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# Engaging Struggling Readers in Literacy at the Elementary Level

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# Engaging Struggling Readers in Literacy at the Elementary Level

by

Cienna Christine Bills

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of The College  
at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Literacy in Education.

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**Abstract**

This case study is an investigation into the different ways we as educators can effectively engage struggling readers in literacy at the elementary level. This study takes place at a rural school district 80 miles South of Rochester, in the Finger Lakes area and was conducted over a ten-week period. This case study offers insight into the relationship between literacy strategies in the classroom and student engagement. It investigates ways in which teachers can create engaging lessons that foster early literacy development while also allowing the students to become engaged in the texts they read.

**Key words:** struggling readers, engagement, reading strategies, traveling book clubs, guided reading groups

### **Introduction**

Sitting down with my nephew one afternoon, I asked him if he wanted to read a book with me. He enthusiastically said, “Yes!” I began reading the book and before I knew it, Evan (pseudonym) had taken over and was reading the book to me. When we finished reading the book, he asked me if we could read another one and gave me ideas of what books he enjoys reading and what we could read the next time we are together. I was amazed how engaged and enthusiastic Evan was about reading with me. It was a complete shock to me when Evan’s father said to me, “I can’t believe you were able to get Evan to read with you.” He went on to say, “Getting Evan to read is like pulling teeth, especially when it comes to reading for homework.” I found out through our continued conversation that Evan had a negative reading experience with his second grade teacher and had shut down ever since when it came to literacy.

Evan’s grades were starting to reflect his disengaged attitude towards reading. When I spent time with Evan the following week and we sat down to read, I asked him to talk to me about his feelings towards reading. Evan shared with me that his teacher had been mean to him when she tried to get him to read. He also told me he was never given the choice of what he could read for school, therefore he shut down and began to think of reading time as torture because he was not interested or engaged in what he was asked to read. This is a clear example of why we as, educators, have to get to know our students on a personal level so we can differentiate instruction to fit the needs of all students. Furthermore, if we give students more choice when it comes to reading materials, they will be more likely to stay engaged in reading.

**Problem Statement**

In today's classrooms, there are more and more students who are becoming disengaged or uninterested in literacy. It is important for teachers to understand what topics students are interested in reading about and using that to create engaging literacy activities that grab the attention of all students. Many elementary students have become disengaged in reading and therefore lack the basic skills that interconnect across the content areas. We as educators need to find a way to engage students in reading while also motivating students to read inside and outside of school.

Taylor's (2012) study demonstrates the following:

In order "to be successful in the content areas, students must have the reading skills necessary to navigate through multiple texts and so many of the students who enter middle school and more specifically high school are failing these required disciplines due to poor reading skills (p. 57).

Many of these struggling students are failing because they enter a content area classroom with deficient reading skills, which then negatively affect their success in content classes. From this evidence, we can gather the importance of educators pursuing more effective strategies to promote student interest in literacy early on. This will lead to improving student reading skills; otherwise they may be affected in other content areas later in their education.

**Rationale**

Taylor (2012) states, "Since reading is a major component of the literacy crisis, it is critical that educators examine the reading process and why so many

students are ‘struggling’ readers” (p. 51). Research suggests that student engagement leads to student success. “Motivation plays a strong mediating role in the reader’s engagement; in turn, engagement is strongly related to reading achievement” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 472). Student learning and how they communicate are impacted by basic literacy skills, which, shows why this topic is important to investigate. We as educators need to engage struggling students in reading as well as motivate them to read both in school and outside of the school environment. In order to better serve our struggling readers, educators need to know what is necessary to motivate their students to become fluent readers.

Researching ways to help struggling elementary readers is important to me because I work with second and third grade students and see them struggling in reading, which can result in frustration. Last school year, I worked in a middle school setting and there were students who had difficulties keeping up in their core subjects because they struggled with basic reading skills such as comprehension, vocabulary and fluency. Without the basic reading skills being mastered, students will continue to struggle in not only reading, but their core subjects as well. I want to be able to help my students become more proficient readers and develop strategies that will help them become independent not only in language arts, but across all subject areas.

### **Purpose**

The aim of this research project is to find ways to engage elementary students in literacy and help them become motivated to read independently both in school and outside of the school environment. I want struggling readers to become more confident in themselves while reading and handling texts, which will hopefully lead



to reading improvement and motivation to read more. According to Fountas and Pinnell (2009) “Emotion and motivation play a vital role in struggling readers’ ability to become deeply engaged in texts” (p.470). The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover strategies that will engage and motivate elementary students who struggle with reading.

### **Research Questions**

With a growing number of struggling readers, I wonder how we as educators can engage struggling readers in literacy at the elementary level? Other questions I address include:

- Why do some students avoid and dislike reading?
- Why do some students struggle with reading?
- How do students feel about the book choices given?

### **Literature Review**

Throughout my research journey, I found several studies that set out to determine student engagement and the effect of parent involvement. I did not however, find many studies researching effective strategies to help engage students who have had a negative experience with literacy. In 2006, Catherine Compton-Lilly conducted a case study that “demonstrates how children’s identities and cultural resources intersect and converge during literacy learning” (para. 1). Through this case study, Compton-Lilly (2006) “illustrates ways students’ identities are constructed and revised in conjunction with literacy learning” (p. 57).

This study is an investigation into the different strategies teachers can use to engage struggling readers and to help them develop an interest in literacy both in the classroom and outside of school. The following segment of this report will be divided into four sections: effective literacy practices, motivation and engagement in literacy, student perspectives on engaging literacy instruction /activities, and what does it mean to be a struggling reader? In the following subsections, I will discuss the current research on each specific topic.

#### **What does it Mean to be a “Struggling Reader?”**

The term “struggling reader” indicates that all students who have misconceptions or are not meeting standards with reading belong to a single group. However, this is not true, as all students learn and read differently. Struggling readers are students who do not comprehend the reading process and have not yet created a reading system that helps them construct meaning. “It is a mistake to talk about *the* struggling reader, because students who experience difficulty in learning are an even

more diverse group than those who do not” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2002, p.44). Fountas and Pinnell (2012) go on to explain that struggling readers require individual or small-group interventions and instruction that is tailored to them in order to help them make gains.

Taylor’s (2012) study found the following:

Since there are so many definitions and varying degrees of ‘the struggling reader,’ it is quite safe to list some agreed upon characteristics of ‘the struggling reader’ which include: is very reluctant to participate in reading activities, has a negative attitude about reading and is usually unwilling to read, often suffers from low self-esteem or confidence level, tried to hide the fact that he/she can’t read, accuracy is missing, and rarely reads with fluency unless selection is memorized (p. 52).

There are students who spend a lot of time and energy in sounding out words without internalizing what the words are actually saying. Some students look at each word or read multiple words without thinking about what they are reading. Other students may be trying to read books that are above their reading level, which often leads to additional struggling and frustration while reading. It is important for both teachers and students to understand that failing and struggling are not the same thing.

According to Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock (2001), after many experiences with failure, some students may begin to believe that they are not capable of success, and give up without even trying. Teachers must continually reinforce the link between effort and achievement with struggling students. An environment where

success is possible and students set reachable goals can have a profound, positive effect on struggling students.

All students learn differently and at different paces, therefore reading is not naturally an easy accomplishment for all children. There are some children who need additional instruction and reading lessons in order to succeed.

### **Effective Literacy Practices to Support Struggling Readers**

Some examples of literacy practices used in schools currently include: book clubs, reading contests, student choice, readers theatre productions, choral reading, partner reading and more. “All are interested in engaging students in active reading and writing events, recognizing that collaborative learning offers opportunities to work within students’ abilities, engage learning, and provide access to literacy materials and events” (Casey, 2009, p. 284). Book clubs can be introduced in second grade and continued beyond high school.

Casey’s (2009) study states the following:

Literature circles, or book clubs, are examples of smaller communities of learning that form within this larger classroom context. As students decode, describe, and react to a shared reading event, their individual identities and experiences shape conversations and the texts being considered while the conversations and texts shape the individual identities and experiences of the participants (p. 286). This shows that creating a comfortable learning environment in the classroom is an important component in the process of engaging students in literacy practices.

Casey (2009) recognizes that in order to “engage students in active reading and writing events, teachers need to offer collaborative learning opportunities to work within students’ abilities, engage learning, and provide access to literacy materials and events” (p. 284). Research in this area offers evidence that students who struggle with literacy will have greater achievement when presented a variety of activities that support reading and writing. “As research predicts, students are engaged because they have the opportunity to make choices about their reading and their participation while sharing responsibility for learning with their peers and their teachers” (Casey, 2007, p. 286).

Taylor (2012) states that educators “have to find ways to stimulate and engage students in their own learning” (p. 56). One way to stimulate and engage students in their learning is by incorporating technology to enhance/support reading skills. This shows that using technology to support reading skills within the curriculum encourages growth in many necessary skills due to its interactive and engaging components.

### **Motivation and Engagement in Literacy**

“Motivation is often linked to interest and when it comes to literacy, motivation is enjoying a book, being excited about an author, or being delighted by new information” (Cambria, J. & Guthrie, J., 2010, p. 16). Students need to learn how to choose books that are of interest to them and that can be read with understanding and fluency. According to Fountas & Pinnell (2002), “if children find learning hard, their emotional responses are set up to lose motivation” (p. 41). In order to motivate struggling readers in today’s schools, Taylor (2012) states, “we have to find ways to

stimulate and engage them in their own learning” (p. 56). “For teachers to better serve struggling readers, they need to be well educated on what is necessary to motivate their students to become fluent readers. Students are then equipped to explore strategies that enhance the development of the strategic content literacy that is needed for success across the content areas” (p. 52).

“Motivation is strongly affected by two variables: whether we expect to be successful at a task, and how much value we place on that success” (Wigfield & Asher, 1984). Unfortunately, educators have to present content to students that is outside of their interest or prior experience. It has been continuously demonstrated that when students are interested in a subject, they are better prepared to make connections to the information being presented to them. The mission for teachers, then, is to choose work that is meaningful and helps students to be self-motivated and engaged.

Casey’s (2008) study found the following:

Research described engaged readers as those who (a) are motivated by the material, (b) use multiple strategies to ensure comprehension, (c) are able to construct new knowledge as a result of the interactions with the text, and (d) draw on social interactions to mediate these literate processes (Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, & Rice, 1996, p. 313).

### **Student Perspectives on Engaging Literacy Instruction & Activities**

In order to gain the attention of students who find reading uninteresting, it is important to take the time to better understand what they are interested in. “One way to motivate students to become interested in reading is to give them choice. “There is

nothing more gratifying than seeing a student who has found the perfect book or has discovered an author she can call her own” (Cambrie, J. & Guthrie, J., 2010, p. 22). In order to better understand what students are interested in reading, teachers can have students complete a Reading Interest Survey.

Through a case study, Compton-Lilly (2009) explains that “privilege, access, and opportunity, related to race, class, and gender, have influenced and continue to influence the experiences and relationships that contribute to the formation of reading identities for students” (Compton-Lilly, 2009, p. 60). This case study is relevant to my inquiry because I also believe that in order to hold student interest in learning, especially in literacy, teachers need to better understand individual students for their identities outside of the school setting. Teachers will then be able to plan individualized instruction to meet the needs of these struggling and disengaged students.

In my study, I tried finding ways to incorporate more interesting reading materials for students that engaged them while also still meeting the state standards. Students come from many diverse backgrounds and often, what they have to share is worth bringing into the classroom. Their identities matter and hold a stronger connection to their literacy learning even more than some educators may know.

### **Summary**

There are several research studies proving that students need to be engaged in literacy, especially struggling readers. On the other hand, I discovered there are not set strategies to use to engage these struggling readers. There is also a lack of research about parent involvement or negative reading experiences playing a role in why there

are an increasing number of students struggling with literacy. I strongly believe it is important that further research be conducted in classrooms around the world to clarify the influence of specific literacy strategies and how they will engage and support struggling readers.

### **Methodology**

This Capstone Project is an in depth analysis of how educators can engage struggling elementary readers both in school and out of the school environment. This is important because more and more students are becoming disengaged or uninterested in reading, which negatively effects their learning. “Reading impacts how students learn, what students learn, how students communicate and show students how to engage in critical thinking activities, all of which are integral to students’ success in school and in life” (Taylor, 2012, p. 57). Reading has gained national attention because of the increasing number of struggling readers in schools today; therefore it is pertinent that educators investigate the reading process and why several students are considered “struggling readers.” Educators need to work to find thought-provoking and appealing strategies to promote students in their own learning, by giving them options and taking into consideration their interests when it comes to literacy.

### **Participants**

The participants were six second and third-grade students from a rural school district. I purposely selected those students because they struggled with reading. The characteristics of my participants were determined through reading interest surveys, interviews, observations, and small group interactions with literacy. I determined



which students were considered “struggling readers” by their level of intervention in RtI. The participants in my study were a mix of Tier II and Tier III students. Tier II students received intervention on a daily basis while Tier III students are seen daily along with 2 additional periods weekly. At my school, I was not only a Teaching Assistant for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, but was also a part of the Response to Intervention team for grades 2 and 3. As an RtI teacher, I worked daily with students who found reading difficult.

In my study, there were two boys and one girl from second-grade, while all three participants from third-grade were boys. The participants’ names (all pseudonyms) were Sonia, Scott, Bryan, Ian, Mike, and Tyler. The selected students for my study were part of the Response to Intervention (RtI) program at Marshall Primary School (pseudonym); therefore they participated in literacy activities with me on a daily basis. Prior to my study, all six students already worked with me on a daily basis or they were involved in the Response to Intervention (RtI) program in school to better assist their literacy skills.

All participants were reading below grade level at the beginning of the school year. During our time together, many of the participants opened up to me and became comfortable reading with me, which lead to gains in their literacy skills. The majority of the participants did not read outside of the school environment, but many became engaged and began reading outside of school by the end of my study.

#### **Participant Characteristics**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Tier II or III</b>
<b>Sonia</b>	White	F	7	2nd	III

<b>Scott</b>	White	M	8	2 <sup>nd</sup>	III
<b>Bryan</b>	White	M	8	2 <sup>nd</sup>	III
<b>Ian</b>	White	M	9	3 <sup>rd</sup>	II
<b>Mike</b>	White	M	9	3 <sup>rd</sup>	II
<b>Tyler</b>	White	M	10	3 <sup>rd</sup>	II

*Figure 1. Characteristics of the Participants. This figure illustrates the participants' race, gender, age, grade level, and tier level for reading.*

### **Setting**

I conducted my research at Marshall Primary School (pseudonym). Marshall Primary School is a small rural school district located 80 miles outside of Rochester in Western, NY. This Primary School had 551 enrolled students; 69% of the students were on free or reduced-price lunches. Approximately 98% of students enrolled were Caucasian, 1% were African American, and the remaining 1% were Native American, Hispanic, Asian American, or other. Marshall Primary has 17% enrolled Students with Disabilities. There were approximately 18 students in each classroom, preschool through Grade 3, with exception of the smaller Special Education classrooms.

The classroom where I conducted my study was very organized and divided into three small sections. Those three sections included guided reading, independent reading and word work. Since there was a reading teacher and two teaching assistants in the room, it was easy for us to split up the students in small groups and rotate them during the class period. During my study, I worked with students in the guided reading and independent reading section of the room. During my time with the students I met one-on-one and in small groups with the selected participants. All

students who participated in my study were already used to the routine of working with me on a daily basis for 15-minutes of literacy instruction. After 15-minutes of literacy instruction with me, the students went over to the word study side of the classroom where they completed writing activities and word work.

I chose to pursue a research project in engaging struggling readers at the elementary level because I worked hands-on with struggling readers in the second and third grade and was very curious about teaching strategies to use in the classroom to engage struggling readers in literacy. As the weeks continued in school, I noticed more students voicing their disinterest towards reading or demonstrating a negative attitude towards reading. With the completion of this research project and experience in the classroom on a daily basis, I hoped to become an expert on effective strategies to use with struggling readers that will result in the increase of students being engaged in literacy as a whole.

### **Research Positionality**

During the data collection period, I was employed as a teaching assistant to a reading teacher at the second and third grade level. Since I was employed by a school district and worked daily with students in small group and one-on-one, I had the opportunity to connect with the students and teachers in order to fulfill the research needed for my case study. I was a graduate student studying Literacy Education (B-12) at the College at Brockport, State University of New York (SUNY). I grew up living in the Finger Lakes area where I currently live and teach.

I was a participant observer and a teacher in my research study on engaging struggling elementary readers. During this research study, I taught students a variety

of reading strategies and skills, while also observing them. Another role I pursued during my research study was as a mentor to the students I worked with. I feel that it is important to get to know each student on a personal and an educational level in order to make connections with them, which leads to a successful teacher-student relationship. If we better understand how a student learns and some of their interests, we are more likely to make connections with our students and make learning more engaging for them. This was something I demonstrated through my research study process.

In high school, I struggled with anxiety, which negatively affected my math grades. I studied every night, completed additional worksheets to practice, and even stayed after school to get help from my teachers. None of this mattered because as soon as a quiz or test was put in front of me, my mind went blank. It was because of these experiences and the anxiety I felt towards math that made me want to become a teacher and help others who struggle in school. Growing up, I loved reading and did so often. My parents both read to me at night and I received books for birthdays and holidays. Although I did not struggle with reading, I know the feeling of trying very hard at something and not being successful. The frustration alone can cause you to want to give up or dislike that subject. I want to help struggling readers overcome their areas of weakness and gain more confidence in themselves as well as develop an interest in reading.

### **Data Collection**

This is a qualitative study carried out over a period of 10 weeks. The methods of data collection I used for my research project are research journals, observations,

anecdotal notes, students' work, student surveys, and semi-structured interviews about book choices and students' reading interests. Through the feedback I received from students, I implemented different teaching strategies as well as different literacy activities to determine if they had a positive impact on student engagement in literacy. The primary purpose of this research study was to determine what teaching strategies and literacy activities are most beneficial to promote student engagement in literacy. The study unfolded over time through several weeks of observations, anecdotal notes, interviews, collecting student work, recording audio and digital sessions and working closely with the struggling readers who were selected as participants in my study.

**Observations.** My observation notes included reflections I had while observing my students. I also looked for student growth in reading over time.

**Interest Survey.** I instructed the students to participate in the first reading interest survey to help me better determine each students' reading preferences. Reading Interest Surveys are a tool that can be used by teachers to connect with each student on a personal level and also to gain insight on how to engage that student in reading. Once the teacher understands each student's level of familiarity with reading and their interests, they will be able to find texts that will engage and motivate that student to read more frequently.

**Interviews.** Throughout my study I conducted interviews with the students selected for this study. These interviews sounded like conversations instead of just 'yes or no' answers after questions were asked. From these interviews I was looking to hear what literacy instruction and activities are most and least beneficial to each student. I asked that each student gave examples and explained their opinions. This

information was beneficial to my study because it determined which strategies are engaging and should be continued and also, which strategies to disregard.

### **Procedures.**

Every week during the study, I continued my regular teaching schedule and procedures to keep all students in the routine. Mondays are our guided reading lessons where I read a book to the students and then we discuss specific elements of the text. Tuesday through Friday are independent reading days, which are designed to promote student independence and reading stamina. During these days I have a set schedule and meet with individual students one at a time to check in on their reading process and make sure they are picking appropriate books they can comprehend. Below are some of the procedures I implemented in this study.

**Book Choice.** Mackey's (2014) study shows that "many who think they are poor readers willingly invest time and interest in reading when they find the right book. Learning to choose is a paramount skill often neglected in schools" (p. 521). A strategy I implemented into my teaching for this research project was the "I PICK" strategy for choosing books for independent reading. This strategy originates from Boushey & Moser's (2006) book: The Daily 5: Fostering Literacy Independence in the Elementary Grades. I previously used this strategy during my student teaching as an undergrad student and the results were great. When students are given choice in what they read, they can learn how to improve their reading skills by knowing how to pick good-fit books. "An independent reader, a reader likely to keep on reading for the pleasure of it, knows how to find something satisfying to read, but this skill is often not taught in schools" (Mackey, 2014, p.521).

According to Boushey & Moser's book, there are five ways in which we can look for a good-fit book. This is done by using the 'I PICK' strategy, which stands for "I – I choose a book, Purpose – Why do I want to read it? For information or for fun?, Interest – Does this book interest me? Comprehend – Am I understanding what I am reading?, and Know – I know most of the words" (Boushey & Moser, 2006). This independent reading strategy gives students choices in the books they can read and also ensures they will be engaged in their reading. Although it is important to allow students choice in what books they read in the classroom, it is dually important for teachers to make sure students know how to pick a "good fit" book for themselves. "No matter what a person's reading preferences, selection proficiency matters. It is a significant life skill. Many people who are perceived -- by teachers, by parents, and often by themselves – as poor or nonreaders are in fact simply poor choosers of reading material, a very different concern" (Mackey, 2014, p.253).

**Traveling Book Club.** Another literacy strategy I implemented in my study was a traveling book club. "Book clubs enable students to learn from the freedoms given, which lead to a deeper understanding of their reading, developing deeper understanding of other people through their conversations, and providing opportunities to safely fail and celebrate success" (Petrich, 2015, p.5). First, I administered a Running Reading Record with each student to determine their fluency, comprehension, accuracy, self-correction rate and miscue percentages, which established an appropriate leveled text for them to begin reading at. I kept records of which level each student began and ended at for the study to determine their progress over time. After introducing the students to the appropriate level book they currently

were reading, they had the opportunity to pick a book out and take it home to read. This traveling book club process showed me which students were choosing to read at home and then bringing their books back to trade them in for new one each week or bi-weekly. The traveling book club was purely based on the motivation of each student to read outside of the school setting and was not mandatory to participate in.

In my study, book clubs were introduced to second and third grade students at the beginning of the year. The students are first given a Running Reading Record, a tool used to discover patterns in student reading behaviors. After determining an appropriate reading level for the students, each is given a book to read on their own or with an adult. The purpose of the book club is to encourage students to become engaged in reading and excelling to the next reading level after completing the current level they are at. This book club activity also promotes parent/guardian involvement in their child's reading outside of school.

Once a student read all of the books at their specific level, they advanced to the next reading level and received a certificate of completion for that previous level. This strategy was used to motivate struggling readers to become engaged in a series of leveled texts over several weeks both in school and at home. The last week of my study, I analyzed the progress each student made in reading through the traveling book club. My hope was that every student would drastically advance to a higher reading level while also becoming more motivated to read on their own.

**Technology.** In order to motivate struggling readers, we as educators need to incorporate technology into the classroom to enhance reading skills, such as a



SMART board. By using the SMART board in the classroom, students are able to work hands-on with technology and participate in reading and writing activities.

Another technology tool to use in the classroom to promote reading engagement is providing e-books on tablets, which several school are currently provided with. E-books are an electronic version of a book that students can read on a tablet, computer or cell phone. E-books can be purchased, downloaded and read within minutes. With the increase in technology and the availability of such electronic devices, e-books are a new and engaging way to promote reading to struggling readers.

### **Trustworthiness**

I conducted a qualitative study and outlined studies conducted by Compton-Lilly, Taylor, Graves, and other well-known researchers to ensure my research design was valid. To enhance the credibility of my research, I triangulated information from different data sources such as surveys, student interviews, and small group conversations and activities. Clark & Creswell (2015) state, “Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence about a finding from different individuals or types of data” (p.364). This study provides in depth descriptions of participants, data, and the research process to ensure that the themes found in a study are credible representations of the participant’s experiences and perspectives.

I worked over an extended period of time with the participants in my study throughout the data collection process. It was imperative that I include participant quotes throughout my study to provide emphasis and realism to my study. Throughout my study, I asked peers and colleagues to critically review my work to

guarantee accuracy of my findings, which is referred to as member checking. I also cited others' work, such as established methods of interviewing and collecting data to support the trustworthiness of my data and research processes.

### **Analysis**

“Qualitative data analysis should be a systematic, rigorous, and thoughtful process that researchers use to uncover detailed descriptions of and larger patterns about the central phenomenon from the collected data” (Clark & Creswell, 2015, p. 355). I used an open coding process for interpreting and analyzing my data. When analyzing my data I did not start with predetermined codes but instead, I read the data and created codes based on my interpretation of the meaning of the data. According to Clark & Creswell (2015), this is often referred to as *open coding* because the researcher is open to the ideas that occur in the data (p. 359). During open coding, the codes can be written in three different ways: standard academic terms, expressed in the researchers own language, or stated in the participant's actual words. My codes were a mix of three versions of open coding phrasing.

The first step I took to analyze and interpret my data was to go through my daily observations, interviews and surveys. Next, I divided the observations, interviews and surveys into appropriate grade levels of the participants, second or third grade. When I went through the surveys the participants took, I found similar themes across both the second and third grade students.

I categorized themes across my surveys, interviews and observations by reading through each result and comparing similarities and differences according to the grade level of the participants. I used two interviews that I created regarding

student interest in reading, engagement while reading, book choice and the participant's view of themselves as readers. The similarities I found in the surveys and interviews were also evident in my daily observations, which occurred over a ten-week time period. The themes I found came directly from my methods of data collection.

### **Findings**

The purpose of my study was to analyze how to engage struggling readers in literacy. I explored how second and third grade students became engaged in literacy through traveling book clubs, interactive guided reading lessons, and giving students more choice. I discovered themes within my findings by observing, using surveys and interviews with each participant. I recognized the participants were all more engaged during small group guided reading lessons, the majority of the participants disliked reading in general, all participants want more choice in picking books to read, and the participation in the traveling book club was not successful in both grade levels.

**Finding One: Guided Reading Lessons Promoted Student Engagement.** I noticed from the first guided reading lesson I conducted with the participants that they were all engaged while I was reading. During guided reading lessons each week the book chosen was read by the teacher, the students popcorn read or we choral read as a group. After reading the book of the week, the students and I had a conversation about the text to determine which students were able to comprehend what was read to them. It was common that later in the week during independent reading, many participants would reread the text from our guided reading lesson earlier in the week. This showed me that they were engaged in reading we had previously covered in

small group at the beginning of the week. Student engagement was measured by the amount of attention, curiosity, interest and passion the students' showed when they were learning or being taught. I measured student engagement by tracking on a daily basis if they were enjoying the book they were reading, laughing/smiling, or reading the whole time during independent reading. If a student looked disengaged, I would often see them flipping through pages, not actually reading, changing books every couple minutes, or looking around the room, not taking advantage of independent reading time. Through this process I noticed the engagement and attentiveness of all students during our guided reading lessons on Mondays.

At the beginning of my study, my findings showed many of the participants struggled to find good-fit books that kept their attention for the whole 15-minutes of independent reading time. After noting these observations, I sat down with these students and asked them what kinds of books they would be interested in reading and that would hold their attention the whole 15- minutes. By taking the time to talk with each of these participants who were struggling to find a good-fit book, I learned more about their personal interests and what I could do to help them become more engaged in literacy.

Scott and Bryan, the two second grade male participants, showed characteristics of a reluctant reader. By definition, a reluctant reader is "anyone who does not show interest in reading" (k12reader.com, 2015). During independent reading time Scott and Bryan rarely used the time to work on improving their reading skills unless a teacher was sitting next to them. During guided reading lessons, both reluctant readers were more engaged and participated in group discussions. I asked

these students to explain their feelings about guided reading lessons in small group versus independent reading. Bryan and Scott both surprisingly identified themselves as “not good readers” and neither felt confident enough to read books independently without frustration and confusion as to what they were reading. “When we sit in small group during reading lessons, I understand what the book is about because you explain hard words I don’t know” said Scott. Bryan said, “I don’t know a lot of words sometimes when I read by myself and then I get confused and don’t want to read my book anymore during independent reading.” These statements show that when readers struggle independently, it can promote a disengagement towards reading. These students would prefer to have an adult or another student to read with them to help them when they are stuck on an unknown word or are unsure of what they are reading.

I also asked the third grade participants to express their feelings towards guided reading lessons versus independent reading. Many of the third graders had similar responses as the second graders, Bryan and Scott. Third grade student, Tyler stated, “I used to not like reading by myself because I didn’t know what to do when I didn’t know a word but now I like reading by myself because I know strategies I can use to understand tricky words in my book.” This tells me that the guided reading lessons helped build Tyler’s confidence as well as his independent reading skills by teaching him several reading strategies to decode unknown words. Another third grade student, Mike expressed his feelings towards guided reading when he said, “I like reading alone now because I found books that I like and can read good.” Mike showed a disinterest in reading at the beginning of the study but now he has become

more engaged because he found a good fit book for him. He currently is reading the *Magic Tree House* books which are part of a series and some days he can't put his book down because he enjoys it.

**Student Observations of Engagement**

Grade Level of Participants	Guided Reading Lesson 01/25	Guided Reading Lesson 02/02	Guided Reading Lesson 02/08	Guided Reading Lesson 02/22	Guided Reading Lesson 03/07
2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade	Engaged	Sort of Engaged	Engaged	Engaged	Engaged
3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	Engaged	Engaged	Engaged	Engaged	Engaged

**Table 2. Student engagement. This figure shows that students were engaged in guided reading lessons.**

**Finding Two: The Majority of Participants Dislike Reading.** After meeting with each participant individually and conducting multiple interest surveys and interviews, it was clear that the majority of the participants disliked reading. When asked why they disliked reading, students responded similarly with: “I don’t like what I am reading,” “I’m not interested in this book,” or “I’m not good at reading so I don’t like it.” After analyzing participants’ survey questions (see *Table 3*) it was evident that the majority of the students did not like reading at the beginning of my study and by the end of the study, their attitudes changed. A common thread between all participants is their lack of confidence in themselves as readers.

I wanted to further determine what was causing the lack of confidence in these students as readers so I continued asking the participants questions. When asked why he felt he was not a good reader, second grader Scott replied, “Sometimes I don’t know the words in the book I’m reading and I can’t figure it out so I get mad and

need help. That makes me not a good reader.” Scott’s perception of what not being a good reader looks like is misled. I explained to him that not knowing all the words in a text and needing help doesn’t make him a bad reader. According to Scharer, Pinnell, Lyons & Fountas (2005), “Children who are experiencing difficulty learning to read commonly become frustrated” (p. 29). Scott along with many of the other participants struggled with reading and became frustrated so they would give up on the task at hand. To help solve this frustration issue, I showed Scott strategies to use while he is reading alone to help him decode tricky or unknown words. During the study, Scott slowly gained confidence in his reading ability especially his independent reading.

Ian, a third grade participant said, “My mom wasn’t very good at school and reading so that’s probably why I’m not good at reading either.” This response really took me by surprise but also showed me that literacy is not a big focus at home for some of the participants. Ian’s statement encouraged me to ask the other participants in my study questions about literacy and the amount of parental involvement in their home. It became clear that many of the participants did not have parent-involvement at home when it came to reading. I believe that the lack of parental involvement in the students’ literacy may have led to the majority of the students having a negative attitude towards reading. Research demonstrates that “the effects of parental involvement have shown a consistent, positive relationship between parents’ engagement in their children’s education and student outcomes” (Reglin, Camron & Losike-Sedimo, 2012, p. 19).

### Student Interview and Survey Questions

Participants	Do you like to read?	Have you gained an interest in reading so far this year?
Sophia	Yes	“Yes, ‘cause I think reading is fun!”
Scott	No	“Not really, I liked it when I first started.”
Bryan	No	“Only a little bit.”
Ian	Yes	“Yes – I used to not read a lot and now I read more and am interested.”
Mike	No	“Yeah because when I started this year I didn’t ever read at home and now I go home and read mystery books.”
Tyler	No	“Yeah, I’m getting better at reading now.”

*Table 3. Student survey and Interview questions. This table illustrates students’ answers to a survey question from the beginning of the study and an interview question asked at the end of the study.*

#### Finding Three: All Participants Want More Choice in What They Read.

Through my study, I found that when given choice in what they could read, the students became hooked on a book that was part of a series. “It is important for texts to be varied and appealing. Use a good mix of fiction and nonfiction texts with students” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2002, p. 112). Fountas and Pinnell (2002) found “Series books can play a special role in supporting all readers, but struggling readers in particular respond to them in very positive ways” (p. 112). This proved to be true in my study as the participants were drawn to series books such as *Henry and Mudge*, *Ready Freddy*, *Frog and Toad*, and *Little Critters*.



Creating an engaging classroom library “begins with understanding the students’ needs, strengths, and interests. That understanding grows as we learn more about the supports and challenges within texts” (Gordano, L., 2011, p. 612-619). The next step is to support independent reading, which involves students selecting books that are appropriate for them to read on their own.

**Student Interview Question & Answers**

<b>What Can Teachers Do to Make Reading More Engaging and Fun for You?</b>
“I wish teachers would give me more books to choose from.”
“I like to pick my own books.”
“I know what books I like.”
“I can’t connect with books my teacher picks.”
“I know what I want to read about.”
“I don’t like a lot of the books we have to read in class.”

**Table 4.** Student interview answers. This table shows the students’ responses to an interview question about making reading more engaging.

The results from the interviews with the participants (See table 4) showed that all participants want more choice in what they read in school. When asked the questions, “What can teachers do to make reading more engaging and fun for you and do you wish you had more choice in books you can read in school?” These responses from the students showed me that many struggling readers have the same ideas when it comes to what teachers can do to help them be more engaged in reading.

I also asked students to name some books they would like to see more of in school as an option for them to read. Some of the fiction books the participants in my

study listed as books they want to read include: *Lego books, Star Wars, Magic Tree House, I Survived, Bad Kitty, Henry and Mudge, Frog and Toad, Little Critter, Ready Freddy, Pete the Cat, Minecraft and The Lion King*. Some non-fiction books the participants enjoyed reading are about animals, dinosaurs, and nature. As you can see, the participants had a wide variety of reading interests. This is something that needs to be noted by classroom teachers so they can provide a more engaging and appropriate library for their students.

**Interview Questions about Book Choice**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Do you want more choice in the books you can read?</b>	<b>Why?</b>
<b>Sophia</b>	Yes	"I like to pick my own books."
<b>Scott</b>	Yes	"I would pick what I want."
<b>Bryan</b>	Yes	"So I get books I know I want."
<b>Ian</b>	Yes	"I want to pick books I know I like to read."
<b>Mike</b>	Yes	"I want to choose books that interest me."
<b>Tyler</b>	Yes	"I would pick books I like."

*Table 5. Interview questions. This figures demonstrates students' answers to an interview question about being given more book choice.*

**Finding Four: The Traveling Book Club was Not Successful Overall.** The participants in grade 2 participated in the traveling book club on a monthly basis. The traveling book club was a reading intervention I used in my study to promote reading engagement and also to track student motivation to read outside of the school setting. The traveling book club was 100% optional for the students to participate in. There

were seven levels (K, K-1, 1, 1-2, 2, 2-3, and 3) that the students could work through. All second grade students began at level K and the third grade students began reading at level 1. There were 57 books total that the students were able to read if they chose to. Each book level contained a specific number of books that the student could read. Once the student completed all of the books at that level, they would receive a certificate of completion and could move on to the next book level.

At the beginning of the study, all students took a book at their specific level and seemed enthusiastic about participating in the traveling book club. This was an option for these students to read books at home with a parent, guardian, or older sibling. After the first month of the traveling book club beginning, I noticed not many students were bringing their books back to change out for another. The students had lost interest in the traveling book club and only participated when they were asked about their progress. The participants in grade 3 only participated during the first month, October and again in December when I checked in with them before winter break from school. In an interview at the end of the study, I asked each student if they would participate more in the traveling book club if they had the option to pick their books. Some of the responses I received were: “No. I didn’t like the books,” and “I like when you choose the books for me.”

I also asked students what I could do to better next year to make the traveling book club more successful. Many students said, “I didn’t have anyone to read with at home” or “I liked picking books that were in the classroom not the traveling books.” I dug a little deeper and asked what the difference was between the traveling books and the books in the classroom? Sonia said, “The books in the classroom are books I like

and the traveling books are harder to read. My parents don't read the other side of the book and it's too hard for me." This is relevant information because now I know to leave the traveling books out for an additional option for the students to read but their interest is in taking out books they are interested in from the classroom. Future traveling book clubs would be more effective if the students could sign out a book they show great interest in.

**Traveling Book Club – Number of Books Read by Students**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>October</b>	<b>November</b>	<b>December</b>	<b>January</b>	<b>February</b>	<b>March</b>
<b>Sonia</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Scott</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Bryan</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Ian</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Mike</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Tyler</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>

*Table 6.* Traveling Book Club results. This table shows that between October 2015 and March 2016, participants did not take advantage of the 57 books available to them through the Traveling Book Club.

**Discussion**

**Conclusions**

During this study, I made several conclusions. After analyzing my data, I found three significant findings from my study. My findings include a) guided reading lessons improved student engagement, b) all participants want more book choice, and c) the Traveling Book Club was unsuccessful.

**Guided Reading Lessons Improved Student Engagement.** Student interest was at an all-time high during guided reading lessons, which led to ongoing student engagement every week. The guided reading lessons conducted in this study were created to promote student engagement in active reading. Casey's (2008) study shows that "collaborative learning offers opportunities to work within students' abilities, engage learning, and provide access to literacy materials and events" (p. 284). "As students decode, describe, and react to a shared reading event, their individual identities and experiences shape conversations and the texts shape the individual identities and experiences of the participants" (Casey, 2008, p. 286). Research shows that students are engaged when given the opportunity to make choices about their reading and students are more likely to participate in reading experiences shared with their peers and teachers (Casey, 2008, p. 286).

**Participants Want More Book Choice.** At the beginning of the study, 67% of the participants disliked reading because they were unable to relate to the books. This shows that reading engagement during independent reading was affected by lack of book choice. By giving students more book choice, they are able to pick books of their interest. In today's world, a wide variety of books are available through technology such as electronic books (e-books), which are gaining popularity for personal reading. "Options for access to a large selection of book titles and 'anytime/anywhere' reading choices have added to the increased use of e-books" (Brown, 2011, p. 1). "Reading engagement is an important component of a child's ultimate literacy development. "Based on earlier research, it is known that the materials that parents decide to keep in their home or the material that teachers select

for the classroom are crucial in shaping the literacy development of children” (Jones, T. & Brown, C., 2011, p.1-19).

**Traveling Book Clubs was Unsuccessful.** Students were not interested in participating in the Traveling Book Club because the books were not of interest to them. Parents were encouraged to read and discuss the books from the traveling book club with their children, while also helping the children relate the books to regular life outside of school. Results from the traveling book club in this study showed that more parent involvement would have influenced student participation. The lack of parent involvement in the traveling book club resulted in very little student interest and participation. At the end of the study students were asked a series of questions pertaining to the traveling book club and what needed to be changed to promote student interest. Several students responded that they did not like the books that were in the traveling book club and still would not participate if they were able to choose their own books.

### **Implications**

During this study, I developed several implications that may benefit the participants in my study as well as struggling readers in the future. These implications may improve student engagement and interest in literacy. It would be pertinent for teachers working with struggling readers to create engaging guided reading lessons, give students more book choice, and allow students the choice to participate in traveling book clubs.

**Engaging Reading Lessons.** Guided reading and interactive read aloud lessons are beneficial in small group settings. Scharer, Pinnell, Lyons & Fountas

(2005) believe that “Interactive read-aloud is an efficient way for students to expand their vocabulary and concepts and share and understand texts” (p.25). Through interactive read-alouds, teachers provide meaningful and enjoyable experiences for students, engage readers through thoughtful discussion, model and provide support for fluent reading (Scharer, Pinnell, Lyons & Fountas, 2005, p.26). Interactive read-alouds are also known for articulating thinking through discussion, which extends students’ understanding and also sets a clear expectation that reading is about making meaning.

**Student Choice.** Students need to be given more book choice to promote engagement in literacy. “Without interesting and engaging texts, reading instruction is joyless. We need texts that captivate students even at the beginning levels” (Scharer, Pinnell, Lyons & Fountas, 2005, p.28). This is an example of why it is important for teachers both choose engaging books that will be of interest to students and also allow the students to pick books for the classroom. Fountas & Pinnell (2002) state, “Finding the right books alone will not be sufficient to help struggling readers; however, once we achieve this goal, we need to create a setting within which we can do powerful teaching” (p.89). This is true in that many struggling readers need more than just more book choice. The first step in helping struggling readers is to match the text to their ability to read. Once students have been matched with appropriate texts to use as tools, it is pertinent that teachers create a classroom setting that promotes success for teaching and learning.

**Book Clubs.** It is common in book clubs to be structured around the learners having very little control. The emphasis in a book club is on reading and is set by the

teacher with little flexibility. In contrast, the traveling book club I introduced in my study allowed the students to decide for themselves if they wanted to participate, which gave the students control within their reading and learning. The traveling book club in this study was intended to promote student motivation outside of school as well as parent/guardian involvement. According to Petrich (2015), "Discussion of books and articles with others deepens students' understanding, and helps keep them accountable in how they are thinking with the text prior to their conversations with others" (p. 5). Since this study did not take place in small group in the school setting, the results did not match other studies. This study shows that not all traveling book clubs are successful when depending on parent involvement.

### **Limitations**

Over the 10 weeks of my study, I observed, worked with and collected data on six participants. The data I collected was limited due to the small amount of participants and the restricted time I had with each student. There were several days that my observations, interviews and teaching were interfered with due to holidays, assemblies, fieldtrips and other school events.

Another limitation I had was working with and collecting data from students who were not in the Response to Intervention program. The study may have shown different results if I was able to work with students who were not part of the Response to Intervention program.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

After completing this study, I have three suggestions for future research on how to engage struggling readers. Future researchers should collect data by observing



a larger number of participants, selecting students who are not receiving Response to Intervention services and lastly, it would be beneficial to look into the impact of parental involvement in literacy on student engagement.

### **Closing**

“Our goal as teachers is to observe what readers can do, can almost do, and cannot yet do so that we can help them build systems that resemble the systems of effective, flexible proficient readers” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2002, p. 60). This study is significant because it focuses on how educators can improve struggling readers’ attitude towards reading. This information can be used to work with future struggling readers or students who show a negative attitude towards literacy. My work can also lend support to other future research.

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