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## Lexile levels and their value to public school teachers

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LEXILE LEVELS AND THEIR VALUE  
TO PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHERS

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts Education

Kristin Schumacher  
University of Northern Iowa  
July 2022

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how teachers perceive Lexile level and its value, and whether or not their beliefs inform their practice. To address questions regarding teachers' beliefs about Lexile level, I designed and implemented an online survey for public school teachers. My research shows that teachers have a favorable view of Lexile level, that they believe both students and parents should be informed of students' Lexile level, that books should be labeled with Lexile level, and that asking students to read within their Lexile level range is a good practice. This survey research reveals the need to further interrogate whether or not Lexile level has true and applicable value, especially when viewed through a lens of disability studies in education, critical literacy, and the demands of diverse and socially just classroom practices.

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This Study by: Kristin Schumacher

Entitled: Lexile Levels and Their Value to Public School Teachers

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts Education

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my sons, whose struggles in school inspired me to be a more compassionate educator; to my husband, whose unfailing support made my graduate education possible; and to Boone Grove High School Class of 2022, who challenged me to grow and adapt as a teacher in ways I did not believe I was capable.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### THE BADGES THEY WEAR

#### Background of the Study

Although her straight brown hair blocked my view of her face, I could see her dragging her index finger along the page in the book “The Outsiders,” by S.E. Hinton. She was reading ahead as I read aloud to the class. “Oh my God! Johnny’s dead! He’s dead!” she blurted. The girl then dropped her head squarely upon the book and remained in that state until we caught up with her impassioned revelation. The brown-haired girl, who I will call Maddy, along with the rest of the class, engaged in a lively discussion after finding out Johnny died. For many of these 7<sup>th</sup> graders, it was the first time a beloved book character had died. I was delighted by the emotional connection they had made, especially since this was a class composed primarily of students who received Special Education services, and who, I was told, may not be able to “handle” a book like “The Outsiders.”

Not too long after this remarkable 1<sup>st</sup> period Reading class, I attended Maddy’s IEP meeting. Her mother kept repeating, “My daughter can’t read! She’s in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and she reads at a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level!” I told the anecdote about Maddy speeding forward to find out what happened to Johnny, and of her intense response to his death. My story did not have the impact I had hoped, however. The mother’s face reddened, and she spat, “I don’t care about that! Her test scores show she can’t read!” The test scores she was referring to were the STAR Reading results that her teacher-of-record had provided. This report included Maddy’s Lexile level and her Instructional Reading Level, which indicated a

grade level at which Maddy's materials should be prepared. In spite of these numbers, I remained confident that what Maddy demonstrated in class that day proved that she could indeed read, and that she not only comprehended the text, but also personally related to it.

Maddy's experience of Johnny's death, and the IEP meeting that followed stay with me because I believe these incidents expose the gap between computerized testing and teacher assessment of literate behaviors. What I witnessed in class is what Afflerbach (2016) suggests should be part of assessment: a student's "affective stance" toward reading. Maddy was engaged, focused, and motivated to read. She was eager to find out the fate of the character. She was so swept away by the action that she shouted out loud and put her head down in sadness. Given all of this, why should Maddy wear the label "struggling reader" or "nonreader" because of her STAR Reading results? This made me wonder about Lexile Level as well.

Lexile works two ways: one is a way of measuring the readability of text based on a matrix developed by Dr. A. Jackson Stenner and Dr. Malbert Smith and implemented by a company called MetaMetrics; the other way is through assigning a score to students based on computerized reading assessment. So, books can be given a Lexile level, and students can as well. The goal of providing Lexile levels, according to the MetaMetrics website (<https://www.lexile.com>) is to "make it easier for educators to personalize learning, measure student growth, and communicate with parents about their child's progress." According to Laura E. Archer, author of the 2010 article, "Lexile reading growth as a function of starting level in at-risk middle school students," Lexile level is a way to answer questions teachers have about how to effectively measure students'

reading growth (p. 288). Archer (2010) also states that Lexile levels provide a baseline from which teachers can set “statistically informed goals for individual students” (p. 289). Teachers are not the only ones who use Lexile levels. In her 2012 article “Libraries and Lexile levels,” Dixie Forcht states that “Empowering stakeholders through understanding of the Lexile Framework for Reading enables students to make better independent choices and allows teachers to differentiate more effectively” (p. 22). Teachers can choose to use Lexile levels to monitor progress and to help guide students toward independent reading material.

However, when a teacher, parent, or student sees that result, how do they interpret it? After numerous students asked me if they could really read anything they wanted in my class because their elementary school teachers told them they could only check out books that were in their Lexile range, my curiosity only deepened. My initial questions included: How are Lexile levels being used by teachers? Is students’ access to books being restricted by their Lexile level? Why are Lexile levels displayed via spine labels on the books in the school library? Finally, when I began tutoring a 6<sup>th</sup> grade boy during the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020, and he proudly informed me over Zoom that his Lexile level was 1250, I wondered: Does that number become part of students’ reading identity? If the Lexile level is nothing the student feels they can brag about, then does it have a disabling effect? How has Lexile level become more than a way to gauge the approximate difficulty level of a text? Additionally, according to Kathy Short (2018), in terms of global literature, Lexile level is an insufficient method of capturing text complexity due to “the influence of readers’ own global knowledge and culture” (p. 2).

Short's point illustrates that readers' background knowledge might determine readability more accurately than Lexile level. Furthermore, is Lexile level now another part of the "hidden curriculum" that students absorb?

### Problem Statement

According to Learned (2016), "static assessments," (p. 370) which are utilized to identify readers and for progress monitoring purposes, fail to represent the multidimensionality of literacy. My experience with Maddy showed that although she was reading behind her grade-level peers according to the STAR assessment, she could engage in highly literate behaviors. The problem that Maddy's situation highlighted is that assessments used to categorize her as "learning disabled" were not providing an accurate picture of her actual reading experience. Although Kliewer and Biklen (2001) revealed that students with severe disabilities are denied access to literacy at school due to perceptions about their abilities, there is not ample research into the impact of the results of computerized reading assessment on students' literacy opportunities. There are several factors converging within this issue: how literacy is defined, how it is assessed, and how disability is not only perceived, but also how it is perpetuated by school policies and practice. While there is substantial research on what constitutes literacy, assessment of reading and writing, and educational disability, there seems to be a lack of research on the topic I am proposing, and I believe it is necessary to investigate due to the ubiquity of computerized tests that provide Lexile Level as one in a host of assessment results. Recent studies, such as Stenner et al.'s (2006) article "How accurate are Lexile text measures?" deal exclusively with the accuracy of Lexile level as a way to measure



readability. The authors contend that “Lexile text measures are an order of magnitude more accurate than those produced by older technologies that rely on text sampling instead of whole-text processing” (p. 320). Teachers, in an attempt to provide evidence-based instruction, could be using measures like Lexile level to categorize students or to help them find appropriate reading materials, possibly with unintended consequences. Perhaps students are internalizing messages about their reading ability based on knowledge of their Lexile level.

### Focus and Scope

In an attempt to better understand how Lexile level is being viewed and used at school, I am examining teacher’s beliefs and attitudes toward Lexile level. Kontovourki (2012) implies that when teachers place value on reading levels, those levels become part of the classroom culture and of students’ reading identity. Therefore, I am interested in finding out what teachers believe about Lexile’s purpose and what kind of value they place on students’ levels. Through the survey, I am hoping to gain a sense of how Lexile level is being used by teachers. I am wondering if students are encouraged to choose books to read during classroom independent reading time that are within their Lexile range. I would also like to know if Lexile levels are shared with students, if rewards or incentives are offered to students if they show growth in Lexile level, and if they are grouped by this measure for literacy activities.

### Relevance and Importance

This research is relevant to the body of literacy research around how literacy is defined, literacy assessment, disability studies in education, and teachers’ beliefs and

attitudes about assessments and reading levels. In addition, there does not seem to be much in the literature about how Lexile level is being used by teachers. Lexile level is routinely provided as part of computerized tests, and it is important to know if it is being used in a way that could result in restricted access to literacy for students. Students need to learn to choose books authentically, based on their identities, not artificially, by numbers imposed on them after taking tests that are divorced from classroom curriculum.

### Questions and Objectives

How do public school teachers view the usefulness of Lexile Level, and do they use this measure to inform their classroom policies and procedures? How is Lexile Level shared with students and parents? How is Lexile Level incentivized in the classroom, if at all?

- Conduct surveys to collect data on public school teachers use of and attitude toward Lexile Level measures of students.
- Examine how teachers' beliefs and attitudes about Lexile Level informs their decisions about access to books and other materials for students.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### A Malleable Measure of Literacy

The way in which an individual or group defines literacy should not restrict the literacy opportunities of which another has access. At the very least, if those with the power to define literacy do so from an inclusive standpoint, then perhaps more individuals will be invited into the circle of a literate life. This is the premise of Keefe and Copeland's (2011) article "What is literacy? The power of a definition." As the authors note, many people may define literacy as reading and writing; however, they claim that those words need defining as well, and furthermore, they ask: what do those terms mean when considering *all* people? Individuals who have "extensive needs for support" (Keefe & Copeland, 2011, p. 92) are routinely denied access to literacy because others have determined that literacy is out of their reach. If literacy is defined more broadly, and from a "narrative of optimism" that assumes that everyone is competent, then the definition of literacy changes (Keefe & Copeland, 2011, p. 92). The authors concede that "literacy exists on a continuum and develops across an individual's lifetime," however, they also disavow the "notion of a literate/nonliterate dichotomy" (Keefe & Copeland, 2011, p. 96). Keefe and Copeland (2011) offer a foundation for defining literacy with their "set of five core definitional principles for literacy" (p. 97). Essentially, the five principles state that everyone is able to be literate; literacy is a right; literacy is transactional and involves a relationship with others; it "includes communication, contact, and the expectation that interaction is possible for all" and can

lead to empowerment, and finally, that every individual in a community is responsible for literacy, which means that everyone is charged with making meaning however possible in an attempt to both send and receive information. The authors conducted a pilot study which aimed to find out how professionals, families, and advocates defined literacy, and how these same individuals perceive the importance of literacy instruction for individuals with extensive needs throughout their lifetimes. Keefe and Copeland (2011) found that while the definitions of literacy varied, traditional notions of literacy, such as the ability of an individual to read and comprehend and to write simply, prevailed (p. 93). They were heartened to find that their respondents believed that literacy instruction should be prioritized. People with extensive needs of support are consistently denied full access to literacy, so the authors hope their work will prompt an optimistic look at what defines literacy, and that this view will come from a place of presumed ability. Since the way in which literacy is defined influences how research is funded, how policies are crafted, and ultimately, how it is taught, it is extremely important that this definition benefits everyone.

Keefe and Copeland reference Kliwer et al., (2004) in their assertion that the “assumption of capability” is vital when determining access to literacy, and it is Kliwer et al., (2006) who plunge into the past where the historical roots of how literacy came to be defined by a narrow, deficit-model began. In their introduction, Kliwer et al. (2006) include the following quote by Prendergast (2002), “the dominant U.S. educational policy was to use whatever means possible, including force of law, to restrict access to literacy for African Americans and to preserve it for Whites” (p. 163). As race has been used to

restrict access to literacy, so has perceived disability status. Kliewer et al. (2006) argue that it is erroneous to assume that the ability to be literate is somehow connected to one's biology, but that literacy becomes unattainable when children are marginalized and denied access to the types of education that the privileged receive. Their article demonstrates how "human devaluation" (Kliewer et al., 2006, p. 165), whether it is in terms of race or disability, leads to lack of literacy opportunities. Using the lives of poet Phillis Wheatley and activist Helen Keller as examples, Kliewer et al., (2006) show that although both women were highly literate individuals, they were forced to prove their abilities in front of a panel of "experts" due to preconceived notions about who could be literate. Wheatley, a Black woman, and Keller, a woman with severe disabilities, were thought to be incapable of producing the written works they authored. The lives of these women are the backdrop to an ethnographic study conducted by the authors, who used a "disability studies and critical interpretivist orientation" (Kliewer et al., 2006, p. 170) to examine the themes that arose when considering the educational experiences of several students with disabilities. All of the students the authors studied were deemed incapable of literacy by experts at school or in clinical settings; however, they all had the ability to engage in highly literate behaviors. Kliewer et al. (2006) show that the "burden of proof regarding the right to literate citizenship generally rests squarely on the shoulders of those at the cultural margins" (p. 184). Through socially accepted and perpetuated definitions of literacy and disability that do not include the viewpoints of marginalized individuals, literacy is being denied to capable people.

### Literacy Assessment – First, Do No Harm

Exclusive definitions of literacy may result in the restriction of literacy opportunities for those of whom do not fit the profile of who may be literate, and this problem is exacerbated when literacy assessments infringe upon a person's identity. For example, if an assessment results in a person being labeled as a "struggling reader," then that person may internalize that notion even though they see themselves differently. In her 1997 article, "Literacy assessment and the politics of identities," Sharon Murphy discusses how literacy assessments impose identities on the individuals being assessed. These identities may not be wanted, and they may conflict with identities already in place. Murphy (1997) argues that standardized tests, under the guise of being tools of meritocracy, unfairly reward students who perform well, and unjustly stigmatize those who do not. She quotes Mercer, by way of Milofsky (1989), as "most of those whom schools identify as handicapped are not so identified outside the school context" (p. 263). Murphy (1997) believes that standardized tests, with their embedded biases, imbue students with the feeling that they are "failures in school," (p. 264), even though "the failure may not be theirs, but rather is contained in the instruments designed to serve them" (p. 264). The author reports the ways in which standardized tests are inequitable. These reasons range from the way in which the tests are scored to the fact that students' general test-taking skills lead to better results. Students are not the only ones impacted by standardized tests. According to Murphy (1997), teachers are affected as well. The identity of the teacher becomes wrapped up in testing as the act of teaching becomes "identified as working with or around the testing tools that control rewards rather than as

engaging children's minds" (p. 270). Murphy (1997) reminds her audience that testing thoroughly impacts identity, and that these tests can set students on a course of "school-based failure" (p. 272), which can be disabling.

For students with disabilities, the stakes are high in terms of making gains, so it stands to reason that concern as to whether or not standardized tests "make a difference in improving how well students write" (Graham et al., 2011, p. 1) is justified. Especially if teachers, as explained by Murphy (1997), are directing much of their instruction towards the aim of improving test scores. This is the question that Graham et al. (2011) explore in their article "Throw 'em out or make 'em better? State and district high-stakes writing assessments." The authors claim that proponents of high-stakes standardized writing tests believe that these measures help students and teachers because they raise expectations and provide a framework for writing instruction. To ascertain whether or not these tests actually beneficial to students, students with disabilities, and teachers, Graham et al. (2011) conducted a review of studies that examined the "relationship between indirect and direct measures of writing performance" (p. 3) and "the reliability of holistic quality measures used to score high-stakes writing tests" (p. 4). Their work showed high-stakes writing assessments are unreliable at best, and indefensible at worst. Graham et al. (2011) liken these tests to "administering a one-item test" (p. 3). Graham et al. (2011) propose reform of current high-stakes tests rather than completely discarding them. These reform measures include: making tests fair by providing training for scorers, assigning multiple writing tasks to students, expanding the range of scores, and increasing accountability for discrepancies in scoring, implementing accommodations for students with disabilities,

making the writing for these high-stakes tests authentic, and reducing the unintended consequences of high-stakes writing assessments (pp. 8-9). The bottom line for Graham et al. (2011) is that these tests must be improved for students, especially for students with disabilities.

Johnston and Costello (2005) would agree with Graham et al. (2011) that literacy assessments must be improved, but they take a more expansive view by outlining a range of literate behaviors that can be assessed by teachers. In their article, "Theory and research into practice: Principles for literacy assessment," Johnston and Costello (2005) explain that literacy is necessary for participating in a democracy, and also that literacy is complex, social, and changing rapidly (p. 257). Given this framework for understanding literacy, Johnston and Costello (2005) argue that skills like resilience need to be assessed because students "will need to be resilient learners to maintain their literate development in the face of the increasingly rapid transformations of literacy in their communities" (p. 257). In addition, the authors claim that assessment is a "social practice that involves noticing, representing, and responding to children's literate behaviors" (Johnston & Costello, 2005, p. 258). This is in contrast to the narrow measures of literacy that are currently assessed in the high-stakes testing to which students are subjected. Johnston and Costello (2005), like Graham et al. (2011), explain the lack of reliability of these types of assessments, and argue that test scores are "representational and interpretive" (p. 261), which means that these scores will carry different meanings among teachers, administrators, and parents. To take this idea further, if a category for reading disabled exists, then measures will be created to place students into that category, and



interventions will be implemented. Students' identities as literate individuals are jeopardized by being caught in this "discursive web" (Johnston & Costello, 2005, p. 261). Johnston and Costello (2005) call for dispersing the power inherent to assessment among all interested parties, which include students and their families because the true goal of literacy assessment should be to "serve literacy learners and society," (p. 265) not to perpetuate high-stakes testing linked to "accountability and retention" (p. 265).

As Johnston and Costello (2005) note, assessment results are open to interpretation. This is a point that Peter Afflerbach (2016) makes in his article "Reading assessment: Looking ahead." Afflerbach (2016) notes, "When we assess, we make inferences about the nature of a student's reading from a sample of reading behavior." Generalizations that are made based on a snapshot of students' engagement with text may not be completely accurate because they are restricted by the types of assessments being used (Afflerbach, 2016, p. 413). Afflerbach (2016) explains that high-stakes tests have negatively and pervasively impacted the ways in which reading is taught and how it is assessed. This is the result of the National Reading Panel's report, which stressed the importance of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension in reading instruction, but failed to include other factors involved in reading proficiency – motivation and self-efficacy (Afflerbach, 2016, p. 414). Afflerbach (2016) argues that these measures, which he terms "affective stances" (p. 418) ought to be assessed not only because they contribute to the ability of students to read effectively, but also because phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension "do not tell the full story of students' reading development and achievement" (p. 417). Afflerbach (2016)

argues that teachers need professional development so that they may take full ownership over assessments that would ideally include “Running Records, informal reading inventories, and detailed questioning routines” (p. 418). According to Afflerbach (2016), students can also take on responsibility for assessment when they are taught that it is an internal process of self-monitoring and not something that is done to them or for them by teachers or test-makers (p. 417).

### Disability and Access to Literacy

Students with disabilities stand to benefit tremendously from teacher ownership over assessment. As Kliewer and Biklen (2001) note in their article “‘School’s not really a place of reading’: A research synthesis of the literate lives of students with severe disabilities,” students who were “diagnosed with moderate to severe cognitive limitations...through relationships with their teachers, have demonstrated symbolic literacy capacities” (p. 2). These are students, who, if assessed in typical ways, would be deemed illiterate. However, if viewed through a more expansive lens, with a more encompassing definition of literacy, then they are indeed capable of literacy. In their article, Kliewer and Biklen (2001) describe qualitative studies they conducted with students with profound intellectual disabilities and their experiences with literacy. A common thread running through the students’ lives was that their parents and caregivers believed in their ability to engage with text even though those in authority did not. For example, the title of the article comes from a quote by the mother of a boy with autism who did not have reading and writing goals in his IEP because professionals thought he was incapable. However, when the boy was at home, he immersed himself in books about

insects and butterflies. The authors show that the “image of a normative ladder to literacy” (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001, p. 2) results in the “common exclusion of people with severe intellectual disabilities from opportunities to engage the written word” (p. 11). Kliewer and Biklen (2001) propose imagining literacy as a web made up of relationships. Disregarding the ladder metaphor allows for students with severe disabilities to forge ahead with their literacy development with the help of teachers who see them in terms of their abilities, and who do not “demand strict adherence to notions of normal performance” (p. 9).

Like Kliewer and Biklen (2001), Stephanie Brewster, author of the article “Insights from a social model of literacy and disability” (2004) is concerned with the lack of access to literacy within the population of individuals who experience disability. Brewster claims that one reason this issue exists is because both literacy and disability are viewed as problems of the individual. Meaning, literacy is seen as a personal accomplishment, and disability is considered an individual obstacle. However, as Brewster (2004), notes if one views both literacy and disability through a social model, then both become the purview of the community. Through interviews with four people who have physical disabilities, Brewster (2004) examines the meaning of reading and writing to them. She found that although all four individuals experienced a limited range of literacy activities, literacy helped all of her interviewees in the development of their social identities (p. 50). Brewster’s (2004) work also supports the idea that affirming early literacy experiences make positive differences as all of the participants reported that

this was the case for them. Through her interviews, Brewster (2004) hopes to show that the social model is a useful way to engage in studies of both literacy and disability.

The social model that Brewster (2004) refers to in her article is the framework that authors Kathleen Collins and Beth Ferri (2016) employ in their article, "Literacy education and disability studies: Reenvisioning struggling students." This framework was used as a way of understanding the needs of two students in Collins's class: one student plagiarized an essay, and the other did not complete it. Collins and Ferri (2016) refer to this social model as "disability studies in education" or DSE (p. 8), and they define it as seeing disability as "not a problem located in particular bodies or brains of individual students," but as a "lack of fit between a particular learner and his or her context" (p. 8). Collins and Ferri (2016) affirm that "teachers who embrace DSE presume competence" (p. 9), and that the problems students encounter with literacy are academic, and not due to disability. In order to help the aforementioned students, Collins and Ferri (2016) had to consider how the context of her class impacted them, and then she had to look at them as competent individuals who could complete the task. Collins and Ferri (2016) emphasize that DSE requires a recognition that "struggle is located in the interaction between learners and features of learning environment, including text genres, patterns of talk, and modes of literate expression" (p. 11). This means that teachers can be empowered to change the learning environment to include more expansive options for students to engage with lessons with the goal of accessibility for all students. According to Collins and Ferri (2016), the purpose of DSE in literacy teaching is to disrupt disabling patterns of assessment and subsequent sorting and exclusion of students.

As Collins and Ferri (2016) illuminate, the DSE framework helps teachers to see their students in a new way and empowers them to change their classrooms to make them accessible for all. Linda Feldmeier White's (2002) article "Learning disability, pedagogies, and public discourse," affirms a similar notion that disability does not originate in the brain or body of individuals. White (2002) states that disability studies also include an acknowledgement of power dynamics in play when a medical model is used to define learning issues. The medical model can "reinforce hierarchical relationships that serve professionals' needs" (p. 712). In addition, this has the effect of taking power away from individuals with disabilities and putting them in a dependent position. In terms of difficulties with reading, White (2002) rejects the idea that problems arise from neurological deficits, rather, readers can become puzzled or discouraged, and these feelings can end up being disabling. To emphasize her point, White (2002) examines the difference between the way spelling is taught to students identified as learning disabled, and students who are not labeled as such. She states that spelling programs for students with learning disabilities are strict, regimented, behaviorist, and based on a battery of assessments. Furthermore, there is no robust research to support the efficacy of such programs. White (2002) claims that if LD specialists looked for research outside of their field, they could find useful and applicable information. For instance, White (2002) mentions a longitudinal study of the development of spelling in children from Kindergarten to sixth grade. This study showed that students who achieved correct spelling did so in a variety of ways and at different times. Students who were considered good spellers commonly recognized that spelling had an order to it that they were capable

of understanding. Those who were deemed poor spellers believed spelling was random, and they judged whether or not words were spelled correctly by production, not by the way they looked. White (2002) claims that research into learning disabilities is popular among those who support “traditional teaching methods” (p. 719). For example, studies showing “phonological deficit as a cause for reading failure in dyslexia are now used as empirical evidence of the universal need for drill and practice in phonics as the basis of all reading instruction” (p. 719). Meaning making from text is ignored because LD researchers claim that it is too taxing for students to decode and comprehend simultaneously, therefore, meaning is put aside until students are able to decode automatically. This is in contrast to studies that surmise that “decoding cannot be separated from comprehension without changing what it means to ‘read’” (p. 720). White (2002) pushes back against commonplace recommendations that students identified as learning disabled should receive only basic skill instruction despite teacher knowledge of the contrary. Accommodations based on perceived “neurological dysfunction” (p. 728), she argues, only divide students and emphasize disability. Ultimately, White’s (2002) point seems to be that research into learning disabilities is hampered by the fact that it fails to look outside itself for research that could provide greater insight into the struggles some students face, and this problem is exacerbated by the demand for empirically-based teaching practice that is often misguided and/or based on erroneous ideas.

In her article “‘Feeling like I’m slow because I’m in this class’: Secondary school contexts and the identification and construction of struggling readers,” Julie E. Learned (2016) demonstrates an outcome of what White (2002) described regarding a “back to

basics” approach for readers who struggle. Learned (2016) completed an ethnographic study of eight ninth graders who were identified as struggling readers and compared them with students who were not labeled as such. Learned (2016) affirms that the label “struggling reader” comes with consequences that negatively impact not only students, but also literacy instruction, which then becomes narrow and skills-based. The author found that the students she observed did not suffer from damaged self-perception because they struggled with reading, but instead, the way in which their reading difficulties were “framed through and across different school contexts” (p. 369) affected them adversely. Learned (2016) provides an example of one student who was enrolled in a remedial English class that utilized Scholastic’s Read 180 program. The student had been using this program at school for four years without any substantive gains in reading assessment scores. Learned (2016) reports that this student claimed that even though she reads at home and sees herself as having a decent vocabulary, she feels “slow because I’m in this class, like I’m special” (p. 369). The student Learned (2016) describes had a much different experience in her math class, where the teacher viewed her as “inherently capable and well intentioned” (p. 370). In this context, the student was able to succeed. In conclusion, Learned (2016) states that “static assessments, which were used for reader identification and progress monitoring, failed to capture this multidimensionality” of students whose identities as readers changed based on the different learning environments they were in throughout the day.

### Leveling Up

Like the students featured in Learned's (2016) article, the children described in Stavroula Kontovourki's (2012) article "Reading leveled books in assessment-saturated classrooms: A close examination of unmarked processes of assessment" have internalized messages about themselves and their identities as readers through classroom practices. Kontovourki (2012) conducted her research in a third grade, public school classroom located in a metropolitan area. The author sought to determine, through observations and interviews, how the use of leveled text impacted the ways in which students perceived themselves as readers. Kontovourki (2012) explained that classroom teachers used running records to determine each student's level and these levels were "expressed in alphabet letters, which reflected the leveling system established through methods and materials across the school" (p. 161). Students were expected to read books at their designated level during independent reading time at school. The author found that both teachers and students adopted these levels as descriptors when discussing reading (p. 161). For example, a classroom teacher described a student as a level J/K, and a student revealed to the author that he was an M/N, which he defined as being "at a good level" (Kontovourki, 2012, p. 162). Kontovourki also discovered that some students rejected these constraints on their reading and chose books from baskets for levels other than their own. This resulted in other students tattling on them and teachers conducting pointed minilessons reminding students of the importance of choosing "just-right books" (p. 165). Kontovourki (2012) concluded that the assessments given to determine reading levels, and the use of leveled readers became a part of the way literacy was not only viewed, but



also performed in the classroom. Students' and teachers' beliefs about reading were shaped by the practices surrounding leveled readers.

Leveled readers are also featured in Gilson et al.'s (2014) article, "An investigation of elementary teachers' use of follow-up questions for students at different reading levels." The authors focused on classroom discourse, and the strategic manner in which teachers ask students questions during classroom discussions. Gilson et al. (2014) focused on Phase 2 of the SEM-R model of questioning, which allows teachers to assess whether or not students are reading books appropriate to their ability (p. 106). In addition, questions in Phase 2 uncover the reasons why students chose the books they are reading and if the students are comprehending what they are reading (p. 121). According to [gifted.uconn.edu](http://gifted.uconn.edu), SEM-R stands for Schoolwide Enrichment Model-Reading, and it was "developed at The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented to provide teachers with a framework for engaging students in differentiated, enriched reading experiences" (Gilson et al., 2014, p. 106). Gilson et al. (2014) stated there is "considerable evidence supporting its connection to student achievement" (p. 104). For this study, the authors examined the questioning behaviors of three teachers at a small, urban elementary school where SEM-R had recently been implemented for Grades 3-5 (p. 108). The teachers involved in the study included one from each of the following grade levels: third, fourth, and fifth, and they all had five or more years of experience. Each teacher then identified three students to participate in the study on the basis of classroom assessment results (Gilson et al., 2014, p. 108). In addition, they were asked to choose "one student struggling or performing below average for their class in reading,

one performing on average...and one performing at a high level or above average...” (Gilson et al., 2014, p. 108). The teachers recorded their individual conferences with students, and the authors transcribed and coded the interactions. Gilson et al.’s (2014) main finding was that “each participating teacher asked students different types of questions accessing both higher- and lower-level thinking regardless of reading level” (p. 115). However, in each classroom, “the reader identified as high or above average was asked the greatest percentage of follow-up questions accessing higher-level thinking, compared with the average and struggling reader” (Gilson et al., 2014, p. 117). Two out of the three teachers were found to increase their “questions accessing higher-level thinking for higher-level students” (p.122). Students’ reading level contributed to the types of questions teachers asked. Gilson et al. state that further research needs to be done to determine how teachers’ intentions influence the types of questions they ask in order to measure the effectiveness of their follow-up questions in differentiating for students.

#### “Science, Generally, Hates Beliefs”

As much as one might hope that science and math, and the data that these disciplines provide are objective, one must acknowledge that, while the data may be unblemished by the dirty lens of the human eye, the human mind does tend to impress its values and beliefs upon research. As evidenced by what Kontovourki (2012) observed in the classroom with leveled readers, both students and teachers adopted beliefs surrounding the use of reading levels and the books offered to students to support their levels. Ultimately, what teachers believe about research, assessments, and data influences how this information is used in their classrooms. This is also evident in the 2019 article

“Literacy teachers’ belief about data use at the bookends of elementary school” published by Barnes et al. The authors executed a multi-case study to determine how teachers’ beliefs about data “function as filters, frames, and/or guides” (p. 512). According to the authors, filters are implicit, therefore, teachers have to make a concentrated effort to uncover their beliefs so that they are aware of how their beliefs direct their attention. On the other hand, frames are explicit, and guides are influential in terms of actions and performance expectations (pp. 512-513). In order to determine how teachers’ beliefs influenced how they viewed assessment data, the researchers collected information from two sets of teachers: one of fifth-grade teachers from New Jersey and one of Kindergarten teachers from Virginia (p. 517). Barnes et al. (2019) found that Kindergarten teachers believed that the purpose of data was to expose students’ deficits, and fifth-grade teachers thought that data should be used to determine students’ “current performance in literacy” (p. 526). Kindergarten teachers were interested in finding out which students were struggling readers. Using data, they identified and grouped students according to the weaknesses they found (p. 527). Fifth grade teachers wanted to know what their students’ skills were, and they used the information they gathered to plan instruction (p. 527). In terms of filters, frames, and guides, teachers’ beliefs about their students and context influenced how assessment data was analyzed (p. 527); beliefs standing in as frames (p. 527) influenced what data teachers viewed as “real,” and beliefs that were guides revealed themselves in teachers’ views of how data should be utilized, which in turn impacted their teaching practices (p. 527).

Barnes et al. (2019) demonstrated that teachers respond to students' assessment data and make instructional decisions based upon their beliefs about that data. What happens when data suggest that some students are outside of the realm of literacy? Teachers' underlying beliefs about what students are capable of and about their own abilities to effectively provide literacy instruction become the driving forces behind their pedagogical decision-making. This is evident in Andrea L. Ruppert's (2017) article, "Without being able to read, what's literacy mean to them?": Situated beliefs about literacy for students with significant disabilities." Ruppert (2017) conducted a study, which consisted of interviews and observations, of eight paraeducators and one special education teacher in a special education classroom in a Midwestern high school. Through the lens of "sacred stories and secret stories" (p. 115), Ruppert (2017) analyzed how the "official messages about reform and initiatives...outside the classroom" (sacred stories) and the "ways teachers actually work within the classroom" (secret stories) influence literacy opportunities for students (p. 115). The concept of "sacred and secret stories" comes from authors Clandinin and Connelly in their 1996 article, "Teachers' professional knowledge landscapes: Teacher stories-stories of teachers-school stories-stories of school." The authors defined "secret stories" as what teachers tell themselves about their practice, or what happens in their classrooms behind closed doors (p. 25). "Sacred stories" are those told about the school itself – its culture, its greater purpose, its contribution to the community at large (p. 26). Clandinin and Connelly (1996) claim that teachers face quandaries regarding their practices because of the tension between sacred and secret stories, and that "conceptualizing a professional knowledge landscape provides

a way to contextualize teachers' personal practical knowledge" (p. 25). Ruppap (2017) found that the teacher in her study "symbolically separated students based on his assumptions about their potential," (p. 121). She also indicated that he "illustrated the expectation that certain students might be denied literacy instruction due to their learning challenges" (p. 121). Overall, many team members revealed to Ruppap (2017) that they could not reconcile what they knew they should be doing in terms of literacy instruction, and what they felt capable of actually executing (p. 123). Ruppap (2017) revealed that beliefs, by way of sacred and secret stories, shaped access to literacy for the students in this classroom.

### Summary

The research summarized in this literature review shows that by changing the notions of what it means to be literate, accepting and validating a broader vision of literacy (Keefe & Copeland, 2011; Kliewer et al., 2006), and by using expansive and nuanced assessments to measure literacy (Afflerbach, 2016; Graham et al., 2011; Johnston & Costello, 2005; Murphy, 1997), a greater number of individuals could be considered literate. In addition, this literature shows that the ways in which disability and reading difficulties are perceived by teachers can hinder access to literacy (Kliewer & Biklen, 2001), but viewing disability through a social model such as DSE (Brewster, 2004; Collins & Ferri, 2016; White, 2002) can be beneficial in terms of literacy development. Finally, both teachers' and students' perceptions about reading ability are influenced by class placements and reading levels (Barnes et al., 2019; Gilson et al., 2014; Kontovourki, 2012; Learned, 2016; Ruppap, 2017). Due to the ways in which these

factors intersect, more research needs to be conducted in order to reveal how teachers' beliefs about assessment data influences students' access to literacy. A survey of teachers' attitudes toward Lexile level may illuminate how this measure is being used, and may reveal underlying patterns not as easily discernible in smaller scale, qualitative research.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### Survey Design

For this thesis, I investigated how public-school teachers use Lexile level measures, and their attitudes toward it. I wanted to know if students' Lexile levels are shared with parents and students. My research aimed to gain greater understanding of the ways in which Lexile level shapes classroom policies and practices regarding access to literacy opportunities. I conducted an Internet-based survey using Google Forms that was distributed via e-mail directly to teachers. Their e-mail addresses were obtained through school district websites. A cross-sectional approach seemed suitable for the type of questions I wanted answered, and for the participants. Since teachers are busy, I wanted to conduct research in a manner that was neither too time consuming nor too intrusive, and an online survey seemed to be the best way to achieve these objectives. In addition, according to Haydn Aarons (2021), surveys are “profoundly useful instruments, crucial for the practical applications of knowledge creation, evaluation, planning, and resource allocation” (p. 3). Furthermore, surveys are a fitting way to “investigate human phenomena, such as emotions and opinions” (Phillips, 2016, p. 1), which was what I hoped to explore as the survey collected data regarding teachers' opinions about Lexile levels and their use.

#### Population and Sample

To gather data, I used an online survey, and sent it to 3<sup>rd</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers at four different school districts located in Porter County, Indiana, and 16 school districts in

Lake County, Indiana. See Appendix A for the survey invitation e-mail, and Appendix B for the survey questions. This was completed in a single stage; I contacted teachers directly through email. I chose teachers from these grade levels because high-stakes testing begins in grade three in Indiana with the IREAD exam. Students are required to pass IREAD before advancing to the next grade level. Every year thereafter, students take the ILEARN test. I considered that pressure to prepare students for these tests might prompt teachers to use more measures like Lexile level to track students' progress. According to Lori Assaf (2006), "The consequences of high-stakes testing are being felt by classroom teachers" because of the focus on ensuring that students pass these tests (p. 158). Lexile level could fulfill a perceived need to closely monitor and numerically quantify reading growth. I targeted school districts in my area out of convenience and because I have some familiarity with them, and they are as follows: Valparaiso Community Schools, Duneland School Corporation, Portage Township Schools, and Union Township Schools. According to census.gov, the racial makeup of Porter County is 91.9% White, 4.4% Black, 10.4% Hispanic, and 1.67% Asian. The total population of the county is 170,389, and the median household income is \$71,152 per year. The school districts in Lake County are: Crown Point Community School Corporation, Gary Community School Corporation, Griffith Public Schools, Hanover Community School Corporation, Lake Central School Corporation, Lake Ridge Schools, Lake Station Community Schools, Merrillville Community Schools, River Forest Community Schools, School City of East Chicago, School City of Hammond, School City of Hobart, School Town of Highland, School Town of Munster, The School City of Whiting, and Tri-Creek



School Corporation. According to census.gov, the racial makeup of Lake County is 71.3 % White, 24.4% Black, 19.6 % Hispanic, and 1.7% Asian. The total population of the county is 485,493, and the median household income is \$56,128. I limited distribution of surveys to public school teachers, and they will be e-mailed in the 2021-2022 school year. I had anticipated that approximately 200 individuals would participate in this study.

### Survey Instrument

Using Google Forms, I designed the survey with Likert scale responses (eight questions), multiple choice questions (three questions), and five short answer questions. The Likert scale-based questions ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and all the questions related to teachers' beliefs about how Lexile levels should be used, interpreted, and shared. Strongly disagree was considered one, disagree was two, neutral was three, agree was four, and strongly agree was five. The multiple-choice questions were related specifically to teachers' individual practices regarding Lexile level. Answer options for this category were "yes, not sure, and no." The short answer questions were meant to gather information about teaching experience, education level, grade level, and school district employment. Surveys should not have taken longer than 10 minutes to complete. This survey was pilot tested with approximately 14 3<sup>rd</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers from the Porter Township School Corporation. The rationale behind this choice was that I was formerly employed by this district, so was convenient, and I was expecting that most, if not all, teachers would respond since they might have remembered me. However, none of the teachers from this district responded at the time I attempted a pilot test. I sent the e-

mails again to these teachers when I e-mailed teachers from the aforementioned school districts, and I gained a few responses, so their data was included with the rest.

Surveys were e-mailed directly to teachers at five school districts (when Porter Township Schools was included) in Porter County, Indiana, and 16 school districts in Lake County, Indiana. Teachers' e-mail addresses were obtained through the district websites. The reason why this group of teachers was being selected was because high-stakes standardized testing begins in grade three in Indiana, and I postulated that teachers might feel greater pressure to employ "evidence-based" practices. As Afflerbach (2016) warns, "We do well to not underestimate the pervasive influence of testing on reading instruction and on all aspects of reading assessment" (p. 414). Participants were given one-week to complete the survey, and then I sent out a reminder e-mail to teachers to prompt those who had not yet responded. I gave an additional week for anyone else who was interested in completing the survey. After getting a poor number of responses, I received permission to extend my survey research to South Bend Community School Corporation, and to Indianapolis Public Schools in Indiana. I chose these two districts because of their large size, and I thought more teachers would respond. I followed the same protocol as I did with the initial districts. Again, I did not obtain many results. I was granted permission to conduct my survey nationwide through social media, and after posting the survey on Facebook, I reached 103 respondents. I had been advised that I needed at least 100 for statistical relevance, so I closed the survey after reaching that number. I offered to enter all participants into a drawing for a \$50 Visa gift card for completing in the survey.

### Study Variables

Two Likert scale responses that were meant to answer the question “How do public school teachers view the usefulness of Lexile Level?” were: “Lexile level is a useful tool in helping students find appropriate books,” and “Lexile level is a reliable way to determine a student’s reading ability.” Responses to those questions were categorized as “Usefulness of Lexile.” Three Likert scale responses and two multiple choice questions were intended to answer the question “Do teachers use Lexile measure to inform classroom/library policies and procedures?” The Likert scale responses connected with that question were: “At school, students should read books within their Lexile range;” “Books in school or classroom libraries should be labeled with Lexile level;” and “Asking students to read books at school within their Lexile range is a good practice.” The multiple-choice questions developed to answer that question were: “Do you label books in your classroom library with Lexile level,” and “Do you require students to stay within their Lexile range when choosing books to read in school?” Responses to these statements and questions were categorized as “Lexile Level and Its Influence on Classroom Practice.” Two Likert scale responses and two multiple-choice questions were directed at the questions “Is Lexile level shared with parents and/or students?” These were as follows: “Students should be informed of their Lexile level;” “Parents should be informed of their child’s Lexile level;” “Do your students know their Lexile level?” and “Are parents provided with information about their child’s Lexile level?” Responses to these statements and questions were categorized as “Sharing of Lexile Level.” One Likert scale response – “Incentives should be given to students who show growth in their Lexile

level over the course of the school year” - was directed at the question “Is Lexile level incentivized at school?” Responses to this statement were categorized as “Incentivization of Lexile Level.” Open-ended questions were intended to gain information about which school district teachers work for, grade level taught, years of teaching experience, and education level.

### Data Analysis Plan

Using jamovi, I computed descriptive statistics for the variables. This included the mean, median, mode, and range, in addition to the standard deviation. For the Likert scale questions, strongly disagree was one, disagree was two, neutral was three, agree was four, and strongly agree was five. I computed a series of single sample T tests to compare the mean response to each Likert question to three, which is the midpoint, or neutral point, of the scale. With each T test, I computed a mean difference, a  $p$  value, an effect size, and confidence intervals around the mean difference and effect size. For the yes/no questions, I computed percentages for each category. Sample size did not permit, so I did not do exploratory analyses to determine if certain groups of teachers provided similar responses. In addition, survey results were interpreted through the lens of critical literacy and disability studies in education.

### Hypothesis

I hypothesized that teachers would agree that Lexile level is a useful measure. Responses that fell under the aforementioned category “Usefulness of Lexile” would demonstrate this. I hypothesized that teachers would agree that Lexile level informs their classroom policies and procedures. Responses in the category “Lexile Level and Its

Influence on Classroom Practice” would confirm this. I hypothesized teachers would agree that parents and students should be informed of their Lexile level. Responses in the category “Sharing of Lexile Level” would indicate this. I hypothesized that Lexile level is incentivized. Responses in the category “Incentivization of Lexile Level” would show this.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

As stated in Chapter Three, a pilot test with teachers from Porter Township School Corporation was conducted. None of the teachers who were e-mailed responded. These teachers were contacted again, but were included along with teachers from public schools in Lake and Porter County, Indiana. All were e-mailed directly to addresses obtained from school websites. Reminder e-mails were sent after one week. Only thirteen teachers responded. Permission was granted by the IRB administrator to extend the survey to teachers employed by South Bend and Indianapolis public schools in Indiana. The same procedure was followed, and results increased to 24. In order to reach the goal of 100 respondents, the survey was posted on Facebook with approval of the IRB administrator. The survey reached 103 respondents after two days.

Using jamovi (<https://www.jamovi.org/>), which is a “free and open statistical platform” that provides analyses for social science research, survey data was analyzed through a series of single sample T tests to compare the mean response to each Likert question to three, which is the midpoint, or neutral point of the scale. Mean difference, *p* values, effect size, and confidence intervals around the mean difference and effect size were determined. Percentages were computed for the yes/no/sometimes questions. See Table 1 for detailed results.

**Table 1***Survey Questions with Data Analysis*

Survey Questions	Mean (SD)	Median (RANGE)	Mode	t p	d [ci]
Lexile level is a useful tool in helping students find appropriate books.	3.55 (1.10)	4 (1-5)	4	t= 5.02 p<.00001	d =.50 [.29, .70]
At school, students should read books within their Lexile range.	3.11 (1.12)	3 (1-5)	4	t=.98 p=.33	d=.10 [-.10, .29]
Books in school or classroom libraries should be labeled with Lexile level.	3.26 (1.10)	3.5 (1-5)	4.0	t=2.43 p=.02	d=.24 [.04, .44]
Students should be informed of their Lexile level.	3.52 (1.11)	4 (1-5)	4	t=4.75 p<.00001	d=.52 [.31, .74]

Parents should be informed of their child's Lexile level.	3.75 (1.03)	4 (1-5)	4	t=7.41 p<.00001	d=.73 [.51, .95]
Incentives should be given to students who show growth in their Lexile level over the course of the school year.	3.18 (1.24)	3 (1-5)	3	t=1.45 p=.15	d=.14 [-.05, .34]
Asking students to read books at school within their Lexile range is a good practice.	3.60 (.99)	4 (1-5)	4	t=6.12 p<.00001	d=.61 [.39-.82]
Lexile level is a reliable way to determine a student's reading ability.	3.19 (.97)	3 (1-5)	3	t=1.94 p=.06	d=.19 [0-.39]



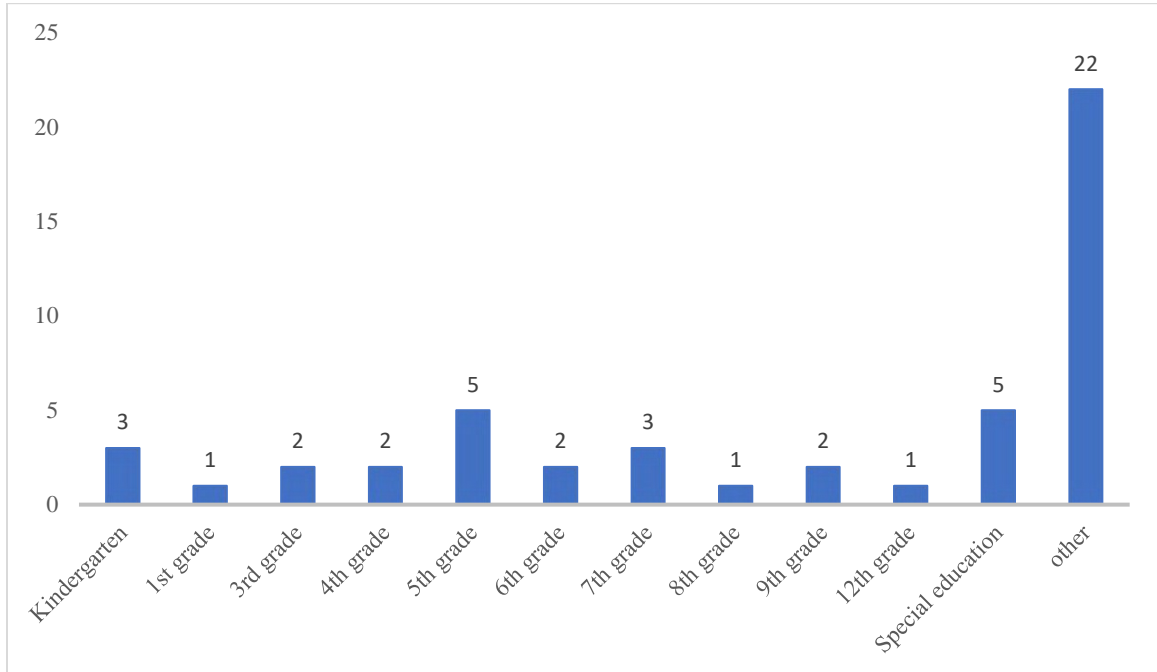
Multiple Choice	Yes	Sometimes	No
Do you label books in your classroom library with Lexile level?	15.15%	21.21%	63.64%
Do you require students to stay within their Lexile range when choosing books to read in school?	8.08%	28.28%	63.64%
Do your students know their Lexile level?	32.65%	18.37%	48.98%
Are parents provided with information about their child's Lexile level?	44.90%	18.37%	36.74%
Do you consult publisher guidelines regarding use of Lexile level?	18.75%	23.96%	57.29%

The results revealed that teachers agreed with the following: Lexile level is a useful tool in helping students find appropriate books ( $p < .00001$ ), books in school or classroom libraries should be labeled with Lexile level ( $p = .02$ ), students should be informed of their Lexile level ( $p < .00001$ ), parents should be informed of their child's Lexile level ( $p < .00001$ ), asking students to read books at school within their Lexile range is a good practice ( $p < .00001$ ). The statement, Lexile level is a reliable way to determine a student's reading ability, had a  $p$  value of .06, which is slightly greater than the  $p$  value of .05 required to indicate statistical significance, so it is unclear whether or not teachers agreed with that statement. Items that did not show statistically significant results were as follows: At school, students should read books within their Lexile range ( $p = .33$ ), and incentives should be given to students who show growth in their Lexile level over the course of a school year ( $p = .15$ ). Since the  $p$  value exceeds .05 for both of these statements, the results indicate that teachers did not agree with either.

Results of the yes/no/sometimes questions were as follows: Teachers (63.64%) are not labeling books in their classroom libraries with Lexile level; teachers (63.64%) are not requiring students to read books within their Lexile range at school; teachers (48.98%) report that their students do not know their Lexile level; teachers (44.90%) provide parents with information about their child's Lexile level, and teachers (57.29%) do not consult with publisher guidelines regarding use of Lexile level. In addition, confidence intervals were wide due to the small sample size.

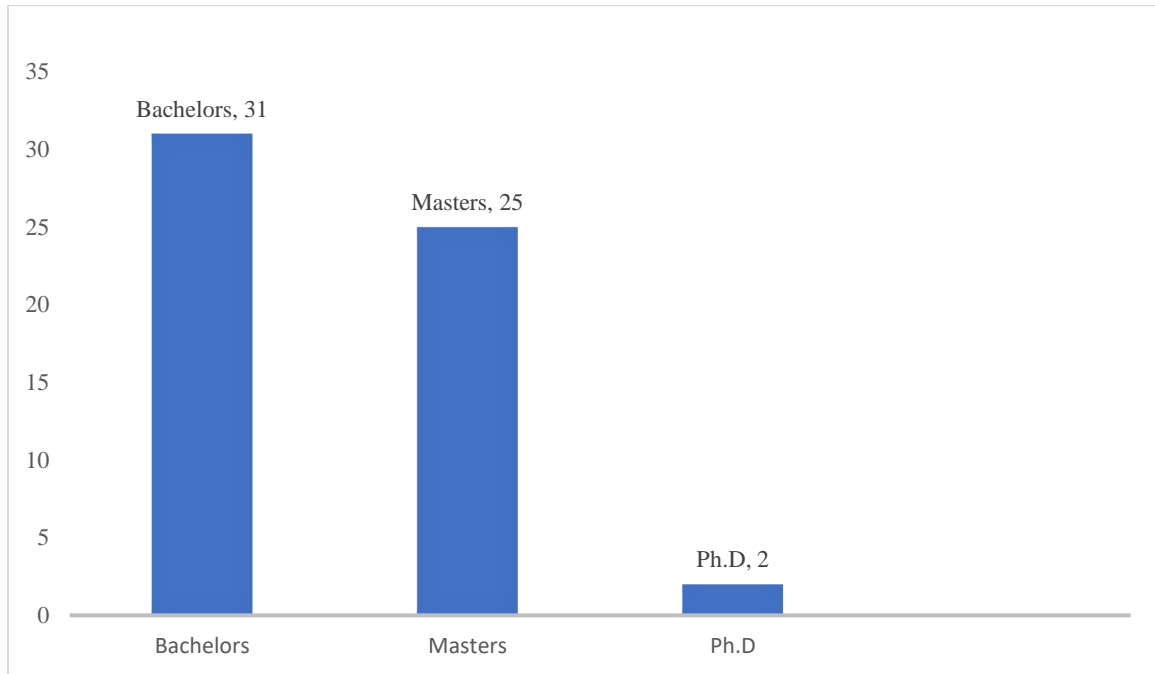
**Figure 1**

*What Grade do you Teach? Respondents by Grade Level*



**Figure 2**

*What is Your Education Level? Respondents*



Note: Data could not be divided by school district because there was not enough in a group.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

Through conducting this survey, my goal was to gain insight into teachers' beliefs about the value of Lexile level, and if their beliefs informed their practice. The results indicate that teachers view Lexile level favorably as evidenced by their views that Lexile level is a useful tool in helping students find books, that books in school or classroom libraries should be labeled with Lexile level, that students and parents should be informed of students' Lexile level, and that asking students to read within their Lexile range at school is a good practice. These results align with my hypothesis that teachers believe that Lexile level is a useful tool in helping students find appropriate books. The results also support my hypothesis that teachers use Lexile level to inform their classroom policies and procedures in that they agree that books in school or classroom libraries should be labeled with Lexile level and that asking students to read books at school within their Lexile range is a good practice. The results did not support my hypothesis that students would receive incentives for showing growth in Lexile level over the course of the school year.

Lexile levels are everywhere. According to [Metametricsinc.com](http://Metametricsinc.com), "More than 35 million students in all 50 U.S. states...receive Lexile measures." In addition, "more than 100 million books, articles and websites have received Lexile measures..." (Metametrics, n.d.). Lexile levels are provided through 65 widely used reading assessments, and currently, 25 states report Lexile level on their high-stakes assessments. Because of Lexile's pervasiveness, and their inclusion in popular assessments, it is easy

to see why teachers view them positively. However, when viewed as a label, Lexile level takes on a different meaning. If teachers value Lexile level, it is reasonable to deduce that students will also assign value to these measures as well. As demonstrated by Kontovourki (2012), teachers' beliefs about reading levels (leveled reader programs) can shape the way students see themselves as readers. The same could be said about Lexile levels. Certain levels could be seen as desirable, while others could be viewed negatively. Moreover, if students and parents are informed of the students' Lexile levels, students are, in some respects, being given a label that they did not seek. Labels can have serious consequences for students in terms of how they see themselves as readers, and more broadly, how they view their academic abilities. According to Mara Sapon-Shevin (1999),

In schools we make many decisions based on the labels we give students. As a result of labels, students have different types of opportunities. Adults and peers respond to students in different ways based on these labels, and this influences how students are socialized and how they form their views of themselves. Labels in schools affect both the opportunities for children and their subsequent performance in class (p. 244).

Sapon-Shevin's remarks about the impact of labeling students raises concerns about the ethics of supplying Lexile level to students and to their parents. Teachers may want to reconsider sharing Lexile level if they take into account the possible ramifications of students knowing this score. At the very least, teachers could make a concerted effort to diminish the significance of the score by choosing not to label books with Lexile level,

and not drawing attention to Lexile level when helping students select books.

Additionally, looking at this issue from a lens of disability studies in education, as outlined by Collins and Ferri (2016), teachers benefit from considering their students as capable learners, and allowing Lexile level to become a de facto label could impede their ability to see their students as competent readers. Lexile level could become a shorthand for reading ability. Metametrics even claims that Lexile measures indicate students' reading ability (Metametrics, n.d.), and that, paired with teachers' favorable view of Lexile, could mean a narrow view of students' literacy proficiency.

Since my survey revealed that teachers believe Lexile is useful in terms of choosing books, they may be suggesting it to their students as a way to make reading choices. However, Lexile level, despite claims made by Metametrics, is not the best way for students to find "just right books." Teachers should encourage their students to find books that align with their interests and their identities rather than Lexile level. Teachers could continue to instruct students in ways of identifying if books are too difficult to read effectively, and help students find similar books that are easier to decode and comprehend. These are more practical and authentic approaches that positively build and support students' reading identities. According to Kathleen Rogers (n.d.), author of the online article "Selecting books for your child: Finding 'just right books,'" students can decide which books to read by following the "five finger rule," which requires them to choose a book that looks interesting to them, read the second page, and count how many words with which they struggle. Rogers states that if there are five words that are problematic, then students should choose another book. Rogers also recommends that

students ask themselves questions such as “Do I understand what I’m reading?” and “When I read aloud, can I read it smoothly?” after reading a few pages to determine if the book is accessible to them. These methods of choosing books allows students to take charge of their reading selections and to monitor their own reading ability by self-assessment. Self-assessment has benefits for readers, as suggested by Afflerbach (2014) who notes, “Self-assessment is a major contributor to reading development, and doing well at self-assessment has significant cognitive and affective benefits” (p. 30). In addition, matching students with books via Lexile level relies on outdated notions of encouraging students to read books at their instructional level. According to Shanahan (2014), “The point shouldn’t be to place students in books easy enough to ensure good reading, but to provide enough scaffolding to allow them to read harder books successfully” (p. 15). Metametrics purports putting students in the reading comprehension “sweet spot,” and the company recommends that “it’s best to choose books within your child’s Lexile range” because “your child will comprehend them better without getting frustrated” (*Find Books that Match Your Measure*, 2022), it is reasonable to assume that Lexile level falls between an independent and an instructional level. The idea that students need to stay within a certain range while reading has been misinterpreted, and as Shanahan (2014) notes, “... there is no credible evidence supporting learning benefits from teaching kids at their levels” (p. 15). If the goal of reading at school is to learn, perhaps it is time to move beyond using leveling systems such as Lexile to pair students with books. Furthermore, perhaps students would be better



served in the long run if they were coached to stick with challenging reading material, rather than to avoid it.

From this research, one cannot conclude that teachers are not already encouraging students to select books based on their unique likes and dislikes. This research also does not provide answers regarding why teachers believe that Lexile level should be shared with parents and students. Since the survey ultimately gained the most responses after being posted on Facebook, the sample included teachers from a wider range of grade levels than what was intended. This made it impossible to notice similarities among teachers of the same grade. I also could not divide data by school district because there were not enough in a group. These are limitations based on the research design and implementation. Despite these limitations, the results are valid because they addressed my research questions and provided valuable insight into how teachers view Lexile level. This research adds to the existing literature about how teachers' beliefs influence their practice. It also casts Lexile in a different light as much of the existing research on Lexile focuses on its accuracy as a readability measure and as a cataloging tool for libraries. This research demonstrates that teachers view Lexile level positively, and that it informs their practice.

Further research is required to establish how parents and students view Lexile level. Do they believe it is an indication of students' reading ability? Are they using Lexile when choosing books to read outside of school? Research delving into teachers' reasons for their beliefs would be helpful as well. Perhaps interviewing teachers from one particular school district would add valuable insight into the data collected by this survey.

Knowing the reasons behind teachers beliefs about Lexile would add another dimension to the data uncovered by this survey. Finally, it would be of interest to know if teachers are using Lexile level for ability-level tracking. For example, do teachers use Lexile level as a criterion for placement in gifted or high ability classes? Or, is Lexile level a measure teachers use to initiate RTI or testing for special education placement?

More specifically, I would like to investigate the uses of Lexile level within third-grade classrooms. Since this is the grade level at which high-stakes testing begins in Indiana, I am interested to see how Lexile might influence literacy practices of teachers of that grade. My plan would include delving into the reasons why teachers place value on Lexile level. Students are also impacted by the ways in which teachers frame literacy, so in taking a close look at third-grade classrooms, I would, with permission, be able to interview children to find out how they interpret Lexile level. Are they placing as much value on it as their teachers? What does it mean to them to have certain scores, or to see Lexile level on the spine labels of books in their library? This future research could be an important addition to the literature in that literacy practices centered around or influenced by Lexile level run contrary to the types of “sacred” messages (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) we promote when we discuss the value of books and reading with children. We certainly do not want students to associate their favorite books with numerical values, but the “secret” story is that in our classrooms, we may be engaging in practices involving Lexile level that do quantify literature in ways that restrict access to literacy.

With the proliferation of educational testing websites that offer Lexile level results as a way of allegedly assessing students’ reading ability, it is easy to see why

teachers would view Lexile favorably. In addition, my survey revealed that, in general, teachers do not consult publishers guidelines regarding recommended use of Lexile level. According to Yen Cabag (n.d.) of TCK Publishing, it is not really recommended to strictly adhere to reading levels, but to use the numbers more like guideposts for reading comfortably. Perhaps the two aforementioned factors could contribute to Lexile level being used as a sort of metonym for literacy achievement. Teachers are under immense pressure to prove that their students are demonstrating quantifiable growth, and Lexile level results might provide the numbers that administrators, parents, and students equate with success or failure. However, when these numbers become labels due to the perception of their value, students can suffer. If, as Shanahan (2014) suggests, reading levels are not useful in terms of learning, then it is difficult to justify using Lexile level to help students find books. Students need to be challenged in order to learn from text. Why should we label books with Lexile, which is a practice the participants in this survey support, if in doing so, we are limiting access to reading material due to erroneous perceptions about the books' readability? If the costs of Lexile level are that teachers end up with one-dimensional views about their students' reading ability, and that the Lexile levels prominently displayed on spine-labels of books become gatekeepers, then we must ask ourselves if we are placing value where it is deserved.

The disability studies in education framework as described by Collins and Ferri (2016) calls teachers to view their students from a standpoint of capability. Imposing unnecessary labels on students, such as Lexile level, diminishes the sense that students are capable of choosing and reading their own books based on their interest and

motivation. Teachers show students that they believe them to be capable when they give students the tools they need to make their own reading choices, and then allow them to do so without inauthentic parameters like Lexile level. Lexile level may accurately quantify the readability of text, but does it really benefit students and their parents to know this level and to make reading choices based upon it? Teachers who participated in this survey believe students and parents should be made aware of this score. However, I argue that by knowing students' Lexile levels, we may be unable to see them as capable readers based on what we believe are "good" and "bad" scores. Furthermore, knowing Lexile level may increase teachers' expectations of students who score "well." As indicated by Gilson et al. (2014), this knowledge could cause teachers to engage in interactions about text that require higher-level thinking with only those students. All students, whether or not they are pegged as "high-achieving," need an opportunity to engage in critical thinking, and they must be seen as capable of participating in meaning conversations about their reading. Again, are teachers ascribing more value to Lexile level than it actually warrants? This research shows that Lexile level is viewed favorably by teachers. Perhaps this favorable view is giving far too much credit to a score that was really only meant to quantify the readability of text. Moreover, this measure is not appropriate for quantifying global literature because readers' background knowledge, or lack thereof, is crucial when engaging with these texts (Short, 2018). As public schools become more diverse, and as we strive to become more inclusive in terms of the literature we study and share in classrooms, it does not make sense to apply Lexile level to books. This measure simply does not meet the demands of multiculturalism, and it runs contrary to our desire

for socially just and equitable learning environments. More questions need to be asked and answered in order to learn if Lexile level is truly a beneficial part of students' literacy development, or if we are placing value on something that is potentially harmful. Assigning Lexile level to students may not be without consequences for teachers, students, and parents alike.

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## APPENDIX A

## SURVEY E-MAIL INVITATION

Hello!

My name is Kristin Schumacher, and I am a graduate student in the Master of Literacy Education program through the University of Northern Iowa. For my thesis, I am investigating what public school teachers believe about Lexile level. This study involves completing an online survey, which should take about 10 minutes. Participation is completely voluntary, and you will have the option to skip questions that you do not wish to answer. The study risks are minimal, although you may feel some discomfort in answering questions about your beliefs regarding Lexile level, and how these beliefs may influence your classroom practices. There will be no compensation for your time, but if you elect to participate in the survey, you can choose to be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Visa gift card. While there will be no direct benefits to you, I believe this study will contribute to literacy researchers understanding of how teachers' beliefs influence their practice.

This survey is confidential. I will not be asking your name, but I will ask some demographic information, such as school district employed by, number of years of experience, and education level. Since the survey is on the Internet, I cannot guarantee that the data will not be intercepted by others, though that seems unlikely. After receiving your survey, I will separate the survey sections and store the demographic information in a different file than the survey responses, and only combine those data during analysis. Individual results will not be shared with anyone. Grouped results will be included in my thesis, and may also be used in articles and presentations. I may also use the data again later in other research studies, and may share the de-identified datasets with other researchers interested in the topic.

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at [schumkaj@uni.edu](mailto:schumkaj@uni.edu). If you have questions about the rights of research participants, contact the UNI IRB Administrator at [lisa.ahern@uni.edu](mailto:lisa.ahern@uni.edu). If you are interested in completing the survey, click "Yes" below. If not, you may simply close your browser.

I know you are busy, and I greatly appreciate the time you would spend completing the survey.

Sincerely,

Kristin Schumacher

APPENDIX B  
SURVEY QUESTIONS

Survey Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Lexile level is a useful tool in helping students find appropriate books.					
At school, students should read books within their Lexile range.					
Books in school or classroom libraries should be labeled with Lexile level.					
Students should be informed of their Lexile level.					
Parents should be informed of their child's Lexile level.					
Incentives should be given to students who show growth in their Lexile level over the course of the school year.					
Asking students to read books at school within their Lexile range is a good practice.					
Lexile level is a reliable way to determine a student's reading ability.					
	<b>Yes</b>		<b>Sometimes</b>		<b>No</b>
Do you label books in your classroom library with Lexile level?					

Do you require students to stay within their Lexile range when choosing books to read in school?					
Do your students know their Lexile level?					
Are parents provided with information about their child's Lexile level?					
Do you consult publisher guidelines regarding use of Lexile level?					

What school district do you work for?

What grade do you teach?

How many years have you been teaching?

What is your education level?

Is there anything else you would like me to know that was not covered by this survey?