack of study habits, and poor preparation. Still other

times, parents are seen at fault. Yet sometimes society as a whole is to blame (Salinger,

2003). Unfortunately, the root of the problem is rarely found, and therefore the problem

is not solved. In the following literature review, discussion ensues concerning strategies

to use both in Language Arts classrooms and core content areas to aid these struggling

readers in obtaining these literacy skills.

Rationale

As an educator, it is frustrating to see students come into my classroom, work

diligently on homework and tests, yet see little to no reward academically. It was not

until I started working with small literature groups that I realized many of these students

had difficulties with fluency, and in turn, comprehension. I listened to them painfully

struggle with oral fluency and noted with awe that they could not answer the most basic

comprehension questions. I began to look at their grades in other classes and speak to

their other teachers, and it became apparent that this deficiency was appearing elsewhere.

Thus, I began my pursuit of finding reading strategies for all teachers to use in improving

comprehension for these students.

Purpose of the Review

Jane Greene (1998) shared a discussion with an eighth-grade teacher whose

frustration with her students left her feeling helpless. She felt her students weren't

reading at grade level, and the material she was responsible to teach to them was of no

value to her in helping them to become better readers. This type of frustration is

consistently found in middle schools around the country (Greene, 1998). Teachers deal

with students who have special needs, language barriers, behavior problems, and learning

disabilities. For these students, *504 Plans*, defined as a specific list of accommodations

made by teachers in the classroom for disabled persons (United States Department of

Education, 2005), allows for those persons to have an equal opportunity to succeed in the

learning process, through both mainstream and specialized classrooms. Teachers who

specialize in special education and instructing English language learners utilize numerous

accommodations to ensure success inside the classroom. However, the eighth grade

teacher (as cited in Greene, 1998) spoke about the mainstream students who are not

reading at grade level, yet do not meet the qualifications for special education assistance.

So what can she do? Much research has been done on this very dilemma. This study found four instructional strategies teachers can utilize with struggling adolescent readers: Reciprocal Teaching, Direct Instruction, Teacher Modeling, and Repeated Reading.

Importance of the Review

As federal regulation on education heightens, so does the focus on reading (Reutzel & Smith, 2004). Schools are taking the necessary steps to become accountable to the mandates set by the federal government's *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation. In doing so, educators are looking to research-based strategies to improve reading comprehension at all age levels. Four strategies will be discussed in the ensuing literature review. Teachers, administrators, and other professionals in the field of education can all benefit from this review, as it will provide information about effective strategies to use in the classroom with struggling middle school readers.

Research Questions

This research will be the basis for the following literature review. The questions used for the review are the following:

1. What are numerous strategies to use in order to facilitate literacy education for struggling middle school readers?

2. What are successful strategies that can be implemented throughout the curriculum, and are not to be taught in isolation?

3. What are strategies that can be infused within the four content areas of mathematics, language arts, social studies, and science?

Chapter II

Methodology

This review of literature focuses on reading strategies to help struggling middle level students. Prior to looking for any materials to use in this review, I set two goals for myself. My first goal was to find research that was relevant to my research questions. My second goal was to find primary sources where studies provided solid evidence of beneficial reading strategies. In doing research for this review, I used several methods to locate sources, including searching professional databases and speaking to my teaching peers and my professors from the University of Northern Iowa. After I located sources, I used specific criteria in deciding whether or not to select the sources to use as part of my research. Once I had selected my sources, I began reading them. While reading, I used specific procedures to analyze them; I constantly reminded myself to check whether the research met my two goals. Lastly, I looked to see for consistencies in authors, studies, and themes throughout my readings.

Method to Locate Sources

In searching for sources that discuss reading strategies for struggling middle school readers, I located sources that were readily available to me. In looking for these sources, I had two goals. The first goal was to find research that was relevant to my research questions. My second goal was to find primary sources where studies provide solid evidence of beneficial reading strategies.

Sources were obtained from a variety of resources, including the University of Northern Iowa's Rod Library, Wilson Web, and ERIC databases. Journal articles from

the Wilson Web and Rod Library were introduced to me via my middle level cohort

instructors, Dr. Donna Douglas and Dr. Jean Schneider. Journal articles from ERIC

databases were made available to me through assistance from Waukee Community

School District's former Technology Resource Strategist, Denise Krefting. Search terms

such as *middle school reading*, *struggling middle school readers*, and *reading strategies*

were used. Terms that did *not* include a reference to middle school seemed to be more

successful in turning up useful articles. Many articles do not refer to middle school

students specifically, and therefore the term, *middle school*, hindered my search.

Books on reading strategies were also used. I purchased *I Read It, But I Don't

Get It* by Chris Tovani, and checked out *Strategies that Work* by Stephanie Harvey and

Anne Goudvis from the Waukee Middle School Library. The former book was suggested

and referenced at a conference I attended in the fall of 2003, and the latter book was a

suggestion from several of my fellow Language Arts teachers. I also referenced Rachel

Billmeyer's *Reading in the Content Areas*. This book was the focus of Waukee

Community School District's professional development for the last three years.

Method to Select Sources

I selected sources based on the amount of information I found, concerning the

topic of reading strategies for struggling middle school students. In determining this, I

decided whether the findings seemed logical, applicable, and consistent with other

findings I had discovered. In essence, I asked myself whether the suggested strategies

could be implemented into my classroom and other middle school classrooms without

straying from curriculums that already existed. Would the strategies I researched support

learning for struggling middle level readers?

Sources were also selected based on the research presented to defend the

strategies mentioned for improving reading. The criteria for inclusion in the study were

as follows: (a) Was the research explained thoroughly? (b) Was the methodology

explained in a way that was understandable to me? (c) Were the researcher's findings

logical, or did they seem skewed? (d) If the author did not do research of his or her own,

was there sufficient evidence to support his or her assertions?

Additionally, I considered the authors, sources, and the dates of the publications I

read in order to determine their usefulness. In searching for authors, I looked for names

of researchers mentioned in my other readings, or those suggested to me by my peers. In

searching for sources, I searched for journals suggested to me by my peers and middle

level cohort professors, such as *Middle Level Journal, The Reading Teacher,* and *Journal*

of Educational Research. When looking at dates of publications, I looked back about 10

years for reading strategy material, as research on effective reading instruction has been

done for decades, and I looked back about five years for material referring to middle level

instruction, as an abundance of writing has flourished about middle level instruction in

the last five to ten years. Lastly, the author's reputation was taken into account. If I

noticed the author's name frequently used as a primary source in other research, I

pursued his or her research, as it seemed pertinent to so many others. As stated before, I

took into account the journal publishing the work, and the author's research, assertions,

and references in determining authors' reputations. Resources that did not meet the criteria were not used as references in this literature review.

Procedures to Analyze Sources

In reading the books and the journal articles retrieved from databases, I kept my research questions in mind and continually asked myself whether the literature I was reading was guiding me to better understand those questions. Specifically, I asked myself whether specific reading strategies mentioned in my readings could be understood and applied to my own teachings. If the article did not identify specific reading strategies, I asked myself whether the information provided would better help to understand students' struggles when reading or help me to better understand the reading process. If the reading did not do any of these things, then I did not include the source in this review of literature.

I also highlighted text that explained new information to me and that either explained my students' behaviors or their reading difficulties. Additionally, I highlighted text that explained reading strategies. I took notes in the margins of articles and books throughout my reading. In the margins, I often wrote down questions the text brought to my mind, or I tried to write the main ideas and author's assertions into my own words. This way, I was actively processing how the material I was reading could be implemented into my own classroom.

Criteria to Include Literature

      I cross-referenced my readings. I looked to see if certain terminology or reading strategies were mentioned in multiple places. For example, I found the strategy, *reciprocal teaching,* in many articles. I also looked to see if certain authors or studies were referenced in several places. In one instance, The National Assessment for Educational Progress report card was a study that was frequently referred to throughout my reading, and Sarah Dowhower was an author often mentioned. So, I considered this study and Dowhower as reliable and important sources. Lastly, I looked to see whether certain themes evolved from reading multiple sources. For example, several research studies suggested that getting to know the students' interests and determining the group's size play an important role in attempting to improve student reading. Although these are not specific reading strategies to use in my literature review, and ultimately my classroom, I now know these are important factors that play a role in teaching effective reading strategies.

Chapter III

Literature Review and Discussion

For many years, teachers have held a misconception that struggling readers were simply low achievers (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). However, this is usually not the case. Guthrie and Davis stated that struggling readers have low confidence in their reading abilities, and at times, will procrastinate and avoid putting forth effort in an attempt to cover up their lack of self-confidence. Additionally, as students enter the middle school setting, Guthrie and Davis pointed out that the students are no longer the responsibility of one teacher, as is the case in a typical elementary setting. Rather, different teachers instruct each content area. Despite the fact that many middle school staff work together to integrate their curriculums, teachers still serve many more students in a school day than elementary teachers do. Thus, students must take on a greater responsibility in monitoring their progress in learning (Slater & Horstman, 2002). According to Alfassi (2004), "Such readers must become cognizant of their performance limitations, intentionally weigh their options, and willfully execute compensatory procedures" (p.171). Alfassi continued to point out that it is pertinent that comprehension instruction is geared toward teaching students a sense of conscious control of their cognitive process. But how does a teacher - or an entire teaching team, for that matter - do this?

The following literature review discusses four specific strategies teachers can use to help the struggling readers in the classroom: Reciprocal Teaching, Direct Instruction, Teacher Modeling, and Repeated Reading. Before instructing these struggling readers, however, it is important for the teacher to get to know his or her students. In doing this,

teachers can gain insight as to what interests the students. This information can then be used in aiding teachers to select materials to utilize with the four specific reading strategies. The literature review then goes on to discuss the importance of grouping students to maximize learning while using the reading strategies. Lastly, the four strategies are discussed in depth.

Getting to Know the Student

Lenski and Nierstheimer (2002) suggested that one of the most important things a teacher can do before jumping into a list of strategies is observe the student and research the student's background. Lenski and Nierstheimer suggested teachers need to ask the following questions:

1. What does the child already know?

2. What strategies does this child already use?

3. Which additional strategies does the child need in order to make progress?

4. Which strategies is the child neglecting?

5. What is this child's level of understanding?

Additionally, Lenski and Nierstheimer (2002) suggested that teachers observe what strategies these students use when they come to a text that is difficult to read, and then utilize this knowledge as a springboard for further literacy instruction. They used the example of a beginning reader who gazes at the pictures in a book for an extensive period of time before beginning to read, as if searching for the meaning and action of the story before they actually begin. The teacher, they suggested, should work with this child to build word recognition strategies, so the child is not so dependent on the pictures.

Valencia and Buly (2004) performed a study in which students' scores on standardized tests were looked at more closely in an attempt to better understand the results. Although the students involved in the study seemed to show the same problem areas overall, such as the need for more reading instruction, a breakdown of the results and more in-depth testing better described students' specific needs. By utilizing reading tests such as the Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-Educational Battery-R (Woodcock & Johnson, 1990, as cited in Valencia & Buly, 2004), the Qualitative Reading Inventory-II (Leslie & Caldwell, 1995, as cited in Valencia & Buly, 2004), the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn, 1981, as cited in Valencia & Buly, 2004), and the state standardized reading passages, the researchers were able to divide the 108 fourth grade students into six different categories of reading difficulties. With this detailed amount of information, teachers can then find and utilize literacy strategies that better-suit specific student needs. Valencia and Buly found that, ultimately, by using assessments similar to those listed above, teachers could assess their own students' standardized tests scores in an attempt to better interpret what those test results, indeed, do tell about their students' reading abilities. This interpretation would then allow for teachers to provide more focused reading instruction.

Understanding the Student's Needs

The following section of this literature review concentrates on two important areas teachers must focus on while getting to know their students. Both of these areas challenge teachers to take extra time to truly understand the developmental needs and interests of their students. These two areas are student interest and grouping of students.

Student interest. As with all teaching, it is vital in literacy education to utilize

learning material that piques student interest (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). As part of their

Supportive Literacy Cycle, Hindin, Morocco, and Aguilar (2001) discussed the

importance of choosing literature that presents compelling dilemmas for young

adolescents to ponder. Their research is explained based on this understanding: "Explore

problems and issues with value and relevance to students' lives, both within and beyond

school" (p. 207). Additionally, these researchers made the following case. Often by the

time these struggling readers reach middle school, they have accumulated so many

scholastic failures that they lack motivation and rarely participate (Hindin et al., 2001).

By choosing literature topics that students show interest in, teachers can reverse students'

lack of motivation and participation. According to Guthrie and Davis (2003), "To re-

engage students who are struggling with reading, a wide range of texts should focus on

content that deals with real-life problems" (p. 75). It is also important that the interesting

topics be integrated with the content goals of the classroom, and the text must be chosen

to teach cognitive skills necessary to teach struggling readers (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

Guthrie and Davis (2003) suggested that teachers include students in deciding which

topics to explore, which texts to read, the sequence of texts, and the particular skills to

emphasize. They also state that although teachers are empowering students and giving

them some control over their own learning by giving limited choices, teachers can stay on

track with the content goals of the classroom (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

Grouping of students. Although struggling middle level readers express feelings

as if they are alone in their reading difficulty, research shows that they are not (Tovani,

2000). In fact, many are together inside the same classroom walls each day. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Education Goals Panel, 1999), more than two-thirds of eighth graders cannot read challenging text successfully. Working in small groups is one way for students to realize that they are not alone in their reading struggles. Teachers can group students into two, three, or four students to enhance literacy instruction.

Vaughn et al. (2003) conducted a study on the effectiveness of group size. They compared groups of three and ten students with students working individually. Each group had one teacher instructing the students. The students were pretested, utilizing a variety of assessments. Teachers were trained in instruction of three primary literacy functions: phonological awareness, word study, and reading fluency. Vaughn found that students working one-on-one, or with one teacher and one student, and those working in groups of three, or with one teacher and three students, performed much higher on posttests than those students working in groups of ten, or with one teacher and ten students, despite all having received the same instruction. The researchers concluded that struggling readers working in either a one-on-one or one-on-three setting benefit from an "intensive, explicit approach to reading instruction" (p. 312).

Harmon (2002) emphasized the importance of small groups in vocabulary strategy building lessons. Within this project, she discussed how most average and above average students do not have any difficulty obtaining strategies, such as utilizing context clues, examining word structure, and using reference books. However, those students who struggle with reading have difficulty transferring these concepts to independent reading.

"Hence, they tend to know fewer words than their more proficient counterparts and continue to fall behind in their reading. These students are the ones who need more intensive help with independent worked learning strategies [utilizing context clues, examining word structure, and using reference books]" (Harmon, p. 606).

Harmon's (2002) recommendation for a successful intervention was through a small group method called *peer dialoguing*, in which students work in groups of two, along with the teacher, to develop their focus on functional word meaning constructions and metacognitive awareness of strategic moves. Harmon suggested that teachers provide support when students were unable to grasp important context clues in the text or lacked the necessary background knowledge about the specific topic or the language conventions. Otherwise, Harmon suggested, the students discuss with one another the thought-processes they use to determine the meaning of unknown words.

The recommended suggestion for small group instruction holds great implications for both language arts teachers and other core content area teachers who utilize whole-group instruction on a regular basis (Vaughn et al., 2003). Whole-group instruction is a time-effective strategy to use, considering many teachers have a limited amount of instructional time (Ganske, Monroe, & Strickland, 2003). However, these studies demonstrated that students who struggle with literacy can have great difficulty obtaining the information being taught in such a short period of time. Ganske, et al. (2003) recommended that, when working in small groups, teachers make sure that the instructional time will be beneficial to everyone, not just the students working in small groups. "They [teachers] should plan meaningful tasks for the rest of the class and make

it a priority to teach students the routines and expectations for completing tasks at centers and for independent work" (p.122). In other words, as teachers see the need, they can pull struggling students aside to further assist them while the rest of the students begin working independently on other previously teacher-directed tasks.

Specific Strategies for Instructing Struggling Readers

The following section of this literature review focuses on specific strategies for teachers to utilize in their classroom with struggling readers. These research-based strategies have been proven to benefit struggling readers and can be used in all content area classrooms. These strategies include reciprocal teaching, direction explanation, teacher modeling, and repeated reading.

Reciprocal teaching. One comprehension strategy that utilizes teacher modeling is called *reciprocal teaching.* Palincsar and Brown developed reciprocal teaching in 1984 (as cited in Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). According to Pearson and Dole (1988), reciprocal teaching allows for teachers to more effectively and explicitly teach reading comprehension. They establish four different stages for this strategy: (1) questioning, (2) clarifying, (3) summarizing, and (4) predicting (Marzano, et al. 2001; Pearson & Dole, 1988; Slater & Horstman, 2002). Students are put into small groups and short selections are read. After each paragraph is read, the group stops, and the teacher models the process (Marzano, et al. 2001; Pearson & Dole, 1988; Slater & Horstman, 2002). In the questioning stage, the teacher and the students generate several questions prompted by the passage just read, and then try to find the answers (Marzano, et al. 2001; Pearson & Dole, 1988; Slater & Horstman, 2002). In the second stage, the clarification

stage, the teacher addresses any problems or misunderstandings any of the group members might have had (Marzano, et al. 2001; Pearson & Dole, 1988; Slater & Horstman, 2002). In the third stage, the summarizing stage, the teacher and the group members summarize the text segment (Marzano, et al. 2001; Pearson & Dole, 1988; Slater & Horstman, 2002). In the last stage, the prediction stage, the teacher and the students make predictions about the content of the upcoming section of the text, based on what has been read, coupled with the previous discussion (Marzano, et al. 2001; Pearson & Dole, 1988; Slater & Horstman, 2002).

The process of reciprocal teaching is outlined in the work of Carter (1997) and in Slater and Horstman (2002). In both studies, the authors explain that the process of reciprocal teaching is one of scaffolding. They also recognize that it is important that the teacher begin to gradually decrease his or her role of group leader (Carter, 1997; Slater & Horstman, 2002). The responsibility then becomes that of the teacher and students together (Carter, 1997; Slater & Horstman, 2002). Finally, the students take turns playing the role as group leader (Carter, 1997; Slater & Horstman, 2002). However, the level of scaffolding almost always depends on the difficulty of the text (Carter, 1997; Slater & Horstman, 2002). When the text is more difficult for students to understand, then it is necessary for the teacher to play a more active role in the group's learning by stepping back into the group to provide more modeling and direct explanation (Carter, 1997; Slater & Horstman, 2002).

This model of reciprocal teaching can be used for writing, too (Slater & Horstman, 2002). The same steps are followed: (1) questioning, (2) clarifying, (3)

summarizing, and (4) predicting. In addition to these four steps, students write down what was discussed after each stage, a fifth step in the process (Slater & Horstman, 2002). For example, after the summarizing stage, the group members take time to write down the summary the group generated. As in the reading portion of this strategy, Slater and Horstman recommended that the teacher would model this writing process first, then facilitate the process as students needed, and eventually turn that leadership role over to the students.

Direct explanation. Salinger (2003) provided another successful literacy strategy, entitled *direct explanation.* His research discussed the five major components of reading acquisition: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Salinger stated that many struggling adolescent readers have been taught these individual components, but have difficulty putting the pieces of the puzzle together to become successful readers. In order for students to be able to do this, Salinger believes they need "systematic, explicit instruction" (p. 81). Unfortunately, Salinger stated this very often does not take place in the classroom.

In 1978, Durkin (as cited in Salinger, 2003) observed classrooms to see whether direct instruction was being used. She found that little to no direct instruction was taking place. In fact, she surmised that teachers were assuming the students were able to "figure out" (p. 81) comprehension strategies on their own. This can be a dangerous assumption for any teacher to make, especially for students who are older, struggling readers (Salinger, 2003). If students are not armed with the appropriate strategies necessary to

become successful, independent readers, then the rest of their educational experiences can be extremely challenging and frustrating (Salinger, 2003).

Salinger (2003) suggested several different things for teachers to focus on teaching through direct explanation. The first is identifying meaningful clusters of letters as important clues for word meaning and revisiting consonant and vowel patterns. It is important for students to understand the meaningful clusters of letters when decoding, so they have tools to attack unfamiliar words in the future. This also pays dividends for spelling, as studies show students think of clusters when spelling, too (Salinger, 2003). The second thing Salinger suggested is teaching students to identify root words, applying them to new words, and leading discussions of word origins. In doing so, teachers are to use semantic mapping and guide them to use resources, such as dictionaries and thesauruses (Salinger, 2003). Lastly, Salinger suggested teachers use numerous pre-reading, during reading, and post-reading strategies to model comprehension. "Before reading, teachers can ask motivating questions, establish a purpose for reading, build vocabulary and concept knowledge, and help students access their own background knowledge" (Salinger, p. 83). During and after reading, teachers should check periodically for individual understanding and try to expand the students' grasp of the material by sharing ideas. When students show difficulty understanding the material, teachers should model returning to the text to recheck facts and ideas (Salinger, 2003). In doing this, Salinger suggested using graphic organizers to assist students to externalize their thoughts and encourages them to recheck their facts. For example, Salinger (2003)

suggested having students fill out a story frame or a comparison chart after reading a story to demonstrate their understanding of a story's content.

The Iowa Department of Education, through its *Every Child Reads* initiative, strongly emphasizes the use of direct, explicit instruction, as well (Iowa Department of Education, 2007). It states this: "The idea behind explicit instruction of text comprehension is that comprehension can be improved by teaching students to use specific cognitive strategies or to reason strategically when they encounter barriers to comprehension when reading" (Iowa Department of Education, p.77). Conversely, it points out that those students who do not receive such direct instruction "are unlikely to learn, develop, or use them spontaneously" (Iowa Department of Education, p. 77). Teachers are encouraged to use a variety of ways to teach comprehension strategies directly and to be adaptive and flexible with the strategy instruction rather than emphasizing only one way to use the strategy (Iowa Department of Education, 2007).

Tovani (2000) also emphasizes the importance of direct instruction. "With direct, explicit instruction that demonstrates what good readers do, struggling readers can be taught *how* to comprehend text better" (Tovani, p. 108). Throughout Tovani's research, direct instruction is constantly infused with teacher modeling (2000), the next strategy discussed in this review of literature. Tovani calls one such comprehension strategy that uses direct instruction *Real World Monitoring* (2000). Here, she shows students how to monitor their thinking so as to actively conquer confusing text.

Tovani (2000) begins by instructing her students about the following six signals for identifying confusing text:

1. The voice inside the reader's head isn't interacting with the text.

2. The camera inside the reader's head shuts off.

3. The reader's mind begins to wander.

4. The reader can't remember what has been read.

5. Clarifying questions asked by the reader can't be answered.

6. The reader reencounters a character and has no recollection when the character was introduced (Tovani, p. 38).

She then recommends that the students find the first place in the text that is confusing and describe their confusion on a post-it note, such as not knowing a word's meaning or a reference to something in which the reader is unfamiliar (Tovani, 2000). She models this for the students several times before allowing them to attempt the strategy on their own. Another recommendation Tovani (2000) makes is having the students highlight in one color the text they completely understand and could adequately explain to a peer and highlight in another color the information that they found confusing. After students do these two things, she suggests holding a class discussion where students can share thoughts about the confusing text with one another in an attempt to construct meaning (Tovani, 2000).

Lastly, Tovani (2000) emphasizes in her Real World Monitoring comprehension strategy that struggling adolescent readers don't use two different "voices" as they read: the reciting voice, the one that reads the words off the page, and the conversation voice,

the one that helps the reader interact with the text. She states this about the interaction voice: "An interacting voice encourages the reader to infer, make connections, ask questions, and synthesize information" (Tovani, p. 45). Because this interaction voice is so important in aiding comprehension, she continually models the use of hers during instruction (Tovani, 2000). The hope is that students will begin to use this voice actively not only in the reader classroom, but also in other content areas (2000). This can then aid students in recognizing confusing texts and making efforts to better understand the material (2000).

Teacher modeling. A third strategy discussed throughout numerous pieces of research was *teacher modeling* (Bhattacharya & Ehri, 2004; Pearson & Dole, 1988; Salinger, 2003; Slater & Horstman, 2002). Because teacher modeling tends to be an elementary school skill, many teachers of middle school students tend to stray away from this invaluable teaching resource (Salinger, 2003).

Bhattacharya and Ehri (2004) performed a study that emphasized the strategy of teacher modeling. One hundred and fifty middle school students, who were significantly below grade level in reading, were divided into three different groups. In their study, each group was taught word pronunciation skills, but two groups were taught through teacher modeling. Each group was taught the words differently. One group was taught a graphosyllabic strategy (Bhattacharya & Ehri, 2004). This meant those students were taught only one rule of the syllabication rules: divide each word into multiple syllables based on one vowel nucleus (Bhattacharya & Ehri, 2004). For example, the word *finish* was broken down into *fin-ish* based on the idea that each syllable has only one vowel

sound in it. The actual instruction was based not on memorizing syllable rules, but rather on applying knowledge of previous words' syllables to new, unknown words (Bhattacharya & Ehri). A second group was taught a whole-word strategy (Bhattacharya & Ehri). In other words, the students were asked to pronounce the words over and over again; if pronounced inaccurately, the teacher corrected the mistake (Bhattacharya & Ehri). The third group was a no-treatment control group, so they were given the same pretests and posttests as the other two groups, but they remained in the classrooms and received the reading instruction provided by the school, as usual (Bhattacharya & Ehri). The results of this study suggested that the students in the first and second groups understood the pronunciations taught much better than those of the third group; however, there was little difference in effect between the first two methods (Bhattacharya & Ehri). The researchers (Bhattacharya & Ehri) concluded the reason for this similarity was due to the teacher modeling, as it was the constant used with both of the first two groups but not with the third group.

One specific comprehension strategy that emphasizes teacher modeling is *asking questions*. Lloyd (2004) discusses this comprehensions strategy in his article about literature circles. In an effort to improve upon the typical literature circle format- assigned reading passages and uniform role sheets- Lloyd decided to shift towards questioning because he wanted to encourage engagement in the text through talk (2004). Lloyd noted, as did Tovani (2000) that even good readers didn't truly realize how a question can help to understand the text better (2004).

Lloyd (2004) began his instruction by using a read-aloud novel. He constantly modeled his own use of questioning, making sure to ask genuine, thought-provoking queries (Lloyd, 2004). Additionally, he did not allow the students to answer the questions aloud, which intrigued his students (Lloyd, 2004). After several days of modeling this strategy, Lloyd then allowed students to begin recording their own questions. Students initially responded with many factual recall questions, but Lloyd pushed his students to create their own thought-provoking questions that drove each reader deeper into the text (2004). After several weeks of this, students began consistently asking questions "to clarify meaning, identify confusing vocabulary, and explore the author's intentions" (p. 118). He did begin to allow students to answer a few questions together as a class, but he found that it was the unanswered questions that kept the students engaged (2004).

Finally, Lloyd allowed the students to begin the literature circles. He found that more students participated more frequently as students gained independence (Lloyd, 2004). He continued to model the strategy throughout the school year with a variety of other genres, including non-fiction (Lloyd, 2004). He also used direct instruction to support students on concepts such as root words and context clues (Lloyd, 2004).

One specific comprehension strategy that also uses modeling and focuses on asking and answering questions is called *Question Answer* Relationships, or QAR (Raphael & Au, 2005). QAR challenges students to identify where the answers to questions can be found; these are located either "in the book" or "in my [the reader] head" (Raphael & Au, 2005). The "in the book" answers are divided into two sub-

categories: those that are "right there" in the text and those that encourage the reader to "think and search" (Raphael & Au, 2005). Examples of the latter would be creating a simple list, explaining a process, or creating a sequence of events (2005). The "in my head" answers are also divided into two sub-categories: "author and me" and "on my own" (2005). The "author and me" answers require students to think about how the text and their own background knowledge fit together (2005). The "on my own" answers are those that the students can answer with their own ides and experiences (2005).

QAR is a successful comprehension strategy because it encourages teachers, administrators, schools, and districts to use the same vocabulary when modeling such a complex, invisible process (Raphael & Au, 2005). Additionally, it is a strategy that can begin being modeled in the primary grades (Raphael & Au, 2005). All teachers can use QAR, including instructors of special programs, such as Special Education and English as a Second Language (Raphael & Au, 2005). Lastly, QAR provides an active approach for preparing students for high-stakes testing without straying from rigorous, existing curriculum (2005).

In addition to the above-listed studies, both reciprocal teaching and direct explanation utilize teacher modeling as a part of the learning process (Iowa Department of Education, 2007; Salinger, 2003; Slater & Horstman, 2002; Tovani, 2000). Thus the strategy of teacher modeling plays an intricate role in the first two strategies discussed in this literature review.

Repeated reading. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NCES) described fluency as the appropriate grouping or chunking of words into phrases that are

characterized by correct intonation, stress, and pauses (NCES, 1996). More specifically, the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory (NWREL) described fluent readers in the following manner: "the advanced reader in fluency reads aloud with appropriate pauses, stops, starts, and signals for transitions" (2005, p. 1). A fluent reader reads aloud with appropriate pauses, stops, and starts with text automatically, that is, without attention (Worthy & Prater, 2002). This allows the reader the opportunity to give more attention to comprehension of the material being read (Samuels, 1997). However, struggling readers often have difficulty grouping words that go together (Dowhower, 1991). Samuels (1997) suggested utilizing the strategy of *repeated reading* to aid these students in increasing fluency. Repeated reading is defined as "Rereading a short, meaningful passage several times until a satisfactory level of fluency is reached. Then the procedure is repeated with a new passage" (Samuels, p. 377). As students repeat the task of repeated reading, the decoding barrier to comprehension is gradually overcome. In one study (Sindelar, Monda, & O'Shea, 1990), results suggested that disabled and non-disabled students in Grades 3 through 5 increase fluency and comprehension drastically when repeating a reading just three times.

One specific way to incorporate repeated reading into the classroom is through Readers Theatre (Tyler & Chard, 2000). Readers Theatre, as defined by Worthy and Prater (2002), "Is an activity where students rehearse a poem, joke, story, script, speech, or other appropriate text until they can read it with fluency and expression" (p. 294). There are many rewards from using Readers Theatre. Tyler and Chard (2000) and Worthy and Prater (2002) suggested the following benefits: (a) students read their

assigned lines, relieving them of the stress of memorization; (b) students can focus

energies on interpreting and sharing their understanding of character; (c) students can

work with peers, so feelings of isolation do not exist; (d) students only read certain lines

of the text, so students have small breaks between lines; and (e) students have the

opportunity to practice, successfully perform, and increase their self-confidence. Thus,

Readers Theatre pays dividends not only for students' fluency, but also in promoting their

self-worth.

Summary of Strategies for Instructing Struggling Readers

This literature review focused on four specific strategies that can be used in all

classrooms to help struggling readers. Reciprocal teaching, direct explanation, teacher

modeling, and repeated reading can all be infused throughout existing middle level

curriculums in order to assist struggling readers. When using these four strategies, it is

important for teachers to learn about students' reading background. Once this is done, it

is suggested that teachers use reading material that is of students' interest to teach reading

strategies, as research shows students are motivated to participate when reading material

they find interesting. Lastly, teachers should keep in mind that small groups, such as

groups of three or four, are the ideal size in using these strategies.

Discussion of Literature Review

The following section of this literature review addresses the three research

questions listed in the first chapter. In doing so, the researcher will look to see if the

three research questions were adequately addressed throughout the literature review, and

if they were not, the researcher will address any limitations of the research and address any questions left unanswered.

The research questions used for the review are the following:

1. What are numerous strategies to use in order to facilitate literacy education for struggling middle school readers?

2. What are successful strategies that can be implemented throughout the curriculum, not to be taught in isolation?

3. What are strategies that can be infused within the four content areas of mathematics, language arts, social studies, and science?

It was the hope of the author of this literature review to use these questions as more of a checklist; in other words, each strategy found could be used as an example strategy for all three questions. The four strategies discussed throughout this paper- reciprocal teaching, direction explanation, teacher modeling, and repeated reading- each addresses all three questions well. The research discussed in this literature review demonstrates that each strategy benefits literacy education in the middle school, as the first question poses. For example, teacher modeling was used in a middle school setting in vocabulary research done by Bhattacharya and Ehri (2004), and much improvement in the students was noted, due to teacher modeling.

The second research question asks whether the strategies mentioned can be infused throughout existing curriculum, rather than taught in isolation. Again, all four strategies can be used to enhance existing curriculum. Direction explanation and teacher modeling are two specific examples of this. Neither requires teachers to pursue new material for

teaching; rather, they simply encourage teachers to take more time in providing instruction of existing curriculum.

The last research question addresses the issue of the four content areas: Can the strategies be used beyond the confines of a Reading or Language Arts classroom? The answer is yes, they all can. Repeated reading and reciprocal teaching are two great examples of this. Repeated reading is used in many science, math, and social studies classrooms. For example, a middle school Readers Theatre script about The United States Constitution could be used in a social studies classroom. Additionally, teachers can use existing science and social studies textbooks as the reading material for reciprocal teaching. In conclusion, then, the researcher has concluded that all four strategies address all three research questions and answer them positively.

Chapter IV

Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter discusses the conclusions and recommendations the author of this literature review drawn from the research cited. In drawing conclusions, the author kept in mind the limitations of the research, which can hinder the research process. Recommendations are made for teacher practices, future research, and educational policies.

Conclusions

The purpose of this literature review was to seek strategies proven useful to struggling readers at the middle level. In looking for these strategies, the hope is that all content area teachers can utilize them in their classrooms without having to stray from the existing curriculum. Incorporating these strategies means the classroom teacher has to spend some time getting to know their students and their students' interests, first. Another important aspect of implementing these strategies is to consider the grouping of students. Teachers need to stray away from putting these struggling readers into large groups; the research indicates these students are much more likely to learn better in small group settings. Teachers should focus on working with groups of three or four when instructing, as groups of this size are the most effective learning environments for struggling readers.

Reciprocal teaching was one strategy found to benefit many struggling readers. In this strategy, the teacher begins by modeling the four different stages: (1) questioning, (2) clarifying, (3) summarizing, and (4) predicting. As the students become more

comfortable with the four different stages, the teacher scaffolds his or her way out of the process until it is completely student-led. Using direct explanation was another effective strategy to utilize. Teachers need to use direct explanation throughout instruction, so students can clearly understand the strategies they are expected to understand and use independently. Teacher modeling is a third strategy; this strategy plays an intricate role in both the two previous strategies mentioned. It is important for teachers to model their own thought processes for struggling readers, so the readers can clearly see how to successfully interact with text to comprehend better. Repeated reading is the last strategy this literature review discusses. Here, research suggests that students who are exposed to a text multiple times drastically improve both their fluency and comprehension. Thus, teachers should allow multiple opportunities for students to reread text.

Limitations

One limitation the writer of this literature review encountered was a lack of research concerning middle level students. A minimal amount of literature was available to this researcher that directly pertained to middle school students. Much of the research was geared towards elementary students, and some was directed towards high school students. Ultimately, the specific topic, strategies for struggling middle school readers, was seldom addressed in the literature.

Recommendations

The recommendations of this literature review considered several things. The first discusses how the findings of this paper can be applied specifically to teacher practices. The second discusses where future research can be implemented in order to

further learning about reading strategies for struggling middle school readers. The last section discusses how educational policies may be impacted by the findings of the research.

Teacher practices. First, the research for this literature review has revealed that it is vital that middle school teachers take the time to get to know their students. In doing so, teachers can find material of interest to the students that still teaches to the standards and benchmarks mandated by their curriculum. It has also become evident that this material be provided at the students' reading level, so success in reading can be achieved. Research also suggests that teachers should get to know their students and the strategies they already use when reading material. This way, teachers have some background information about their students to utilize when trying to interpret what materials and strategies to teach.

Secondly, throughout my research, it was clear that middle school teachers need to be active role models for their students. Many middle level teachers shy away from strategies such as teacher modeling and direct explanation. Many middle school educators think of these strategies as "elementary" and do not feel they have time to use them inside their classroom. However, struggling readers need this guidance and modeling from their instructors. With these strategies in place, the classroom becomes a more successful environment for the struggling students.

Future research. Much research is still needed in this field. There is some research available on middle school students, specifically on struggling readers in the middle school. Future research needs to be done to develop specific strategies that

benefit these students. Additionally, research can be done about the instructional setting suitable for these students. Should struggling readers be in the classrooms with other students when working on improving their reading, or should they be put together into language arts classes geared towards specifically improving their reading abilities?

Educational policies. Depending on future research, the reading instruction of struggling readers may gravely impact current instructional strategies. If schools move toward putting struggling students together in classrooms without their more proficient peers, instruction could change to concentrate more on developing comprehension strategies. Educators in all content areas would be in need of professional development. This professional development would guide teachers of all content areas in strategic reading comprehension instruction. In other words, differentiated instruction would become a necessity inside these classrooms. However, if these students are separated from the mainstream and put in classes together, the issue of tracking can develop. This could become another controversial research topic within itself. Nonetheless, as research continues concerning these struggling students, best practices will emerge to guide teachers in making these readers' educational experiences a success.

Final Thoughts

It is my hope, through the practices examined in this literature review, it is clear that struggling readers can be helped to begin developing a confidence that will carry them throughout the rest of their academic lives. So many of these students are hiding in the shadows of their reading-proficient peers, hoping to go unnoticed. It is our job as educators to seek these students out, create a safe learning environment inside our

classrooms, and arm them with the necessary strategies to become willing and able readers. After all, it is what they deserve, and it is what we are called to do as teachers.

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