Making Their Voices Count: Using Students' Perspectives to Inform Literacy Instruction for Striving Middle Grade Readers with Academic Difficulties

Carolyn Groff
Monmouth University

Recommended Citation

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
**Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic**

MAKING THEIR VOICES COUNT: USING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES TO INFORM LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR STRIVING MIDDLE GRADE READERS WITH ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES

Dr. Carolyn Groff

──────── **Abstract** ────────

The consequences of lack of reading and poor reading skills are problematic for all students, regardless of background; however, for middle grade striving readers with academic difficulties these problems can lead to lower self-efficacy and motivation to engage in literacy tasks. Using the perspectives of urban, middle grade special education students, this article seeks to demonstrate how teachers can use student interview feedback to differentiate instruction by aligning their voices with appropriate practices. Consistent with previous research, (Roe, 2009; Smith &Wilhelm, 2002), the data show that supportive contexts increase self-efficacy and interest in reading. These perspectives have the potential to provide teachers with better insight about the needs of striving middle grade readers and inform their instructional strategies and materials.

Introduction

"Once you get into that book [Bridge to Terabithia], you can sink your teeth inside and not let go until you read the whole thing!" These words, spoken by an eighth grade struggling reader, Jay, are what every language arts teacher would love to hear from their students on a daily basis. Unfortunately, many of our middle grade striving readers do not feel this way about books. This is due, in part, to the contribution their reading difficulties make to a lack of motivation and low self-efficacy. Further, as Alvermann (2005) points out, the reading problems these learners face became increasingly difficult to ameliorate as they progress through school. In practice, this can lead to further decreases in their desire to engage with text and can result in their falling further behind their peers (Alvermann, 2005; Stanovich, 1986). Moreover, teachers of struggling middle grade readers find themselves becoming frustrated in their attempts to meet the needs of these readers (Ash, 2002).

Student Perspectives

However, as a new teacher, I never thought to formally ask my striving middle grade readers with academic difficulties about their experiences with reading instruction in an effort to use student feedback for the purposes of differentiating their instruction. Research suggests that talking to students can help educators improve their instructional programs and affect student achievement (Roe, 2009; Serafini, 2010). For example, Pachtman and Wilson (2006) argue that student voices are rarely used when evaluating instructional programs: "Much has been written about best practices in the classroom. However, the people directly affected by such practices are rarely consulted" (p. 680). They suggest that educators increase the significance of student opinions in the decision- making process that affects instructional practices. Similarly, Oldfather (1995) suggests that talking to students can help educators find ways to increase student engagement:

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

Despite the recognition that students' voices can make an important contribution to our understandings of literacy practices, however, only a small amount of research has addressed the problems of striving readers from their own perspectives (e.g., McCray, Vaughn & Neal, 2001).

This small volume of research using students' perspectives, such as the work of Wray and Medwell (2005) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002), has suggested that students' feelings about literacy tasks are not always what adults perceive them to be. For example, in the U.K., Wray and Medwell (2005) found that the perspectives students had about literacy instruction in schools can confirm or disconfirm widely held beliefs by teachers about students' participation, enjoyment and achievement in literacy. Similarly, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) used interviews with adolescent boys to suggest that engagement with literacy tasks is increased when factors such as challenge, social interaction, immediate feedback and feelings of competence are created within specific contexts. Roe (2009) found that using students' voices supported a richer understanding of the practice of differentiation in middle grade literacy instruction. Often teachers choose practices, such as round-robin reading (e.g., Kuhn, 2009; Ash & Kuhn, 2006) that they think may be advantageous to striving readers, when, in reality, those practices can be detrimental to a student's reading achievement and motivation.

In order to identify a place for research on student perspectives on literacy instruction, it is useful to review how student perspectives have been incorporated into assessments designed to evaluate students' affective factors (McKenna & Dougherty- Stahl, 2009). One approach to assessing students' feelings about reading is to administer interest inventories; these focus on students' liking of certain topics, characters and even surface features of texts, such as book covers or titles (McKenna & Dougherty-Stahl, 2009). A different approach assesses students' general positive or negative attitudes toward reading (e.g. McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995); yet another evaluates how students perceive themselves as readers (Henk & Melnick, 1995). While these assessments, as well as the corresponding research, have been helpful in guiding teachers toward appropriate text selection or instructional design, I would argue a broader framework that incorporates the concepts from these assessments would allow us to better see a greater array of the elements that play a role in a reader's relationship with reading. The framework proposed in this article suggests that student feedback from open-ended interview questions should be examined through the lens of perceived self- efficacy and the related constructs of context and interest in order to create a richer portrait of our striving middle grade readers.

Student efficacy

Self-efficacy plays a key role in a reader's belief that he or she can successfully read a text in the first place. The notion of perceived self-efficacy is central to reading and relates to the previous two dimensions, interest and context. Bandura (1993), a pioneer in the research on self-efficacy, argues that perceived self-efficacy plays a critical role in a person's motivation to engage in a task. Bandura (1993) suggests that high levels of self-efficacy contribute to the amount of effort one exerts during a task. He also suggests that a person with positive self-efficacy beliefs spends longer amounts of time undertaking a task and "is persistent in the face of failure when he or she fails to accomplish a goal on the first attempt" (Bandura, 1993, p. 131).

Context

Further, it is important to understand that self-efficacy is context specific. Context begs the following question: What are the features of the space that engage or disengage readers in reading? A great deal of literacy research has been devoted to creating an appropriate physical environment that will engage students in literacy tasks. However, context characteristics are not only physical, but also include the abstract constructs of the space. In fact, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) consider the abstract contextual features of space crucial to literacy engagement. For example, Smith and Wilhelm found that multiple contextual features contributed to adolescent boy's engagement with literacy tasks, including opportunities for being social, being challenged, having control over one's learning, getting feedback and experiencing change in routines. In other words, self-efficacy cannot be divorced from contextual features, such as the opportunity for challenge. As Smith and Wilhelm suggest (2004):

> The young men in our study wanted to be challenged, but they wanted to be challenged in contexts in which they felt confident of improvement, if not success. If the challenge seemed too great, they tended to avoid it, instead returning to a domain in which they felt more competent (p. 37).

And context may be especially important in relation to students who are struggling with their reading. While the cause and nature of reading difficulties are often difficult to assess (Spear-Swerling, 2004), many researchers believe they are the result of several factors, including school instruction (Wixson & Lipson, 1996). Unfortunately, it is often the case that students with reading difficulties are placed

in classrooms in which the reading instruction differs from that of their more able peers (Johnston & Allington, 1996).

Interest

A related construct to self-efficacy is that of interest. According to Bandura (1993), people with high levels of perceived self-efficacy are more likely to develop interest and engage in tasks; like self-efficacy, interest plays a critical role in students' academic motivation and achievement (Hidi, 2001). With regard to reading, McKenna and K.A.D. Stahl (2009) state, "An interest area is really an attitude toward reading about a particular topic" (p. 205). However, other factors, can contribute to the interest in reading about particular topics. These factors include "aspects of the learning environment, such as task presentations, and teaching materials, as well as by variations in individuals' self-regulation" (Hidi, 2001, p. 197).

For teachers of striving readers, interest is extremely important. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) in their study of adolescent boys and literacy suggest that the individual interests of boys played key roles in these boys' literacy engagement. The authors also show how certain types of texts were more engaging for the boys than were others and note that teachers can learn to utilize both types of interests in order to lure disengaged students to reading.

A review of the research indicates that perceived self-efficacy, context and interest are rarely put in dialogue in research that uses the voices of the readers themselves. While the literature on contexts and literacy is rich with ethnographic data

(e.g. Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), less research exists that examines the three concepts using qualitative data. By talking to striving readers, we can learn more about how these dimensions combine, or act alone, to engage, or more often disengage, such readers with texts. Further, by giving these readers a voice, we are better able to meet their needs through differentiated instruction that increases both their success and motivation in the literacy classroom (Roe, 2009).

Our striving middle grade readers can find a voice in open-ended interview protocols that assess various aspects of students' home and school literacy practices, views on reading instruction, and more recently, their preferences for the new literacies involved in the use of technological tools. However, for teachers already overwhelmed by the amounts of quantitative data gathered on students' performance, it can be difficult to determine what should be done with these atypical kinds of data. This leads to the central question that will be examined in

this article: How can teachers acknowledge and incorporate striving middle grade students' perspectives on self-efficacy, interests, and instructional contexts when designing literacy instructional practices? While some interest and attitude inventories can be quantified, this article suggests that, in addition to those inventory scores, student interview data be collected and aligned with an established best practice framework in order that students' perspectives on self-efficacy, interests, and instructional needs be taken into consideration during instructional planning.

The Study: Voices of Four Middle Grade Readers

Setting and Participants

The voices used to illustrate the alignment of interview data with middle grade instructional practices are those of four young men: Jay, Andre, Rasheem (grade 8), Robert (grade 7) and one young woman, Kaya (grade 7) in an urban K-8 school in central New Jersey (all names are pseudonyms). The school's population is entirely Latino/a, African-American and Asian. All of the five students were classified on their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) as specific learning disabled and received language arts-literacy instruction in special education resource or self-contained classrooms.

Data Collection and Instruments

Each student was interviewed three times throughout the school year. The three interview guides were based on previously developed reading interviews (e.g. Burke, 1987; Ewoldt, 1986; McCray, Vaughn & Neal, 2001; Johnson, 2005; McKenna, Kear & Ellsworth, 1995; Miller & Yochum, 1991) and relevant constructs in the literature that relate to students' self-perceived competence (Bandura, 1993; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; 2004) and feelings about interest and context (Hidi, 2001; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; 2004) during literacy instruction. The interview guides consisted of sets of open-ended questions that provided the students with the opportunity to elaborate or initiate new topics. They were asked about various aspects of reading, including their experiences reading at school and at home, their reading improvement, favorite reading materials, and reading skills. These topics often led to discussions about their teachers' instruction during class.

Data Analysis

These qualitative data were coded through microanalysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, the interviews were parsed into segments by analyzing the transcript

for topic shifts. A segment was formed through two ways. First, a new episode happens when the author, as the interviewer, shifted the conversation by asking a major question not related to the last answer given by the student. Alternatively, although less frequently, a student would change the direction of the conversation by making an unexpected comment. Next in the data analysis process, the episodes were labeled using the three a priori categories (self-efficacy, interest, context) while remaining open to the possibility of new categories. Within each episode labeled by a major category, the words of the participants were used to label the data. Those labels were then collapsed into categories and became sub-categories within the major a priori category already ascribed to that episode. This process occurred in all cases, with one exception. When using the participant's words, it was revealed that students would use words that indicated the passage of time or the expenditure of significant amounts of time, especially when talking about their favorite activities. Phrases and terms such as "practice a lot", "every day", " the whole night", "a few hours" within the context of these episodes indicated that time, rather than one of the other categories, was of utmost important to these students. Therefore, time was not included as a contextual feature because it interacted with self- efficacy and interests in the readers, therefore complicating the three categories.

Results

The learners in this study talked about reading in very different ways because they were all at different places in their literacy acquisitions; however, one common feature is their focus on ways that teachers could help them improve their reading by choosing practices that create supportive environments, boost their self-efficacy, and support their interests. Roe (2009) also found through interviews that middle grade students emphasized ways teachers can assist them in their literacy tasks.

Robert's story

Robert who, in his words, was "twelve years old and can't read" related the following narrative to me each time I spoke with him.

> Like when that other teacher was teachin' us, and I was try to sound out the words, and every time I try to sound out the words, she'd be sayin' it to me, and I be keep on saying can you let, can you please let me try it by myself, and she wouldn't listen to me. Which made me mad. And then I didn't want to read no more,

she's just going keep on telling me, without giving me a chance to say I need help, can you help me? I didn't even say that. She just gonna blurt out the words.

Robert, who already "hated" reading, was resentful of the assistance the teacher was trying to give him. From the Vygotskian perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), assistance from another person or tool is critical when one is performing or learning a task. Vygotsky suggests that processes involved in learning are realized because of the dialogic interaction that occurs when a person is being assisted by another; in fact, without that interaction, learning is hindered because the exchange of ideas is not able to take place. However, not all types of assistance are equivalent, and what teachers perceive to be scaffolding is not always welcome. How the assistance is provided and the circumstances in which it occurs are essential components of reading instruction. While the teacher discussed above might have been well-intended in giving Robert each word, when he was denied the opportunity to attempt to identify a word before asking for assistance, he lost his sense of control over his reading. Robert's lack of reading skills, coupled with the instruction he was receiving, completely diminished his enthusiasm for reading:

> R: *I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.*
> Author: *Okay, so you told me you don't like reading.*
> R: *I just hate it.*
> Author: *Why do you feel that way about reading?*
> R: *Because I can't do it. And when I tried to sound out the words my head starts hurting, and I don't like it.*

Robert communicated his feelings of frustration throughout the interview with statements like, "*I get frustrated when I try to read a book and I don't know the words*" and "*sometimes I get so mad because I'm twelve years old and I can't read*". While Robert had a low sense of self-efficacy about being to read, he told me that he still enjoyed another of aspect of literacy: writing his own action books with his own words and pictures. In Robert's case, a context that gave him control and choice over his literacy tasks allowed him to work on his own level by writing books with words he knows and on topics in which he is interested.

Andre's story

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

Andre: *Language arts is better than last year.*

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

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

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

Andre: *She's a nice teacher.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Andre's teacher provided him with the assistance that he needed to maintain control over his reading. Rather than telling him the answers, she made Andre accountable for his knowledge by breaking the text into smaller units and through the use of questions for understanding. Andre's story resonates with the Vygotskian perspective which argues that students must receive assistance through social mediation in order for learning to take place. While providing students with the opportunity to establish control over the situation, Andre's teacher made him articulate the ideas in the text and prompted his understanding through the use of questions. The difference between Robert's and Andre's accounts of teacher assistance is striking and shows that the type of scaffolding a teacher chooses is a powerful factor in the way students view their competence in reading. Similarly, Roe (2009), in her study of middle grade readers' perceptions of differentiation, states, "These students recognize and appreciate the assistance that their teachers

offer and the different paths that the assistance often takes to make their success probable" (16). Student competence is complicated by the practices teachers use when assisting their students.

Kaya's story

Kaya is very aware of her literacy practices, both in and out of school. She makes it very clear in one short interview that she requires a context in which she has control over her reading, and does not want her self-efficacy compromised:

Author: *Do you like reading out loud?*
K: *No.*
Author: *How come?*
K: *Cause I read better when I read by myself.*
Author: *How come?*
K: *'Cause I get nervous when I read out loud, cause I think when I mess up on a word, I think students are going to laugh at me.*
(In a later episode)
Author: *So what kind of reading are you better at? The reading you do outside of school or the reading in school?*
K: *Outside, because when I'm inside, I have to read out loud.*
Author: *So when you're in school you have to read out loud.*
K: *Yes, and when I'm home, I can read to myself.*

Kaya not only relishes control over her reading processes, but when she reads as well. She was upset that her teacher tells her when to read rather than giving her the freedom to choose when to read. Yet, despite the fact that she had little control over when and how she read in class, Kaya still enjoyed one of the class novels immensely.

Author: *So let's talk about the reading you've been doing in class. So you read Tears of Tiger. What did you think?*
K: *It's good. I like that book*
Author: *How come?*
K: *Because it's talking about, its effect on how we are today, on how teenage kids act today, and how they go through different kinds of experience in their life.*
Author: *So of all the books you just named which one did you like the best?*
K: *Tears of a Tiger.*
Author: *How come you like it more than the other books?*

K: *I just love that story.*
Author: *How come?*
K: *Because it's nice, it's a nice story.*
Author: *But it's sad at the end!*
K: *Yes, it is sad, but it has poems in it, and it talks the way we talk today.*

Overall, Kaya is a student who relishes her independence and the freedom to control her reading. Kaya is eager to learn and wants to get better at her reading; however, she cannot do that unless she is guaranteed an environment that offers her choices and risk-taking free of embarrassment.

Rasheem's story

Rasheem is a captain of the school's basketball team. His interest in playing basketball transferred over to his reading and was reluctant to talk in our interview about reading unless we were discussing reading about basketball or sports. In fact, in a few consecutive conversation episodes, he wanted to ensure I understood that he wanted to read about sports:

Author: *Okay. You don't like reading by yourself. How come?*
R: *I get tired after a while.*
Author: *You get tired after a while.*
R: *If I'm reading sports, I'll read it to myself.*
Author: *Okay, so wait, if you're reading sports you read it to yourself and do you get tired after a while of reading it?*
R: *No.*
Author: *How come? Why is that?*
R: *Cause it's players that are in the NBA, everybody's famous in the NBA, the players in the NBA are in the book.*

Rasheem's interest in basketball contributed to the amount of time he spends reading about basketball, which, in turn, contributed to a sense of competence in reading about this material:

Author: *So when you're at home do you still pick up a book and read it?*
R: *No. I go on the computer and read about basketball.*
Author: *So where would you read about basketball?*
R: *The Lakers and some other teams.*
Author: *So there are team sites? Or is it like ESPN?*
R: *Teams.*

Author: *Is that reading hard or easy?*
R: *It's easy.*
Author: *How come?*
R: *I like it. I like some of the teams. I mostly read about the Lakers.*
Author: *So is that kind of reading fun?*
R: *Yeah.*
Author: *Would you say that you are good at it?*
R: *Yeah.*
Author: *How do you know you're good at it?*
R: *Cause I always read it.*
Author: *How often do you read it?*
R: *Every time I get a chance, I go on the computer.*
Author: *Would you say you're better at reading about the Lakers than you are at the story you read in class?*
R: *Yeah.*
Author: *How do you know?*
R: *I read it every day.*

Rasheem's was able to give me definitive answers about his basketball reading. When the reading did not apply to his individual interest, Rasheem did not even care to discuss it. Rasheem's reading about basketball served a purpose; it helped him pursue an interest about which he was passionate, whereas school literacy was unconnected to his interest. Rasheem's story confirms the argument made by Smith and Wilhelm (2002): boys need to see literacy as purposeful and connected to an activity that they value. Rasheem's interest in basketball led to an enthusiasm for playing and reading about the game. Overall, Rasheem was indifferent to school literacy for two reasons: first, the reading was not about his interest (i.e., basketball); and second, he felt that he did not have enough practice in school reading. While Rasheem did not state that he was poor at school reading, he was rather ambivalent toward it and was unable or unwilling to evaluate it one way or the other.

Jay's story

Jay is an eighth grader who receives his language arts-literacy instruction in the same resource class as Andre and Rasheem. Jay's real passion is playing video games, especially an on-line game in which he interacts with other players. Jay spent a great deal of the interviews focusing on this game, providing me with

specific examples of a typical game session as well as with examples of the literacy skills involved in playing this type of game. Jay had a real sense of what is means to be engaged in an activity.

> Author: *So do you think your reading has changed since the beginning of the school year?*
> J: *Yes.*
> Author: *Why would you say that?*
> J: *Because I learn new words, I read new books, and it was fun.*

Jay feels that knowing the words is important to reading, but he also thinks about reading in terms of understanding the text and being able to imagine it; he said that his best reading skill is being able to imagine the story. Jay seems to understand that reading is an enjoyable activity:

> Author: *So out of all of those stories, Bride to Terabithia, Yes Ma'am, and Charles.... (Jay cuts me off)*
> J: *Bridge to Terabithia, I have to say it's better.*
> Author: *Why would you say that?*
> J: *Well, it's longer, but I like it because it's like a nice story. Once you get into that book, you can sink your teeth inside and not let go until you read the whole thing.*

Whether it is video games or reading in or out of school, Jay likes to be involved in what he is doing. He wants to have fun, reap rewards, improve and learn all at the same time. Given Jay's experiences with his game playing out of school, he has the potential to experience school literacy in the same way. It is up to us as educators to provide him with such opportunities. As with any qualitative research study involving young students, there are limitations to the data. First, because of their academic difficulties, the students may not have fully articulated their feelings about particular aspects of reading because they lack the vocabulary to do so. Second, the students may have understated or exaggerated certain aspects of their literacy practices just to please me, as the interviewer, or their teachers. However, to disregard their voices for their occasional lack of clarity as being valuable to our reflective practice would be to disenfranchise these students from a system that is supposed to give them access to social and economic capital (Delpit, 1995; Freire, 2004).

Discussion: Choosing supportive and beneficial practices based on student interview feedback

Based on the interview feedback, the students in this study would further benefit from instructional methods designed to increase reading fluency and comprehension while maintaining the dignity of striving readers and building confidence. This calls for a wide range of practices that would allow teachers to differentiate instruction using activities for large and small groups, as well as individuals (Roe, 2009). Ash (2002) proposed a framework of middle grade classroom practices linked to instructional activities that would meet the needs of both general education and special education readers within a balanced literacy program. Using Ash's framework, I propose that teachers can link data from their own student interviews to find the most appropriate practices to enhance self-efficacy and interest, while maintaining supportive environments (see table 1):

Table 1

Classroom Practices and Examples of Instructional Activities (Ash, 2002)	Link to data analysis of student interviews	Example from Interviews
Practice: Daily oral or shared reading Activities: Choral reading, Readers' Theatre, teacher read-aloud, repeated readings, taped read-alongs	Self-efficacy and supportive contexts: These activities take the place of individuals reading aloud in front of their peers (round-robin reading); students self-efficacy is built when proper support is offered for reading orally	Robert: Did not want teacher to tell him the words all of the time Kaya: Did not want to "mess up" reading in front of others
Practice: Guided reading in flexible groups Activities: Book club, literacy study circles, guided reading	Supportive contexts and interest: teachers can scaffold comprehension and have students assist with text selection to fit their interests; supportive context also offers choice and control over text selection	Rasheem: reading about basketball Jay: wanted to become involved in the text Kaya: wanted to read books in which she could relate to the topic
Practice: Word study in guided reading groups Activities: Word sorts, making big words, mystery word match, constructing and deconstructing words	Self-efficacy: as striving readers learn to read words, they begin to feel better about themselves as readers	Robert: wanted to try reading the words himself before he asked the teacher for help Jay: wanted to learn new words
Practice: Self-selected extended reading and writing Activities: SSR/SSW, reading/writing workshop, discussion partners, dialogue journals	Interest and context: Students can select their own texts to read or write according to interest; discussion groups allow students to experience the social nature of literacy within a supportive setting; supportive context also offers choice and control over literacy tasks	Robert: liked to write his own action stories Rasheem: wanted to read about basketball Kaya: wanted to have control over how and what she read Jay: enjoyed reading new books and becoming involved in the text
Practice: Comprehension strategy instruction Activities: Reciprocal teaching, making connections, formulating questions	Self-efficacy, interest and contexts: These activities require a context in which learning is scaffolded; as students engage in teaching and questioning, their interest is heightened and their self-efficacy increases	Andre: teacher assisted his comprehension by segmenting the text into smaller pieces and holding Andre accountable for explaining the segment

I encourage teachers to not only ask students about their reading interests, as is typically done in reading interviews, but to also ask about the kinds of school literacy activities and instruction that they enjoy or dislike—even if the answers may not always be what we want to hear. Teachers then can add their own interview data in the third column of the table to align with practices and activities suggested by Ash. For example, Robert and Kaya felt that their self-efficacy was compromised reading aloud in class; Ash suggests that students read orally through choral or readers' theatre activities to provide the oral reading practice with support. Jay loved reading new books and the social aspects of learning new ideas; he would benefit from self-selected reading and discussion partners, as suggested in the framework. In aligning their students' voices with the practices, teachers can begin to eliminate those practices which do not seem to benefit their students based on the feedback and start implementing differentiated instruction using activities designed to meet a wide range of students' needs such as self-selected extended reading or small group word study instruction.

When constructing a supportive and safe environment that would allow striving readers to feel they can take risks in reading, it is essential any practices designed to draw attention to students' reading difficulties or to make them feel embarrassed be avoided. For example, of all the experiences discussed in the interviews, reading out loud was the one aspect to which students reacted most passionately. After years of struggling to read out loud in an inhospitable environment, students felt that the practice affected them in a negative manner. The aversions to reading out loud that these students described echoes research undertaken on "round robin" reading. Based on their own research and that of others, Ash and Kuhn (2006) suggest that round robin reading harms students' self- efficacy in reading by embarrassing them and discourages disfluent reading by interrupting the flow of the text. Kuhn (2009) also argues that this type of reading fails to provide students with adequate practice reading print since the amount they read, usually a few sentences to a paragraph, is not enough to increase reading skills. Furthermore, a classroom of striving readers reading out loud provides poor models of what fluent should sound like (Kuhn, 2009). Rather than round-robin reading, teachers could implement choral reading, echo reading, partner reading or repeated readings (see Kuhn, 2009; Kuhn and Stahl, 2003). Therefore, any frameworks of practices that teachers choose to align with interview data should be ones that contain only supportive, research- based practices, rather than those to which teachers may have been subjected as they progressed through school.

Given the self-awareness that the students in this study articulated, I would argue that the most important idea to emerge from these interviews is the importance of listening to our learners when they speak about their reading. Serafini (2010), advocating for the use of extended interviews, states:

> These extended interviews take a while to complete, but I have found that they generate information no other assessment windows provide. Their usefulness more than compensates for any struggle teachers have finding to complete them...Interviews allow teachers to talk with students about a variety of concepts and attitudes that are not readily observable. They provide teachers with students' preferences and feedback about their own teaching and procedures (p. 55).

We must treat this data as carefully as we would other forms of data by recording, analyzing and using it to drive instruction. If, as teachers, we take the time to talk to our striving students individually about their ideas regarding reading and instruction, we may be able to cater more to their needs, whether it is choosing appropriate texts, giving appropriate forms and levels of assistance, or creating instructional contexts that support and challenge each learner. This article suggests that teachers construct a short interview protocol to examine practices that contribute or constrain our students' abilities to complete literacy tasks. Once analyzed, teachers can then begin to link their students' input to appropriate and research-based instructional strategies to use in their classroom using the framework provided (Ash, 2002), replacing ones that do not meet their students' needs as necessary. Reflective practice is the very foundation of good instruction. In addition to our more frequently used forms of feedback such as assessment data, we should insist that voices from our underrepresented students become a part of this reflective process in order to compose accurate and complete portraits of instructional programs in all types of classrooms.

References

Alvermann, D. E. (2005). Literacy on the edge: How close are we to closing the achievement gap? *Voices from the Middle, 13*(1), 8-14.

Ash, G. E. (2002, March). Teaching readers who struggle: A pragmatic middle school framework. *Reading Online: The Online Journal of the International Reading Association, (5)*7. Available at http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?href=ash/index.html

Ash, G.E., & Hagood, M.C. (2000, May). Improving struggling readers' oral reading fluency, meaning making, and motivation through karaoke. *"This next song goes out to Miss Margaret and Miss Gwynne!": Creating a Karaoke Club at your school.* Session presented at the annual meeting of the International Reading Association, Indianapolis, IN

Ash, G. E., & Kuhn, M. R. (2006). Meaningful oral and silent reading in the elementary and middle school classroom: Breaking the Round Robin Reading addiction. In T. Rasinski, C. Blachowicz, & K. Lems (Eds.), *Fluency instruction: Research-based best practices*. (pp. 155-172). New York: The Guilford Press.

Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist (28)*2, 117-148.

Burke, C. L. (1977). *The reading interview*. Unpublished manuscript.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: cultural conflict in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.

Ewoldt, C. (1986). What does "reading" mean? *Perspectives for the teachers of the hearing impaired, 4*(3), 10-13.

Freire, P. (2004). *The pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Continuum International Group.

Henk, W.A. & Melnick, S.A. (1995). The Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS): A new tool for measuring how children feel about themselves as readers. *The Reading Teacher, 48*,470-482.

Hidi, S. (2001). Interest, reading, and learning: Theoretical and practical considerations. *Educational Psychology Review (13)* 3, 191-209.

Johnson, J. C. (2005). What makes a "good" reader? Asking students to define good readers. *The Reading Teacher, 58*(8), 766-773.

Johnston, P., & Allington, R. L. (1996). Remediation. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *The handbook of reading research* (pp. 984- 1012). Mahwah: Laurence Erlbaum Associates.

Kuhn, M.R. (2009). *The hows and whys of fluency instruction*. Allyn & Bacon.

Kuhn, M.R. & Schwanenflugel, P. J. (2006). Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction: A merging of theory and practice. In K.A. D. Stahl & M.C. McKenna (Eds). *Reading research at work: Foundations of effective practice*. (pp. 205-213). New York: The Guilford Press.

Kuhn, M.R. & Stahl, S.A. (2003). Fluency: A review of developmental and remedial practices. *The Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*, 3-21.

McCray, A.D., Vaughn, S. & Neal, L.I. (2001). Not all students learn to read by third grade: Middle school students speak out about their learning disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education, 35*(1), 17-30.

McKenna, M.C. & Stahl, K.A.D. (2009). *Assessment for reading instruction* (2nd ed). New York: Guilford.

McKenna, M.C., Kear, D. J. & Ellsworth, R.A. (1995). Children's attitudes toward reading: A national survey. *Reading Research Quarterly, 30*(4), 934-956.

Miller, S. D. & Yochum, N. (1991). Asking students about the nature of their reading difficulties. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 23*(4), 465-485.

Pachtman, A. B. & Wilson, K. A. (2006). What do the kids think? *The Reading Teacher, 59*(7), 680-684.

Roe, Mary F. (2009). *Differentiation in middle level literacy classrooms: The students speak*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Reading Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED507336)

Serafini, F. (2010). Classroom reading assessments: More efficient ways to view and evaluate your readers. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Smith, M.W. & Wilhelm, J.D. (2002). *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Smith, M. W. & Wilhelm, J. D. (2004). "I just like being good at it": The importance of competence in the literate lives of young men. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy (47)* 6, 454-461.

Spear-Swerling, L. (2004). A road map for understanding reading disability and other reading problems; origins, prevention, and intervention. In R. B. Ruddell, & N. J. Unrau (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (pp. 517-573). Newark: International Reading Association.

Stanovich, K. E. (1986). Matthew effects in reading: Some consequences of individual differences in the acquisition of literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly, 21*(4), 360- 407.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Wixson, K.K. & Lipson, M.Y. (1996). Perspectives on reading disability research. In R. Barr, M.L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal & P.D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research: Vol. II.* (pp. 539-570). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Wray, D. J. & Medwell, J. (2005, May). *The student perspective: What do learners think about literacy and literacy teaching, and does it matter?* Paper presented at the International Reading Association (IRA) Convention, San Antonio, TX. Retrieved August 16, 2005, from http://www.warwick.ac.uk/staff/DJWray.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: *The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Appendix

Interview Guides

Guide 1

What activities do you like to do outside of school?

Of all of those activities, which one do you like the best? Why?

Which one of the activities do you think you do the best? Why would you say this? Do any of those activities involve reading? What kind of reading?

How does that kind of reading you do for "activity x/activities x, y, z" compare with the reading you do while you in school? (Hint: it is more fun or less fun, is it harder or easier)

Which kind of reading are you better at? The reading you do outside of school (for the activities you just named) or the reading you do inside of school? Why?

Let's talk about the reading you've been doing in reading and language arts class. I see that you are reading "book x"? How do you like reading this book?

What book did you read before this book? Tell me more about that book.

Which book do you like more: book z or book x? Why? Which book are you better at reading? Why?

Guide 2:

Do you have a favorite book? Can you tell me about it?

What kinds of things do you read besides books (newspapers, instructions for gaming, comic books, magazines)?

Which of things do you enjoy reading the most? Why?

Do you read for fun?   Tell me more about reading for fun.

How often do your parents or caregivers ask you to read? Tell me more about that.

If someone was having difficulty reading, how would you help them? What would the teacher do to help them?

Guide 3

What kind of reader do you think you are? What would you like to do better as a reader?

What things could someone like your teacher, parent, or me do to help you become at better reader?

When you are reading and you come to something you don't know, what do you do? Do you ever do anything else?

Do you think your reading has changed since the beginning of the school year? Why would you say this?

How do you feel about reading now compared to how you felt about it last year? What things could we do to help you enjoy reading more?

Can you tell me something else about your reading or reading in general? It can be anything you want (how you feel about reading; things you like to read or don't like to read).

About the Author

Carolyn Groff holds a B.A. from Mount Holyoke College and Ph.D. in Literacy and Language Education from Rutgers University. She is currently an assistant professor of literacy instruction at Monmouth University. Prior to coming to New Jersey, she taught literacy to an under-served population at a Title I school in rural Virginia.