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Personalized Reading Strategies and Tools to Support Struggling Third Grade Readers

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PERSONALIZED READING STRATEGIES AND TOOLS TO SUPPORT
STRUGGLING THIRD GRADE READERS

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching.

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ABSTRACT

A common concern among elementary school teachers involves supporting students who struggle with reading. This capstone project provides a combination of tools to aid elementary school teachers in the support of struggling readers, specifically third-grade students, through motivation, environmental influences, time opportunities, and effective practice with comprehension and fluency. This project and the review of literature help to answer the capstone question, *What personalized tools and reading strategies best support struggling third-grade readers?* According to literature, a reader’s motivation, emotions, and environment play critical roles in the growth of students who struggle with reading success which is synthesized throughout this capstone.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

One of the most critical life skills that individuals face is learning how to read. Reading can be a challenging experience for students, and even more challenging for the teachers who work so hard to reach, teach, and encourage students throughout the mastery of this important skill. Not all students take to reading as quickly or as easily as other students. The grade-level standards for reading are set before teachers as guidelines and benchmarks to measure student growth and success. Each year, teachers must work with incoming students of varying levels regardless of grade level. It is not uncommon that a particular group of students who are of like ages can be at varied reading levels spanning one, two, three, or even more grade levels apart. The students who are at or above the grade level benchmarks will be pushed and encouraged to continue in their growth. The others who are lagging, especially those who are grade levels behind, can pose a challenge to teachers as they strive to narrow the gap. This has been my experience over the past five years of teaching third grade. After benchmarking my students at the beginning of each school year, I have come to ask the same question regarding the students who are not at benchmark for reading fluency and comprehension: 

*What personalized tools and reading strategies best support struggling third-grade readers?*

**Personal Reading Experiences**
Upon reflection, while I didn't mind reading in elementary school, I didn't particularly enjoy it either. I can recall “popcorn” reading, whole group style, and being so worried about making mistakes that the content of the passages read was not even considered. Popcorn reading refers to a teacher choosing who reads next and the student does not know when they will be called upon as the reader. I do not remember disliking this method in particular, but as this reflection lingers, it obviously created some anxiety as the fear of making mistakes and worry about what peers might think about my reading abilities was important to me. So much so, that when reading aloud to the class, all comprehension was lost. Worries persisted about making mistakes, who was listening, and about being placed in the “low group.” I knew I was not in the lowest group because those were the kids that were sent out of the room to read with a different teacher during reading time. I also knew that I was not in the high group because they were the kids who read quickly without errors, which was not me. I was the reader who stumbled and fumbled with her nerves to get through the assigned paragraph while likely sweating in front of the class. The worst part was the fact that I knew I would not remember what I read, and I always hoped that I was not asked any questions after reading. For me as an individual, this was clearly not an effective method to practice reading fluency nor reading comprehension.

Today, when going over informational texts in science or social studies time with my students, we occasionally have text that needs to be reviewed or read before breaking into groups. I always find it interesting that so many of my students’ hands go up as they beg to read aloud in front of their peers. What is even more interesting to me about this is
that many of these students are not particularly good readers. They are, however, clearly gaining confidence in their reading and love the practice if they are asking to read aloud in front of their entire class.

Remembering how much that fear of being forced to read gave me anxiety and affected my own comprehension, I have never asked a student to read aloud who was not begging to do so. In addition, the faster readers tend to dread following along and listening to the slower readers as they might have already done so in half of the time. Thus, limiting the times teachers utilize this method and choosing strategically who reads what in order to keep things moving is more common today. While popcorn reading may not be a practice that many teachers use today as a fluency and comprehension tool, it is important for teachers to consider reading methods that could create a negative reading experience in particular students. This feeling of anxiety is an emotional experience that will likely be remembered for many years. For me, it has been nearly 35 years and I still remember it quite vividly.

I do recall having books at home that were enjoyable to read, and my parents ordered books occasionally through book club magazines that were sent home from school. They also subscribed to the Highlights magazine which was a personal favorite. I did enjoy reading these at my own pace and was fortunate to have these tools provided for me at home. What is quite interesting to me in this reflection is that I do not recall my elementary classrooms ever having books that we could check out to read at home or books that we could read for fun anywhere in the classroom. We had a small school
library where students could check out books, one at a time, but that was the extent of accessible books aside from the reading textbooks in the classrooms.

Reflecting upon my later elementary years, third through fifth grade, I remember my mother insisted that I read *The Little House on the Prairie* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder or *Beezus and Ramona* by Beverly Cleary. I vividly recall dreading this. I wanted to read books like *Sweet Valley Twins* or *The Babysitter’s Club* series but she had purchased the other collections, without conferencing with the reader, and insisted that those be read first. This recollection has impacted me as a teacher because I remember how hard it was to drag myself through a book that I did not want to read. I loathed the experience and there was even a bit of resentment toward my mother because I did not understand why it was so important to her if I read them or not. This is surely the case with some students and their teachers as they are forced to read books that do not interest them or that they just truly do not relate to. When the motivation to read is not there, surely the comprehension will be difficult. I will admit that I did this to my own two sons many years ago, as well. I thought that I knew what they would like or I thought that the book might be good for them. In all honesty, my own children did not want me to choose what I thought they should read either.

In considering these parenting experiences, I recollect that my sons eventually chose books that I never would have chosen for them because they were not what I might have liked. What I chose to read, often behind my mother’s back, was not what my mother or teachers would have chosen for me either. I was never an avid reader in my childhood years and quite possibly this was due to the books that were available to me.
My own children, however, always loved to read. They read in the car, at night before bed, and whenever they could when they had a book that they were into because they chose their own books. The experiences that they had were quite different from those of their mother.

I do not recall that I was a struggling reader per se, but I know that I was not at the top of my class as far as reading fluency and accuracy go. Perhaps it was my anxiety that got the best of me or maybe it was just the lack of oral reading fluency practice. I do not remember ever reading out loud at home, only at school in my reading group or during the previously mentioned popcorn reading. I do not know whether times have changed, or my state and/or school had different standards for reading. Perhaps students today will recall their reading experiences such as running records or fluency checks in the future like my recollection of popcorn reading.

**Reading Standards**

The current reading standards in Minnesota state that students must be able to read grade-level material with fluency and accuracy. While this seems a bit vague, my conclusion is that individual districts have their own benchmarks for what specific grade level fluency and accuracy targets students should be meeting. Fluency is the way in which a passage is read aloud using the proper expression, intonation, and rate for which a listener can best comprehend the passage. Currently, I teach at a suburban charter school that uses the Dynamic Indicators of Basic and Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment system from the University of Oregon Center of Teaching and Learning (Good, Kaminski, Simmons, & Kame’enui, 2001). Many schools across the nation use
this system in order for teachers to measure their student performance on important reading skills.

The DIBELS Next benchmark goal for the end of third grade is to have students reading at 123 words per minute with an accuracy rate of 99% (University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2012). While this goal is used as a target throughout the school year, my biggest challenge as a third-grade teacher is the number of students who enter the classroom each fall reading well below 50 words per minute when the DIBELS benchmark for the beginning of third grade is 99 words per minute at 99% accuracy (University of Oregon Center for Teaching and Learning, 2012). I wonder every year how students are only able to read 20-30 words per minute after three full years of reading instruction. What is more concerning to me, and often stressful, is how to grow struggling readers to the fourth-grade benchmark before the 3rd grade school year is through. Based on the DIBELS Next data, over the last five years, 66% of my incoming 3rd graders are below the third-grade benchmark of 99 words per minute at 99% accuracy. Of the 66% of students who are below the benchmark, 53% are well below the benchmark and in the intensive needs category. This percentage of 53% does not include students with identified learning disabilities in reading. Overall, 35% of my third-grade students in the past five years have entered third grade with a severe reading deficit compared to their same-aged peers. The third grade is a transitional year where students are reading to learn rather than learning to read, so this inability to read poses yet another problem with developing the overall learner and not just in reading. Each year, I do my due diligence to grow each child as much as possible, but this work is not easy and
recurrently the growth does not meet the grade-specific benchmark goal. According to DIBELS Next, the odds of achieving subsequent early literacy goals for students requiring intensive reading support are between 10% and 20% (University of Oregon Center for Teaching and Learning, 2012).

**Summary**

Since I was not the best reader growing up, I can relate to many students who are not great readers. Additionally, because I did not particularly like reading in my earlier years, I can relate to the students who do not like to read as well. However, because reading is such a critical life skill that is vitally important to one's success and future, it is important for me as a teacher to grow and develop readers. Teachers must inform students about the importance of this skill and work hard to find ways for students to be successful in reading. With each new school year I find myself wondering how to best go about this as I start over with a new class full of students.

Because the ever-growing problem of serving students who are struggling readers is not going to vanish, teachers need to have tools and resources that will support students in developing reading skills, strategies, and ultimately, engagement. Student needs will continue to vary as well as the number of struggling readers within a classroom from year to year. With the continued need to help struggling readers, it is important to answer the question: *What personalized tools and reading strategies best support struggling third-grade readers?*

In the upcoming chapters, further development into this research question has been provided. In Chapter two, various resources are explored and synthesized to provide
insight and further understanding on why reading by the third grade is important. Additionally, building teacher capacity, student motivation, and tools to support readers are further explored. Chapter three explains the development of the project resource chart as well as the timeline in which it was made. The purpose of the interactive chart is to serve as a helpful tool for teachers of struggling readers as well as a useful tool for myself to utilize within my own teaching. Chapter four includes a reflection on the project and research synthesized including what learnings were found to be most important. Limitations of the project were explained as well as recommendations based on the research findings. Additionally, ways in which this project benefits the teaching profession as well as how these results will be communicated moving forward are also explained.
CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Teachers are ever examining ways to better their teaching each year with goals of improving student learning, especially in reading. Each year, increasing concerns arise from teachers with the number of struggling readers who enter their classrooms below benchmark and labeled as struggling readers by fluency scores. The label, “struggling reader,” refers to students who are not reading at their expected level or rate (Lyons, 2003). These students are often unenthusiastic about reading because they find reading difficult. Along with concern, teachers face frustration, worry, and even fear as they begin each new school year with readers who are one, two, and even three grade levels behind district adopted reading benchmarks for third grade. This recurring gap in student reading achievement year after year raises the following question: What personalized tools and reading strategies best support struggling third-grade readers?

Throughout this chapter, various reading strategies and tools were considered along with research to support these ideas. First, the stages of reading, fluency, and why fluency is such an important factor in reading comprehension, specifically for third-grade students, was explained. Second, strategies used to both inspire and engage readers were reviewed. This was followed by a deeper look at motivation and how student buy-in leads to a better comprehension of the “why” in reading. Third, options for various tools and
supports for readers who struggle that allow teachers to be better prepared for meeting individual student needs were explored. Since not all struggling readers require the same amount nor the same level of support, a combination of tools to assist students in a variety of ways, offering differentiated instruction tailored to individual students were reviewed.

By combining inspiration and engagement, tools and interventions, and personalized instruction, teachers are more likely to reach struggling readers and grow them in the appropriate direction at the appropriate pace. This narrows the gap between the struggling reader and the fluent reader on grade level. The goal for this information is to help uncover pertinent strategies applicable to teaching that will also benefit fellow teachers and their students in the collaboration to find purposeful instruction to grow readers.

**Reading by Third Grade**

There is more at stake than a student’s ability to read fluently by third grade. Reading success for third-grade students marks an important point in a student’s educational development. By failing to read proficiently by the end of third grade, students are at increased risk for dropping out of school. Student drop out leads to lower earning potential due to the inability to compete for higher-income jobs (Adams & Alexander, 2012). According to statistics, of the students who are not proficient in reading by third grade, one out of six will not graduate from high school (Adams & Alexander, 2012). Third graders reading below grade level are six times more likely to drop out of school or fail to graduate at the same time as their proficient peers. It is also
known that 42% of third-grade boys compared to 34% of third-grade girls are below grade level in reading (Adams & Alexander, 2012), and 37% of fourth-grade students are one or more years behind in grade-level reading proficiency (Rasinski, Paige, Rains, Stewart, Julovich, Prenkert, & Nichols, 2017). If third-grade reading success is determining the graduation rate for readers who struggle, it is of great importance that teachers are able to reach and grow the reading fluency and comprehension of these students.

**Building Teacher Capacity to Meet Student Needs**

To better understand students and to support their growth from the level at which they are currently, it is important to understand the stages of literacy development. (Gehsmann, 2012).

**Stages in reading.** In the Emergent Stage, behaviors in writing include scribbling and drawings followed by pictures of print (Gehsmann, 2012). Children will often pretend to read using language that they recall from books. This stage typically begins during the preschool and kindergarten years. Soon after this, children learn sounds, letters, and the alphabet. They also begin to understand that words are written and read from left to right (Gehsmann, 2012).

The Transitional Stage, typically around first through second grade, is when children are thinking strictly left to right on a page, sounding out single letter sounds, and slowly putting two and then three-letter words together. They gain an understanding of vowel patterns such as the silent e at the end of a word and see how grouping of letters relate to sounds (Gehsmann, 2012). Once reading becomes more fluid with single
syllable sounds, readers begin phrasing with increased expression and comprehension (Gehsmann, 2012).

In the Intermediate Stage, readers are understanding word patterns within words such as those found in the words cream, stream, and dream where the vowels e and a together make the long e sounds and gaining understanding in multi-syllable words such as sim-ple. Readers are decoding longer words for both reading and writing, including how affixes affect word meanings of root words. For example, a prefix, suffix, or both can be added to the word “eat” in order to change the meaning of the word such as “uneaten.” With this increased knowledge and understanding, the intermediate reader engages in greater independent reading and writing, particularly when prompted with a read-aloud and interactive instruction (Gehsman, 2012).

In the Advanced, Skilled/Proficient Stage, readers have an understanding of alphabetic patterns and the relationship of word meaning (Gehsmann, 2012). This is typically the stage of reading that students are expected to be on in third grade. Students understand that words related in spelling are often related in meaning, even though the sounds may be different. Readers in this stage understand that base words, or root words, that are changed with affixes all share the same core meaning which also clarifies the spelling similarities. The knowledge from this level extends through the remaining grades and then through college and vocational schooling. (Gehsmann, 2012).

**Forming instruction from assessment.** The expected level for a third-grade student to be at in reading development is the intermediate stage. Here, the reading level should be at or about the Fountas and Pinnell levels M-Q with a reasonable understanding
of syllables and affixes in word recognition and spelling. By providing students with a spelling inventory test, teachers gain a better understanding of a student’s current developmental stage in reading along with an understanding of the student’s ability to decode words (Gehsmann, 2012).

In the book *Fluency Instruction, Second Edition*, Timothy Shanahan (2012) wrote that there are four key components to effective literacy instruction: word knowledge, reading comprehension, writing, and fluency (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012). To make literacy instruction effective, teachers need to ensure that students are learning, not just doing activities.

**Word knowledge.** Vocabulary proficiency is known to correlate with reading fluency. When teaching word knowledge, students need to learn both the meaning of the word as well as know and understand the written word in order to grow their knowledge of word meanings (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012). Sight word knowledge is also important. Students need to know how to recognize common words quickly and automatically, as well as how these words work in a sentence in order to clearly comprehend the meaning of a written text. Students who lack skills in decoding and word recognition have greater difficulty in reading fluency (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012).

**Reading comprehension.** In teaching reading comprehension, teachers must educate students on how books are organized and structured so they can use them effectively to find information successfully (Miller, 2009). This is especially true for non-fiction texts when searching for information. Students must also know how to look
for particular kinds of information within texts as well as possess a diverse range of thinking strategies to gain deep understandings of text on their own. For example, students must be able to ask themselves what will happen next and connect important details in the story. Students not only benefit from comprehension practice but comprehension instruction as well. Reading comprehension is known to be connected to reading fluency and vice versa because, with both skills, a reader can make more complex cognitive connections (Shanahan, 2012).

**Writing.** Children must know how to write using their own knowledge of text organization and vocabulary. They must also be able to recall events, analyze information, and write an argument using proper spelling, grammar, and writing mechanics (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012). While there is no direct evidence showing that writing achievement correlates with reading fluency, the accuracy in spelling words in one’s writing does have a fluency connection (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012).

**Fluency.** Oral reading out loud with appropriate accuracy, speed, and expression is what we refer to as fluency. Proficient reading fluency is important and plays a major role in a student’s vocabulary building as well as their reading comprehension (Clementi, 2010). Developing fluency skills are most effective through oral reading practice; that is, reading aloud. Once a student has reached an acceptable level of reading fluency, which is about 100 words per minute with an accuracy rate of 99% for third-grade students per the DIBELS fluency measures, teachers may reduce the amount of fluency instruction in order to focus more on other areas of comprehension (University of Oregon, 2012).
Students who are not proficient in reading fluency at an acceptable level for their age and grade, however, should continue practicing reading fluency at least daily according to DIBELS (University of Oregon, 2012).

_**Fluency Assessments.**_ Fluency tests such as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) allow teachers to track student progress by maintaining records on student fluency and comprehension data. Allington (2012) stated that DIBELS is a waste of time and money in his view because there is no data that supports that students become proficient at reading comprehension from using the DIBELS assessment specifically.

Fluency practice includes reading aloud. Students can practice reading with a peer, teacher, parent or family member, or pet (Brown, Schell, Denton, & Knode, 2019; Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012). Another way to practice fluency is to utilize Reader’s Theater passages and practice appropriate phrasing, pausing, expression, and tone when reading (Rasinski, Blachowicz & Lems, 2012). Any book can be customized into a reader’s theater in order to make the reading more fun and less monotonous (Clementi, 2010). Reader’s Theater passages should be practiced about 15-20 times over about three to four days in order to ensure that student phrasing is accurate and confidence is up. This process not only improves student fluency but increases student comprehension and motivation to perform while reading (Clementi, 2010).

**Paired reading peer tutors.** An intervention strategy that has been introduced with excellent results is a Paired Reading Peer Tutor (PRPT) strategy (Allington, 2012). Students in this particular program are paired up to provide support for one another.
Here, students can be taught to echo read back and forth, choral read together, duet read every other word, or even have students write all of the spelling words out (Allington, 2012) working with their paired peer. Many educators feel that it makes the most sense to pair the highest reader with the reader who needs the most support. This method is not best practice as students should not be paired with the widest reading gaps due to the better reader often taking over and the struggling reader not participating (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012). In this pairing it is difficult for the lower level reader to be able to support and grow the high-level reader. Regardless of student ability, the help of a similarly leveled peer allows students to feel less competition and more support while keeping one another accountable and supporting growth (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012).

The building of teacher capacity to meet student needs includes understanding and effectively teaching the essential foundational skills needed in reading, the appropriate assessment of these skills, and by then providing students with effective ways to practice and grow these skills. By being better able to identify the needs and goals of students, teachers have answered part of the question: What personalized tools and reading strategies best support struggling third-grade readers?

**Inspire and Engage the Reader**

Emotional responses to stimuli such as happiness, fear, sadness, anxiety, excitement, anger, or embarrassment play a role in student learning as well as academic performance. Emotion is linked to decoding, symbol development, and information processing. According to research, negative experiences are remembered and can cause
anxiety and fear just as positive experiences can trigger excitement and happiness (Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010). Anxiety is a powerful emotion that can render a child frozen in fear. This negative emotion can hinder the brain’s ability to process information. Positive emotions, however, expand the brain’s abilities to retain information and increase productivity (Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010). With this knowledge, teachers can understand the importance of growing readers in a safe, trusted, and positive environment where learning can take place. Motivation and emotions play an active role in learning how to read. Fostering positive experiences and overcoming negative experiences is critical for learners who are struggling to be successful readers (Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010).

Emotions in reading. For students, the mere request to take out a book or open to a particular page can cause an emotional response. The emotions are personal and cannot be seen by others as they belong only to the student. Only they know what experiences they have had and how their experiences felt emotionally. The associations may be positive, but for others, the associations may trigger negative feelings of fear, worry, or even stress. Just as a student who has had wonderful reading experiences feels great calmness and happiness when reading, a student who has had negative experiences in reading can have negative emotions associated with the mere thought of reading due to their emotional experiences being stored in the brain. As stated by Lyons, “The brain always gives priority to emotions” (2012, p. 66). This statement is powerful when thinking of emotion and how struggling readers perceive it. For readers with poor reading experiences or associations of negative emotions with reading, the simple request from a teacher to read aloud may have physical implications on their well being, creating further
negative experiences and greater negative emotion in connection to the reading experience. (Lyons, 2012)

Physical ailments and emotions triggered by what should be a simple request to read is automatic in some students, like trauma. Thus, anticipating the possibility of these emotions before they occur is vital to the emotional being of struggling readers since having to reverse the emotional damage creates yet another setback (Lyons, 2012). Here, with emotional difficulties alongside the inability to read fluently or comprehend at grade level, students who struggle in reading feel even greater stress when asked to read out loud to their teacher or, worse, asked to read in front of their peers.

Keeping this in mind, for students who have this fear, the fear may grow but not resolve on its own when emotionally connected. Educators can assist readers in overcoming these emotions by providing an appropriate, responsive learning environment as well as text that students can be successful in reading, specifically at their individual level. Overcoming and letting go of these bad feelings can allow reading to become enjoyable rather than an emotional trigger or stress response (Allington, 2012; Lyons, 2003).

**Motivating the reader.** Motivation has to do with the reason, motive, or driving force that stimulates a person’s desire to want to do something. It is a desire that is self-generated and happens within (Lyons, 2003). When working with students who have negative emotional experiences in reading, it is likely that they are not motivated to read. Their negative experiences have given them a reason not to read or attempt to read. There is often difficulty associated with encouraging students to continue working on their
skill-building, and continuing to practice reading regardless of the discomfort, but even more difficult when their motivation and drive is depleted. Depending on the child, motivators may be needed such as offering a prize or a desired reward in exchange for attempting reading goals and the gradual build-up to reaching these goals (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). This type of motivation is called extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation refers to the child working for a type of reward that is outside of the individual body such as praise from a teacher or parent, stickers as a reward, earning good grade marks, or working to win a contest (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). Intrinsic motivation refers to the internal desire to do something for reasons that are inside of the individual body. This type of motivation emerges in readers when they want to read because they cannot wait to see what the book is about, or they cannot wait to read-to-the next chapter to find out what happens in a story (Miller, 2009; Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

**Motivating factors.** According to Pinnell and Fountas (2009), a student’s reading achievement is strongly related to their motivation to read and to readers’ engagement. Student motivation may also be connected to the amount or lack of support that students receive in their classroom community and/or at home. Additionally, the comparing of students to other students, overwhelming feelings of competition to do better, and merely being evaluated can create either positive or negative emotions which in turn affect student motivation. Either way, whether it be intrinsic or extrinsic, readers who are engaged and motivated in their reading typically have something personal on the line.

Factors related to reading motivation include student self-efficacy, successful processing, engagement of texts, appropriate text levels, shared understanding through
talk, and social motivation (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009, p. 473). Self-efficacy refers to the confidence or belief that one can produce effects or intended results (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009, p. 473). It is the belief in oneself that one can be successful in making something happen. Successful processing in reading refers to the smooth, automatic processing of written text, including the taking apart of words while focusing on meaning. In writing, this process includes the composition and encoding of a text to communicate meaning (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009, p. 473). Texts which engage a reader’s interests and provide enjoyment in the reading of the text are known as engaging texts. This also refers to the building of background knowledge to support successful processing. There must be some texts that are enthralling to students which provide deep engagement necessary for ongoing motivation (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009, p. 473). An appropriate text level is a text that is just right for supporting effective processing with appropriate teaching (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009, p. 473). When a text allows for new learning, readers may learn how to process a text more effectively. Shared understanding through talk refers to readers and writers being part of a community in which they read and write about texts and then discuss their interpretation with others in the community (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009, p. 473). The opinions within the reading and writing learning community are valued and respected along with peer opinions allowing for increased social motivation for learners (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009, p. 473).

**Partner and text selection.** By allowing students to have a “like” partner, similar in reading level, a positive collaborative environment can form (Lyons, 2012). This is also applicable under the social motivation factor. Students need to feel respected and
supported in their reading environment. When they feel that they have a valuable relationship with their reading community, partner, or peer, students are more likely to feel secure enough to read openly and unguarded.

In addition, students must have various reading options available at their level to ensure successful comprehension and growth. For the sake of fostering reading success, providing students with appropriate reading leveled texts is a must (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). When an adult packs for a vacation, they do not choose a book with undesirable content and difficult text, but rather something enjoyable and compatible with their reading style. Educators should expect the same for children and provide them with books that they are able to read (Allington, 2012). For students with performance anxiety, eliminating the competition with safe reading communities and providing readable books that they can be successful in reading fosters a more positive reading experience. A positive reading environment will in turn increase the amount of reading (Lyons, 2012).

Positive teachers and culture. Teachers must create opportunities for students to take chances without the fear of failing. By knowing what is important or special about each child, and by showing personal interest in each child, teachers can build solid interpersonal relationships with students that will, in turn, build trust between them. Teachers can also develop lessons and activities around student interests to fuel motivation and engagement. Teachers should also expect that their students will be successful. Having high expectations for students and believing that they can achieve success has a significant impact on the way that students perceive their abilities to succeed and how they view themselves (Lyons, 2012).
Award-winning teacher and author, Donalyn Miller (2014) suggested that creating an environment where reading is not only safe but expected should be a priority for teachers. In addition, while encouraging students to read, teachers must also encourage parents to encourage their children to read. Teachers can offer support to parents by providing reading facts, information, and recommendations for parents to support their children in their reading (Miller, 2014). Parents do not always know the best ways to do this, nor do they always have the knowledge to do so. Teachers encouraging parents could include book recommendations or reading tips to families in weekly newsletters. Teachers can also support families who may not have books at home by allowing students to take classroom books home that they want to read, or by offering books to families at conferences that they would like to read to their children (Miller, 2014). In addition, supporting parents with simple tips on ways to fit more reading time into busy family schedules as well as fostering the importance of reading will encourage families to extend this culture of reading at home (Miller, 2014).

Not only does Donalyn Miller (2009) encourage the reading of books, but also encourages the creation of an environment conducive to reading. Not every student will want to sit in a hard desk chair while they read for 20-30 minutes. Teachers are encouraged to make optional reading spaces for students in the classroom where students can curl up or nestle in with their books in an atmosphere created for reading enjoyment (Miller, 2009).

Donalyn Miller on reading engagement. Author Donalyn Miller wrote about encouraging students to love reading and love books (2009). She advised ways to present
books to readers, organize books so that students can easily see them and find them according to the genre, and identified meaningful ways to discuss books with students. She also encouraged teachers to allow students to choose their own books rather than force students to read particular books in a literature circle or teacher-led group. An idea for teachers to increase student reading motivation is to create literature discussion groups among students on student-selected texts. Here, students engage in discussions about what they have listened to, read, or heard. These literature discussion groups can be differentiated for students of all ages and reading abilities (Miller, 2009). If teachers want to encourage students to read, and to read a lot, Miller (2009) suggested that we must let students have the freedom to choose the books that they enjoy. She also suggested that teachers allow students to talk about their reading and be excited about their books in book talks. Allowing students to share and inspire other students to want to read their recent book is effective, but also within parameters so as not to give away too much information about the plot (Miller, 2009).

Rasinski, Blachowicz, and Lems (2012) wrote that some research suggests there is increased motivation in student reading if students have a purpose for reading or a mission. For example, assign students a passage and allow a creative discussion or assignment with a special reconsideration or “what if” scenario to change the outcome of the story and have students discuss those what-ifs (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012). The purpose of these activities is to increase engagement and to motivate reading. In Motivating Struggling Readers: Three Keys to Success, Padak and Potenza-Radis (2010) wrote similarly that purposeful and authentic reading practices strongly motivate
students. A student’s ability to make authentic connections to the world outside of the classroom in a text is a powerful motivator. How and what they read as well as the responses to this reading must be real and authentic, connecting the student’s life and interests to the real world. The job of teachers, here, is to create and promote sincere engagement in this authentic reading and move students away from compliant, automatic, and instinctive responses to reading and encourage purposeful and intentional responses (Padak & Potenza-Radis, 2010).

In summary, the most common factors in motivating struggling readers to read are authentic interest, engaging texts, student choice, and support from a trusted teacher and student learning community. While much research goes into depth on the processes of these factors, understanding what motivates struggling students is an important first step to reaching them (Rasinski, Blachowicz, and Lems, 2012). To understand and know how to motivate struggling readers, teachers have an important tool to answer the question: *What personalized tools and reading strategies best support struggling third-grade readers?*

**Options and Tools to Support Readers**

Research has shown that there are many tools available for teachers to utilize in order to support struggling readers. Some of these tools are not tangible materials but rather intangible ideas that can be incorporated into daily teaching.

**Time for reading.** While there are various methods and intervention approaches to support struggling readers, the most evident and obvious support is time (Allington, 2012; Miller, 2009). Carving out a block of time in an overscheduled school day only for
reading is critical for getting students to read authentically. The use of time, the quality of time, and the amount of time play a tremendous role in the reading success of students. Studies show that students who are higher achieving read about triple the amount of time than their peers who are lower achieving. (Allington, 2012) Thus, the time for reading is more than important.

**Reading during reading time.** Schools, whether public or private, have varying lengths to their school days. In addition to the amount of time at school, some students spend more time at recess, lunch, physical education, and specialized instruction combined than on core subjects such as reading (Allington, 2012). This reduction in minutes could be only five minutes per day, but in a week’s time that is 25 minutes per week, and over an hour and a half each month. Students who attend a school with a longer-day may receive up to an additional month of instruction over a year’s time compared to students in schools with a shorter day (Allington, 2012). According to research, it is clear that teachers must review their instructional efficiency to ensure that students are not missing out on critical minutes that could be used for instructional time regardless of the length of their school day.

Teachers, at the very least, should allow students 15-20 minutes each day specifically to read (Miller, 2009). In addition to ensuring instructional efficiency, a look at one's curriculum and reading block to ensure that there is actually time for reading is an essential key to ensuring reading success (Allington, 2012; Miller, 2009). Reading lessons with too little “reading time” are not effective when students should be practicing this important and essential new skill called reading. If the goal is to get students to read,
it is essential that teachers let them (Miller, 2009). If the goal for educators is to grow students into good readers, then showing students how to effectively practice the skill is important. Providing this reading time for authentic reading is critical. Miller (2009) wrote, “Students will read if we give them the books, the time, and the enthusiastic encouragement to do so. If we make them wait for the one unit a year in which they are allowed to choose their own books and become readers, they may never read at all. To keep our students reading, we have to let them” (Miller, 2009, p. 177). This quote confirms a common theme found in this research that teachers have much to teach in very little time.

**Time opportunities.** Aside from a designated time for reading, there are many other opportunities if students are taught to look for them. By encouraging students to read whenever possible and providing the expectation to read, the time, and the practice to do so, students will be given greater opportunities to develop lifelong reading habits (Miller, 2009). Students should keep a book on their desk or learning area at all times. When a teacher is interrupted by a call from the office or an unexpected visitor, students should be primed to wait patiently by going right to their book to read. It may only be a few minutes, but every minute counts (Miller, 2009).

Teachers can help students find moments to read by discussing times when students are stuck waiting somewhere after school, at an appointment, riding the bus, or in the car (Miller, 2014). When students claim that they do not have 20 or 30 minutes at home each night to read, this is a great opportunity to help them carve out minutes in their schedules and find reading time. Teachers should encourage students to carry books
with them everywhere they go so they are always prepared (Miller, 2009). Discuss with students about when they read and why, where they read and why, and if they feel that finding the time to read is difficult or easy. By helping students reflect on their reading habits and behaviors, they will understand more about themselves as individual readers and may opt to make changes to their environments to include more opportunities for reading (Miller, 2014).

Contexts for readers. The environment for which students are provided to do their reading may play a role in the reading success of individual students. “Vygotsky emphasized that to understand children’s development and learning potential, it is necessary to examine and understand the environment and social context that adults create for them” (Lyons, 2003, p.75). Lev Vygotsky was a well-known child development psychologist, teacher, and author who believed that a child’s ability to learn was directly associated with their social interactions. While motivation is different from attention, the process of intrinsic motivation is linked to attention. If a child is unable to provide their attention while reading in a distracting environment, we cannot expect them to be motivated nor produce their best work.

Teachers must know their students and know what they need in order to provide the best reading environment for the individual (Lyons, 2003). Reluctant readers have a reason for their reluctance. In knowing this, teachers must work to uncover these reasons and earn student trust in order to continue growing and motivating the student. The nature of the relationship and the interactions between a child and teacher will likely determine failure or success for struggling students (Lyons, 2003). Relationships are a large part of
the environment. Communication between teachers and students as well as the attitudes of teachers and students all play an impactful part of the learning environment (Lyons, 2003).

**Environment for reading.** The reading environment may also include spaces and ambiance for reading as well as numerous options for books (Allington, 2010). It may include a trip to the school library where students are surrounded by books and quiet, comfortable spaces to read. The environment may include a steady flow of soft music playing in the background. Or, perhaps a teacher is supporting students by encouraging good fit books for students and encouraging students to give books a try (Miller, 2009). Another reading environment might include a classroom community having book talks where students are discussing their current books and what they like about them or encouraging others to read their favorite books. Students need a positive and emotionally stable environment where they can feel safe asking for help, reading aloud, and sharing their responses (Miller, 2009). According to the research, the reading environment is an influential part of a student’s motivation to read.

**Small groups.** Small group reading environments are typically used for students in need of interventions. Discovering that a student has a learning disability or other disorder that affects their learning will also play a role in what environment will be best for student learning. Students with a diagnosed learning disability will require further support to pinpoint their reading problems in order to effectively remediate their area of struggle (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). Often, students with reading disabilities or reading struggles receive small group intervention services provided by the various school,
district, state, or federal programs. Additionally, students who are not pulled for small
group intervention may spend increased time working on interventions with the
classroom teacher building fluency, self-esteem, and working on reading skills more
adapted to the student’s level. While these supplemental instructional programs can be
beneficial for some students, these programs should only be carried out at times outside
of the regular reading block (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). It is recommended that students
should not be pulled out of reading class for supplemental instruction on reading. It has
been found that these small groups are ineffective with some students and missing out on
classroom lessons does not help the already struggling student (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

Research shows a connection between overall student achievement and parent
involvement (Brown, Schell, Denton, & Knode, 2019). Parents can be effective literacy
coaches to their students if shown and guided how to do so. By educating parents on how
they too can help their student by practicing reading at home, students receive additional
one on one support and practice in order to grow their reading skills (Brown, Schell,
Denton, & Knode, 2019).

Educators must keep in mind that the majority of reading problems do not belong
to the child, but rather exist due to the teaching system’s inadequacy to find the
appropriate way to teach the child (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). Where there is difficulty is
not always a disability. Proper interventions are likely to get students with reading
problems back on track. However, reading interventions must be carefully thought out
and designed to provide support to the targeted inadequacy and followed up with
formative assessments of the individual student progress (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).
The research writings and literary works reviewed on a student’s reading environment, the context for reading, and the provision of ample time to read all support student reading growth and proficiency. The above tools and strategies help to answer the question: *What personalized reading strategies and tools best support struggling third-grade readers?*

**Summary**

While there is not a one size fits all strategy in the teaching of reading, there are many options for teachers to work with in their search for the best remedy to aid a struggling reader or readers. Students who struggle in reading may do so for additional reasons stemming from learning disabilities or even language barriers (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). However, readers who do not qualify for these categories but continue to encounter uphill struggles with reading have hopeful options to grow and become effective readers given the appropriate support from educators.

Student emotions must be carefully considered by teachers. Readers who do not like reading or who shut down at the first thought of having to read must be allowed to grow in a safe, secure learning environment that allows them a place to feel comfortable trying, and where it is okay to make mistakes (Lyons, 2003). Teachers must also build trust with these students and among reading communities to afford students a healthy peer environment where they feel supported. Once the environment is safe and reading can begin, selecting appropriately leveled text for the reader’s success and text that relates to the reader can follow (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). Providing students with books that create enthusiasm and a desire to read will help build student motivation intrinsically
(Miller, 2009). Building motivation with outside rewards is acceptable also, as this is needed for some students to be encouraged, but the goal for teachers is to create the desire within individual readers to want to read on their own. Teachers can grow the desire for reading in students by also reaching out to parents for support and helping them to help their students (Brown, Schell, Denton, & Knode, 2019).

While fluency is an important part of reading and a distinct area in recording reading data, reading comprehension is also essential to third grade reading. The most important concept taken from this literature is the understanding that readers will only improve in their reading if given the time to read. In saying this, readers need time to practice reading out loud as well as reading for themselves each and every day with uninterrupted reading time (Miller, 2009). The key to getting better at something is to practice that skill, and children need time every day to practice their reading.

In the coming chapter, an overview has been provided on how the findings from the research were implemented into useful teaching tools to be utilized and shared with other teachers. Considering the information provided by experts, a comprehensive interactive chart for teachers was created to be used as a tool in the development of struggling readers in answer to the question: What personalized tools and reading strategies best support struggling third-grade readers?
CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

The literature reviewed in chapter two has provided understanding and guidance as to why struggling readers struggle along with strategies to support and motivate these readers to grow in their reading skills. While there are countless suggestions to encourage and develop reading in students, the most profound strategy among these findings is perhaps one of the most simple but overlooked tools to implement: the allowance of uninterrupted reading time. Nearly every article and book that was read made some mention of providing uninterrupted time for reading as one of the most important and proven strategies for supporting reading comprehension and fluency in developing readers. Providing this opportunity helps to grow student interest and motivation as well as allow students to practice their skills.

While carrying out my research, I made a point to immediately implement daily uninterrupted reading time and witnessed a near immediate change in the excitement over reading in my third-grade classroom. While it is still too early to tell if this action is proving to be successful in fluency and comprehension assessments, it is apparent that the excitement for reading grew significantly. This adjustment also created a need for some additional tools that would have helped the implementation to go more smoothly such as organizers, bookmarks, and graphic organizers for students to utilize during this independent reading activity. In consideration of these tools, it became apparent to me that an organized information center housing effective tools and strategies would be an invaluable tool to utilize in my teaching. This need developed my project idea of a table
chart with effective tools and supports that can be used and adapted around other curricula in order to answer my research question: *What personalized tools and reading strategies best support struggling third-grade readers?*

**Foundation**

Using the research from chapter two, a usable table chart with organized tools and strategies to support struggling third-grade readers was constructed as shown in the appendix. The chart includes links to helpful supplemental materials to be used by teachers in order to quickly access tools and strategies for motivating students, building a reading community, improving fluency, and tools to use when implementing daily uninterrupted reading time.

Four main topics were created and organized based on the research in chapter two: reading motivation and interests, building an environment for reading, growing fluency and comprehension, and personal reading time. Reading motivation and interest has to do with finding out what the struggling reader is interested in, what may have caused anxiety, if any, in reading, and what possible motivators would help get the struggling reader motivated. Building an environment for reading not only involves the creation of calm and relaxing reading space, but the norms and expectations of students as well so that students know what to expect during the reading activities. Growing fluency and comprehension may serve helpful for teachers to know how to level students appropriately for success and how to measure growth in fluency and comprehension. The fourth topic, personal reading time, provides tools to guide, support, and organize students while reading independently.
Within these four topics are four different categories: target discipline, the significance of target discipline, tools and strategies to meet target discipline, and outcome. Within each target discipline, listed under the appropriate topic, is an explanation as to why it is significant, includes examples to be used by the teacher, and includes the expected outcome of each discipline as well. This chart was my personal design idea, but the contents were influenced by the research provided in chapter two. In addition, the chart is interactive, linking usable tools for instructional support; information, reproducible worksheets, and systems for organization.

**Rationale**

The idea for this chart came about from my desire to have an organized tool with research-backed activities to support readers who are struggling that could be added to a required curriculum. Additionally, this tool could serve useful to other teachers who have a need for similar support with struggling students in reading, particularly newer teachers or mentees. When I first thought of the chart, I reflected on how helpful it would have been to have had such a tool during my first year teaching third grade. In 2015, I began my first year teaching third grade with 17 out of 24 students in my classroom below benchmark in reading. Of those 17 students, 10 of them required intensive support so the experience was quite overwhelming with few resources in my brand new teacher tool belt. Going forward, this table chart will serve as a useful tool since all items are now logically placed and organized in an easy to use format and in one location.

Numerous authors write about research that shows that students who read 15-20 minutes each day perform significantly higher on high stakes exams, students who read
daily are better readers, and when we want to get better at something we need to practice (Allington, 2012; Miller, 2009). Because of this, I immediately carved out time in my classroom reading block to ensure that my third-grade students were getting this important uninterrupted reading time daily.

In the past, I typically included read-to-self in our workshop rotations in order for students to get this reading time, but with transitions and other distractions, this time was not typically uninterrupted. In making this change so quickly, I discovered some tools and supports were missing that would have been helpful in making this transition more smooth and organized such as bookmarks, a log for documentation of pages read, a vocabulary strategies tool, and a reading retell or summary activity for individual books read by each student (Miller, 2009). Since all students are reading different books, I felt that an organized resource for discussion groups or book shares would be helpful also. Additionally, by having some norms and guidelines in place, this implementation into any daily routine would be a much more effective exercise, and deeper comprehension conversations can be held with a well designed and organized structure for third graders (Boushey & Moser, 2014; Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

In thinking about what tools to include in my chart for this project, I considered what I would like to have in an organized structure. I also considered what would be helpful to a veteran teacher or a new teacher beginning their first year in a classroom. In doing so, I started making a list of items that would be helpful in all of the categories; Motivation and Interests, Building an Environment for Reading, Growing Fluency and Comprehension, and Personal Reading Time. According to the research, finding a
motivation to read and providing an environment fit for reading are extremely important in supporting readers who struggle. In order to identify struggling readers, knowing what to look for as a teacher and tracking their progress in fluency and comprehension will also serve useful (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

Reflecting on Donalyn Miller’s (2009) 40 book challenge, I wondered how this activity could be adapted to third graders. And if so, how could this be done mid-school year? Following this reflection, I had a list of ideas that paired with the research in chapter two and constructed a version of this challenge, including it as a tool within the chart along with supports to accompany the challenge. This strategy/activity is found under the first topic called motivation and interests along with other motivational strategies adapted from the Journal Article Motivating Struggling Readers: Three Keys to Success (Lyons, 2003; Padak & Potenza-Radis, 2010).

Under the second topic, building an environment for reading, examples and ideas on building a successful reading environment are included. These tools vary from classroom aesthetics, comfort, organization, expectations, and relationship building. This section provides support to grow a safe reading culture within a classroom including tools to help readers overcome negative emotions in reading (Lyons, 2003; Pinnell & Fountas, 2003).

The next topic, growing fluency and comprehension, includes a variety of activities and strategies to practice both reading fluency and comprehension. Here, valuable activities and strategies on building fluency are available with reader’s theater
strategies as well as tools for the paired partner, choral, and duet reading strategies (Allington, 2012; Clemente, 2010).

The final topic, Personal Reading Time, includes valuable tools for readers such as bookmarks with tools to track reading progress, comprehension strategies, and tools for readers to grow their reading independently. Since this is an activity that should be done daily, strategies on set up, or classroom norms, are included to ensure successful implementation Boushey & Moser, 2014; Miller, 2009; Pinnell & Fountas, 2003).

**Audience and Setting**

The table chart that I created includes proven strategies by well-researched authors as included in chapter two of this capstone paper. The purpose of this chart is for the use by teachers who have struggling readers, particularly in third grade or similar elementary-aged students. It is also designed to serve teachers looking for motivating resources and activities to continue student growth and success in reading. New teachers, in particular, may find this chart to be a helpful resource as the first year in education is often very overwhelming and it is often difficult to know where to start in the search for needed or supplemental resources.

The activities and strategies in the interactive chart are aimed specifically at third-grade students. The grade-level targets and benchmarks are based on the DIBELS Next guidelines (University of Oregon, 2012), which is currently the adopted guideline for reading fluency assessment used by the school in which I am currently employed. Additional age-appropriate activities, standards, and documents are based on Minnesota State Reading Standards as of the 2019-2020 school year (State of Minnesota, 2011).
Timeline

The creation of this document took place over the course of several months. The initial ideas were fostered during the research of literature in early November of 2019. Soon after, I discussed the best way to create and format a document such as this chart with the staff at the Hamline University Writing Center after considering the idea with mentors at both work and school. I was told that this type of document would work in any application and that most were quite user friendly, so my first attempt at creating the document was in a Google document format that could be changed later on if needed. On February 17th, 2020, I began the document outline for the interactive table chart followed by a column to describe why the particular headings were important. The first draft had only four rows which solely housed the four key topics being entertained.

Over the next seven weeks, I attempted and changed software applications three more times before finding the right application to display what I had in mind for the appearance and organization of the project. The first draft was a Google document that was quickly changed to Apple Numbers, then to Microsoft Excel, and then finally to Microsoft Word which would ultimately display the document exactly how I had envisioned it. I created a test document in Microsoft Word on April 3rd with interactive links, emailed them to peers with instructions to test the links, and then finally decided that Microsoft Word was going to be the best option. I was able to construct and format the document in a way that I felt had a cleaner look, and the application was much more user friendly which was a big part of my goal.
While testing software options, I continued writing and building the chart. On February 20th, I determined the categories of the chart that would span the top of the document to include target discipline, the significance of target discipline, tools and strategies to meet target discipline, and outcome. I felt that these categories would serve as the most useful guide for the topics included.

The first sub-heading of the interactive table chart, motivation and interests, was expanded on February 24th, 2020 with four target disciplines along with the significance of these target disciplines. Within the week that followed, I searched for and created the tools and strategies that I wanted to include for this topic. The target disciplines included student interests, reading challenges to create interest, book talks, and celebrating reading. The outcome was the “why” behind the target discipline much like a learning standard.

The second sub-heading of the interactive table chart, building an environment for Reading, was created on March 1st, 2020. This topic included three target disciplines to include flexible seating, norms, and expectations of students during reading time with or without partners, and a calm environment to help foster engagement and minimize distraction. Once these were listed, I spent time finding resources that I could use for strategies and tools within this topic and matched them to the expected outcomes.

The third sub-heading of the interactive chart, growing fluency and comprehension, was created on March 7th, 2020. The topic includes five target disciplines which include fluency, reading comprehension for both fiction and non-fiction texts, book study information, and a targeted discipline for supporting parents. Within
these target disciplines under the topic, growing fluency and comprehension, numerous resources for practicing fluency, finding fluency passages, and building student comprehension exist and have been well organized for ease of use and understanding. All target disciplines have tools and resources to accompany them along with the expected outcome.

The final subheading, personal reading time, was created on March 14th, 2020. While there are only two subheadings under the target disciplines, they hold valuable information with seven links to supportive tools that help to foster independent reading, show the importance of reading 20 minutes each day, and helpful tips on how to read anywhere on a busy schedule. The expected outcomes under this topic foster daily reading independence along with fluency and comprehension growth.

**Measuring Effectiveness**

In order to measure the effectiveness of these tools and supports, data would need to be kept on students when checking fluency and comprehension of a passage. The effectiveness of each will likely vary between individual students as well. However, research has been done to prove the success of these strategies as identified in chapter two. Additionally, reading fluency checks can be done by teachers at their discretion and as frequently as needed depending on the individual student support needs. It is important to remember here, though, that measuring effectiveness is like measuring success which can be an individual and internal emotion or feeling of positivity (Lyons, 2003). In my personal opinion, if a student goes from being a non-reader who is completely uninterested in reading with little to no confidence, to reading confidently at a first-grade
level and enjoying books and reading, this accomplishment is absolutely a success. While a student may not be reading on grade level, they are on their way to reading success when they are growing in their confidence and making leveled progress (Lyons, 2003).

**Summary**

With what I have learned from the reading of the literature in chapter two, my third-grade students will have a defined and uninterrupted reading time each day in an environment that is inviting and supportive of their needs. In my interactive chart, I have provided ways to implement both of these strategies unique to each teacher’s classroom. I may be more sensitive to students’ past experiences, but I still have high expectations for students that they will still grow in their reading. I will continue to hold high standards and encourage students to have these of themselves as well. According to research, students who are successful readers have greater opportunities for productive and successful adulthood (Kids count special report, 2010). Thus, I will use these strategies and tools to grow each reader and promote successful and fluent third-grade readers. Additionally, I will share my findings with other educators who wish to receive suggestions for their struggling readers.

I feel that the interactive table chart that I have created will serve as a very helpful tool in answering my question: *What personalized tools and reading strategies best support struggling third-grade readers?* Identifying topics and tools to motivate students, both intrinsically and extrinsically in order to create and develop a reading interest in struggling readers allows students to get excited about reading. Creating and developing an environment for reading sets students up to be successful and aware of their
expectations. A variety of additional fluency and comprehension tools that support readers at their level allow teachers to continue monitoring the growth of students. Providing individualized time for students to practice their skills independently is another strategy to support struggling third-grade readers.

In chapter four, a recap and reflection were provided on the project as a whole. A review of how the research question came to exist opens the chapter followed by important information learned from the research. Finally, the purpose of the completed project including its intended use and limitations are reviewed along with the benefits of this project to the teaching profession.
CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

As I reflected back on how the research project question for this capstone came to exist, I recalled the desire to research an area that was not something that was easy for me. I wanted this experience to be an opportunity to grow in my teaching and one for great learning. Reading, for me, has been an immense subject to teach year after year with a substantial amount of differentiation due to significant learning gaps in achievement. Because of this, I determined that my topic would focus on the subject of reading.

In working to narrow the topic, the significant number of readers who continue to enter third grade far below the grade level reading benchmark were considered. Over the past five years, 66% of incoming 3rd graders assigned to my homeroom class were below the grade-level reading fluency benchmark (University of Oregon Center for Teaching and Learning, 2012). Based on the DIBELS Next reading fluency assessment used in our district, the benchmark for third-grade students entering third grade was 99 words per minute with 99% accuracy. According to the University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning (2012), of the 66% of students below the benchmark, more than half of them fall into the intensive needs category putting students at risk of not being able to catch up to their grade-level peers. Over the past five years of teaching in the third grade, 35% of my incoming students were in this intensive, or “at-risk” category needing intensive interventions and support. The data from my own classes over the past five years are in line with the statistic that 37% of fourth-grade students are one or more years
behind in grade-level reading proficiency (Rasinski, Paige, Rains, Stewart, Julovich, Prenkert, & Nichols, 2017). Because this has been an ongoing scenario, I wanted to learn more about how to better support these readers. The desire to do so sparked the following research question: What personalized tools and reading strategies best support struggling third-grade readers?

Chapter Overview

This chapter is a reflection of the capstone research project that was completed as a result of this project. First, an overview was provided on how the capstone question came to be followed by an analysis of the literature that was reviewed and synthesized for the literature review. This analysis included why this capstone question is of importance. Next, the implications and limitations for the chapter are described followed by an account of the project that has been completed as a result of the research. Finally, the successes and setbacks that took place for this project were reviewed.

Literature Review

In chapter two, determining the importance of why reading by third-grade matters was not meant to put teachers in a panic, but rather to understand why reading skills are critical by third grade in school. The numbers are directly linked to statistics such as dropping out of school and graduation rates. Third graders reading below grade level are six times more likely to drop out of school or fail to graduate at the same time as their proficient peers (Adams & Alexander, 2012). Because of these statistical facts, supporting third-grade readers who struggle is more important than just preparing students for the fourth grade.
The next section, building teacher capacity for reading, describes the developmental stages in reading as well as the connection between fluency and comprehension. The appropriate developmental stage for third graders is the intermediate stage (Gehsmann, 2012) where students are understanding increased word knowledge and are able to decode words and word meanings such as words with affixes (Gehsmann, 2012). The relationship between vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and fluency is also discussed in chapter two as is forming appropriate instruction based on assessments (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012). Some writers argue the need for assessments stating reader enjoyment and practice should be the overall focus to grow comprehension and fluency (Allington, 2012; Brown, Schell, Denton, & Knode, 2019; Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2012).

The section that follows describes the importance of reading motivation and how experience and self-efficacy impact student reading performance. A powerful statement by Carol Lyons (2012) that “the brain always gives priority to emotion” is important for teachers to remember when encouraging students to step outside of their comfort zone in reading. Motivation and emotion play an important role in learning how to read (Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010). Knowledge about what motivates a student such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are an important piece to encouraging and developing readers (Miller; 2009; Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

While there are various methods and intervention approaches to support struggling readers, the most evident approach is simply reading time (Allington, 2012; Miller, 2009). Carving out a block of time each day for reading is critical for getting
students to read authentically. The use of time, the quality of time, and the amount of time all play a substantial role in the reading success of students. Studies show that higher-achieving students read about triple the amount of time than their peers who are lower achieving (Allington, 2012). This theory was mentioned numerous times in various articles. Along with time to read, students who are provided with an environment-specific to reading are better able to focus and engage in reading activities (Allington, 2012; Miller, 2009).

Along with an environment to read, time to read, and support from educators, parents, and guardians of students can be very helpful resources to struggling reading students as well. The education and involvement of parents is an important tool that proves to be successful in the growth of student readers. Research does show a connection between overall student achievement and parent involvement in the reading of their children (Brown, Schell, Denton, & Knode, 2019).

Educators must be aware that the majority of reading problems do not belong to the child, but rather exist due to the teaching system’s inadequacy to find the appropriate way to teach the child (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009). Where there is difficulty is not always a disability. Proper support and interventions are likely to get students with reading problems back on track (Pinnell & Fountas, 2009).

Implications

The goal for this project was to first discover and understand what the most important strategies were to help and support third-grade readers who struggle with reading. What was learned in doing the literature review for this project was somewhat
different than what was expected. While it was expected that strategies such as sight word practice and decoding strategies would be the most prevalent of tools, it was learned that emotion and motivation are more powerful than any other targeted inadequacy because emotion takes precedence over all else. An individual’s ability to feel emotion is linked to decoding, symbol development, and information processing (Lyons, 2012). According to research, negative experiences are remembered and can cause anxiety and fear just as positive experiences can trigger excitement and happiness (Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010). Motivation and emotions play an active role in learning how to read as well. Fostering positive experiences and overcoming negative experiences are critical strategies for learners who are struggling to be successful readers (Lyons, 2012; Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010). For example, anxiety is a powerful emotion that can render a child frozen in fear. This negative emotion can hinder the brain’s ability to process information. Positive emotions, however, expand the brain’s abilities to retain information and increase productivity (Jalongo & Hirsh, 2010). With this knowledge, teachers can understand the importance of growing readers in a safe, trusted, and positive environment for which learning can take place.

In addition to positive emotional experiences, the allowance of daily uninterrupted reading time to practice reading skills is essential to reading development (Allington, 2012; Miller, 2009). During the extremely busy daily schedules with the large lists of content to cover and rigorous demands of schools and districts, teachers are often forced to find ways to fit every lesson in for their students and get caught up in the rush of everyday teaching. However, when teachers present skills and strategies to students, it
is important that students are allowed to practice these skills in order for the improvement and growth of the skills. Therefore, the allowance of daily uninterrupted reading time to practice reading fluency skills, comprehension skills, develop a love for reading, and to increase reading stamina is essential to reading development (Allington, 2012; Miller, 2009). We can not expect students to be good readers if they are not given the time needed to practice the skill (Miller, 2009). This was by far the most simple of solutions and the most profound realization that I took away doing this research.

**Limitations**

Throughout the groundwork, analysis, and synthesis of this research question and project, there were no limitations restricting the information or outcome of the work. However, the implementation of the strategies provided could have potential limitations. It is possible that some teachers may not have the support of administration to use tools outside of district-provided curriculum. It is also possible that teachers may be hesitant to try something new and unfamiliar to them. Many teachers do not feel adequately prepared to use particular strategies that experts deem necessary to help students who struggle. Student motivation and engagement, for example, could be quite challenging for teachers depending on individual students that they are working with. While this tool for teachers may not be easily implemented for all, it is my hope that it will at least serve as useful with the information that it provides.

**Project Overview**

The idea that I had for my project was to create a usable chart with supportive tools to help grow and support struggling readers. The chart was to be useful in my own
teaching as well as an optional tool for teachers with similar needs for support. In addition, teachers new to the profession, or mentees, would also benefit from this tool and its contents.

While many districts require teachers to use their district adopted curriculum with fidelity, I wanted tools to use as complements rather than supplements to augment curriculum. With this in mind, I felt that an interactive table chart of supports and ideas to use where needed would be an appropriate choice for a project.

First, I determined the most important factors found in my research to support struggling readers. The four main topics of the interactive table chart were created in order to represent the research and provide knowledge to users. The four main topics: Reading and Interest, Building an Environment for Reading, Growing Fluency and Comprehension, and Personal Reading Time.

Next, the column headings were determined in order to provide guidance and purpose for the topics provided. The first heading, target discipline, defines what the task or action is under each main topic. The heading that follows, the significance of target discipline, describes the purpose and reasoning behind the target discipline. The next column heading, tools and strategies to meet target discipline, includes specific resources or tools which can be used by teachers with their students. All of these items are interactive links, to be selected by the user, which open up into purposeful descriptions for the target discipline or resourceful tasks and activities to support the target discipline. Most of these activities, supports, or tools were created by me based on need or purpose backed by the research described in chapter two. There are more than 40 supportive tools
and strategies that are connected to the table chart by interactive links in this column. The fourth and final heading, outcome, provides a target goal to be accomplished by completing or using the target discipline in the first column.

**Successes and Setbacks**

As I began researching books on the topic of reading and literacy, I knew that it was a broad topic so I expected to find a lot of ways to support struggling readers. I quickly became aware that this topic was too broad. Since I am currently teaching third grade and have the most experience with third-grade students, I felt that narrowing the topic to supporting third-grade readers specifically was an adequate choice. I feel that the overall development of this relatable topic and the project outcome were successful in growing me as a teacher and educator.

The rapid implementation of learnings from this research proved to be successful in my classroom already this school year. For example, I quickly implemented an uninterrupted reading time in my classroom. What I thought was covering this important strategy was our reading workshop station, “read to self.” However, the many distractions and interruptions associated with this time from other stations in the classroom were not providing the quality reading time that this strategy requires. Additionally, I discussed with students the many ways that they could find time to read when visitors popped into the room, when they finished work, or when waiting for disruption to pass. As students began taking advantage of these opportunities, we found that a bookmark reading log would serve useful to track those quick reading minutes and keep places for readers in
their books. Together, these strategies and tools worked well for students and allowed them to be more independent as well as accountable in their reading.

The outcome of the finished project is pleasing and I am confident that it will serve as useful to other third grade teachers or teachers in the intermediate grades as many of the materials and target disciplines are appropriate for those grades as well. There were times that I felt that my topic was too difficult because there was so much information, I did not know if I could sort it all out effectively or not. I do, however, feel confident in my resources and the conclusions drawn from their complementary associations.

I do not feel that there were any setbacks in my research since a learning experience is part of the process. Any items researched that did not seem to tie in well still had informative information relevant to my profession even if they did not seem like an appropriate fit as a reference for this particular purpose. The setbacks that were experienced in the creation of this project were all related to technology in the search for a suitable platform for which to arrange and display the project adequately. A significant amount of time went into the creation of the table chart in four different platforms before finding an appropriate fit. The creation and recreation was frustrating at the time, but once the results were displayed as desired and links worked successfully, the amount of work required for this part of the project was warranted.

Closing

The purpose of this chapter was to reflect on the development and construction of this capstone. It included reflection on the evolution of the research question, the
importance of the question, and the findings from the research conducted. Chapter four provided insight into the implications of the research and the lack of limitations within the project. The chapter also yielded a detailed description of the project along with successes and setbacks.

Upon deep reflection of the lengthy process of this capstone research and project, I do not consider any of the setbacks a hindrance. Rather, they were opportunities for learning. From my personal experiences from childhood to understanding emotions and motivation, to the creation of an appropriate environment, allowing students to read, and to the compilation of the finished product, I am confident in the outcome and success of this research and project.


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third-grade struggling readers. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 33*(6), 519-532.
doi:10.1080/10573569.2016.1250144

## APPENDIX

### Interactive Table Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Discipline</th>
<th>Significance of Target Discipline</th>
<th>Tools and Strategies to Meet Target Discipline</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading Motivation and Interest</strong></td>
<td>Knowing what interests a student reader allows teachers to offer books of interest. Students are intrinsically motivated to read and explore topics of interest.</td>
<td><strong>Student Reading Surveys</strong> to gain information about what students like.</td>
<td>Students explore, consider, and read books that interest them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Interests and Intrinsic Motivation</strong></td>
<td>Use of external motivators such as contests for the most minutes read or the most stories completed provides extrinsic motivation for students to read.</td>
<td><strong>20 Book Challenge</strong> Interactive learning website, MobyMax.com, offers <strong>Online Reading Challenge</strong> opportunities for students.</td>
<td>Student involvement in healthy competition encourages reading that may not otherwise occur. Allows exposure to various genres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading Challenge and Extrinsic Motivation</strong></td>
<td>Allows peers to provide feedback on books that might interest other readers. Allows student exposure to books that peers have enjoyed.</td>
<td><strong>Book Talk Information &amp; Ideas</strong> <strong>Book Talk Presentation Template</strong></td>
<td>Classmates and peers discover books that they may also enjoy but would not have discovered otherwise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Book Talks</strong></td>
<td>Providing excitement over reading and creating fun opportunities to enjoy reading books allows students to be more excited about books and reading in general.</td>
<td><strong>February is I Love to Read Month Reading Theme Day Ideas</strong></td>
<td>Students become excited for reading time and look forward to reading activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Building an Environment for Reading

| Flexible Seating | Providing a place to read other than a hard desk chair allows students to relax and enjoy the environment for reading. Allows students the freedom of choice and creates a bonus for reading time. | Reading Spots  
Flex Seating Options | Students become absorbed in the reading of their books. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Norms and Expectations | A foundation of norms provides students with appropriate expectations, how to be prepared, and how to ensure success during partner and group reading activities. | Reading Time Expectations  
Reading Group and Partner Norms | Fewer disruptions and quicker transitions. |
| Calm Environment | The creation of a safe, quiet, and relaxing environment provides students the opportunity to focus and engage in reading. | Calming Study Sounds  
Classical Music  
Calm and Peaceful Classroom Tips | Students engage in reading tasks with reduced distractions. |

### Growing Fluency and Comprehension

| Fluency Passages | By practicing oral reading fluency students will grow their rate, accuracy, and expression with the goal of meeting benchmark standards appropriate for age/grade level. Background knowledge is helpful especially for reluctant readers. | Practice and Measure Growth:  
Fluency Passages  
- ReadWorks.org  
- ReadingA-Z.com  
- Read Naturally  
Fluency Strategies and Activities  
Comprehension  
- ReadTheory.org  
- Raz-Plus.com | Student growth in oral reading fluency.  
Increased reading comprehension. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Non-Fiction Text | By understanding how to find vocabulary meanings, make predictions, and locate information, students will better comprehend what they read. Topics that interest the reader are encouraged for reluctant readers. | Informational Text Comprehension  
Informational Text Scavenger Hunt  
Fountas & Pinnell Instructional Level Expectations for Reading | Students grow understanding with non-fiction texts.  
Increase comprehension and fluency skills. |
| Fiction Texts | By understanding story structure and plot, students are able to better comprehend what they read. Topics that interest the reader are encouraged for reluctant readers. | Plot Map  
Character Traits  
Fountas & Pinnell Instructional Level Expectations for Reading | Students develop understanding of fictional text.  
Increase comprehension and fluency skills. |
| Book Study | Practice in literature comprehension is provided by use of predicting, inferencing, vocabulary, and story comprehension skills. | Complete book study guide for Mummies in the Morning by Mary Pope Osborne (Magic Tree House Series #3)  
Book Study Guide (for any book)  
Literature Response Questions | Students increase comprehension and fluency skills.  
Students gain skills through group discussion. |
| Parent Support | Helpful resources and tools provided for parents to utilize at home and guide them in understanding early literacy. | Tools for Parents  
Supports, Tips, and Strategies for Parents | Students benefit from increased support. Parents |
## Personal Reading Time

| Daily Uninterrupted Reading Time | Students encouraged to read at least 15-20 minutes each day during a designated reading time using good fit books to grow their reading fluency and comprehension. | Importance of 20 Minutes per Day  
Foster Independent Reading Success  
Reading Log for students to record 20 minutes/day.  
Bookmark Reading Log to be kept in student chapter book.  
Independent Reading Tools | Support reading enjoyment.  
Students grow comprehension and fluency skills.  
Students gain reading independence with teacher support. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Read Anywhere | Students hold the power to read during any given downtime but may need guidance to begin this routine before it becomes a healthy habit. | Reading Time and Place for busy students  
Best Places to Read | Students achieve 20 minutes of reading regardless of busy schedules. |