Lest I Forget: Case Studies in Listening to High School Students Struggling With Academic Literacy

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Lest I Forget: Case Studies in Listening to High School Students Struggling With
Academic Literacy

by

Lois M. Todd-Meyer

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
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Adolescents who struggle with the academic literacy demands of high school have often experienced years of frustration and even failure with literacy learning. School districts are now accountable for making sure all students achieve a prescribed level of proficiency as measured by standardized and performance assessments. How can educators best help adolescents who struggle with literacy reach a level of proficiency that will facilitate their success not only on standardized tests, but will also help them become engaged citizens of our democracy? The purpose of this study was to listen closely to high school students who were identified as struggling readers early in their experience with school. The intent was to gain insight about how these students view themselves as readers and learners. Understanding this about students can inform effective literacy instruction and intervention. Three students in my high school Reading Enrichment class agreed to participate in this case study research. I conducted multiple interviews with each student and took observation notes both in and outside of class. I also collected students’ artifacts. The data was first analyzed for each case. Then, through cross-case analysis of the educational biographies of all three participants, three
themes were identified that were present in all cases: the impact of elementary school literacy instruction and interventions, the importance to literacy interventions of a relationship with teachers based on mutual respect, and how standardized test-driven literacy instruction and interventions shapes students’ experience with literacy and with school. Implications for teachers, school administrators and policy makers are discussed as well as possibilities for future teacher-researcher case study research.
Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to my adviser, Dr. Stephen Swidler, for “steering the ship” of my dissertation journey. Steve was instrumental in helping me process and articulate the idea that understanding how students experience school, especially those who struggle with academic literacy, is an important element of providing the best education we can for all students. I thank Dr. Kathleen Wilson for providing me with valuable, expert insight into the complex world of literacy and reading instruction that informed my research on reading interventions and adolescent literacy. I also thank my committee members, Dr. Ted Hamann, and Dr. Julia Torquati for their input and suggestions that added clarity to my study.

This dissertation could not have happened without the students who participated in my study. I extend my wholehearted thanks to Sam, Cody and Steve, along with their parents, for trusting me to share how they experienced school and academic literacy. I also thank the hundreds of students who over the years have enriched my life as a teacher.

I deeply appreciate the support of my siblings, David and Marian, and their spouses, Kathleen and Sharon, as well as the support of my other sisters-in-law, both current and former. I also have many friends and colleagues whose words of encouragement helped keep me motivated through the writing process. To the other members of the cohort of CPED II, I cannot express how valuable it was to me to collaborate and share teaching experiences with all of you. I salute you all.
My parents, Phillips and Margaret (Hale) Todd exhibited unwavering love for my siblings and me, and steadfast support for any undertaking involving education that my brother, sister and I took on. They believed deeply in the purpose and power of education for every citizen in a democratic nation, and I felt they were my muses throughout the process of writing this dissertation. I am grateful for their legacy.

To Zachary and Nichole, my wonderful son and daughter, and to their significant others, Sami and Shawn, thank you for believing in me and for never letting up in providing encouragement. Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my beloved husband, Ron. You walked with me from the start of this journey, sharing my conviction that nothing is more important than working toward making sure we do not forsake our students, our nations’ most important resource. You have been and are my rock – thank you!
Preface

**Lest I Forget . . .** Schools and classrooms are busy places, and teachers begin every work week immersed in what needs to be accomplished academically by their students, as well as in what is left to be done from previous weeks. Planning, changing plans, assessing students, evaluating those assessments, teaching lessons, checking for understanding, thinking ahead to what the afternoon or evening’s extra-duty obligation might be. Time is of the essence and there is never enough time. The personhood of teachers and students can get overlooked during the shuffle of priorities.

In this busy world of education, the words, “know your students” have unfortunately become cliché and somewhat trivialized. Of course teachers and administrators understand it is important to know our students, but what exactly does that mean? All too often the scores students receive on their standardized assessments have become the criterion by which teachers are expected to know their students. Students’ strengths and weaknesses – all the data is nicely printed out, everything categorized in data groups on an easily accessed, easy to read document.

If this is the only way we “know” our students, we are rendering them a terrible disservice. In my experience school climate began to reflect a more depersonalized, testing focused, data-driven atmosphere since public education took on a business model of operation over the past 20 – 25 years. Students are now viewed as the “product” of our public education system, and subtle efforts to standardize children as we have standardized curricula concern me.
Resisting standardization takes effort on the part of teachers and administrators, but it is necessary effort lest we forget that the children we work for are as individual as snowflakes that drift down from the winter sky and blanket fields in winter. It is far too easy to be lulled into believing that a one-size-fits-all approach is the most cost-efficient and time-efficient way to approach the education of our students. It is also quite easy then to make a leap of judgment and assume that if a prescribed approach is not working with a student there must be something wrong with the student, not the curricula or the teaching methods. We do not work for the companies who produce curricula. Good teachers show up every day for their students because these students need the best we can offer as creative, informed, engaged educators.

Those involved in every facet of education must begin to include students’ voices, especially the voices of the students who struggle academically, in the decisions made about how we approach their education. We cannot assume that what is true for one child is true for the next, and what works well with one group of students will work well for a population of students in a different school, or for individual students who struggle with academic expectations. Standardized tests and assessments do have value and use, but do provide important information about the stories of the students who sit in our classrooms each day. Lest I forget . . . it is my hope that the stories of the three students who participated in my study will help us all remember that it is the students we work for. Their individual needs cannot be forgotten.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Listening to the Voice of Students who Struggle with Academic Literacy

During the fall semester of 2011, I had a brief moment of insight with a 15-year-old junior who was enrolled in both my English I and English II classes because he had previously failed both classes. I realize now this was a formative experience that provided the catalyst to produce the questions, or problem of practice, that informed my doctoral studies. This experience led to my decision to develop the three case studies that are the heart of my dissertation.

On an ordinary October day, Cooper, tall and rather hulking with dark brown hair, navigated the route to his desk at the back of the room without interacting with any of the other students who were chatting and jostling their way to their own desks. I took roll as a few students, hair still wet from quick showers after P.E class, darted in just after the tardy bell. Meanwhile, Cooper retrieved a book, along with the folder that held his reading log, from a shelf near my desk and settled into his assigned desk, which was next to mine. With his long legs stretched out to the side, he found his place in the book, reached over and selected a pencil from the container on my desk, and bent over his book, Tyrell, by Coe Booth (2007). With his hands over his ears he began to read.

While Cooper read, I facilitated a review of a recently completed vocabulary test with the rest of the students, and then started them in a discussion of an assigned short story, The Most Dangerous Game (Connell, 1924). Later that morning this scene with Cooper and his book repeated itself in my English II class as I worked with the other
students in this class as they planned and developed persuasive essays. When the bell rang at the end of English II, the room cleared quickly as the students hurried to get to the cafeteria for lunch. Except Cooper. He flipped ahead, saw that he had just one more page to finish the chapter, glanced at the clock, and kept reading.

The room was very quiet as I gathered the books and materials I needed for my senior dual-credit College English class meeting right after lunch. When Cooper finished the chapter and got up to put his things back on the shelf, I mentioned how impressed I was with how focused he has been while reading this book. With a rueful smile, tapping his chest with the closed book, he replied, “Ms. M, this book is about me.”

I looked at him quizzically, and asked him what he meant. Cooper gave me a brief, halting account of how he connected with the main character of the book, Tyrell, a 15 year old who lived with his mother and 7-year-old brother in a homeless shelter in Harlem. Cooper is white and has never been homeless, nevertheless, he told me how his life experience mirrored some of the difficulties and issues that Tyrell deals with in the story. Tyrell’s mother is often spaced out on drugs and ignores her sons. Cooper’s mother struggles with financial and emotional issues and a physical disability that was a result of a personal tragedy years before. Tyrell is tempted by the easy money he could make selling drugs on the street, but resists this and comes up with legal ways to earn money so he does not risk arrest and leaving his little brother with no one to care for him.

Cooper pointed to the probation ankle bracelet barely visible under the cuff of his low-slung jeans and explained how he is trying to cope with the consequences of his choice to turn to theft as a way to get money buy cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana. The
main character in the book does his best to live differently from other boys growing up on the mean streets of Harlem. Cooper told me that he wanted to get his life together too. He said he was learning from Tyrell’s struggles that people can change and do not have to stay on a negative path through life.

His account was brief and poignant, likely the most I have ever heard Cooper express about anything he had read in one of my classes. It was one of those moments of textual connection that you hope for as a teacher. As he left the room, I thought to myself, “Wow, he is reading this book, and he gets it.” By this I mean he is reading the book for a purpose not defined by just mastering isolated skills connected to standardized tests, but reading to think, to learn, and to grow. Cooper might not be able to articulate this complex purpose for his reading, but when I listened to his account of how the experiences of the character Tyrell spoke to him, I realized that perhaps for the first time since I had known him as his teacher his experience with reading was providing him with knowledge and information he could use to have a positive influence on his life.

**Why Differentiate Instruction for Cooper?**

My approach to my instruction for Cooper in my English classes came as a result of a mindful attempt to pay attention to how my students who struggle with academic literacy experience school. I particularly began to be aware of their responses to the more complex academic literacy expectations of high school, and then to adapt my instruction to meet their needs. These expectations include how well students can connect new information to their existing knowledge, how they determine whether they understand the text they read, and whether they can interpret the text and draw logical conclusions.
I began doctoral study and research because I sensed that what happens in many secondary classrooms fails to match the literacy needs of adolescent students who struggle with academic literacy. I wanted to find out why I was seeing, after more than 25 years of teaching English, what appeared to be a growing number of students who are able to read but struggle with and resist academic reading. I also wanted to find out whether other teachers and researchers were seeing the same trend. I wanted to understand better ways to facilitate instruction for students who, like Cooper, had developed patterns of resisting academic reading and to hopefully reverse this trend. I wanted to listen to my students who struggled with literacy expectations and about what they had to say about their experience with school and with the methods of instruction they experienced.

As I researched various aspects of adolescent literacy I learned that there are multi-layered reasons why adolescents struggle with academic reading. Some students struggle with fluency (Lewis & Reader, 2009) or with difficult text structure (Wilhelm & Smith, 2007). Others resist academic reading because the content does not capture their interest (Lenters, 2006). Students who struggle with academic reading often do not have an extensive knowledge of vocabulary, lack the ability to decode difficult words and have few strategies to figure out what words mean (Curtis, 2004). The reasons inevitably involve the individual student’s experience and academic biography in reading instruction.

I had this research in mind when I looked at my class schedule for the upcoming school year in 2011-2012. When I saw that Cooper would be repeating both English I
and English II, classes I taught that he had previously failed, I wondered whether it made any sense for me to repeat methods and curricula with him that had not worked for him twice before. Like all of my regular education students, Cooper is clearly capable of learning and able to read in the conventional sense, however, he had not passed an English class since 6th grade. I approached my principal before school began that year to get her support to try a different approach with him. She agreed in large part because after having tried for a year to work with Cooper and his parents to improve his academic performance, she had run out of strategies to try with him.

On the first day of the school year I sat down with Cooper and explained that he would be reading books he selected for himself. If he could not find books in the school library that interested him I told him we would search for titles and obtain them through inter-library loan. I had recently taken a class in young adult literature and the text, *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* (Nilsen & Donelson, 2008) has hundreds of book titles and accompanying synopses of these books from various genres and topics from which to select.

Since Cooper would physically be in my English I and II classroom but pursuing a personalized course of study, we worked out a system of communicating both from home and in the classroom through an educational website called Edmodo (Edmodo, n.d.). This interactive online teaching application uses a format similar to a popular social media site and facilitates communication between teachers and students.

At first Cooper was ambivalent about finding books to read. I realized that he needed to have the process of searching for a book that would be of interest modeled for
him, because it wasn’t something he had much experience with. He had no favorite authors and had never learned how to search by topic. I suggested that he try reading a graphic novel, *Pedro and Me*, by Judd Winick, a book I had recently read for my summer class.

Cooper agreed to read this book because he said the graphic illustrations appealed to him. While he was reading the book he began to open up a bit and we communicated, both through the medium of Edmodo, and in brief face-to-face conversations, about the sensitive subject matter of the book, a true story of a young gay man and his unsuccessful battle with AIDS. However, when Cooper selected and began to read *Tyrell*, and later *Bronxwood*, both by Coe Booth (2007, 2011), I realized that something had clicked for him.

*Bronxwood* is Booth’s (2011) sequel to *Tyrell* (2007). Both books are raw in their depictions of the consequences of absentee parents, teen sex, drug use and poverty, and the stories are told in the frank, expletive rich inner city street language of adolescents. In spite of having grown up in a small town in the Midwest, Cooper evidently felt a connection to the world and people portrayed in these books, and in two months I saw him read with more concentration than in the previous two years I had had him in class.

This connection he felt with these stories helped me know Cooper the person a little bit better. Among other issues, I realized he was trying to establish his place in a world where he had little guidance from the adults in his life at home, and little respect for what counsel he received from the adults he encountered in school. This knowledge helped me understand how important it was for me to continue to work to establish an
atmosphere of mutual trust in order for Cooper to be able to improve his academic work. I sensed that this would not be an easy task, but nothing would be gained if I did not try.

**My Problem of Practice**

My experience with Cooper was one of a number of experiences I have had with students who struggle with academic literacy that reinforced my understanding that how a teacher approaches his/her work with these students is critical to whether they experience success. The questions that triggered the foundation of my study are: How can I help students in my classes who struggle with academic literacy? How do these students view themselves as readers and as learners, and how does this impact their learning? How can knowing this about my students inform my approach to aiding them in gaining skill in academic literacy?

Parker Palmer’s words, in *The Courage to Teach* (Palmer & Scribner, 2007), resonate with me because of his understanding of the importance of experiencing the world as it is, not as we see it based on our own limited experience and biases that often result from our experience. Palmer points out, “We cannot see what is ‘out there’ merely by looking around. Everything depends on the lenses through which we view the world. By putting on new lenses, we can see things that would otherwise remain invisible” (p. 26). I knew of some of the difficulties Cooper dealt with in school. I had heard other teachers speak of him as a “lazy waste of space” and as someone who “our tax dollars would be paying for the rest of his life.” I was not sure if he had ever experienced a mutually respectful relationship with a teacher, and it was clear to me that I needed to look at Cooper through a lens different from what these other teachers used in order to
find a better way to support his literacy needs. I needed to view Cooper and other
students who struggle with academic literacy as individuals of worth and as students who
deserve the best instruction I can provide that would meet their individual needs.

There is no ignoring the fact that high school students who struggle with literacy
can be challenging to teach. From my experience teaching English I have had a number
of students who resist any engagement with literacy expectations and rarely prepare for
class. During the class time I provide for students to read assigned literature, or to work
on vocabulary assignments and other activities, these students are often restless. They
might get up to sharpen a pencil, get a tissue to blow their nose, sign out to use the
restroom, see the school nurse, or claim the need to check with the coach about an
upcoming game. Not only does this avoidance behavior keep these students from doing
their assignments, it also can disrupt the classroom environment by distracting others in
the class.

Often, these students’ test scores indicate that they read below grade level. I am
not surprised. I have proctored several standardized testing sessions for students, and
watched as some randomly filled in the bubbles and closed their test booklets long before
the allotted time was up. Observing students who struggle with academic literacy interact
with these tests taught me that there is “A difference between what you can measure and
what you want to know” (McArdle, 2014). Because some students choose not to engage
with standardized tests, their test scores do not reflect much valid information about their
academic ability.
In reality, by their nature, standardized test scores provide limited information about what educators need to know about the young people in our schools who crowd the hallways between classes, and who sit in our classrooms with varying degrees of interest (Ravitch, 2010). Only students can provide us with information we need to know. Their experiences with school and their voices are important, and we must learn to listen to their unique stories in order to gain the valuable insights they have to offer us about how to best meet their individual academic literacy needs - insights impossible to gain from simply looking at test scores.

The Background of Why I Pursued My Study

Finding efficacious ways to address literacy deficits in adolescents is challenging and this challenge does not lend itself to tidy solutions. Because of time constraints that teachers experience and budget constraints that school districts face, school officials find it tempting to turn to easily implemented and readily assessed scripted interventions. My district was no exception. In 2009, recognizing the need for additional support for students who struggled with academic literacy, my principal asked me to teach a reading intervention class for high school students. Because I had no previous experience with teaching students how to read he sent me to several training sessions for marketed curricula that area professional development coordinators assured him would provide a scientifically based, cost effective curriculum for the proposed reading intervention class. Two training sessions were held at our area Educational Service Unit, and one at Boys Town in Omaha, NE. An espoused benefit to one of these programs was that it was not
necessary for schools to provide certified teachers to implement the program. Anyone could administer the script and therefore more students could be served, minimizing cost.

This was my first introduction to “teacher-proof packages wherein the preference is for noncontamination by teachers’ presence” (Aoki, 1992, p. 24). When I heard the trainer express that professionally certified teachers were not necessary to successfully raise student test scores it went against every instinct I had about the role of professional teachers in working with struggling students. Why would any teacher or administrator feel it is a benefit to turn over the education of students who need the best instruction to people who only need to know how to read a script?

I experienced three different trainings about how to administer three different scripted or direct instruction approaches to reading intervention that were conducted by individuals who were paid and trained by the companies who developed and marketed the curricula. These interventions were Corrective Reading (Corrective Reading, 2008), REWARDS (REWARDS n.d.), and Reading is FAME (Curtis & Longo, 1999). I recognized some merit in these methods, for example REWARDS (Reading Excellence Word Attack and Rate Development Strategies) claims to help students attain strategies to learn meanings of new multisyllabic words. I understand and accept that word recognition and fluency are both important facets of academic literacy (DeVries, 2011; Caldwell & Leslie 2013). However, none of the three addressed the reality that different learners have different needs, and Corrective Reading and REWARDS are highly scripted, disallowing teacher discretion in how they are implemented.
Reflecting the prevailing testing culture in education, all of the programs I was introduced to also included standardized assessments that are to be administered regularly to chart students’ progress in the covered skills. Narrow approaches to reading intervention that focus solely on easily tested skill sets fail to address the fact that determining whether a student has achieved a sufficient level of academic literacy involves much more than looking at a score on an assessment.

Higher level thinking skills such as analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing as noted by Underwood and Pearson (2004) as necessary to perform “the higher order cognitive work required for deep learning of content through reading” (p. 136), are difficult to assess in the multiple choice question format found on standardized tests (Gallagher, 2009; Moore & Cunningham, 2006). Complicating the situation, research indicates that for many adolescents there is a growing lack of connection between the literacies of their daily lives and the literacy expectations of high school, and post-secondary education (Alvermann, 2009). For example, adolescents busy with the demands of instant messaging, web browsing and online chatting have little patience with reading traditional text, especially if they struggle with this form of reading, a skill that continues to be necessary in academic literacy (p. 21). Helping struggling students develop more sophisticated text reading ability is critical.

Another concern I had was that none of the curricula took into consideration the individuality of students, and were designed for an adult to administer to a group of students all at the same time and at the same pace. When I questioned one of the trainers about adapting the script to the needs of individual students, she became visibly frustrated
with me, and told me quite firmly that following the script and methods with fidelity was vital to student success. I became convinced that if I used any of these commercially produced curricula as my only method of literacy intervention it would not meet the needs of the students I knew would be candidates for enrollment in my class. Using a scripted intervention and drilling students on specific reading skill sets would not make them want to read. Students need to experience methods and learn strategies that can help them develop identities as readers and as students.

**The importance of students having an academic identity.** For adolescents, developing academic literacy skills facilitates their ability to establish an academic identity, or a sense of themselves as “studious, intellectual kinds of people who connect with school” (Moore & Cunningham, 2006, p. 139). Adolescents need to be able to participate in academic activities with confidence and assurance in order to develop the skills and emotional maturity needed to succeed in college and/or a job or a profession. Far too often, students will compensate for low academic literacy ability rather than work to improve it (Springer, Wilson, & Dole, 2014).

Students who struggle can also experience school as an unfriendly, even threatening environment. To avoid experiencing failure students often develop sophisticated avoidance/resistance techniques as part of their academic agency, the choices and decisions they make about how and in what way they interact with the academic expectations of high school (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009; Moore & Cunningham, 2006). These choices often include their (and their parents) finding creative ways to get the grade that will allow them to pass classes, but over time these
avoidance techniques exacerbate the difficulties struggling students have with academic expectations.

Situations such as Cooper’s involve students virtually shutting down. When I planned interventions for him I had to consider much more than what his dismal standardized test scores indicated about his reading ability. Providing a learning environment where struggling students can develop positive academic agency and gain the confidence needed to make constructive choices that will enhance their academic identity and literacy should be an integral element of secondary school reading intervention programs.

Since none of the scripted intervention programs for which I received training provided this scope, I asked my principal if I could design a personalized approach to the reading intervention class. He agreed and I began to search to know more about comprehensive approaches of support for students who struggle with academic literacy. This search eventually led me to doctoral study at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, in CPED, the Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate. With the guidance of and collaboration with professors and other doctoral students I began a journey of discovery.

**Research Questions**

My initial research focused on learning about the many effective methods of reading intervention for adolescents so I could personalize interventions for students’ individual literacy needs. This study of methods and strategies informed both my classroom teaching, and the development of my reading intervention class for secondary students, which I called Reading Enrichment. This study of methods and strategies that
work well with adolescents led me to literature that focuses on the complex aspects of adolescent literacy. Chapter 2 is a survey of research on adolescent literacy as well as research that explores the effects on literacy education of the No Child Left Behind legislation, and research that applies to student motivation. Understanding what motivates students is an important element of understanding how to support those who have experienced years of frustration with academic expectations.

In the NCLB data-driven environment of public education, the idea of how important it is to develop an understanding of how students experience school has been pushed aside by the focus on assessments and on the claims of commercially produced reading and literacy programs. I discovered that no matter how effective an intervention program is deemed, based on the claims of those who market curricula with what they present as scientific research, individual students’ results may not reflect the curriculum’s touted level of effectiveness, regardless of whether the curriculum is delivered with fidelity (Allington, 2013). A one-size-fits all approach to literacy instruction does not have research to support its effectiveness (Allington 2013).

Determining what approach will work best for each student demands a critical first step of learning to know our students. Learning about students’ backgrounds, personalities and learning preferences takes the emphasis away from test results and gives teachers the insights needed to provide each student with the best education possible, including support for individual learning needs.

Gaining knowledge about individual students’ experience, especially those students who struggle with and resist academic reading and writing, leads me to the
question: How do these students view themselves as readers and learners? Exploring this can “affirm and actively sponsor the voices of the student, voices that have long been absent from educational research and policy” (Dhunpath, 2000, p. 544). Chapter 3 surveys the process and the value of qualitative teacher research as an avenue of understanding the student experience. “Almost by definition, teacher research is case study – the unit of analysis is typically the individual child, the classroom, or the school” (Lytle & Cochran-Smith, 1992, p. 466, as cited in Rust, 2009, pp. 1883-1884). Developing case studies of the students we teach is a natural way to approach understanding students as learners and to use this information to facilitate effective instruction for each student.

**Organization of the Study**

Based upon what I have learned from my experience with students like Cooper who struggle with academic literacy, I chose to explore how I could best help current and future students enrolled in my Reading Enrichment class. After I selected students from the class who agreed to participate in my study, I felt it was important to understand how each of the participants viewed himself as a reader and as a learner in order to gain insight into how I could best address their literacy needs. I decided to gain this knowledge through the method of case study research and to focus on their perceptions of their experiences with school and with literacy instruction and expectations.

Case studies, written in the form of narrative educational biographies of three students from my Reading Enrichment class, comprise Chapters 4-6. The stories of Sam, Cody, and Steve are constructed from extensive personal interviews conducted in the
spring semester of 2013, along with field notes and artifacts from the same time period. Because of the inherent nature of student/teacher connections in small rural schools, I interacted with these students every day, both in and outside of school and during extra-curricular activities. Thus I was able to include informal perceptions of each in their educational biographies. These narrative educational biographies are “a kind of heuristic device that speaks directly to familiar nearby concerns, even as it raises questions about them” (Barone & Eisner, 2006, p. 98). As the core of a cross case study analysis, the biographies examine how each student perceives his experiences with school and how each understands his motivation to succeed academically in an area where he has been labeled as struggling. Their voices are framed within the context of research that examines the curricula and interventions that schools adopt to address students’ reading deficits because of the ever present focus on testing as a way to evaluate student literacy success.

Participants

**Sam.** Sam, a skilled athlete, is a 17 year-old sophomore who, in spite of a tremendous sense of self-motivation in many aspects of his life, struggles with reading comprehension and with composing the writing assignments required in some of his high school classes. His long-term goals include attending a four-year college, and he is aware that he needs to improve his academic literacy skills. He decided to sign up for Reading Enrichment as a way to facilitate his desire to improve academically.

**Cody.** Cody is a tall, quiet, shy 16 year-old who raises prize-winning cattle on his family’s farm. Cody is a sophomore who actually enjoys reading books that interest him,
but struggles to comprehend academic texts. Cody needs time to be able to read at his own pace, and when he gets frustrated with assignments he tends to give up. He took Reading Enrichment as a freshman, and decided to take it a second year so he could continue to benefit from individualized literacy support and to gain more confidence in his academic literacy skills.

**Steve.** Steve is a freshman. He is a quiet, sensitive, intelligent 15 year old who says he loves listening to and playing music, skateboarding, BMX racing, and playing football. Steve has experienced school in both urban and rural districts and struggles with academic reading and writing expectations, primarily because he says the subjects do not interest him, so he feels little motivation to complete assignments.

**Insights from Case Study Research**

These three case studies provide for a cross-case study analysis that examines three common themes that emerged from the case study students’ experience. The first of these themes examines each student’s perception of his elementary experiences with academic literacy and how these experiences influenced his motivation to perform well academically in high school. A second common theme that emerged was whether the students’ perceived experience with the academic expectations of school and with their teachers is positive and nurturing, and how this shaped their performance. The final thread examines how these students’ literacy experiences were shaped by something completely out of their control. This thread addresses the impact of the assessment driven literacy curriculum that was chosen by their school district because of the
emphasis on standardized assessments that emerged after the No Child Left Behind legislation.

Chapter 8, the conclusion of this dissertation, discusses how teachers who work with struggling students can use the insights gained from this study to explore a comprehensive, individualized approach to instruction and intervention by implementing methods and strategies that focus on the specific needs of each student. The discussion of this study will also inform administrators and policy makers and provide them with insight about how academic and school policy decisions affect the learning experiences of students who struggle with academic expectations. It invites the reader to understand what can be gained from listening to the students we are committed to serve.
Chapter 2

Why Study the Academic Literacy Lives of Three Rural High School Boys?

I made my decision to examine the literacy experiences of three students who were identified as struggling with academic literacy because of my search for efficacious ways to facilitate the academic growth of all my students who struggle with academic literacy. The search for ways to help adolescents who struggle with academic literacy is one that is the subject of a body of scholarly research based on concerns about adolescent literacy that includes works by Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris (2008), Beers (2003), Gallagher (2009), Jetton and Dole (2004), Beers, Probst, and Rief (2007), and Christenbury, Bomer, and Smagorinsky (2009). These works are among those I will examine in my literature review.

I also chose to focus on the lived school experience of struggling students as a way to provide students an opportunity to express their voice about their experience with academic literacy, and to provide educators with an opportunity to listen to this voice. Many adolescents feel disengaged and sometimes alienated from their teachers and school environments because students feel they are often viewed as the source of many problems in our schools. “The consequence of this perception is that it limits the [academic] expectations not only of adults but also of adolescents” (Mitra (2008), p. 1). I chose to try to find ways to help my students by examining the scholarly research and by validating each student’s school experience with academic literacy. I wondered what insights I might gain that could inform the methods and strategies I could use to support their academic growth.
What I learned from the stories of the three students who are the focus of my case studies exemplifies the complexities involved when teachers accept the challenge of working with adolescents who struggle with the academic expectations of school. For example, the stories of Sam, Cody and Steve show us that students who struggle with reading do not always come from disadvantaged backgrounds. All three of these students have at least one parent who is a college graduate, and all of them had exposure at a young age to books and came from home environments that placed value on reading and other forms of literacy. Nevertheless, all three were labeled as struggling readers very early in their school experience.

Exploring ideas and strategies that can support the different needs of these students, as well as those of struggling students who have their own unique backgrounds and experiences with school, is necessary in order to provide the environment conducive to these students becoming self-motivated and eventual active, contributing members of society. Students who fail in school are too often unable to find meaningful work and contribute to their communities. Effective instruction is individualized, differentiated and personalized. A critical part of this approach is that teachers must be allowed to take the time to know their students, to listen to the voice of their students’ experience. There are no easy answers—no one size fits all solutions – but all students deserve and have the right to the instruction that allows them to become academically literate.

A Review of Literature on Adolescent Literacy

Academic literacy goes beyond simply the ability to read and write. Academic literacy involves gaining the ability to develop a sense of fitting in as a student who can
participate in the scholarly activities of school with confidence and assurance. One explanation of this concept recognizes academic literacy as students “making sense of a variety of codes – symbolic, visual, oral and embodied . . . [that] is central to being part of a [learning] community” (Moje et al., 2008, p. 109). Students who do not acquire competence in these codes are vulnerable in a system of education that can be ill equipped to genuinely support students who struggle.

Reading curricula and interventions for adolescents. The quest of educators to help individual students gain full academic literacy is overshadowed by the fact that district policy makers are driven by the need to produce students who can score well on standardized assessments (Ravitch, 2010). In a search for methods that can economically serve as many struggling students as possible, districts often turn to commercially packaged scripted curricula that focus on specific, easily tested reading as methods to address students’ literacy needs (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). The companies that market these curricula claim that if teachers or aides use the curricula with fidelity, (the degree to which the program is to be implemented as intended by the program developer, including the quality of implementation) districts will see significant upward growth in students’ test scores (Allington, 2013).

Examples of scripted curricula that I was introduced to in training sessions when I was asked to teach a high school level reading intervention class are marketed for use with adolescents who score below grade level in reading. These curricula include Corrective Reading (Corrective Reading, 2008), REWARDS [Reading Excellence Word Attack and Rate Development Strategies] (REWARDS, n.d.), and Reading is FAME
[Foundations Adventures Mastery Explorations] (Curtis & Longo, 1999). There are, however, unintended consequences of such instructional methods, methods that actually disallow teachers from using different strategies to suit the needs of individual students (Allington, 2013; Au 2010). Among these consequences is that students can suffer both personally and academically, because the intervention is not designed to address their specific needs.

Recently there has been a resurgence of the use of commercially prepared core elementary reading programs, as school districts attempt to meet assessment goals (Allington, 2013). The What Works Clearinghouse, however, has not been able to find and include any reliable studies of the 153 core reading programs that support their exclusive use as a delivery of effective reading lessons for children (Allington, 2013). Elish-Piper, Matthews, and Risko (2013) indicate that many teachers are concerned about how scripted curricula and commercially produced intervention programs leave them “feeling disempowered and disconnected from their students. Students spoke of feeling absent or invisible in the school literacy instruction and activities” (Elish-Piper et al. 2013, p. 5). This atmosphere is not conducive to meeting the needs of struggling students (Risko, 2013).

According to my observations of the implementation of the scripted regular education reading/literacy curriculum that is used in the elementary classrooms of the school district where I taught, instructional time for this program takes up 90 minutes of each school day. The delivery method is highly scripted and regimented, so teachers have little time to address any personal, individual literacy needs of their students.
Depersonalizing education in this way does not create classroom climates that are interesting or enriched, so students who need the most support become less and less connected to their school experience (Elish-Piper et al. 2013).

Making sure that students are connected to their school experience is a responsibility of school districts. If students have difficulty with academic reading and writing, it is their basic human right that schools provide them with the attention and instruction that each student needs (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). This instruction should be appropriate for the individual student, not generic, depersonalized instruction. “Reading instruction effectiveness lies not with a single program or method but, rather, with a teacher who thoughtfully and analytically integrates various programs, materials, and methods as the situation demands” (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999, p. 11). Students who struggle with academic literacy need teachers who are empowered with the knowledge of and experience with strategies and activities that will support their students’ needs. Students also need teachers who have the time and the intent to know their students as individuals, and who are able to respect each unique adolescent.

**Fostering students’ positive academic agency and identity.** A factor that practitioners must also consider is that if students enter high school with what the system views as significant deficits in their ability to read and comprehend increasingly difficult content area texts, they may also have difficulty making sense of the purpose of assigned readings. A lack of interest in the reading material is a reason most adolescents give as to why they resist academic reading (Lenters, 2006). Disinterest in subject matter can exacerbate the problem of not comprehending what they read with adolescents who have
not developed an understanding of the purpose of gaining knowledge about certain subjects. Because of this, struggling students often develop very sophisticated avoidance and/or resistance techniques. This avoidance and resistance compounds the difficulties these students have with academic expectations.

Additionally, students who struggle can see school as an unfriendly, sometimes even threatening environment (Moore & Cunningham, 2006). As a result of years of experiencing failure, the aforementioned avoidance techniques and resistance behaviors become part of their academic agency, or choices and decisions they make about how and in what way they interact with the academic expectations of high school. Many students who enter high school still struggling to read and write adequately have already experienced years of negative feedback (Greenleaf & Hichman, 2009). Without individualized support students may shut down when they are asked to undertake yet another assignment they perceive as difficult when they lack a self-perception of competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In their research on the importance of students developing positive academic agency, Moore and Cunningham (2006) explain that when students choose not to complete an assignment, or choose not to study for a test, at the time they make the choice, the decision makes perfect sense to them. “Educators need not work to create agency. Youth already enact agency, with or without permission or instruction” (p. 141). Students desire academic agency, or being able to have more control over what they read and at what pace (Lenters, 2006). When adolescents enact this agency, as educators we hope that the choices they make relative to their academic identity, or their sense of self
as students who connect with the scholastic aspects of high school, is agency that positively promotes the academic facet of their identity.

Teenagers are social beings and high school is a time when students experiment with their identity, trying to find one that fits (Lesko, 1996). A student who struggles with reading and writing may choose to adopt an academic identity that will actually impede his/her progress in improving the literacy skills that are needed to succeed in school. Students who do not claim a positive academic identity may choose not to participate in class, not to complete assignments, and in a worst case scenario, may drop out of school altogether (Moore and Cunningham, 2006).

What educators can and must do is to accept this reality about teenagers, and explore ways to provide a trusting environment for all students and to guide them into making informed choices and decisions. For teachers who are working with struggling readers, the first step in providing a positive environment built on mutual trust is for teachers to gain insight about their students (Alvermann, 2009; Mitra 2008). This insight should not be based solely on the knowledge that some students have low-test scores, but to identify them as unique, complex individuals, and to recognize that each has an important story of his/her experience with school. This understanding can help teachers implement the best methods to help facilitate the motivation each student needs to seek significant improvements in their academic literacy, and academic identity (Moje et al, 2008).

Knowing and appreciating what makes students tick is fundamental to developing a healthy teacher/student connection. If teachers view teenagers as people who need to be
“subdued, disciplined and managed” (Lesko, 1996, p. 460), this can exacerbate resistance behavior. Instead, if educators choose to respect adolescents as individuals living in their own time, they can offer constructive guidance, and help them assume responsibility for their behavior and for their learning.

**The impact on instruction of the focus on standardized assessments.**
Implementing effective teaching and learning strategies is integral to providing a supportive structure to help students read for comprehension. There are also “social and affective variables associated with improved motivation and interest in text for older readers [that] are part of the heuristic of reading comprehension” (Edmonds et al. 2009, p. 264). Among these variables are the values of the teacher and the student, as well as the environment the teacher provides for his/her instruction. Establishing an environment of mutual trust and respect is paramount for real teaching and learning to occur, especially in a high school level reading program (Alverman, 2009; Moje et al. 2008). The approach of learning to know students’ specific needs and understanding social and affective variables, however, is not the focus of current state and national school reform, which has led to an almost exclusive focus on data generated by standardized test scores. Ravitch (2010) states, “The passage of no Child Left Behind (in 2002) made testing and accountability our national education strategy. Education reformers [state and federal] endorsed tests of basic skills as the only possible common ground in education” (p. 30). This focus on scores from tests of basic skills as the basis for education reform ignores the fact that children and adolescents are complex, active human beings. Student academic performance cannot be meaningfully measured by a one-size-fits all assessment
When districts adopt an emphasis on testing, teachers lose their ability to make professional instructional decisions. The emphasis becomes "teaching skills for tests rather than teaching students in ways that prepare them for their lives" (Elish-Piper et al. 2013, p. 9). The only ethical use of standards and assessments is their use as a guide for quality instruction, not to use them to judge a student’s academic ability.

Teachers who approach their work with skill and professionalism view standards and assessments as useful tools as they teach students who exhibit all levels of academic ability (Caldwell & Leslie, 2013). They understand the efficacy of assessments, but recognize that they are not the means to an end.

A real danger of placing the sole emphasis of a program for struggling readers on just raising test scores is that it removes teachers from the "conceptual work of teaching, relegating teachers to executing rather than conceiving, reflecting, and adapting the curriculum" (Elish-Piper et al. 2013, p. 7) to his/her individual students’ needs. The resulting teaching and learning climate is not conducive to students and teachers developing personal connections, and too often students do not establish valid connections between what they are learning in school with their background knowledge or information they use in their personal lives. With no development of background knowledge, a key component of reading comprehension strategies is then lost (Beers, 2003; DeVries, 2011).

Developing positive connections with students is not dependent upon curricula; developing these connections is dependent upon opportunities for good teaching.
Allington (2013), Duffy and Hoffman (1999), Beers (2003), and DeVries (2011) also support the idea that the critical component of effective reading lessons is the expertise of the teacher along with his/her ability to determine what methods work best for the individual student.

**The impact on academic literacy of No Child Left Behind.** In my experience, the majority of my students have left high school experiencing satisfactory scores on ACT tests with a level of academic literacy they needed to succeed in either post-secondary education or in the job market. The fact remains, however, that there have been and still are students who, for various reasons, enter and leave high school struggling to read and understand content area texts. These students struggle with developing the ability to analyze, in writing or orally, information that is taught in secondary classrooms. Gaps in student performance occur in schools all over the country with students who have no mental impairment, or specific learning disability, yet do not achieve a level of measured, acceptable academic literacy.

Because of this, much of the educational reform triggered by the passage of the No Child Left Behind Legislation of 2001 (No child left behind, 2002), a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, was directed toward improving the academic literacy skills of all students. The mandate of this law was that by the year 2014, all students, regardless of race, gender or socio-economic background, were to measure as “proficient” in areas of reading and writing. One of the guiding ideas behind NCLB was that school districts and their teachers would finally be held accountable for their students’ performance.
Prior to the passage of NCLB, public high schools were not subject to mandated federal testing requirements that monitored teacher or district accountability for their students’ academic progress in literacy. Schools are now required to administer standardized assessments based on challenging state standards to track the performance of each student (No child left behind, 2002). Data from these assessments are “disaggregated by poverty levels, race, ethnicities, disabilities and limited English proficiency so that no child – regardless of his/her background- is left behind” (p. 9). Elementary students are tested every year from grades 3-8, and secondary students must be tested at least once during grades 10-12.

The goals of this legislation, which include “aiming to foster an environment in which every child can learn and succeed” (No child left behind, 2002, p. 9) are admirable, but the implementation of policy directed toward literacy has not always achieved the goal of improving the academic literacy achievement of all students, nor of providing an environment in which this can occur (Gallagher, 2009). NCLB mandated that schools implement reading curriculum, teaching methods and strategies that are deemed effective by “scientifically based” reading research. Aoki (1992) notes that the use of standardized measurements that are often designed by the same companies that market “scientifically research based” reading curriculum to determine whether a school is effectively teaching its students to read ignores the humanness that lies at the core of education. Putting a singular emphasis on tests scores tends to devalue teachers and create school environments “wherein teachers are mere facilitators to teaching built into programmed learning packages” (Aoki, 1992, p. 24).
Since the mandated assessments schools are required to administer are standardized measures, curriculum and teaching methods in reading instruction began to target the easily tested skills found in these standardized measurements, such as decoding and fluency. Companies have developed measures of these skills that can be done quickly, often in one minute, to monitor students’ progress in acquiring these skills. An example of this is DIBELS (Good, R. H., & Kaminski, R. A., 2002). Pressure to use curriculum and strategies that essentially prepare students for these assessments increased as the stakes, sometimes in the form of federal and state funding for school districts and renewal of teacher contracts, became higher for schools and teachers.

The consequences for “failing” districts where student test scores do not meet “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) for five years in a row, include replacing all or most school staff, loss of federal funding, and/or turning over school operations to the state or to a private company with a demonstrated record of effectiveness (Au, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). The fact that these decisions are determined almost solely by the consideration of student test scores has become the primary policy tool of educational reform.

**Unintended consequences of NCLB.** With more instructional time spent on targeting specific skills, the time teachers are allowed to spend developing the broader aspects of academic literacy, such as those gained in independent reading, discussion and written responses to literature, history and science, began to shrink (Ravitch, 2010). So too has the time teachers have to evaluate specific student needs and to differentiate their lessons to address these needs. Students who struggle are, in many districts, provided interventions that are composed of additional drills of easily tested skills, rather than
strategies and activities that could facilitate improvement in their unique areas of literacy need.

Too often, because of the pressure to produce a certain level of test scores, school districts reserve enriched curriculum and instruction for advanced students (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999; Gallagher, 2009; Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). Students who struggle, those who need and would benefit from enriched curriculum, are relegated to the low expectations of special literacy intervention classes. When students are placed in intervention classes that use a narrow, scripted curriculum that targets only specific skills, they often struggle with the broader aspects of reading. They not only lack the “skills and strategies that proficient readers enjoy, they are increasingly disengaged from reading and develop low perceptions about their abilities” (O’Brien, Stewart, & Beach, 2009, p. 82). Lost almost completely is the complex relationship between skilled teachers and students and the positive results these relationships can garner.

The importance of the teacher/student relationship to learning. In their analysis of relational teaching, as opposed to “teaching to the test,” Beers (2003) and DeVries (2011) have both found in their research that teachers who focus on building mutually respectful relationships with their students generally hold realistic, yet high expectations of their students, and also model positive relational behaviors. Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) recognize that excellent teachers also share the belief that all students are capable of learning, and they have the right to the instruction that meets their needs. Elish-Piper et al. (2013), recognize that students of these teachers generally experience more positive attitudes toward school, less anxiety, and are more likely to stay
in school. When in school they demonstrate a more positive attitude toward school and learning.

Unfortunately, students are too often treated as mere producers of test data. “When students, teachers, schools, districts are measured by standardized testing and compared to other students, teachers and schools, they are necessarily decontextualized in order to make such comparisons possible. They are reduced to a test score” (Au, 2010, p. 7). Adolescents learn by processing information mentally, emotionally and socially, and teachers who respect this about their students do not approach reading intervention solely as a cognitive process. It is important for teachers to create opportunities for students to “engage actively in meaningful subject matter learning that both extends and elaborates on the literacy practices they already possess and value” (Alvermann, 2009, p. 24). It is important to understand that deeper comprehension skills are desired, but are not easily tested (Edmonds et al. 2009). To best serve student needs, literacy instruction should encompass comprehension skills, rather than singularly focus on fluency or speed simply because these are the skills most often addressed in assessments.

It is discouraging that the literacy instruction that many adolescent struggling readers are offered is, “impoverished curriculum, ill suited to their needs” (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p. 4). There are many literacy activities that are more “motivating and engaging to youth than others, compelling youth to persist even in the face of challenging texts” (Moje et al. 2008, p. 112). Literacy development requires cooperative efforts of whole school teams of teachers and administrators (Ogle & Lang, 2007). It is clear that there are multiple affective variables that must be taken into consideration when districts
and their teachers develop intervention plans for adolescents, and one single approach will not address all these variables.

**Student motivation.** Student motivation is a component of adolescent literacy that informs every aspect of student academic growth. When struggling students feel challenged, but not overwhelmed, receive meaningful, positive, and respectful feedback from their teachers, and are not subjected to comments from teachers or peers that demean their academic performance, they are more likely to become motivated to improve their academic performance (Gallagher, 2009).

In contrast, as a consequence of years of academic struggle, there are times when the attitude expressed by struggling students is what Ryan and Deci (2000) refer to as “amotivation, or the state of lacking the intention to act” (p. 72). Dahbany and McFadden (2009), describe amotivation as when struggling students, who are placed in a non-nurturing classroom environment, choose not to complete an assignment, study for a test, or to participate in classroom activities or discussions. The choices are made unconsciously, or sometimes consciously, but they result in a serious impediment to these students’ academic progress.

**Why students choose not to read.** Most teachers instinctively understand that not only do students struggle for different reasons, but the reasons why they choose not to read are different as well. Evidence, both empirical and in published research, indicates that those who choose not to read – aliterates – make up a growing number of the population of schools and of society in general (Beers, 2003). This is a tremendous concern for educators for a number of reasons, foremost because students who are
aliterate fall further and further behind. When they do not engage in reading, their skills diminish.

There are ranges of reasons why students become reluctant readers (Beers, 2003; DeVries, 2011). These include: Dormant Readers – those who like to read, and consider themselves readers, but because of busy schedules do not make the time to read. Uncommitted Readers – those who are willing to read if they are given a book that aligns with a personal interest. Rarely do these readers search independently for the right book. They do not have a negative attitude about reading; reading just does not interest them. Unmotivated Readers – students who have a negative attitude both about reading, and about those who like to read. They place no value in the act of reading. Unskilled Readers – these are students who struggle with the cognitive aspects of reading. Their negative attitude toward reading exists because reading is very difficult for them. There are students who exhibit a combination of these characteristics, but the numbers of students who actually fall into the category of unskilled are a small minority of adolescent readers.

**Why self-confidence matters.** All of these students, however, can benefit from school and classroom experiences that encourage and foster the worth of each student. Much of students’ sense of self-worth comes from their perception of how they perform in a given context (Ryan and Deci, 2000). The opinions of their peers and teachers, as well as those of their family are also important to their self-perception of successful students, because as a rule, adolescents do not want to experience anxiety or guilt about their academic performance. Rather, they want to feel pride in their accomplishments.
When conditions in the classroom promote a genuine sense of positive self-worth, students are more apt to accept responsibility for a poor performance instead of seeking to cast blame on another person, or on extenuating circumstances (Blumenfeld, 1992). When the environment is one that supports and nurtures all students, struggling students learn that it is possible to set mastery goals that can be attained with reasonable effort.

These goals will necessarily be different for different students, another reason why it is a paradox to use arbitrarily assigned grade level standardized tests as a sole measure of an individual student’s achievement. School districts and educators should be, and need to be held accountable for providing a quality education for all students (Brenner, Pearson, & Rief, 2007). Scores on standardized tests, however, are ineffective ways to assess this accountability. Too many students experience these tests as an empty exercise because, struggling or not, they find little meaning or purpose to them.

Teachers who want to help struggling students learn to develop positive academic identity and agency recognize that motivating students and helping them attain self-confidence requires qualities of “creativity, ingenuity, and knowledge of an individual student’s strengths, weaknesses and interests” (Dahbany & McFadden, 2009, p. 45). Incorporating methods and strategies that are research-based, including those that have shown significant efficacy in helping students make gains in academic literacy is an important first step.

Understanding that adolescents need to have genuine dialogue with adults, particularly with their teachers, is the second. “Teens are desperate for adults who are about them and for them” (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009, p. 32). It is the students’ voices,
the voices we can access through genuine dialogue, that are too often missing from the process of addressing the needs of struggling students. Seeking out and providing the voice of students is the goal of this dissertation narrative.

There are many reasons why a research focus on adolescent literacy is important, but my sense is that how well we educate our young people today will have a significant impact on our democracy in the future. Quality leadership demands individuals who are able to reason well and to discern what impact their decisions have on other people. The foundation of the ability to reason well is the ability to read and to write about what we read – it is as simple, and as complex as that. Providing our students the opportunity to read and to write well is the responsibility of all the adults responsible for their education.

The Purpose of This Study

With this sense of responsibility in mind, and knowing my Reading Enrichment class would evolve each year I taught it, I developed a foundation for the class supported by the knowledge I was gaining about adolescent literacy from my doctoral research. The initial research of my doctoral program inquiry provided me with a number of research-based strategies, ideas and activities to use with students, not only in my Reading Enrichment class, but also in my regular English classes. Implementing one or two of these methods, and collecting data on their efficacy with students in my Reading Enrichment class would have been an interesting study, but I was increasingly drawn toward finding a way to examine student experience with school, and to gain a more holistic insight that could help teachers make decisions about how best to help their students who struggle with academic literacy. What emerges is the question: how can
insights we gain from understanding how individual students experience school inform and improve our approach to their education?

Students who struggle with academic literacy represent those who challenge educators to view them not as individuals in crisis, but as students who have a true “degree of agency” and who have experiences with literacy we can learn from (Alvermann, 2009). Many like me who teach high school students often aspire to being able to help all teenagers learn to enjoy reading and to facilitate their process of reading to learn. Ideally teenagers “would be independent readers – those readers who are skilled at the cognitive and affective demands of reading and see benefit in and derive pleasure from this skill” (Beers, 2003, p. 13). It is affirming when we work with students who understand how personally rewarding reading and inquiry for knowledge can be, and it is difficult when we are faced with the reality that not every student who enters high school has had the opportunity to have early, positive experiences with reading. This raises the question, what can teachers do to help those high school students who struggle with academic literacy, and who resist the instruction and curricula we provide?

Students who struggle with reading throughout their early educational experience enter secondary classrooms with little confidence and ability to meet teachers’ academic literacy expectations. Many secondary content area teachers are not prepared or ready to add reading strategies to their instruction (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013; Jetton & Shanahan, 2012). I began teaching high school English and Language Arts in the mid-1980’s, and I believed strongly from the beginning of my career that the ability to read and to communicate effectively through writing and speaking about what is read were among
the most important educational life skills students can acquire. I believed and still believe that these skills provide a foundation not only for students’ academic success but also for their becoming full members of a democratic society, one of the primary goals of schooling.

For many years, however, though my subject matter was grounded in literacy, I was among the number of secondary teachers who had little background or experience with teaching reading. I did not fully understand that helping older students become skilled readers was part of my teaching responsibilities. My research reinforces the recognition of the moral responsibility all educators have to ensure that we provide appropriate literacy education to all our students and not become complacent and adopt a one-size fits all approach to teaching.

**The scope of adolescent literacy education.** It is important to note that the scope of literacy education has expanded over the years of my teaching career, and it is likely to continue this expansion. Today’s teenagers use both traditional text and digital media to communicate and locate information (Rhodes & Robnolt, 2009), and they use print and digital literacy in different settings with different audiences. These audiences include their own peer groups, families, and educators, and adolescents use these multiple literacies with various levels of skill (Lewis & Reader, 2009). Again, academic literacy is one of the literacies that students need to be highly competent in its use. It incorporates the skills and the level of reading and writing that allows students to achieve in the classroom as well as on standardized assessments of these specific skills (Lewis & Reader, 2009). While the Internet and technology are expanding the literacies of
teenagers, school-based academic literacy is still centered on the printed word and the capacity to read and communicate in writing at a high level of competency. There is a societal expectation that schools are required to teach students to read difficult text and to write well (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). How then do teachers determine what methods of instruction will best help students who struggle with reading and writing?

This study is not designed to prove the efficacy of a particular method of instruction. Rather its purpose is, by taking the opportunity to listen closely to the perceptions of three students who struggle with academic literacy, to open up the possibilities of what we can do with literacy education with the information we learn from our students. There is no single best way to make sure our students leave high school with a high level of academic literacy. This study invites all teachers to take a step back from the test and data driven culture of our high school classrooms and allow us to discover the insights we need to approach each struggling student as a person of value and to address his/her specific needs with professional skill and integrity. Our students deserve no less.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter explains the reasons behind selecting the method of ethnographic case study research as the best way to communicate both the stories of the participants in my study as well as the insights I gained through compiling their educational biographies. The power of case study is its attention to particular situations. “A case study is both a process of inquiry about the case and the product of that inquiry” (Stake, 2006, p. 8). The insights come from examining phenomena from the students’ point of view, from their perceptions and perspectives of how they understand themselves as readers and learners. By providing a close look at how these students experience school and literacy expectations, readers will have the opportunity to project these insights to their own experience with struggling students in their classrooms.

The Method of Narrative Inquiry

In order to gain the insights I sought, I chose the method of narrative inquiry within the context of case study. The strength of case study method is in its ability to examine, in-depth, a ‘case’ within its ‘real-life’ context (Yin, 2006). Narrative inquiry can be a combination of a post-modernist, post-structuralist, qualitative, ethnographic research methodology that is not new in its use in educational research, but is not the norm in post NCLB education research (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Merriam, 2002). The use of narrative inquiry, however, is growing in studies of curricula, language learning, school reform and teaching. Since narrative inquiry is the study of the way humans view the world, the fact that teachers and their students are characters in each
other’s school stories makes this form of ethnographic study ideal for examining how students perceive themselves as learners (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; 2006).

My use of narrative inquiry is also informed by my role as a practitioner-researcher, because of my immersion in the school environment of my case study students as their teacher. Teacher research is “an important and practical way to engage teachers as researchers of their own practice who use research to shape practice, and as informants to scholars and policy makers regarding critical issues in the field” (Rust, 2009, p. 1882). Scholars are also giving qualitative teacher research more viability as a method for teachers to examine the effectiveness of interventions, as well as to inform policy makers about how decisions about curriculum are understood by students and teachers, and enacted by teachers.

**Narrative inquiry is the study of experience as a story.** As a methodology, narrative inquiry conveys a view of the phenomena of the school experiences of the students with the purpose of learning about how each student experiences school as a unique individual learner. Retelling is already part of what teachers ask of students, and while interviewing is time consuming and intensive, it is an effective way to gain insight about the school lives of students who have difficulty with academic reading and writing (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identify three commonplaces of narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place. Temporality relates to a particular person’s history, as it seems to be projecting in particular ways into the future. Students tend to describe things as they are, so a narrative biography puts this into the context of what happened in the
days, weeks, months, and years before. Sociality deals with the personal conditions of
the student, his/her feelings, hopes and desires, as well as relationships with the people
who are part of his/her environment. It is important to listen to students in order to
understand how the relationship between students and teachers, and between students and
the methods and curricula teachers use, impact these students’ perceptions of their
experiences. The third commonplace is the relationship students have with where the
events of their story take place. In narrative inquiry, the specific location is critical to the
students’ experience, so an analysis of their school and classroom environment must be
considered as an important context of their school lives.

**Theoretical Framework and Design**

The theoretical framework for this study is emergent life-history methodology,
using three case studies of students in my Reading Enrichment class. Life-history
methodology is included in the genre of arts-based educational research (ABER), which
has at its core the goal to “enhance perspectives pertaining to certain human activities”
(Barone & Eisner, 2006, p. 95). Baron and Eisner (2006) explain that educational
research has traditionally been conducted to gain knowledge that is deemed, “highly valid
and reliable, as truthful and trustworthy as possible” (p. 96). Traditional findings strive
for certainty and there is an effort to explain, predict and control outcomes so consumers
of the research can argue with confidence about how to act.

In contrast, ABER is not aimed toward a quest for certainty. Rather, its aim is to
enhance perspectives and to broaden the conversation about educational practice and
policy. This happens as a result of research that focuses its attention on the sometimes
ignored or often overlooked commonplace, everyday occurrences in the environment of school. ABER research texts use formats that tend to be less traditional or standardized (Barone & Eisner, 2006). Researchers have used literary forms that include narrative biography with language directly associated with lived experience.

One goal of ABER is to serve as a method of educational critique. The formal process of education, by its nature, exists to do some good, and ABER allows readers to examine whether the life of students is enhanced by their experience in school. The insight gained from analyzing the school experience of three students from my Reading Enrichment class therefore has the potential to “broaden and deepen ongoing conversation about educational policy and practice” (Barone & Eisner, 2006, p. 96).

**The significance of life-history methodology.** Life-history methodology is a framework for research that does not replace, but complements the current, more prevalent use of methods of scientific enquiry (Dhunpath, 2000). Eisner (1981) proposes that in educational research “it is to the artistic to which we must turn, not as a rejection of the scientific, but because with both we can achieve binocular vision. Looking through one eye never did provide much depth of field” (Dhunpath, 2000, p. 544). Using the life-history framework provides an authentic means of understanding how individuals interact in the “intersection of institutional and individual experience” (ibid). The students in my study have unique personalities and life experiences, and have constructed individual meanings of school experience even though they all attend the same school, and are enrolled in many of the same classes, including my Reading Enrichment class.
In evaluating the school experience of the three students, I will situate and organize my discussion of their biographies as a cross case study analysis. This is a form of analysis that involves collecting and analyzing data from more than one case study to allow for greater opportunity to “generalize across several representations of the phenomenon” (Borman, Clarke, Cotner, & Lee, 2006, p. 123). This can be more compelling to the reader than the experience of a single student. Through this form of analysis of case studies, Hancock and Algozzine (2006), reiterate that a researcher can hope to gain in-depth understanding of situations and meaning for those involved. Examining emergent themes from these case studies will provide me with insights that could affect school policy, choice of curricula, and future research.

**The location and context of the rural setting of the study.** Given the location of my study, a rural school that serves fewer than 500 students, Pre-K through 12th grade, I considered whether insights gained from the school experience of students in this setting would be relevant to teachers from larger school districts. Educators and administrators who are accustomed to large urban or suburban school systems, with buildings that house 1000 or more students, would discover a different school climate from what they are used to if they spent time inside a school in a rural community.

The community where my study is located has a population of just less than 1500. The closest communities with populations over 25,000 are 30-45 miles away, and the closest city with a population over 200,000 is 90 miles distant. The school district serves approximately 400 students PK-12, and subscribes to professional development services for its teachers from an area educational service unit.
In this rural community it is likely that half of the population is directly connected with the school through being a parent or other relative of a student, or as an employee of the district. Another third is indirectly involved by providing necessary services. Schools in rural communities are extensions of the communities themselves with teachers and students who often interact outside the classroom on a daily basis. Many families have lived in their rural communities for several generations, and teachers who are employed for a number of years in a district can expect to teach siblings, possibly more than one generation of a family, and even their own children.

Rarely do disciplinary infractions raise much above the level of students pushing the envelope a bit. Examples include testing the rules about tardiness, or bringing food into the classrooms. There is an occasional tobacco offense, or a student cursing at someone, but overall the climate in a rural school can be described as being a calm and safe environment for students and staff.

An acknowledged truth, however, is that wherever educators teach, we interact with young men and women who are complex individuals. Multiple factors impact each student, including family background, family dynamics, socio-economic status, gender, and the community environment in which they live. No two children are the same, and it is not impossible to understand that insights we gain from research obtained by listening to students who attend school in an urban California inner-city district, for example, can inform teachers who work with students in a small, rural Midwestern community. The reverse is also true.
The subjects of my cross case study are all students in the high school where I taught in this rural community, which I will refer to as Glenley. Glenley has industrial agriculture as its economic base, and was founded in the late 19th century by people of northern European origin. The descendants of these people still comprise the owners of large tracts of farmland, and of the business and residential community of Glenley. Currently there is a growing Hispanic immigrant population that has experienced a mixed reception among the descendants of the original citizens.

Glenley is large enough to have businesses that make it possible for most people to get the necessities of life without ever leaving town. Steve, one of my case study students, appreciates this. He explained “In 30 minutes you can get groceries, go to the pharmacy, go to the bank. In [nearby city] that takes a whole day.” These businesses also regularly contribute, both financially and in community spirit, to the school and its extra-curricular activities.

Like many small-town schools, Glenley High School projects its primary identity through the performances of its students in extra-curricular activities, primarily in athletics. From September through March, Friday nights often see several hundred people lining the football field or sitting on the gym bleachers cheering for their local team. Athletic legacies among families are well established among both men and women of the community, and the trophies that crowd the trophy cases in the school hallways attest to the success of teams over the years.

The school building houses all grades, Pre-K-12, in a sprawling single story structure that was completed in sections, first the high school and middle school, then the
elementary, all funded by successful bond measures. The community of Glenley has a tradition of solid support for their school district. There is nothing fancy about the inside of the building or the classrooms, but everything is kept clean and up-to-date. The largest recent expenditures by the school board have been to fund the construction of a state of the art weight room and a new football stadium and complex.

In spite of the evident attention given to athletics, however, by both the school and the community, there was and is a fundamental understanding that the primary purpose of the school is to prepare its students to make the transition to four-year colleges and universities, to two-year technical schools, or directly to the area job market. Glenley has many former students who have gone on to do well in the fields of medicine, law, education and business. Traditionally, students who did not go on to post-secondary education for financial or academic reasons could usually find substantive work on local farms, in construction, or with nearby manufacturing entities. Others chose military service as a route to job or career training and economic stability.

Beginning in the 1980’s, however, the rural economy began to change because small, diversified farms merged into fewer, but larger farm operations (Berry, 2015). Well paying jobs left the local economy, and rural schools began to undergo a subtle shift of purpose. Making sure that every student had the background knowledge and the academic literacy skills to pursue a post-secondary education, now deemed necessary to prepare for jobs that demanded higher skills, became an unspoken mandate.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that nationwide, all public schools had to respond to similar changing needs of society (Ravitch, 2010). Part of that response was to
implement curricula and methods to ensure that schools provide every student the instruction and support so all students could read and write at a level that would facilitate success after graduation in post-secondary education and in a career. Success is generally measured in economic terms based upon whether students are able to become contributing members of society. It is in the context of a school district that is focused on ways to increase students’ standardized test scores that the educational experience of the subjects of my three case studies is placed.

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. Presenting a view of three students as “living contradictions” in the world of their school community will give other professionals the opportunity to reflect upon their own educational practice as they work to improve the quality of their instruction with the intent to enhance their students’ learning (Dhunpath, 2000). Providing an opportunity to listen to student voice in the discussion about adolescent academic literacy gives recognition to the truth that we are involved in the process of educating unique individuals who are much more than simply the sum of their standardized test scores.

Connelly and Clandinin, in Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry (1990) explain that like other qualitative methods, narrative inquiry relies on different criteria than scientific inquiry to establish validity in the mind of the reader. There is not necessarily a search for cause and effect, rather a sense of being “driven by a sense of the whole, or that case studies can be read and lived vicariously by the reader” (p. 8). The challenge of constructing narrative educational biographies of students is to provide an
account of their experience that will ring true to readers in order for them to have a sense that they could see that happening (Eisenhart, 2006).

The risks involved in using life-history methodology include the fact that as a practitioner-researcher, my work could be subject to claims that I could fake the data and tell falsehoods as easily as I could tell the truth (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Eisenhart, 2006). Regardless of the limitations, however, life history methodology provides a depth and richness of information that other methodologies cannot (Sikes, 2006).

A nation-wide emphasis upon scientifically based educational research since the implementation of No Child Left Behind is evident, and as Sikes (2006) points out, the pursuit of science seems to place the highest value on the generalizable, while the pursuit of professional work seems to value the particular more. When educators search for generalizations, this implies a search for causes. The insights from this study help us understand how students’ experience with school shapes their response to literacy instruction, rather than a search for what definitively causes students to enter high school still struggling to attain a higher level of academic literacy. There is, according to Sikes (2006) a reason to avoid oversimplification in drawing conclusions from research.

When districts look for ways to help struggling readers, the tendency to oversimplify and make generalizations from scientifically based research too often leads to settling for a quick fix, one-size-fits all approach to reading instruction and/or reading interventions (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). As the experiences of the students in my study will show, there is no perfect method of instruction or of intervention, and the attempts to
find and implement a quick fix method can lead educators away from what can genuinely meet the individual needs of adolescents who struggle with academic literacy.

**Data collection.** The implication that life history data can be fabricated is a legitimate criticism of this method of inquiry. As an experienced educator, it is my responsibility to establish a sense of trust with my readers by being transparent about how I collected and analyzed the data for my study. With IRB approval from the University of Nebraska (see Appendix I), I conducted and audiotaped extensive interviews with three students enrolled in my Reading Enrichment class (see Appendix J). The participants were purposefully chosen from my Reading Enrichment class. I avoided selecting students who were children of colleagues, or who were related to each other. Gender is not a theoretical concern for this study, but three males were chosen to support effective cross-case analysis. Pseudonyms are used for both the students and the community where they live to protect their privacy. I took classroom observation notes and collected student work as artifacts. I also interacted with the three students on a daily basis, both inside and outside of school, as is common with teachers and students who live in a rural school community. Some observations I made in these interactions I included in my notes, but most became part of my collective knowledge of each student as an individual. As teachers, this is what we do every day. We systematically observe our students and link what we see to our past experiences with the student.

I personally transcribed the extensive audiotaped interviews I conducted with the three participants to prepare for the cross-case analysis of the content of these interviews.
The process of content analysis is appropriate for narrative inquiry (Markoff, Shapiro, & Weitman, 1975)

After transcribing the interviews I analyzed the content as data that contains anecdotes, stories, and emergent themes. These emergent themes connect the students’ account of their experiences with school to research that addresses adolescent literacy and motivation. I identified significant incidents in the context of the research that I have compiled about approaches to reading intervention for older adolescents, as well as research about student motivation. I wrote the students’ stories using the present tense as a way to place the reader in the moment of time the students’ experience took place. These stories will give voice to their perceptions of how school works for them, and how they perceive their role in the institution and process of education.

**Why narrative biography?** The choice of narrative biography as the method of communicating the data is based on the understanding that it is primarily through story that we humans make sense of the world and the things that happen to us (Sikes & Gale, 2006). This re-presentation of the students’ experience will allow readers to vicariously experience the phenomena under study, which is how three students, who have been identified as struggling readers, experienced their relationships with the teachers, methods, and curricula that was chosen and implemented with the intent to facilitate their academic success (Eisenhart, 2006). Creating their narrative educational biographies locates them in the larger world of school that they inhabit (Sikes, 2006), and will help readers understand how struggling students adapt and function within a system that has a significant influence on their past, present and future lives.
The methodology of narrative biography arises from the post-modernist/post-structuralist ideas that there are multiple realities in any given situation, and that experience depends upon how a person is socially positioned (Sikes, 2006). For example, why do different students respond in different ways to a particular curriculum, or to a specific teaching or learning strategy? Interpretive analysis allows for the identification of larger themes that “tie together the particulars of individual experience” (Brenner, 2006, p. 367).

Case study analysis in the form of narrative biography provides a depth and richness of information that other methodologies cannot. In an era when the “hegemonic influence of the positivist science paradigm continues to be strong and pervasive in what constitutes valid research [in education]” (Sikes & Gale, 2006, pp. 14-15), there is increasing recognition that narrative research adds an important level of understanding.

To add background to the re-telling of each student’s experience, information from classroom field notes and examples of curriculum and class work will add depth and support to their narratives. This background provides a source of validation of their experience with academic literacy interventions, and with school in general.

The case study students. In the following chapters, this study examines how three adolescent students experience school and how they each adapt to their struggles with academic literacy:

Sam. Sam is a 17 year-old sophomore and student athlete who voluntarily enrolled in Reading Enrichment because he was self-aware that he needed to improve his academic reading and writing. Sam has attended Glenley Public Schools since
Kindergarten, and is the youngest of three children. He has two older sisters. Sam’s dad attended college, works for a local bank and operates the family farm. Sam’s mom is an elementary school teacher in a neighboring community. Both of Sam’s older sisters are graduates of an in-state university.

Cody. Cody is a 16 year-old sophomore, who, like Sam, has attended school in Glenley since he was in Kindergarten. This was his second year in Reading Enrichment. Cody gained confidence and improved his academic literacy skills by taking the class as a freshman, so he decided it would not hurt to sign up for it again. His mom is a college graduate and a former elementary teacher, and his dad is a large-scale farmer who began farming land owned by his family right out of high school. Cody has two older brothers from his mother’s first marriage, and both are university graduates. Cody also has a younger brother who was adopted before Cody began elementary school.

Steve. Steve is a 15 year-old freshman boy who signed up for Reading Enrichment class at the urging of his dad. His older brother took the class the year before and his reading scores, approach to and attitude about reading improved significantly. Steve lives with his dad, a pastor of a small church in Glenley. His mother is an elementary principal in a nearby city. Steve took a reading intervention class the year before [taught by another teacher] because he scored below grade level on standardized tests. His father hoped that he would benefit from another year of academic literacy support.

In contrast to research that uses a singular focus on test score data to determine intervention needs for students, this study allowed me to take a step back and look at
school and literacy instruction and interventions through the experiences of the students. Narrative inquiry is not meant to prove a theory, or to prove that one particular method of reading intervention is more effective in improving reading scores over another. Rather, this study’s purpose is to deepen our understanding of how school works for students who have been identified as struggling with academic literacy.
The school experience of Sam can be summarized briefly as pleasant and relatively stress free. Popular, athletic and described by fellow students and teachers alike as “a really nice guy”, there are not many outward signs that Sam struggles with academic literacy. Looking more closely, however, it becomes evident that Sam’s story illustrates a case of what can happen to a student’s ability to attain higher levels of academic literacy when throughout his/her formative years in school, the student is subject to limited, or low expectations.

A Case of Limited Academic Expectations

Limited expectations for students can be an outcome of the quality of curricula schools choose, the instructional methods teachers implement, or the more recent tendency of placing too much emphasis on the limited information available from standardized assessment data as the primary method of knowing students. The incidence of low academic expectations for individual students is rarely, if ever done intentionally. The negative consequences of low expectations, however, are very real and these consequences manifest themselves in students such as Sam. Students like Sam are great kids who do their work with few complaints, and are pleasant to have in the classroom. Nevertheless they reach high school without strategies in place to be able to reach the level of academic literacy necessary they need to experience a smooth transition from high school to college level academic expectations.
The limited academic expectations started early in Sam’s school experience and subtly shaped his perception of himself as a struggling reader. It is important to note that even though students such as Sam perceive themselves as poor readers, they are not educational failures. In fact, if we consider only their standardized assessment scores, they often meet the standards set by their states. They may score on the lower range of what is deemed proficient, but this is sufficient when districts gauge their success on how many students’ test scores meet the state’s standards. What can be tragic about setting arbitrary levels of adequate academic proficiency is that “good enough” does not meet the needs of students such as Sam who struggle with the more advanced nuances of academic literacy. This presents these students with a real task if or when they try to overcome these deficits at a relatively late stage of their school experience.

Adolescents are generally not sophisticated enough to advocate for themselves, especially concerning their experience with school. When their time spent in classrooms is relatively stress free, many students fall into a pattern of becoming passive receivers of instruction. If they begin to have difficulties with an aspect of academic literacy, they discover ways to compensate in order to receive a passing grade. There are many high school students who are “compensating for low reading ability rather than significantly improving it” (Springer et al., 2014, p. 299). Listening to and analyzing Sam’s story gives me the opportunity to share how he perceives himself as a reader and learner, how his school experience has shaped this perception, and to examine his efforts to overcome what he recognizes as his limited academic literacy skills.
Sam’s Place in the Glenley School and Community

Sam and his family have lived in the Glenley area for several generations and his grandparents and dad jointly own and farm land that will eventually become Sam’s responsibility. He indicates that working on and managing the family farm is a position he looks forward to after he graduates from college. It is significant to Sam’s story of his experience with school to note that Sam is among the students of Glenley High School who garner considerable acclaim and attention from the community as a result of his athletic achievements on the football field and to a lesser degree on the basketball court and track.

To understand Sam’s experience it is important to note that Glenley is similar to many small communities in the state in that the school’s athletic teams contribute a great deal to the town’s identity. Most individual high school athletes’ fame, however, is ephemeral and once students graduate, their time as a recognized athlete is over. Sam hopes his story has a different ending. He has a good deal of natural talent so his primary motivation to do well academically is tied to his desire and goal to play football at the college level. In order to earn an athletic scholarship Sam has to have the grades and the ACT score to qualify. In this context, what is Sam’s academic life?

Sam has difficulties with secondary reading and writing expectations that he is trying to overcome. Sam had problems with reading at the beginning of his school experience, and he was held back to repeat an additional year of Kindergarten. In his elementary years he was placed in the lower level reading groups, which established and reinforced his sense of being a poor reader. The reason for Sam’s placement in the lower
level reading groups was because he struggled with fluency, the ability to read aloud quickly with no pronunciation errors. As a result, Sam said that he developed a habit of skipping words he did not know how to pronounce so he could attain the required speed. Because of this ineffective strategy, Sam’s ability to comprehend, which is the primary purpose of reading, suffered. Sam also entered high school with no pattern of independent reading, and no strategies in place that could help him comprehend the increasing difficulty of content area texts.

This exploration of Sam’s story allows us to understand his experience with school and to gain insight as to why Sam entered secondary school still struggling to comprehend what he read. This study also considers the efficacy of Sam’s motivation to achieve academically. His motivation is not based on his desire to learn, or by curiosity about what he is learning, but by the fact that he needs to be able to earn a certain grade point average to earn an athletic scholarship for college. Sam does have the concrete goal to operate his family’s farm after he graduates from college, but at this point his primary motivation rests in his athletic dreams.

The Unintended Consequences of Non-Personalized Instruction

Sam’s current difficulties with academic literacy were in great part shaped by the Glenley school district’s well-intentioned implementation of a scripted elementary core-reading curriculum. If teachers use this curriculum with fidelity, deemed necessary for certain measurable outcomes, it does not allow time or provide methods for teachers to address the specific, individual needs of the students who do not learn to read quickly by the prescribed methodology of the program. Maintaining fidelity to core reading
programs has become a goal in too many schools in spite of the fact that according to What Works Clearinghouse (Allington, 2013), there is no independent research that provides evidence that such programs provide effective reading lessons.

Because not all children find it easy to learn to read, some need access to expert instruction. The key to the availability of this access is a teacher who understands that while there are “best practices” there is no single way to teach struggling early readers. These teachers require the freedom to adapt his/her teaching strategies and to use his/her expertise in reading instruction in order to find the best method for each child.

Sam’s elementary experience was in the early to mid-2000’s, at the same time his teachers became locked into the strictures of a core-reading curriculum that the district adopted in 2004 for grades K-6. The intent of adopting this curriculum was to implement a standards-based instruction model so students could improve their standardized test scores in reading. The Glenley school district, as did many other districts, made this curricula decision in response to the state’s adoption of standardized testing as a way to measure student growth in the key areas of reading, writing, and math. Students’ performance on these standardized tests became a priority and this particular curriculum claims to be an effective way to teach students the skills they need to perform well on standardized tests.

The curriculum Glenley chose is one that approaches elementary reading instruction as a process of learning phonics in isolation by students first learning letter names and sounds, then simple words that are easily decoded using these letters and sounds. Once they learn the simple words, students read stories that consist of these
words. These curricula function with a specific script that teachers are to use with fidelity if they want their students’ test scores to reflect the growth the curriculum marketing promises (Elish-Piper et al. 2013; DeVries 2011). The script, however, does not offer teachers flexibility to address specific learning needs of individual students other than placing them into leveled reading groups, and drilling them individually on phonics skills sets. Sam was never diagnosed with a learning disability but he still struggled with reading throughout elementary school. It appears that differentiated reading instruction would have enhanced his ability to learn to read well.

**A Struggling Reader Outside the Stereotype**

Sam does not fit the stereotypical profile of a student who struggles with reading. For example, educators too often assume struggling readers are children of single parents living in poverty, or children of poor parents who do not speak English as a first language. Both of Sam’s parents, however, are college-educated and his mother teaches elementary school in a school district near Glenley. Sam’s dad works in a local bank and, with Sam’s help, operates the family farm, which is a mid-sized commodity grain and beef cattle operation. The socio-economic status of the family is solidly middle class.

Sam has memories of his parents and older sisters reading to him before he attended preschool so he has a home environment that exposed him to literacy at a young age. Sam was identified as a struggling reader, however, early in his experience with school. When I listened to Sam, it is clear he entered school with the desire to learn to read. He just did not thrive as a reader under a skills-based method of instruction that did not provide enriched or differentiated instruction.
As a sophomore, Sam voluntarily enrolled in my Reading Enrichment class because he is self-aware that he struggles with academic literacy. Not only is Sam self-aware, but also he is disappointed that he entered high school still struggling with academic reading and writing expectations. I have the sense that he feels let down. Sam does not like not doing well in something he undertakes, whether it is his performance in a game or his performance on a test. Sam’s goals include attending a 4-year college or university after he graduates from high school, so he enrolled in my Reading Enrichment class as part of his effort to gain more academic literacy support, and more confidence in his ability to read and to write at an academic level that will allow him to succeed in college.

**Sam’s determination to succeed.** Sam maintains a positive attitude and is determined to improve his academic literacy skills, a determination which is not typical of the stereotyped of a struggling reader. He is not discouraged, nor does he have any intention of giving up. The fact remains, however, that for a student like Sam, overcoming his deficits will require a concerted effort to read as much as possible in order to build upon his foundational reading skills (Beers 2003).

Adolescents who struggle with academic literacy are not confident in their own abilities to undertake difficult literacy tasks, nor do they trust or value their own thinking. This is why it is important for teachers to learn about and understand each student, including the reading histories of those who struggle with academic literacy (Kamil et al. 2008). It is through valuing the particular experience that professionals gain understanding of the problem under study (Stake, 2006). Through the information Sam
shared with me during our interviews and from my own classroom observations and from examples of his class work, I was able to develop a sense of Sam’s literacy strengths and limitations. Sam’s strengths included his ability to comprehend literature when he had sufficient time to read carefully. His most pressing limitations were finding and discerning valid information to support written arguments, and composing sentences and paragraphs. His experience will inform educators that there are consequences to the choices we make about the methods we use to instruct our struggling readers.

**Sam the Student – A Student-Athlete**

In addition to taking my Reading Enrichment class this year, Sam was also my student in English I as a freshman, and is currently in my English II class. In my teaching relationship with Sam over the past two years, I found him to be modest, well behaved and respectful. I have had numerous occasions to observe Sam’s interactions with students and other faculty in school, and at extra-curricular events, and perceive that he is well liked at Glenley High School by both students and by faculty. Sam is not conspicuous either by appearance or by personality. He has blond hair, fair skin and blue eyes, is 6 feet tall, and has a pleasant grin to go with his straightforward eye contact. He has the trim, muscular build of an athlete, and walks confidently with a bounce in his step.

Sam is not particularly outgoing but I notice that his interactions with his close friends are open and friendly. With everyone else he is a bit shy and reserved, but cordial. Sam is establishing his identity as a student-athlete, and is comfortable with himself and with his position in Glenley High School’s social order, one that is characteristic of small
town schools. Athletes are at the top followed by those who are involved in other extra-curricular activities such as FFA, music, or speech and theatre, but who avidly support the schools’ athletic teams.

**Sam’s elementary school experiences with academic literacy.** Sam’s memories of his elementary school experiences are fragmented, but he remembers quite clearly that he did not like to read. With the reserved and polite manner that is characteristic of Sam, he said very honestly, “I wasn’t the best reader.” Teachers used information from placement assessments to place Sam and the other students in leveled reading groups. During the 90 minutes each day allotted to language arts instruction, the good readers stayed with the classroom teacher and the others went to rooms with other teachers. Sam remembers they were Mrs. X. and Mrs. Y., the special education and Title I teachers. Sam does not remember anyone explaining to him the results of his placement test, but when he was assigned to his specific group, Sam understood it was because, as he says, “I could not read as good as the others.” This identification was the beginning of Sam’s perception of himself as a poor reader and this self-concept was reinforced when he remained in lower level reading groups throughout elementary school.

**Sam’s elementary reading instruction.** In his elementary reading classes Sam remembers that he and the other students followed the same routine every day. He and the others in his group took turns reading aloud, each taking turns reading sentences or short paragraphs from the selections in the reading book. Sam intensely disliked this procedure because, as he expressed in an interview, “Umm, I really hated oral reading. If I came to a word I didn’t know how to pronounce then that wasn’t fun.” The reading
curriculum emphasized the importance of the skill of reading words at a prescribed normal rate with fluency. Sam remembers being instructed about how to sound words out, and that he would try, but he said he would skip over words he could not pronounce in order to read at the target speed or pace.

Sam’s negative reaction to his early experiences of this form of round robin reading in his elementary reading classes illustrates an example of why Allington (2013) is concerned about the efficacy of this method. He finds that in many schools struggling readers are required to do more oral reading than what their better reading classmates are required to do. A primary problem with round robin reading is that only one child is reading while, at best, the others merely follow along (Allington, 2013). If the students were allowed to read silently, or in a whisper voice for the same amount of time, they would be able to read much more text, and it is the volume of reading that students accomplish that is a strong indicator of growth in reading proficiency. An irony in early reading instruction is that struggling readers often spend less time than good readers do in the activity that will help them most – reading (Allington, 2013).

Sam also remembers that pronouncing words was not his only difficulty in his elementary reading classes. He also struggled with understanding the meanings of words. If he could figure out how to pronounce the word he might know what it meant, but not always. Sam does not recall studying the meanings of vocabulary words in his elementary reading experience, but he does remember having weekly spelling tests. Sam said, very simply, “We would take spelling tests. There were 25 words. We’d have to know how to spell them each week.” Sam remembers having to look up the meanings of
the words, but knowing what the words meant was not given as much importance as was knowing the correct spelling.

The series of spelling tests Sam was required to take were an ineffective way to help struggling students gain knowledge of new words (Caldwell & Leslie, 2013). Given that comprehension is the purpose of reading, and this involves knowing the meanings of words and using them to construct meaning, “intervention for struggling readers, as well as classroom instruction for all readers, should address vocabulary learning and include regular attention to word meaning” (Caldwell & Leslie, p. 145). Our interviews offered Sam an opportunity to reflect on his early reading experiences, and he expressed that he knows he missed out when he memorized how words were spelled, but did not learn what the words meant. Not having access to enriched vocabulary lessons exacerbated Sam’s struggles with gaining confidence in his ability to not only read fluently but also to understand what he read.

**Meaningful literacy experiences in elementary school.** The elementary school experiences that Sam remembers most clearly are ones that involved experiential learning. One example that he still has good memories about was participating in his class’s State’s Fair. Each student in his grade researched a state, learned about its cities, logos, and other information, and then designed a dioramic presentation about the state that was put on display for the public. During the public display event, each student stood by his/her project, and answered questions from parents and others who viewed the displays. The whole experience was a big deal to Sam and he still remembers information about the state he researched, Nevada.
The fact that Sam remembers this learning activity with this much detail is worth noting because it is an example of an authentic reading experience (Gallagher, 2009). Instead of a singular focus on the narrow aspects of reading that can be easily tested, the State’s Fair experience incorporated a variety of academic literacy components. These include reading from a variety of sources, selecting information from these sources and writing about them, all with a clear purpose. The presentation component of the exercise added oral communication, another important aspect of academic literacy.

**Sam’s Transition to High School**

According to Sam his transition from elementary school into middle/junior high school went smoothly for the most part, but his transition into high school has been more difficult because of the amount of reading that is expected, and the number of assignments that are due every day. Sam also realizes that the academic expectations are higher and feels as if he needs, “to be paying attention all the time. If you find yourself daydreaming, it can really get you behind. In elementary, or junior high, it wasn’t like that. It seemed more relaxed. You could always learn somehow.” He explained that in elementary school some of the teachers were more approachable than are some teachers in high school. If students did not understand something right away they could ask these teachers and receive help with their questions. According to Sam, this is not the case with some of the high school faculty.

In high school, Sam feels that what he and other students are learning is more complicated, and it takes more class time for teachers to explain the concepts. He stated that some teachers get impatient if students do not understand right away, so he tries to
pay attention so he does not miss out on important things he needs to know. He does not want to be the student who gets yelled at when the teacher gets frustrated because he/she is not able to cover chapters in the planned or expected time frame.

Secondary academic literacy expectations. Listening to Sam describe the expectations of the academic classes he is taking the year of this study, it appears that most of the academic reading and writing expectations were those required in his Language Arts classes. This year his Language arts classes are one semester of Speech Communication and a full year of English II.

In our conversations and interviews, Sam indicated that there is a good deal of required independent reading from the textbook in his Speech Communication class. A considerable number of academic literacy elements are covered in this class including the critical thinking, research and speaking skills involved in public speaking. In a polite understatement about the expectations of the class, Sam says, “We have to learn a lot of vocabulary words, and we have to research, write and deliver four speeches.” The implication is that this is a challenging class for him because of the teacher’s very high expectations. She believes in the importance of instilling good public speaking skills in all her students and according to Sam, she is not unkind, but she does get impatient with students who do not complete the required textbook readings. The pace of the class moves quickly because it is only a semester class, so students are assessed on a number of chapters from a text that is designed for a yearlong course.

English II is a required course that I teach at Glenley High School. The goals of this course include building upon and reinforcing the academic reading and writing skills
students have gained throughout their school experience. Sam and the other students read, discuss and analyze theme-based literature selections from a world literature anthology. The literature covers all genres, including short stories, essays, poetry and drama. The students also read assigned books, including Hiroshima, by John Hersey (1946/1989), and Night, by Elie Wiesel (1982) as a class. For additional reading students are required to bring a book of their own choice to class each day to read during independent reading time. Differentiated vocabulary study is an integral part of the class, and the writing focus is on persuasive essays because this is the genre of writing that will be evaluated in the Nebraska State Writing Assessment (NeSA-W) that the students are required to take their junior year.

Overall, Sam performs well in English II. I observe that his silent reading pace is slower than that of higher skilled readers in the class, but if he does not finish reading assignments in the time I allot in class for reading, he takes his work home to finish. It is important to note that if Sam completes the required reading he exhibits an appropriate level of comprehension measured through his homework completion and class assessments.

The homework requirements vary from day to day. Assignments often include completing graphic organizers associated with the reading. Graphic organizers are a research-supported comprehension strategy that helps students, struggling or otherwise, organize information (DeVries, 2011). These graphic organizers focus on different elements of the selections, such as predicting outcomes, or analyzing characterization,
plot or theme. I do not discourage students from collaborating on homework assignments, and homework is not graded, but I do give daily points for completed homework.

During English class, when students have the opportunity to read aloud, my observation is that Sam will pause when he comes to a multi-syllabic word he does not recognize. If I provide the word, he usually does not repeat it after me but proceeds with the rest of the sentence. This is a continuation of a pattern he developed in elementary when Sam would skip words he did not know in order to read at a faster pace. Sam is not the only student who does this and I have begun to ask students to repeat the word after I give the correct pronunciation. If it is a word that is unfamiliar to students, I will model for them the process of getting the meaning of the word from the context in which it is used, or provide other strategies for learning unfamiliar words if context clues are not sufficient.

**The importance of vocabulary to Sam’s academic literacy.** Sam realizes the benefits to his academic literacy he has gained from the explicit vocabulary study in English II and in Reading Enrichment. According to DeVries (2011), proficient readers tend to have a large working vocabulary, so comprehension comes more easily to them. Caldwell and Leslie (2013) also stress the importance of deep knowledge of vocabulary to increased comprehension.

Sam recognizes the advantages of building his academic vocabulary as a way to become more confident in his academic literacy skills. He indicated this in an interview when he spoke about his experience with incorporating new words, primarily in his writing, something that adds to building his self-confidence in academic writing.
I’ve found myself actually using some of the words, especially in my writing. It helps to use bigger words sometimes. I don’t remember all of them [the words he’s studied], but I do remember the ones that apply to me, or to things I’m interested in.

Sam voices some frustration that he had to wait until high school to receive instruction on strategies to learn the meanings of vocabulary words. He has no memory from elementary school of ever being taught, for example, the strategies of learning what words mean by understanding the meanings of root words, or of prefixes and suffixes. These are strategies he has learned in English I and II that are reinforced in Reading Enrichment. Sam is now beginning to use these strategies successfully.

**Academic literacy and experiential learning.** During our interviews Sam reflected on class projects he has experienced, and he specifically remembers a mythology web-quest project, one that covered several weeks, which I had assigned the class when he was a freshman taking English I. This project required assigned groups of students to select a god or goddess from the pantheon of Greek, Roman or Norse mythology and create a poster presentation. Each group researched different aspects of this mythological deity’s personality and importance to the culture and then designed an imaginary home to fit his/her persona.

Each group then created a poster that included their chosen home design, furnishings and a suitable location for the home. Planning a housewarming party was the next step and this involved creating a guest list and dinner seating, keeping in mind the conflicts the group had discovered that existed between and among the deities. The groups also planned an appropriate menu for the occasion, created an invitation, selected a theme song, and wrote a gossip column describing the events they imagined occurred
during this house-warming party. The project was time consuming, but the goal of this assignment was to support a unit in mythology by giving the students a chance to personalize a character in mythology and to use multiple literacies in the process.

The mythology web-quest was a complex hands-on project Sam enjoyed that involved many elements of academic literacy. These elements included research, reading, discerning relevant information, writing, and oral communication. He implicitly questioned why I did not assign something similar for English II. Sam responded with a nod of his head when I explained that creating time for a comparable project this year was difficult because of the time I had to schedule for explicit writing instruction. I am compelled to devote more time to persuasive writing instruction during English II to support the writing expectations with the intent to provide his class with a solid foundation in persuasive writing so they can all do well on their state writing assessment the following year. Forgoing class time that could be used for project learning began to happen more often in my classroom when students’ state test scores became a district priority.

**Disciplinary Academic Literacy**

Sam and other students in his class receive instruction on how to apply their existing academic reading and writing skills in required Language Arts classes, and there is also explicit instruction in reading strategies built into English courses that supports students who are still developing these skills. Teachers in the content area classes that Sam struggles with, however, have the expectation that students in the class have already developed a level of academic literacy skill that will enable them to understand the
concepts of the subject matter without the teacher spending class time instructing students on reading strategies.

Many content area teachers assume that English/Language Arts classes provide students with a “toolbox of strategies that can be used no matter the field to help them with comprehension” (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013, p. 93). Sam’s experience in his content area classes supports Hynd-Shanahan’s (2013) critique that content area teachers need to understand that teaching students how to use specific strategies appropriate for their discipline allows students to learn and to think about the content in appropriate ways for the subject matter.

An example is Sam’s experience with Spanish II class. He admits that he does not do well in this class. In an interview he said that for him “it [Spanish class] can be pretty intense. There is quite a bit of reading actually. Reading and translating, mostly. Vocabulary, we have tests every week, and for writing, we do some of the assignments from the book.” Sam also describes difficulties with learning Spanish that mirror what he finds challenging in English. “Umm, fluency, putting sentences together. I’m not very good at knowing the sentence parts in English or Spanish.” Subject appropriate, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies that apply to students’ study of Spanish and other content area classes can enhance their learning experience. These strategies include setting a purpose for the reading, activating prior knowledge and asking questions to determine the importance of the information (Jetton & Lee, 2012). Reviewing important vocabulary, analyzing text structure and helping students visualize are also relevant content area comprehension strategies.
High school content area teachers may not know much about the literacy processes in their subjects, and therefore do not fully understand how to communicate ways to create knowledge in their discipline (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013). They take courses in their subject area, but often become teachers without a full understanding of the literacy of their own disciplines. Students, such as Sam, who already struggle with academic literacy, find themselves overwhelmed without having additional strategic support from their content area teachers.

As a result of his experience with trying to learn Spanish, Sam does not think he will take another year of the language. Most colleges only require that a high school student take two years of a foreign language, so two years is all he plans to take.

Sam explained that he struggles similarly with understanding some of the content of his Advanced Biology class. He stated that the textbook is not easy to read or to understand, and that the students are not required to read the text. He and most other students use it only as a reference tool, primarily to look up the meanings of the vocabulary words. The writing requirements of the class consists of taking notes from the teacher’s power point presentations over each chapter and completing worksheets over each chapter. The reading requirements are focused on students being expected to read the power point slides.

It is a well-known problem among high school teachers that students generally do not want to read difficult texts. Teachers will attempt to solve the problem by telling students what they need to know, by using presentations, films or video, or just having the best readers in the class read the text out loud (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013). This solves
the immediate problem of communicating subject matter, but creates another problem because students, especially those who struggle with academic literacy, never learn how to read texts for that particular discipline. Even for skilled readers “reading difficult text takes persistence and focus” (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013, p. 96). For a student like Sam, who intends to pursue his education after high school, not having the knowledge about how to make meaning from difficult text will leave him at a distinct disadvantage in college classes where some professors make few allowances for students who struggle with academic literacy.

**Reading Enrichment for Sam**

In accordance with Sam’s academic literacy needs, including the areas he himself wants to improve upon, his work in my Reading Enrichment class has two components, one of which is to increase the amount he reads. Based upon my observation, and Sam’s own assessment, he is what Beers (2003) refers to as an “uncommitted reader”. He is not opposed to reading, it just does not interest him. As required for the class, Sam began to select books at a reading level he was comfortable with to read independently, and for this component of the class the only assessment I implemented was requiring him to keep a reading log (see Appendix A).

At first finding a book that interested him was a challenge, but Sam discovered an author, Gary Paulson, who writes books he relates to and that he actually enjoys reading. Paulson wrote titles such as *Hatchet* (1987) and *Brian’s Hunt* (2003), books about survival in the wild, hunting and coming of age. Once Sam discovered an author’s writings that appealed to him, he became more comfortable with reading for pleasure.
This was something that he said surprised him. Before taking Reading Enrichment, Sam read only what was required for his classes, but according to Sam, “I would say reading the book I get to choose is more interesting, more enjoyable.” Over the course of the school year Sam read six young adult fiction books.

Another component of Reading Enrichment for Sam was to develop strategies for reading and understanding content material. This component grew out of my implementing, with modifications, the curriculum the district purchased for the class. Students choose topics and subjects to research, and write compositions to prompts that guide their research at a level of difficulty that is challenging but attainable.

I provided Sam with direct instruction on how to use different types of graphic organizers to organize the information from the sources he selected, and then with additional graphic organizers that helped him organize the information he would use to develop into paragraphs for his essays (see Appendix B). I ascertained that after instruction and guided practice he was able to choose which method of organization would work best for the topic he chose.

Sam researched numerous topics for his compositions during the two semesters of Reading Enrichment. I asked Sam whether he gained valuable background knowledge from reading and writing about the topics he chose for the class. Like many teenagers Sam can be somewhat inarticulate when he tries to explain something, but he responded that he did find value in learning about the topics he chose.

Yeah, I think it’s important to know random things about something, because [he paused]. I don’t know. There was a topic about the Grand Canyon. When people talk about this, now I know what they are talking about. When people talk about something, it’s nice to know about that topic.
Developing broad background knowledge of literature, world knowledge, and life experiences is an important strategy to be able to comprehend content material from texts (DeVries, 2011).

After a year of Reading Enrichment, Sam’s assessment of his progress was simply put:

I’ve really improved on gathering information and knowing how to put it into writing. I’ve done reports before, but this has really helped me know how to organize my thoughts and information. Also, different styles of writing. I was so used to doing the same kind all the time. Now I know different ways to write.

It appeared to me that Sam has gained a significant amount of confidence in both his ability to read selected text about different content areas, and his ability to write about what he learned.

Sam did express that while he feels more confident about both his reading ability and his writing skills, he still finds it difficult to write persuasive essays. Learning how to establish a thesis, create an argument, and then defend it with evidence are skills he still wants to improve. The strategies he learned and used will help him as he continues to develop his academic literacies.

What Motivates Sam?

By listening to Sam I learned that he has a significant amount of motivation behind his desire to improve his academic literacy skills. Higher student motivation is linked with not only better performance in academics, but also to lower dropout rates (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Student motivation, however, is a primary challenge facing secondary teachers. Effective teaching is an integral part of helping students stay motivated to navigate difficult text (Wilhelm & Smith, 2007). Establishing goals
motivates students to accomplish challenging tasks (Blumenfeld, 1992). Learning the sources of Sam’s motivation will be an important facet of understanding how Sam, and students similar to him, learn to persevere in spite of their struggles with academic literacy.

Sam maintains a positive attitude about his school experience. Sam tells me he does not mind at all coming to school. Like most students, he experiences some days as better than others, depending upon what is going on at school, the activities after school, and to some degree what he has to do in his classes. Sam explains that school is where he has the opportunity every day to see and to visit with his friends. Motivation to improve in academic literacy for Sam comes not from a compelling interest to learn about the subjects he is taking, but from knowing he needs to keep his grades up so he can participate in sports and activities. Sam gains his academic motivation from an aspect of his life that for some students can be academically distracting. This external academic motivation was shaped by the lowered literacy expectations that resulted in a limited concept of himself as a student who could excel academically.

It is a truth, however, that what Sam enjoys the most are the sports and activities that are associated with school. Therefore, in spite of having difficulty with academic literacy, he has never entertained the idea of dropping out of school. In fact, he chuckled somewhat incredulously when I asked whether he had ever entertained this idea. He responded:

I think the school does a good job of explaining the dangers of dropping out of school. How hard it is to get a job. I don’t want to end up like that! I see a lot of people who don’t have much and who really struggle [financially], and I do not want to be like that. I try hard – I don’t want to worry about that.
Sam makes a strong correlation between education and the opportunity for financial success, and that serves as another area of motivation. Sam knows he needs to perform well in school in order to have a chance to realize his long-term goals of attending college and eventually taking over his family’s farm.

**Intrinsic, extrinsic motivation – or both?** The types of academic motivation generally recognized by researchers include intrinsic motivation, the desire to achieve something because one truly wants to, and extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation occurs not necessarily by doing something for enjoyment, but when an action leads to a certain, desired result or goal. At times, it is difficult to distinguish between the two.

Sam explained that what motivates him to work hard to improve academically is similar to what motivates him to improve athletically.

I feel like I have been successful because I try hard at everything I do and I hate failing at something no matter what it is. Every time I come to a change in school I relate it to sports and how my coaches tell me to never give up because the hardest working people will always end up on top. (see Appendix C)

Sam also explained in an interview that when he “zones in on something,” as he does when he plays sports, he does not hear the crowd at all. When he is in the classroom he tries to focus on the teacher and block out distractions. When I asked him if the technique he developed in competition transfers to the classroom, he replied, “Yeah, or maybe I transferred what I developed in classes to sports. I really don’t know.” This statement indicates how integrated his love for playing sports and his desire to improve academically have become.
Another aspect of what motivates Sam is his implicit understanding that in spite of how much he loves playing football, his academic performance is ultimately more important to his future than how he performs on the field. Sam noted that it bothers him when his fellow athletes focus more on sports and neglect academics. As Sam says, “They don’t try very hard in classes, they care more about the sport they play. Many don’t find school that enjoyable, and there’s an attitude to do only what’s required in school so they can play sports.” This attitude among those he plays sports with is shaped by the importance the community of Glenley places on the school’s athletic programs.

Sam explained that among the populace of Glenley, students get much more recognition for athletic achievement than they do for academic achievement. The local papers cover sports thoroughly, and area TV sportscasters often interview local athletes, so some students get a good deal of regional name recognition because of their athletic achievements. Even the less than stellar athletes gain recognition by association. From my observations, I sense Sam is taking the growing attention he receives from the local press in stride and remains grounded in his understanding that he cannot neglect his efforts to improve his academic literacy.

Sam mentioned a friend of his, a fellow athlete who is one of the top athletes in the area. He noted, “I think someone like him could really do well in school, but [he] doesn’t try. I don’t know what his grades are, but probably not the best. And he doesn’t try because he doesn’t care.” Sam says this frustrates him because reading and other aspects of academic literacy have not come as easily for him as they did for his friend,
and Sam has learned he has to work hard to try to overcome his difficulties. Therefore it is not easy for Sam to watch a friend “slide by” putting in little or no effort.

Sam expressed concern for how this friend will fare when he goes to college. He explains that he knows bad study habits in high school do not automatically improve once a person gets to college. Sam is already gaining attention for his athletic achievements, so his understanding that he cannot neglect academics in order to give all of his focus to his athletic endeavors indicates a positive sense of academic agency, which is an element of motivation (Moore & Cunningham, 2006).

Motivation and family support. Sam explained that he thinks the main reason that athletics is the primary focus of the community, and by extension many of the students, stems from the families. He put it this way: “If the families focused more on academics then maybe students would too. Maybe in the long run people realize the importance of doing well in school, but for the moment it would be sports.” Sam feels fortunate that his parents and sisters encourage him to do well in school. From visiting with Sam’s parents at parent-teacher conferences, I can attest to how supportive and involved they are in his academic endeavors. Their involvement has not been intrusive, but it has served to mitigate Sam’s sense of himself as a poor reader, and thus as a poor student.

The motivation to perform academically that Sam attributes to the support of his family exemplifies, as explained in a report on student motivation research by the Center on Education Policy (Usher & Kober, 2012), an aspect of student motivation strongly documented by research. According to this report, parents who are actively involved in
their children’s education help them develop feelings of competence, and positive attitudes toward academics. Another finding is that students who are not necessarily motivated by the love of learning may be motivated if they see learning as a way to attain something else they value. It does appear that achieving the highest grades he can in his classes represents Sam’s sense of doing well in school. His reasons for wanting to do well in school are directly tied to his goal of attending a four-year university.

In order to continue improving his performance in academic literacy, Sam’s motivation to earn high grades needs to include a reader identity (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). Sam has the identity of an athlete, but creating a genuine reader and learner identity is a critical element of sustaining improved academic performance.

The experience of one year of Reading Enrichment did not erase the fact that Sam still encounters difficulties with academic literacy. What it did do was provide him with strategies he can use when he does encounter academic literacy challenges, to raise the bar of his own expectations and not to settle for just being “good enough” with academic literacy. If he chooses to incorporate these strategies the on-going process will continue to increase his sense of self-confidence about his academic literacy performance.

My second case study, Cody, is in some ways similar to that of Sam’s. The differences, however underscore the reasons why educators cannot look at students who experience difficulties in academic literacy as being identical. Their literacy problems may be similar, but the reasons behind their difficulties are unique to the individual as should be the approach to literacy instruction and intervention.
Chapter 5

Cody

Cody comes from a similar background to Sam’s. Both boys have lived their entire lives in Glenley, and have been in the same class since Kindergarten. They experienced the same teachers in elementary school as well as the same language arts instruction. Their personalities are different, however, and while Sam’s early emotional response to school was positive, Cody’s was not. As a result of this early negative emotional response to school, Cody’s story of his struggle with academic literacy becomes a case of missed opportunities.

A Case of Missed Instructional Opportunities

These missed opportunities led to long term negative consequences for Cody when aspects of his personality, specifically his extreme shyness and sensitivity, impeded his early ability to adapt to the school environment, thus to respond to initial literacy instruction. Cody was very shy when he began school, and according to his self-description, his initial reaction to Kindergarten and to being in school every day was both extreme and negative. In our first interview Cody said, “I think the first day I was kind of freaked out. I was pretty scared. I was pretty freaked out the first couple of years. It was just a lot to handle, I don’t know. I just kinda stood around, mostly.” Cody’s memory is of being so painfully shy that initially he did not know how to respond to his teachers or understand how he was expected to participate in instruction or activities with other students.
In time Cody was able to adjust, but it was not something that happened quickly. As he says, “It kept getting more fun. Learning new things, and meeting new people. Getting to know them better. Making friends.” As a 16-year old it is difficult for Cody to be articulate when he describes his feelings about his early experiences with school, but it is evident that these early experiences had a long-term impact on how he viewed himself as a student. His teachers, because of circumstances largely outside of their control, missed opportunities to facilitate Cody’s adjustment to becoming a student, and to gain a positive sense of student identity.

Most teachers do not normally associate the difficulties that some students experience adjusting to school as being traumatic. Cody’s unusually negative reaction was so strong, however, that a lack of readiness for early learning experiences was a repercussion. When Cody did not learn to read quickly with the method his teachers were compelled to use, his anxiety about school only increased because of his struggles with learning to read.

The basic human need to connect, to be a part of the world around us does not lessen when students enter a classroom (Elish-Piper et al. 2013). Students who find school a daunting place to go everyday need teachers who are allowed to gain knowledge about their students’ needs by “reading the language of their behavior” (Hawkins, 1967/2002). In order to provide a supportive learning environment, these teachers must then be able to create classroom literacy activities that build on their students’ needs (Elish-Piper et al. 2013). Cody’s teachers did not have the instructional flexibility they needed to adapt to his inability to engage because they had to depend exclusively upon the
scripted method of reading instruction they were expected to administer with fidelity. The fact that enriched reading opportunities did not happen inside the prescribed language arts curriculum constitutes a significant missed opportunity for Cody and for the other students as well.

Without early differentiation in instructional methods, initial negative school experiences can impact students’ self-perception of themselves as learners. This low self-perception can carry over and shape whether they view themselves as competent readers throughout their school experience. Cody was identified as a struggling reader, and problems with literacy, such as what Cody experienced, persist because systems provide only “cookie-cutter instructional responses that do not address youth’s literacy needs” (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p. 11). Because early instruction is critical to creating a foundation for students’ literacy development, it is productive for districts to provide personalized instruction and interventions, particularly for reading, because a one size fits all method cannot meet students’ individual needs. Cody’s initial experiences with school, and his early experience with being a struggling reader significantly shaped how he views himself as a student. How he views himself as a student impacts the choices he makes now about his continued school experience.

**Cody’s Place in the Glenley School and Community**

Cody’s sense of place in Glenley High School is one unique to him. He has chosen a path different from the one guided by the status quo student interests of the Glenley High School’s milieu. What is unique to Cody’s experience is that he excels at raising and showing prize-winning cattle, an activity that is not part of school sanctioned
extra-curricular activities. Many people in the Glenley community value the importance of raising quality cattle, but because it is not an athletic activity, Cody’s school and social experiences are different from the students at Glenley who have followed the more traditional path of being active in school sponsored athletic activities.

Cody explains that while he is comfortable when he publically shows cattle, he is still very shy in some circumstances. My observations of him in class and in the school environment support this. Cody has difficulty expressing his ideas and feelings when he communicates with faculty and staff, but like many teenagers, he appears relaxed when I see him with close friends. Cody does not appear to be uncomfortable in my classroom, or when he talks to me, but he is reticent, and rarely speaks unless he is called on to respond. Cody also has a soft voice, barely audible at times. When I transcribed my interviews with him I had to listen very carefully so I did not miss something. I wrote a note to myself indicating that teachers need to follow suit when working with students such as Cody, to listen carefully so as not to miss or overlook their unique needs.

According to Cody, he does get discouraged when his academic performance is less than he feels it should be. When he gets discouraged he says it is easy to want to give up. Yet, at the same time, he communicates that he has a lot of support from his parents and from his older brothers to do well in school, and it is important to him not to let them down. Cody wants to follow in his brothers’ footsteps and attend college, and since his dad also wants him to take over the farm operation after he retires, Cody wants to be as prepared as he can be to assume that responsibility.
Cody has many reasons to want to succeed in high school. His goals to attend college and to make his family proud of him appear to be very important to Cody. His current anxiety about academics is shaped by his concerns about how well he must perform on tests in subjects he struggles with, and on standardized assessments. His ability to comprehend and to understand what he reads is an important factor for Cody to consider as he continues to progress in his academic literacy skills. To alleviate his anxiety so he can see himself as a thriving reader and gain confidence in his academic literacy skills, Cody is entitled to instruction that treats him as a capable and competent learner (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009). Cody communicated that he tends to perform better for teachers who create an environment that allows him to feel capable of meeting their expectations.

An Avid Reader Who Struggles with Academic Literacy

Cody was identified as a struggling reader in early elementary, and received individual tutoring for several summers from Glenley Elementary School’s Speech and Language Pathologist. According to Cody’s recollections, the tutor helped him with “the reading and vocabulary stuff. She also helped me with my speech, how to pronounce certain sounds, letters and stuff.” This tutorial support came as a result of Cody’s mother actively pursuing ways to help her son overcome his difficulties with reading in school.

The strong interest and support from Cody’s mother exemplifies one reason why Cody does not fit the usual archetype of a struggling reader. This archetype includes students who come from literacy-impoverished environments with parents who may not value reading for themselves and do not understand how to best foster their child’s
academic literacy skills. Nothing could be further from Cody’s experience than this description. His mother is a college graduate and there is an established tradition of post-secondary education in his family. Cody has two older brothers from his mother’s first marriage, whom he says he feels very close to and who are well established in their professions. One is a physical therapist and the other is a construction manager. They are both graduates of major universities and, according to Cody, provide him with a positive perspective on post-secondary education.

Cody’s mother is a former elementary teacher, and currently volunteers at a nearby NPO that offers help to young men and their families who are dealing with severe emotional and behavior disorders. Cody’s mother has actively encouraged and instilled in Cody the importance of reading independently for pleasure. She recommends books and helps Cody find books about subjects that interest him. Because of this, he has an established pattern of reading books he chooses for entertainment. Paradoxically, Cody reads often, yet struggles with academic literacy.

While Cody’s father did not attend college, he is a large landowner in the area of Glenley, and raises the commodity crops of corn and soybeans, as well as beef cattle. Cody helps his dad with all aspects of the family farm operation, and for several years has raised and shown highly prized, award winning beef cattle. Cody comes from an intact middle-class family, and his parents and brothers understand the importance of academic literacy and support him as he navigates the expectations of high school. Because Cody does not fit the stereotype of a struggling reader, it is important to listen to Cody’s story to gain insight about how missed instructional opportunities shaped his
response to his early school experiences, as well as his current struggles with academic literacy.

The insights from Cody’s story indicate that his current difficulties with academic literacy are rooted in both his early difficulties with adjusting to school, and to his need for a different type of early reading instruction than what was offered by the scripted curriculum that is the core Language Arts curriculum at Midtown Elementary School.

**Cody the Student – An Introverted Cowboy**

Cody is in his second year in my Reading Enrichment class, and I have also had him as a student in my English classes for two years. I find Cody to be an unprepossessing young man in both manner and appearance, shy and quiet in the classroom. Cody is over 6 feet tall, and very slender with straight brown hair and soft, dark eyes. It is rare to see Cody in anything but Wrangler jeans and a comfortable shirt, and he cultivates a bit of a cowboy persona, the tall silent type. Perhaps I think this because I know Cody loves to raise and show his cattle, and I am aware that he enjoys reading stories set in the old West.

Cody has a brilliant smile that I rarely see in school, but I have seen it several times in newspaper photographs taken when he was receiving awards for his prize-winning steers. To me, his smile is absolutely transformative, and it makes me wonder why I do not see this expression of joy in school. I may have just not been present when Cody has occasion to smile this way in school.

This year Cody made the choice not to compete in competitive sports. Rather, he spends his after school time focusing on his livestock projects. Cody explained that when
he was younger he did play baseball and basketball, and spent a lot of time in summer basketball camps, but he has decided not to continue with his involvement with extra-curricular athletics. Cody had a difficult conversation with Glenley’s basketball coach earlier this year when he told the coach he no longer wanted to participate on the team. Cody did not relate the details of his conversation with the coach to me, but the coach told several of us in the teacher’s lounge, in very clear language, how he expressed his deep disappointment and disapproval to Cody about his choice to no longer play basketball. The coach has a strong personality, and from my perspective it took courage for Cody to be honest with him about his decision. My sense is that Cody was sensitive to this coach’s vociferous coaching style, and needed a less caustic environment to express his talents. He found that environment working with his show cattle.

Cody noted that both of his older brothers were talented athletes in high school, and told me in an interview that he enjoyed watching them compete in their games, but he feels what he is doing with his livestock is more important to his future plans. In a school and community such as Glenley, choosing not to participate in extra-curricular sports activities tends to put students in different social circles from those of the athletes. Cody explains that he does have friends who compete athletically and he enjoys watching them play. It appears that Cody has no regrets about his choice to forgo athletics.

Cody is currently a sophomore at Glenley High School, and he took my Reading Enrichment class both as a freshman and again this year. He enrolled his freshman year because he had been in reading intervention classes in junior high (classes taught by another teacher), and both his mother and the guidance counselor felt he would benefit
from additional support in academic literacy in high school. He voluntarily chose to take Reading Enrichment for a second year to gain more confidence in the academic literacies of content area reading and writing. With his characteristically quiet, low voice, Cody explained, “The Reading Enrichment class really helped with knowing how to do research. I kinda wanted to improve – more like the longer writing assignments – getting more help so I can write research papers.” Cody told me he has had the most difficulty with the writing expectations of high school, and this has created anxiety that he wants to overcome.

**Cody’s elementary school experiences with academic literacy.** Cody’s struggles with the reading and writing expectations of high school reflect his earlier struggles in elementary school. Cody knows he was identified as a struggling reader, but he was not exactly sure when this happened or how his teachers made this identification. Cody remembers being in reading classes, but he does not recall any activities that involved talking or writing about what he and his classmates read. He says that his experience was the same nearly every day. He explained, “We would just have these books and read stories to each other. Then we had questions.” He did say he remembered being taught different ways to make sure he followed along while others read, but he does not recall discussing the stories, or writing about what they read, only filling out worksheets with questions.

**Cody’s elementary reading instruction.** Cody’s reading experience in elementary school had as its foundation a scripted, direct instruction reading curriculum. The curriculum is based upon the idea that a primary focus on instruction of phonics is
necessary in order to prepare students to read for meaning. Another strong component of this curriculum is for students to be able to pronounce words quickly and accurately – reading fluency. For example, as Cody described, he and other students in his group were instructed to read short passages aloud to each other. He and his reading partners kept note of miscues when others read, with the goal of reading aloud 100 words per minute with no mistakes.

Any interaction between the teachers and their students is written out in script, and his teachers were expected to follow this script with fidelity. Included in this script are what teachers are to say, how it should be said, and even which gestures to use. An example follows:

**Task 1: Children say mmm as in mat.**
A. Let’s say some sounds. Listen to the sound: mmm. When I hold up my finger, we’re going to say (pause) mmm. Get ready. (Hold up one finger and say mmm with the children. mmm)
B. Again. Get ready. (Hold up one finger and say mmm with the children.)
C. Your turn. Get ready. (Hold up finger. mmm)
D. Again. Your turn. Get ready. (Hold up one finger. mmm.)
E. Call on different children to do C. – (from Reading Mastery I, Presentation Book A by Engelmann and Bruner, 1995, p. 1, as reprinted in Beers, 2003)

This scripted approach to early reading instruction is one way to teach phonemic awareness, but there is no research evidence that offers proof that it is the best way (Allington, 2013). Every elementary teacher needs to know several approaches of teaching the necessary decoding skills, and adapt until they locate the best method for each child (Allington, 2013). What if Cody, a struggling reader who was also very shy and having difficulty adapting to the school environment, had had a teacher with the autonomy to find the best approach for him? Could this teacher have facilitated his
acquisition of the skills that would have ensured earlier success in reading? As it was, Cody says he was overwhelmed by how fast he was expected to learn, and missed the opportunity to gain early confidence in his ability to read.

Researchers have known for more than 20 years that when reading lessons for struggling readers are focused on meaning, these readers’ ability to comprehend will improve more than when lessons focus primarily on skills (Allington, 2013). Cody explained that he eventually got pretty good at passing the fluency tests, but it was understanding the meaning of what he read that he struggled with. As he puts it:

> It was just answering the questions about what I read, and if I had to write about it. Comprehension was what was hard. Yeah, it was just trying to find the answers. I don’t know if I always remembered everything the first time I read it. If I read it twice, it was always more clear. Read it once, I don’t always see it, but if I read it a time or two I can get it a lot better.

Cody indicated further that the questions he had to answer on the worksheets for each story was what he struggled with. My sense is that the extra tutoring Cody received when he was younger did help him with his fluency of pronunciation and pace, but not with comprehension.

I have learned that Cody’s current difficulties in my English classes mirror what he struggled with in elementary. Cody can pronounce words correctly and can read a text aloud with very few mistakes. Cody’s ability to comprehend what he reads, however, still depends upon his having the time to read something more than once, to fully understand the meanings of difficult vocabulary, and to complete other comprehension strategies, such as the use of graphic organizers. Being a part of class discussion also helps Cody understand the meaning of what he has read by building on his background
knowledge. If Cody misses any of these steps, the grades he earns on his quizzes and tests suffer because he has not been able to comprehend the deeper meaning of the stories or connect with the themes of the literature.

**Cody’s meaningful literacy experiences in elementary school.** Cody does not have any memory of being taught specific strategies to help him read different kinds of texts for meaning. He does recall that he enjoyed learning about certain subjects in social studies and science. He remembers connecting with the content of these subjects. He stated:

[I liked learning] about different countries and facts. I always wanted to learn a little more about that. And, mmm, yeah. When we were learning about DNA and the evolution of life. I wanted to learn more about that. It seemed kinda cool about how humans evolved – maybe even from fish.

It appears that what Cody read in his content area classes interested him more than what he was reading in his core-reading book. Young readers are motivated to read when they have authentic purposes for doing so (Lenters, 2006). Student interest is quite likely one of the most authentic purposes that exists for students to read, and Cody likely would have progressed more quickly in his reading skills had he been able to choose books about what interested him as he was learning to read.

As Cody got older, however, disciplinary reading became more challenging. It is important to note that student interest can and does provide motivation for students to read difficult content text. Content area reading strategies are effective in increasing motivation, especially for students who struggle with reading comprehension (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013). What if Cody had been taught and/or been given time to practice specific strategies that supported his comprehension of content area texts? A positive
outcome could have resulted in these strategies helping him adapt to high school content area expectations, an area he struggles with now.

**Cody’s Transition to High School**

What Cody remembers most about his transition to 7th grade, (at Glenley, the 7th and 8th grade classes are held in the high school wing, and share many of the same teachers) was that he had more homework, and that reading was no longer a class that he took every day. The kinds of reading changed too, as did the level of difficulty. In an interview, Cody noted, for example, that the story problems in math were harder to figure out. In some classes, however, he points out that the teacher reads the text to the students or has another student, a good reader, do the reading. This is a concern for a struggling reader, such as Cody, because what struggling readers actually need are more opportunities to read (Allington, 2013). What happens, unfortunately, is that too often readers who struggle do less reading and fill out more worksheets.

Another aspect about Cody’s transition from elementary to secondary school that emerged from our conversations is how important it is for Cody to have a positive relationship with his teachers to be able to learn from their instruction. In an interview he explained what happens to him when there is a negative connection with a teacher:

> It just makes you want to give up. It creates more problems because it makes you block out the teacher. It might work for some [students] but I think it causes anxiety when the teacher starts yelling. At least for me. I’m done for the day, and then homework is even more stressful. It affects the desire to even learn.

As Hawkins (1967, 2002) points out in his classic essay, *I, Thou, and It*, students “are not always able to sort out all of this feedback for themselves” (p. 56). A sensitive student such as Cody may take teachers’ negative behavior personally, and a subsequent response
to this kind of classroom climate can and does affect students’ ability to learn. I discovered that Cody does not function well if he does not trust his relationship with a teacher. An example of this was in his apparent discomfort with the direction of a coach who was very vocal in his coaching style. Cody dealt with this situation by ending his participation on the basketball team. Cody indicates that relationships with his teachers throughout his school experience have had a significant impact on his academic literacy growth.

Secondary academic literacy expectations. Although Cody experiences difficulty with the reading in all of his classes in high school, the writing expectations that he feels he has the most difficulty with began in 7th grade and continue to the present. In his 7th and 8th grade English classes, Cody explained that he had to write lengthy book reports. Although he and the other students selected the books they read, he felt unprepared for the difficulty of the expectations of these book reports. Cody’s teacher reviewed the elements of fiction with her students and explained what needed to be covered in their reports, but since Cody had had little background in elementary with analyzing literature, he said he could not understand the expectations quickly enough, so he did not do well.

Another junior high requirement for Cody, in both English and Social Studies, was to complete a research paper. Again, his English teacher [another teacher], reviewed what was required, both the process and the finished product, but Cody still felt overwhelmed. He said this experience was, “Not that great. Probably the research part. It was pretty tough, we had to research more and find a lot about our topics.”
research papers and the book reports required Cody and the other students to write about what they had read, a complex cognitive process.

“Reading requires students to gather background knowledge and connect it to the new information they are processing. Writing requires they synthesize their thoughts to articulate a message in print” (DeVries, 2011, p. 283). There is a considerable amount of comprehension involved in this process, and for a student such as Cody, who struggles with comprehension, the anxiety and insecurity about completing this type of assignment affects his ability to produce writing that meets the teacher’s expectations. That Cody recognizes this, and decided to take Reading Enrichment for a second year so he could become more confident in his writing skills, shows positive academic agency on his part. Making good academic choices will be necessary and beneficial to Cody as he continues to make sense of the literacy expectations of high school.

The classes that require the most academic reading and writing for Cody at this point of his high school tenure appear to be his Language Arts classes, which include Speech Communication, taught by the other English teacher, and English II, the class I teach. Cody explains that from his perspective there is a lot of writing in Speech Communications. He pointed out that there is one kind of writing style that he finds particularly difficult. Cody said, “Writing our speeches and things. It’s OK, except for persuasive. That one is hard. It’s really tough to make it persuasive, not informative.” Writing of any kind is a skill that takes a good deal of practice. Developing an argument for persuasive writing is particularly challenging, and involves a clear understanding of the subject, and the ability to comprehend information that both supports an opinion, and
information that challenges the same opinion. Synthesizing information in this way is complex. For struggling students, it is imperative to have a teacher who will give explicit instruction about and support during the writing process to help facilitate students’ progress and allow them to experience success.

Cody explains that students are expected to read the textbook in Speech Communications, and in addition he indicated that they were expected, as he put it, to write “lots of notes from her lectures and Power Point presentations. She would tell us what to write, she didn’t want us just copying the Power Point.” Learning effective ways to take notes is an effective comprehension strategy, and having a teacher model this provides strong support for students who struggle with academic literacy.

English II and Reading Enrichment are the two classes where I am Cody’s teacher. English II is a literature-based class and students are given assignments that include reading literature from a world literature anthology that includes the genres of short story, essay, poetry, and drama. Students read fiction and non-fiction books to supplement the readings from the anthology. This year I required students to bring a book of their own selection to class each day, and I provide time for independent reading whenever possible. Differentiated vocabulary study and writing instruction that is focused on persuasive writing are also integral components of class instruction.

Cody is quiet in class, consequently he contributes when I specifically ask for his input, but there are times when he does not appear to have a lot of confidence in his answers. Cody acknowledges that he struggles to comprehend some of the literature he and the rest of the class are assigned to read. In our conversations I discovered that Cody
appreciates it when I read selections of literature aloud to the class. Read-alouds can be an effective comprehension strategy for readers of all ages, (Caldwell & Leslie, 2013) and are an especially effective way to introduce challenging text that readers, especially those who struggle, may not have the confidence to read independently.

An example of a challenging piece of literature I read aloud in English II class is a short story written by Edgar Allen Poe. Cody noted that when I read *The Pit and the Pendulum* aloud to the class, he was able to get a better understanding of the plot of the story than he would have had he read it independently. Because of its unfamiliar setting and its challenging vocabulary and syntax, Cody told me is unsure he would have even been able to read this story independently with any understanding had I not read portions of it aloud.

Reading aloud to students of any age is a research supported comprehension strategy (Beers, 2003; DeVries, 2011). I use it occasionally with high school students in all of my English classes to introduce a story and combine my reading portions of selections aloud with silent independent reading by the students. At the high school level it is important for all readers, especially those who struggle, to develop and use strategies that support the goal of becoming independent readers. Introducing difficult text, and modeling how it sounds by reading aloud can help students visualize the scenes and the characters. Scaffolding this into independent reading is a strategy that can help all readers, but it especially allows those who struggle the opportunity to approach text with more confidence (Caldwell & Leslie, 2013).
**Disciplinary academic literacy.** Cody’s experience with academic reading and writing requirements in his content area classes is very different from that of his Language Arts classes. Cody is enrolled in Spanish, and explains that there is very little reading required in this class. According to Cody, “We don’t really read in that book, because there isn’t anything to read. He just kinda teaches us the words and the meanings and how to use it in Spanish.” Cody did say that he has some trouble with Spanish grammar because some of the rules are different from those of English. Having an opportunity to read text written in Spanish would provide Cody the opportunity to become more familiar with sentence structure and how words work in Spanish, and to garner meaning from reading text written in Spanish as he becomes more familiar with the vocabulary.

Cody indicates that the content area class he struggles with the most is Biology. Cody noted that in Biology the students are not required to read the textbook. He said, “We do some reading, but [take] a lot of notes from his Power Points. There are a lot of vocabulary terms we have to learn too.” He described the reading in science as being very different from what he reads in English. As he put it, “It’s more explaining, like the vocabulary we need to know. Sometimes there are equations that the reading explains. Actually, we don’t really read the science book. We just take notes is all.” Cody further explained that the students in his class use the science textbooks primarily to look up the answers for the worksheets and to look up the definitions for the vocabulary words.

Cody’s experience reflects what is common practice in classes that cover difficult subject matter (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013). Students have difficulty reading the text, and do
not want to read it. Teachers often solve this problem by telling the students what they need to know about the subject matter, or at best have one of the best readers in the class read the text aloud. Gaining experience in how to read difficult text is what struggling readers need. Hynd-Shanahan (2013) suggests several strategies that content area teachers can implement to facilitate students’ reading. Examples include:

- Breaking up the reading into smaller chunks to build reading stamina. Being explicit about your intentions to build persistence and capacity. Create a climate in which struggle with text is honored and a valued part of learning and provide instruction that helps students pay attention to the important parts of text, such as graphic organizers and annotation. Set purposes for reading which are authentic to the discipline and foster students’ collaborative efforts by teaching them to work together respectfully to solve comprehension problems. (pp. 96, 97)

Strategies such as these are not complicated, and if used effectively in the classroom, help avoid the long-term problem that can emerge when students never learn how to read difficult text. For students such as Cody, who struggle with academic literacy, it is helpful when teachers implement such strategies to help ensure their students’ short-term and long-term success.

**Reading Enrichment for Cody**

When Cody took Reading Enrichment as a freshman the year before, the aspect of academic literacy he worked on most was researching and composing well-developed paragraphs to the prompts provided by the curriculum purchased by Glenley High School for the class. This year he enrolled in the class again so he could gain more experience and confidence in writing longer compositions.

The writing process for the class was one I worked out together with Cody and the other students in the class. The process reflects the underlying premise of effective
writing workshops (DeVries, 2011). All writers need regular, sustained time for writing, and they need to be able to choose their topics. In the Reading Enrichment class the students and I have been able to create a supportive environment where no one fears being ridiculed, either by me or by each other. Cody is able to work at his own pace as he follows the process of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing his final draft for evaluation. Cody selects and uses specific graphic organizers that he is most comfortable with that facilitate his writing process (See Appendix D).

During this process I was also able to provide Cody brief sessions of explicit instruction on how to discern valid sources, how to use effective prewriting activities, and how to use appropriate graphic organizers to organize his thoughts, both for what information to include in his essays, and how to organize paragraphs within each essay. Included in this instruction was how to balance his use of time by setting goals, both daily and weekly, estimating the time he needed to perform each task, then incorporating this into a written plan. There were times when Cody needed to revisit and modify his plans. My observations were, however, that the planning itself alleviated a good deal of the anxiety that long writing assignments had previously caused for Cody. The more relaxed atmosphere allowed him the opportunity to develop more confidence as a writer. As a result Cody began to be more comfortable with his own writing voice, or the way he speaks to his reader.

Like many students who struggle with academic literacy, I noted that initially Cody had difficulty trusting his own writing skills. When he took notes from his sources, they were written nearly verbatim. I have found that when students take notes verbatim,
this can exacerbate the problem of direct plagiarism because students essentially copy information from their source notes into their essay. With practice, however, Cody steered himself away from this style of note taking, and as a result expanded his choice and use of vocabulary and sentence structure when he drafted his essays.

Cody became increasingly more comfortable and confident in his ability to research and compose, and he said in one of our conversations that he actually grew to like writing the longer compositions. From my observations, and knowing where Cody began with his academic writing as a freshman, his comments show that he is cognizant of making significant progress in his level of confidence. Instead of dreading, or being intimidated by extended writing assignments, Cody now approaches them as he puts it, as “very doable.”

Independent reading, another component of Reading Enrichment was, according to Cody, his favorite part of the class. He said he appreciates having time every day to read books he selects about subjects he enjoys, such as Westerns, mysteries, adventures, outdoor books and sports. Because of his mother’s guidance and encouragement, Cody came into the class with an established habit of reading for pleasure. I helped him add some simple comprehension strategies, such as keeping a written book log/summary, a strategy he is able to carry over into the reading he does for his academic classes. These strategies, if he continues to use them, will help Cody continue to improve in his ability to read and to comprehend text.

Overall, Cody believes that his experiences with reading books and magazines of his choice has helped him with the reading he is required to do in his high school classes.
His insight is supported by Allington (2013) when he notes that how much children read is a better indicator of who will become good readers and who will not. Cody even recommends that someone coming into high school should purposefully take time to read for pleasure. He explains it in his unassuming way: “I think reading over the summer helps when we come back to school. Have a list to pick from and keep a reading log. Some probably wouldn’t do it, but it would help the students who struggle with reading.” From his personal experience, Cody is now able to recognize what has helped him overcome some of the difficulties he has had with academic reading. He feels confident enough in his realization that he is willing to pass on this understanding to others.

**What Motivates Cody?**

Much of Cody’s motivation to do well in school stems from the support and encouragement he receives from his family, and from his goal to pursue post-secondary education. Cody has two older brothers who have graduated from two different universities, and who are successful in their chosen fields. He explains that his older brothers talk to him about their college experiences and they want him to go on to college for many reasons. Cody understands that one important reason is that they want him to learn and to experience other things outside his life in Glenley. He feels he could, “advance my knowledge too, in mechanics and technology. There’s a lot more technology in farming now. My dad always regrets that he didn’t go to college for that.” From our conversations, I have discerned that Cody has a considerable amount of respect for his older brothers and for his parents, and appreciates the fact that they feel he is capable of continuing his education after high school.
Cody came to see that nearly everything he learns in school would help him both to succeed in college, and to succeed in his eventual goal of operating his family’s farm. This positive attitude toward school reflects a point made by Blumenfeld (1992) when she notes, “Reactions to challenge may depend on whether students perceive that what is being learned or gained from tasks is valuable” (p. 273). Cody has decided that even though academic reading and writing are difficult for him, it is worth it for him to persevere, because this effort is valuable to his future.

**Extrinsic or intrinsic motivation.** Cody’s motivation is extrinsic in that it stems from “the performance of an activity in order to attain some separable outcome” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 71). In his case, Cody may not enjoy certain classes, however, he recognizes the worth of the classes he is required to take given his long-term goals. It is very possible that because of his early struggles with academic literacy, it is unlikely that Cody could have attained this level of understanding of the purpose of doing well in high school without the strong support of his family. Again, this is motivation that is coming from outside, but it is authentic motivation in that the family support is not coming in the form of control or threats. Rather, Cody has been able to attain what Ryan and Deci (2000) refer to as “integrated regulation [which] occurs when identified regulations are fully assimilated to the self, which means they have been evaluated and brought into congruence with one’s other values and needs” (p. 73). His parents’ and brothers’ educational values are Cody’s, and he gains a strong sense of self from sharing these values with his family.
Cody is forthright with me and with himself about how important it is for him to keep working hard to improve his academic study skills. He wrote in a letter writing assignment:

I think most of the choices I make academically are pretty good but I know every once in a while I get lazy and decide to slack off. I usually start doing that at the end of the school year. This year I have focused much harder on trying not to do that and I think it will pay off. (See Appendix E)

Cody told me wants to live up to his older brothers’ and parent’s expectations. He knows they are high, but this creates within him a sense of positive self-worth when they all expect good things from him academically. He continued in the letter he wrote: “My parents influence lots of my choices so far through high school. They help me keep focused throughout the school year and through the summer so I’m ready when I go back to school in August” (See Appendix E). Cody’s sense of motivation reflects the outcomes that Ryan and Deci (2000) identify as more positive coping styles, those of persistence and the willingness to expend more effort to achieve realistic goals.

**Cody learns best in a relational teacher/student environment.** The times when Cody struggles to stay motivated in a given class situation is when he encounters teachers whose methods and style appear to intimidate him. This feeling of intimidation is reminiscent of his reaction to being so overwhelmed with his initial experience with school that he was not able to engage with the teacher and his/her instruction. Cody admits that when a teacher yells, either at him or at another student, he shuts down. This reaction is not necessarily uncommon in students, but by the time they reach high school, my experience is that most students mask their reactions, and often do not visibly register their intimidation. Cody’s recognition of his sensitivity to certain teacher behavior does
indicate a growing emotional maturity and honesty about how he experiences school, and which classroom climates allow him to feel comfortable and safe.

An underlying metaphor for teaching is the comparison of teaching and learning to overcoming any barrier in order to move forward. In order to come to school and learn, students need to cross barriers, both physical and emotional (Van Manan, 1991). What teachers can forget sometimes is that learning is always an individual affair, and that patience is a quality of teachers that allows them to meet the child “where the child is” (p. 156), rather than expecting the student to cross barriers alone with no adult, professional support. Teacher behavior does have an effect upon student motivation, and it is incumbent upon teachers to always do what is right and good for his/her students in order to foster their personal growth (Van Manan, 1991).

With the background of support of his family, Cody is growing in his ability to overcome his response to negative classroom climates. Cody told me that he feels it is the responsibility of teachers and students together to create a comfortable classroom environment. He believes that teachers need to set goals for their classes, but it would help if they took individual students into consideration. In his letter he wrote:

I always try to reach [teachers’ goals] but I am not always succeeding at that. I think teachers need to set goals more for certain students rather than just the whole class. Students are not all the same when it come [sic] to learning. Some students try and reach the teachers’ goal but sometimes those goals are just set a little to [sic] high for them. If teachers would set more goals for individual students it should help many more kids throughout their high school career. (Appendix E)
This shows insightful thought on Cody’s part, and this insight is a positive consequence of his growing understanding of the importance of making the most of his remaining experience with school.

The missed opportunities in Cody’s early experience with academic literacy happened with no intentional ill will on the part of his teachers. He was identified as a struggling reader and provided the support available under the strictures of the scripted curriculum with its focus more on standardized test skills rather than on the student behind the test scores. Could Cody be experiencing less stress with high school academic literacy expectations had he had access to a more personalized approach to his reading instruction in grades K-6? The fact that he enjoys reading books of his own choice for pleasure and understands well what he reads indicates that if his teachers had had the discretion to adapt their instruction to his needs, he would have become much more confident in his literacy skills.

To his credit, however, Cody took the initiative to avail himself of the opportunity to have the additional support and instruction of the Reading Enrichment class, not once, but twice. He is gaining self-confidence in his own ability to perform academically and as a result is better able to handle the stress that has impeded his scholastic performance. This is an aspect of academic identity, the sense of self-confidence to perform academically, which eludes the subject of my third case study, Steve.
Chapter 6

Steve

Steve’s difficulties with academic literacy are similar to those of Sam and Cody as he has difficulty with reading challenging content text with comprehension, but his experience with school has been very different. Steve experienced school in large, urban districts before moving to Glenley, so he did not have the continuity the others had by attending the same district throughout their school experience. Steve’s story illustrates a case of a student who is now dealing with the consequences of being what Beers (2005) identifies as an “uncommitted reader.” Becoming an uncommitted reader is a process that happens over time, it rarely happens purposefully, and the reasons are different for each student.

A Case of an Uncommitted Reader

According to Beers (2003), uncommitted readers are able to read, but do not enjoy reading, do not make time to read, do not identify as readers, and at best, view reading as being functional, so they engage in reading only when required. An interesting additional characteristic is that uncommitted readers do have positive feelings about other readers (p. 8). I sense that this is true for Steve. It is as if he admires from afar what reading does for other people. A consequence of being an uncommitted reader, however, is that Steve has entered high school without a reader’s identity and this has had a significantly negative effect upon his academic literacy.

In our interviews, as I listened to Steve talk about his experience with school, I discovered that his difficulty with the process of establishing an identity as a reader began
shortly after he began school. An experience Steve shared illustrates his reaction to his early struggles with reading. He remembers attempting to be invisible to his teachers. Steve would try to hide so he would not have to read aloud during the daily round robin reading routine. As he told me in an interview:

If we had to like read a paragraph I’d always like try to hide, like go behind [another student]. Like we’d be in the classroom, in like a U, and I’d try to scoot away from the table so the teacher wouldn’t see me so – I didn’t want to read [aloud].

This is a memory Steve has from early elementary school, a time when most students are eager to participate in any school activity. Trying to become invisible to adults is not usually something a very young child attempts to do in school unless perhaps they are playing a game of superheroes.

Steve’s experience with school lacks evidence of consistently having teachers who view teaching as relational. Literacy educators have identified the benefits to learning that occur when students feel accepted, valued, and respected (Elish-Piper et al. 2013). Among these benefits are enhanced motivation and increased academic achievement (p. 6). Steve attended school at two large urban school districts before he enrolled at Glenley, and his experience in the large schools indicates that his sense of disconnectedness was exacerbated by being in classrooms where, as he says:

teachers really don’t take the time to actually teach. They just give you a worksheet or a packet and hope you can figure it out. Because they have so many kids in the classes, so many to try to teach. The teachers didn’t know us very well.
These conditions are not conducive to helping students gain an academic identity, or to helping students develop positive academic agency, particularly students who struggle with reading.

Another factor that impacted Steve’s struggle with academic literacy likely was shaped by his having to adapt to the different curricula and teaching methods at several school districts. This came as a result of his parents relocating several times for professional reasons. Steve is not alone in dealing with academic issues created by mobility. Children of military personnel and clergy often experience having to adapt to multiple school districts. Currently there are increasing numbers of students in public schools who face the same situation because society has become more mobile (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center). It is becoming less and less usual that students spend their entire school experience in one school district. Learning from Steve’s experience will allow teachers and administrators to reflect upon their districts’ efficacy in providing smooth transitions for students who enter and leave districts because of their parents’ mobility.

It is evident to me both from our interviews and from having Steve in my classes that he does not avoid reading because of an inability to learn, or an inability to concentrate on something that interests him. For example, a recurring thread in our conversations is Steve’s love of playing drums, and for skateboarding and BMX racing, activities that require high levels of concentration and skill. These are activities that according to Steve, he became absorbed in as a way to alleviate the stress he feels about his poor academic performance.
The insights gained from listening to Steve’s experience with school, and how he currently approaches academic expectations offer an opportunity to understand how and why supporting adolescents who struggle with academic literacy entails much more than merely intervening with instruction and drill on specific reading skill sets. Helping these students involves understanding the layers of individual students’ personalities and life situations.

In Steve’s case, his personality includes his reserved temperament, his sense of being disconnected to school curricula, and his sensitive nature. His life situations have involved his having to adapt to different school environments, including moving from a city to a small, rural school district. Regardless of where students are enrolled in school, helping Steve and other struggling students involves developing an “ethos of hospitality in education” (Rud, 1995, p. 119) in order to work with students as individuals and to help them find ways to unlock their learning potential.

A Discouraged Struggling Reader

Of the three students in my case studies, Steve faces the most serious challenges. According to Steve’s account, he was identified as a struggling reader early in his elementary school experience, and was given additional instruction with the intent of helping him improve his reading competence. As we examine Steve’s experience with academic literacy it is worth noting that he too does not fit the usual previously discussed stereotype of a student who would have difficulties learning to read.

Steve’s parents are both graduates of a Midwestern liberal arts university, and both have since earned post-graduate professional degrees. When Steve began school he
and his family lived in a large city in the southwestern U.S. His mother was an elementary teacher, and his dad had begun his work as a pastor. Steve has good memories of his parents reading to him when he was young, so he was exposed to a literacy-enriched environment when he was very young.

Steve is quiet and reserved, but his eyes lit up when he enthusiastically recalled times when his mom helped him with his reading. He said:

Yeah, like my mom was doing something for teaching. She’s a principal now, but back then she was a teacher. She had this big booklet. She had like lessons and stuff for like curriculum, and I’d read that sometimes and that maybe helped. I felt more comfortable.

The support he received from his mother, and her evident knowledge of instructional tools that helped Steve with his reading, are indicative of an encouraging home environment.

Steve’s oldest brother currently attends a nearby community college, and his other brother will graduate from Glenley this year. This brother has been accepted to attend his parents’ alma mater. Steve plans to follow in his parents’ and brothers’ footsteps and envisions himself going to college, something he views as necessary because the idea of becoming a school guidance counselor appeals to him.

Strong family support from professional parents, and a goal to attend a four-year university are factors that put Steve outside the most common descriptions of students who would struggle with learning to read, and of those who become uncommitted readers. Steve did not grow up in poverty or in an environment with adults who do not value literacy. Along with the stories of Sam and Cody, Steve’s story provides additional
evidence that there is no one size fits all definition of a struggling reader, just as there is no one size fits all method of helping adolescents who struggle with academic literacy.

**Steve’s place in the Glenley community and school.** Steve and an older brother moved to Glenley three years ago with their father when he was called to be the pastor for a church in Glenley. His parents had recently divorced and his mother remained in a city near Glenley where she works as an elementary school principal. Initially the move did not go well for Steve. He explained that at first:

> It was tough – I was used to huge classes in a big school. When I came here it was really weird, ‘cause everyone already knew each other. I didn’t like it at first because I didn’t know anybody, but after I lived here more I liked it.

Steve was so disconcerted by the adjustment to living in a rural community, and the lack of anonymity that he had grown used to, that he moved back to live with his mother for a while. He was doing so poorly in school, however, that his parents decided the environment of the smaller school at Glenley could offer him better opportunities for success, and more one-on-one support from teachers.

In the three years Steve has been living and attending school in Glenley, he has grown to appreciate life in a rural community. According to Steve, the reasons include that fact that:

> Most people here are farmers, and I can connect because my grandpa [his dad’s dad] owned a feedlot, and my uncles on my dad’s side are all farmers so I can connect with that. It was different because no one in [the city where Steve used to live] was a farmer. Everybody is friendly here.

The lack of anonymity that Steve had difficulty with at first became less of a problem when he made a positive connection with the people in Glenley.
Steve also explained that he feels more connected to his teachers and other students in a smaller school environment. He has become comfortable attending school where all his teachers know him and are willing to offer him extra help and opportunities to get his grades back up if he starts slipping. In an interview Steve describes this situation as a positive change from what he was used to. As he puts it, “I can concentrate on my work instead of slacking off. In a big school it’s easy to slack off and people don’t really notice. Here I can actually get good grades and do good in school.” As one of his classroom teachers, I recognize that Steve’s academic experience at Glenley has not been smooth and he struggles to cope with and to overcome anxiety about his academic performance, anxiety that hampers his academic progress.

**Steve the Student – He Hears a Different Drummer**

Steve is currently finishing his freshman year at Glenley High School. He has been a student in this district for three years. The school year of 2012-2013 was the first year I had Steve as a student, and he enrolled in two of my classes, English I, and Reading Enrichment. Steve is reserved, and I often notice him daydreaming, his eyes and mind somewhere different from the present. He is not quite 6 feet tall with a stocky physique, and straight brown hair that comes close to covering his brown eyes. Steve’s shoulders stoop a bit, and he is usually dressed in comfortable non-descript clothing and sneakers.

It is worth noting that Steve was able to be part of Glenley’s high school football team this past fall, an experience he most likely would never have had while attending an urban school because of the highly selective process that athletes undergo to be a member
of a team. Steve says he enjoyed playing football immensely, yet in my perception he does not exhibit the typical persona of an athlete, physically or by personality. He does not appear to have a competitive nature, nor does Steve exhibit the muscular physique that has become common among athletes who spend their summers in the weight room. Rather, Steve has a gentle persona and from my observations he has an easy-going nature. His friends are among those students who are not considered the most popular among the student body, but popularity does not appear to be important to Steve. From what I observe, it appears that he has empathy for students who are less fortunate than he, and he is comfortable befriending them.

Steve’s demeanor with his teachers is very polite and non-confrontational, although I observe that he can appear to be somewhat detached from the essence of conversations with teachers and other adults. One of Steve’s characteristics is that when he is sitting at his desk, his hands and sometimes his feet are nearly always tapping out a rhythm as if he were playing an invisible set of drums. A pencil or pen in his hand becomes an outlet for his inner energy and the rhythms only he hears.

It is not surprising that Steve’s favorite class in high school is band where he is a talented percussionist. Steve told me in an interview, however that he is unable to read music. When I consider Steve and his unique personality, I am reminded of a line from Thoreau’s work, Walden. “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears however measured or far away.” It has occurred to me that this habit of always tapping a rhythm
may provide Steve with an inner escape from the pent up anxiety he says he feels almost daily about his experience with school.

Steve acknowledges that he struggles with the academic expectations of most of the subjects he is enrolled in this year. His academic performance was low enough that he entered into an academic contract with the secondary principal. In a letter he wrote for an English assignment he explained:

The first couple weeks I was doing pretty well in classes, until my math grade went down then I began to stress out. I just basically stopped doing homework. Mrs. A motivated me with a contract that I signed saying I will stay on top of my assignments, but if I didn't I would have detention after school for 45 minutes. (See Appendix F)

This academic contract is a method the principal of Glenley junior/senior high school developed to support teachers’ efforts to help students who struggle in their classes. The intent of the academic contract is that if a student is doing poorly in a class, he/she agrees to spend time after school with individual teachers obtaining additional instruction until he or she is successful in improving his or her grades in a given class.

A few of the teachers Steve could benefit from spending extra time with are also his coaches, so these teachers are unavailable to help him with individual instruction after school because of athletic practices. Unfortunately, the time he spent after school did not then have the intended effect on his academic performance. Rather than working with teachers, I witnessed Steve sitting quietly in the back room of the principal’s office after school waiting for his required 45 minutes of after school time to be over. What could have been additional instructional opportunities for Steve unfortunately turned into unproductive time spent watching the clock.
To understand why Steve reached high school without personal strategies in place to facilitate his academic progress I asked him to recall his early elementary experiences with reading.

**Steve’s elementary school literacy instruction.** Steve’s memories of his early elementary classroom reading instruction include remembering that he and his classmates would get into groups and each of them would read aloud for a certain amount of time. This practice of round robin reading is a method that has been shown to be a “less effective use of instructional time than other alternatives” (Allington, 2013, p. 8), because while one child is reading the others at best simply follow along, are reading ahead from boredom or to practice the section they will most likely be asked to read, or are not engaged in active reading.

Steve recalls that the books he and his classmates read were about various subjects, and when they finished reading there were questions on worksheets to answer about what they read. Steve remembers his early frustration with this process. He explained, “Like if I was reading, and I like stumbled, I was trying to keep it fluent. I don’t know, I just didn’t really understand why I couldn’t like talk or read good. I got frustrated.” Steve said his teacher began to notice that he was having difficulty so he was placed in a special reading class. He remembers considering this class as punishment for not being able to read well. In retrospect, however, Steve said in an interview that he accepts that his teacher was following the school’s reading intervention procedure as a way to try to help support Steve’s reading acquisition.
Steve’s memory of this reading intervention class is one of his earliest memories of school. According to Steve, “Uhh, in second grade I was in like this reading class with six kids. We timed ourselves reading [and] went over vowels and stuff. It kinda helped. It was mainly like fluent for like reading so I could read better.” He remembers he did not like the class because he and the other students did the same thing every day. In Steve’s words, “It was boring.” This kind of reading intervention reflects what Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) describe as approaches that are limited to drilling students on easily measured skills such as decoding or oral reading fluency. These methods do not address the more complex reading skills to measure that include critical thinking and comprehension. Nor do they treat students as though they are possible thriving readers.

Steve remembers his difficulties with reading were, “Like fluency, talking real slow and kinda trying to figure stuff out. I could read something, I could read the whole thing and then I wouldn’t remember what it was about. I had troubles with that.” Evidently, the repetitive interventions Steve received did not specifically address his difficulties with comprehension.

In spite of Steve’s perception that being placed in the class was a form of punishment, he does not remember any negative feelings about going to these reading intervention classes in early elementary. He claims, “I didn’t really feel anything, just had to go.” This attitude reflects Steve’s current reserved temperament in that he was and is compliant and cooperative with school expectations.
Steve acknowledges that reading continued to challenge him throughout elementary school and that he was in reading intervention classes through his 5th grade year. When he entered middle school he was no longer in special reading classes because, according to his understanding, classes such as these were not offered in middle school. He also expressed that he thought that by this time he could read pretty well.

Academic reading was not the only aspect of literacy Steve has difficulty with. Writing assignments, according to Steve, were something else he struggled to make sense of or to complete. He explained,

I didn’t like doing stuff if we had to do like a report or something. They weren’t interesting. The teacher would have to give you the topic and stuff like that. I just didn’t want to pay attention and have to write stuff down and then figure stuff out. I really didn’t like doing that in elementary school.

Reading and writing share many of the same cognitive processes and skills with the ultimate goal of communicating meaning. There are some differences between reading and writing as well. These include the understanding that reading involves receiving a message, while writing involves creating and conveying a message. Readers decode words, while writers encode words to express themselves (DeVries, 2011, p. 284).

Reading and writing are interconnected activities and students need to master both in order to do well with academic literacy when they reach high school.

Steve did not master either skill when he was in elementary school, and it is important to note that this was not necessarily for lack of trying on his part or that of his teachers. Reading can be something students grow to enjoy, or it can become an undesirable activity (Beers, 2005). From my observations as Steve’s teacher, I find that he is able to read, and he is able to gather information and create compositions, however,
both activities have become unpleasant for him. Learning the skills and strategies involved in reading does not automatically produce readers, and Steve was already an uncommitted reader by the time he entered junior/senior high school at Glenley.

**Steve’s Transition to High School**

Because of the moves from state to state with his parents, Steve has had several significant transitions in his experience with school. However, how he experienced the transition from an urban school environment into junior high and high school in rural Glenley is something he acknowledges has had an impact on him and his self-perceptions as a student.

According to Steve, the main difference is that in a smaller school environment he is not anonymous, and his teachers and administrators hold him accountable for his school performance. If he does not do well in a class his teachers and principal promptly communicate with him and with his parents and about implementing strategies that will help him raise his grades. Steve admits that at times he has struggled with having to be accountable for his academic performance. He thought he was happier in the large school when he could slack off and get away with it. Now, however, he views this attention from his teachers and principal as a positive influence. Steve has come to realize that the possibility that he can succeed in school is something that appeals to him for many reasons, including achieving his goal to attend college and to become a guidance counselor. The more positive relationships and connections with his teachers at Glenley have been effective in helping Steve begin to shift his perception about his ability to succeed.
Steve indicated that his grades before he came to school in Glenley were quite bad, and he said it was hard for him to get focused and interested. His explanation for this was:

The teacher wasn’t really involved with the class. They just give lectures and packets and never really explained stuff. It was like they just wanted to go there to get their money, their paycheck and leave. It wasn’t really like they cared about the students.

In contrast to teachers in the urban district he attended, when Steve began to attend school in Glenley, he found teachers who are more involved. As he says, “Teachers actually, like teach, instead of like the teachers in [the school he used to attend].”

Making the transition from being one of many students in a class to one of a much fewer number and in smaller sized classes has, according to Steve, not always been a smooth one. He acknowledges that he had developed some bad study habits and had essentially stopped reading altogether during his urban school experience. Now he finds these behavior patterns difficult to change and he says because of this he feels a significant amount of stress.

Steve is not alone in experiencing stress when he attempts to make sense of the expectations of a higher level of academic literacy. “They [students] are being asked to perform at high levels even though many of them haven’t been doing much authentic reading” (Gallagher, 2009, p. 30). Because of his lack of background knowledge, Steve also struggles to find something that interests him about the subjects of many of his required academic classes, so he has difficulty engaging with the subject matter.

**Secondary literacy expectations.** The classes that Steve took this year that involve a significant amount of reading and academic literacy are his English class,
which I teach, and his Physical Science class. English I is a literature-based class and the students read, discuss and analyze theme based world literature from an anthology. The selections from the anthology include short stories, poetry, essays, and drama. To supplement the anthology, the class also reads three books together as a class, two short novels, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck (1937), *Katherine, Called Birdy* by Karen Cushman (1994) and a memoir, *October Sky* by Homer Hickam (1999). Differentiated vocabulary instruction and various writing opportunities are components of the class as well. This year I asked students to bring a book of their own choice to class each day, and I provided portions of class time during each week for independent reading. My only criteria for their choice of book was an (tongue in cheek) admonition that it needed to be a book their parents would not object to, otherwise they were free to select any subject and any genre.

My observations of Steve in English I include that he is quiet and compliant, and if given a choice he would sit in the back of the classroom. This reflects his early desire to be invisible to his teacher in elementary school so he would not be compelled to read aloud. In English he will answer questions about the selections if he can when I call on him, but he rarely, if ever, volunteers to enter the discussion.

In an interview, Steve expressed a rare bit of humor and chuckled a bit when he talked about the literature I required the class to read. He claimed, “It’s not too bad, in the literature books, those stories are pretty easy to read, not like a punishment.” He indicated that for the most part the stories interest him, especially those about mythology.
Earlier in the year, the class completed a unit on mythology with a group project as a culminating activity.

Each group selected a god or goddess from a culture’s mythology of their choice, and researched this deity. Once the group completed the research they worked together on a poster that depicted a home with a design and furnishings that would fit the personality of their chosen god or goddess. Included on the poster was an invitation to a house-warming party, complete with menu, guest list, a seating chart for a formal dinner, and an account of what the group imagined happened at the party. Steve indicated that the mythology unit stuck out as “something kinda interesting.”

I observed that Steve’s reading for class is functional in that he reads only what is required, but he does make a sincere attempt to complete the required assignments. I did notice that during the class time I allot for independent reading he has difficulty staying focused for an extended period of time. This is consistent with the characteristics of an uncommitted reader (Beers, 2005). For the most part, reading, especially assigned reading, is not something uncommitted readers are able to stay engaged with for extended periods of time.

Steve explains that while the required vocabulary study is difficult, because he has to learn meanings of words he has never heard before, he appreciates it when he discovers words he has learned in other contexts. For example, in an interview he said, “I notice them on TV shows, like that, and in magazines. It kinda helps you know what they are talking about.” My observation was that overall Steve performed satisfactorily with the vocabulary study, and during the course of the year I worked with him to
develop strategies to learn the meanings of words from the context in which they were used, and to understand the derivation of root words to help determine the meanings of new words.

I also observed that in English I, the academic literacy expectations Steve had the most difficulty completing in a timely manner were the writing assignments. Initially he struggled with being overwhelmed with the scope of the assignments, and I determined that he exhibited some of the characteristics identified as those of unskilled writers (DeVries, 2011). These included not understanding the importance of planning and organization, as well as not having a sense of the process of writing.

I worked with Steve to break down the writing process into stages of prewriting, choosing a topic, establishing an audience, drafting his initial composition and then revising and editing before he handed an assignment in to be evaluated. It helped when I gave him (and the rest of the class) what I called mini deadlines. Providing time in class to complete each stage helped Steve perceive these assignments as doable and midyear he completed, on time, a personal narrative that was published in a booklet with the narratives of others in his class (See Appendix G).

The other class that requires a significant use of Steve’s academic literacy skills is Physical Science. This is one of the classes Steve has admitted he struggles with, primarily because, as he said in an interview, “Like, it’s not a story, it’s just straight forward facts about electricity, chemicals, Newton’s force, and like acids, magnets and stuff.” During class he is supposed to take notes, read the chapter review after every lesson and take notes from that as well. There are also questions at the end of each
chapter that students have to answer to review for the tests. Steve is forthright about why he struggles in the class. The subject matter just does not interest him so he often does not complete the reading or the work required to do well in the class.

**Reading enrichment for Steve.** According to Steve, he enrolled in Reading Enrichment because his brother had taken the class the year before and had experienced improvement in both his attitude and approach toward academic literacy and in his standardized test scores. Because of this, Steve’s dad strongly encouraged Steve to sign up for Reading Enrichment. Steve complied, but my sense was that at first he was, at best, indifferent to the class and what it had to offer him.

This attitude is not unusual for a 14 year-old who had experienced several years of reading intervention classes that he considered boring and ineffective. It is also typical of teenagers who do not want to be seen as needing academic help. The first year I taught Reading Enrichment the guidance counselor enrolled students in the class based on their standardized reading scores. A couple students were so upset about being enrolled in the class that they came to school with a parent demanding to be allowed to drop the class. Steve never actively protested taking Reading Enrichment, but initially he did not exhibit any enthusiasm about the class either.

When the class began, and I asked each of the students to select a book for independent reading, Steve told me he had no idea what kind of book would interest him. Together we went over synopses of different books and I encouraged him to try several to see if they appealed to him. Before long he discovered he likes murder mysteries. Steve read three mysteries before he read, at the recommendation of a classmate, a book he said
he connected with on many different levels, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, by Stephen Chbosky (2012).

Steve explained in a conversation with other students in Reading Enrichment that this book was about “just like a normal kid can go bad, turn almost crazy. There was a trial in the book, and now he’s a better person and understands himself better.” Steve also wrote in a book review that he related to the book’s main character because he was his age, and he struggled with understanding where he fit in to the fabric of both his family and his relationships with peers and other adults. I realize from what he said in an interview that Steve was entertained by the murder mysteries, but Chbosky’s book gave him a sense of how reading can serve more than just an entertaining or functional purpose. For the first time reading a book produced an inner response from Steve that was aesthetic and reflective, which is, according to Beers (2005) a necessary first step in emerging from being an uncommitted reader.

Steve now views himself as what he calls a “medium reader.” He recognizes that when he is reading about subjects he likes, he has no trouble understanding and comprehending what he reads. He acknowledges that he approaches reading assignments not necessarily on how difficult the material is, but whether or not the content is interesting. If it interests him, he reads it, if it does not, he will still try to read the assignment or selection, but admits that he finds it difficult to concentrate.

The other focus of Reading Enrichment is on an area of academic literacy that Steve feels he struggles with the most, and that is writing. The writing expectations of Reading Enrichment are modified from the curriculum the district purchased for the class
called Reading is FAME (Curtis & Longo, 1999). The E (Explorations) portion of the curriculum allows students to select writing prompts at different levels of difficulty from several general topics. Steve indicated that most of the topics did not interest him, but he found that prompts from the topics of government, history, the arts, and important women and leaders appealed to him.

The writing instruction for Steve in Reading Enrichment was individualized reinforcement of what I provided in his English class. Steve began to approach each writing prompt he chose as a process, and was able to become more adept and confident in his ability to research, evaluate the content he would include, plan and organize his material, and compose essays, then revising and editing his work (See Appendix H). Steve set personal daily and weekly goals to research the topics he selected and then wrote paragraphs and eventually longer compositions as the prompts required.

More than anything, I sense that purposefully researching a topic that interested him provided Steve the impetus to complete the assignments. Steve indicated that the writing expectations worked for him, “cause you have to learn about different topics. It helped me learn more and I read different types of writing [when researching the topics] and that’s a good thing.” Having a block of time to write, with the opportunity for me to provide consistent feedback gave Steve a platform on which to build his confidence and to begin to be able to express himself, and to find his academic writing voice.

**What Motivates Steve?**

What motivates students, especially adolescents, is a complex issue, as is the idea of, what Moje et al. (2008) call a “motivated literacy” (p. 113). Their concern is not only
whether students are motivated to engage in particular literacy activities, but also whether
the texts and activities are able to influence students’ abilities to engage in more
advanced levels of literacy skills. Steve reached high school able to read and to compose
writing that has meaning, but often makes the choice not to engage in either activity. His
voice and experience can contribute to our understanding of how resistant or
uncommitted readers experience or do not experience motivation to improve their
academic literacy skills (Lenters, 2006).

Steve, like many 15-year-old boys, has difficulty articulating what motivates him
to accomplish the reading that is required in high school. From what I learned from our
interviews, however, I have the sense that his personal interest in the subject does appear
to be the most important element of Steve’s level of engagement. For example, as a
consequence of his early experience with struggling to read Steve did not develop a
pattern of reading for enjoyment. This was the first year he had been encouraged to read
books he had self-selected and Steve found the experience to be a positive one.
Especially so because, as he noted, he did not have to worry about completing a lengthy
book report, he could just enjoy reading the book. One intent of Reading Enrichment is
to provide students with time to read books of their choice, and for Steve, the opportunity
to read without pressure began to change his perception of the purpose of reading.

Before this year, it appears that the concept of reading for enjoyment was
something antithetical to any of Steve’s previous experience with reading. He had
friends who enjoyed reading, but as he said, “I thought they were like crazy because I
really didn’t like reading.” Until his experience in Reading Enrichment, Steve indicated
that he thought all reading was boring, but when he found books he liked he said, “I got into the books, they were good so I kept reading.” Steve explained in an interview that now he sees a connection with people who read and how successful they are. He perceives them as more focused and smarter which makes him want to read more. According to Moje et al. (2008):

> The range of reasons to read to improve the self is powerful; whether or not these youth achieve higher grades in school as a result of their reading, the reading they do appears to have an important impact on their lives. (p. 144)

Steve’s experience reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 2012) reflects the sense of learning that reading can increase his understanding of himself. The impact of one book can possibly be a turning point in Steve’s approach to reading if he continues to engage with books that connect in some way to his life experience.

When our conversations turned to academic reading I discovered a bit of a paradox. According to Steve, what both motivates and inhibits his engagement in academic literacy is the importance given to grades and test scores. When he does well on assignments, quizzes and tests, Steve expresses that this builds his confidence. When he does not do well he tries to find a way to have the negative grade motivate him to improve, but admits that at the same time it “gets me down”.

The anxiety this creates for Steve is something he has difficulty knowing how to cope with. Individuals have three needs, those of competence, relatedness and autonomy, or choice, that “appear to be essential for facilitating optimal functioning of the natural propensities for growth and integration, as well as for constructive social development and personal well-being” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Not feeling competent in his
ability to perform academically is a tremendous hindrance to Steve’s academic growth.

Steve explained:

Like if I get a good grade, like if it’s good I’ll do better. If I get a real bad grade I just like get in a slump, so it’s hard to do something. If I’m doing well, and then don’t do good on a test, then I forget about stuff, and I don’t do homework. I just totally forget about homework, so when I get to class I don’t have it done. I think it’s just mental stress. Just thinking about what I need to do gets overwhelming, and I do kinda shut down. Not completely. If I did I would have all F’s, but I do try to keep focused.

This apparent push and pull of his response to his academic performance appears to have the most negative effect on his academic agency.

Steve also expressed that in some classes he is and has been confused about the criteria on which he was evaluated. There were times when he felt he did well on an assignment only to find out he did quite poorly. Students may be more willing to try in classrooms where progress rather than performance is the emphasis (Blumenfeld, 1992). Steve finds it difficult to advocate for himself if he is confused. This is a situation common among struggling students, therefore it is critical that teachers communicate their expectations clearly so students’ academic stress is mitigated.

The motivational benefits of a relational approach to education. According to Steve, having a positive relationship with his teacher does help motivate him to do well in a class. He recognizes that one of the reasons he and other students he knows develop a “don’t care attitude” is when the connection with a teacher breaks down and there is no positive communication. He recalls one year in elementary school when he had such a positive experience with a teacher that she made him want to learn. He liked her because she made his experience with school fun.
Adversely, he also remembers having the opposite experience with a teacher. In an interview he explained, “When I was in 7th grade [in the urban district] I had this math teacher, and he was really mean. I didn’t like him. He was like really strict; we couldn’t really talk. If you had a question you couldn’t ask someone, you had to raise your hand and ask him.” These two examples portray how important it is for teachers to cultivate positive connections with their students. A relational approach to education places the focus on “the process of learning and consider[s] very deeply how we can help students, as social beings-in-relation-with-others, become knowers” (Thayer-Bacon, 2004, p. 168). Steve made it clear that he is much more comfortable when he can communicate easily with his teachers.

In spite of the difficulties Steve experiences with academic literacy, what keeps him coming to school every day is the knowledge that he needs to finish high school to fulfill his goal of going to college and earning a college degree. He indicates that he cannot imagine quitting school, and he also appreciates the support he gets from his parents.

The presence of caring adults, both teachers and parents, can have a significant influence on the motivation a student feels toward achieving academic goals (Blumenfeld, 1992). Teachers who are seen by the student as knowledgeable, enthusiastic, respectful and trustworthy do have a positive influence on their students’ academic motivation. The desire to please supportive parents also figures significantly into how students perceive their ability to persevere under stress. Both influences have impacted Steve’s experience at Glenley, and have been positive factors in his emerging
sense of how important it is to move from being an unmotivated reader to becoming more engaged in academic literacy.

**What Comes Next for Steve**

This school year has been a mixture of success and setbacks, but overall Steve says he feels better about school and has gained some confidence in his academic ability. Steve does have some concerns about what is ahead for him. He explained that his most immediate concern is that he is moving with his dad back to the city near Glenley where he lived before, and learning to adjust again to a different school system. He will not attend the urban high school near where they will live, but has opted to attend a consolidated district north of the city. The high school is larger than Glenley High School, but much smaller than the large high school in the city. Steve wrote in a letter writing assignment, “Next year I am not going to be in Glenley, that kind of freaks me out. Not really having that close relationship with teachers is going to be tough, but I need to focus on what’s important, GRADES” (See Appendix F).

As Steve reflects upon his first year of high school he acknowledges that the year contained personal academic peaks and valleys. He indicated that he has come to realize

> Grades mean way more than just a letter now. Freshman year to senior year, colleges look at your grades on your transcript. What I would’ve done instead of slacking off sometimes was study more, and ask more questions when I wouldn’t understand (See Appendix F).

During our interviews Steve reflects that he has learned he needs to become more proactive and work with himself to make better academic choices. For example, he realizes he has to make the choice to stay on task when he is in class, and not give in to
the distractions that occur nearly every day, such as friends who want to chat instead of work on their assignments.

When he works on homework he knows now that he can implement study strategies. He said, “I need to work for about 45 minutes and then take a 20 to 30 minute break, and then get back to work. If I keep at it without a break, then I feel like a zombie. Listening to music when I study helps too.” These are all positive strategies, and it will be necessary for him to implement them in order to pull out of the spiral of negative consequences that have developed surrounding the fact that he came into high school as an uncommitted reader. This is the first year Steve has been able to take the necessary preliminary steps to becoming a student with a positive academic identity.

Steve also wrote about what he has learned that will help him move forward as he faces another move, and another change in school environment.

When I look back on this past year, what I really wanted to focus on [was] working as hard as I can in classes. Freshman year changed the way I see school, test scores basically determine if your [sic] going to college. I try to work on what is going on right now, then thinking of my future in college. (See Appendix F)

Even though Steve struggled to keep up with the required work in his classes, he explains that he is beginning to understand the connections between what he learns in school and his goals for his future. Because of his strong reaction to the anxiety he feels surrounding his academic performance as reflected by his grades, Steve does not feel that there is a good correlation between the grades he has received with his actual ability to perform academically. He wishes there were other ways to assess his ability, but has accepted the
fact that the way school works means that other assessment options are not likely to be used. As he puts it, “Tests and grades are everything.”

Steve believes that the strategies and practice he gained from the writing expectations in Reading Enrichment have built his confidence in his ability to write different types of compositions, even when he himself does not select the topic. If he does not choose the topic, he says, “it might not be my best work,” but he knows he can “work through these assignments” and complete essays of different kinds. The writing component of academic literacy has strong ties to reading, and as he moves from being an uncommitted reader to being more engaged, his writing skills will continue to improve.

Although he is admittedly nervous about adjusting to a new school, Steve wants to start out well. He stated, while tapping a quiet beat with the eraser end of his pencil on his knee, “I don’t know, like when I first moved here, I was really shy and stuff. I wouldn’t really talk in class. When I move I’m going to ask questions, and stuff like that.” Steve’s reflections reinforce what Patricia Alexander (as cited in Lenters, 2006) reminds us is important. Educators need to help students:

- to make the switch from situational motivation to individual motivation to learn and thus [move] from the surface processing strategies to the deep-processing strategies educators and researchers know are the key to good reading comprehension. (p. 142)

Students such as Steve, who are hampered by not having developed a strong identity as a reader, and who are confused and overwhelmed by experiencing the expectations of several school districts, cannot be left to fend for themselves. Steve and others like him need and deserve the best support we can offer. And above all, we need to listen to their stories in order to understand their literacy needs.
Of the three students, my sense is that Steve’s situation is the most concerning. Above all he needs to strengthen his sense of being a capable student and to build upon the experience he had this year when, as Beers (2005) notes, “reading becomes a way to learn more about themselves” (p. 20). In our interviews, Steve expressed hope that he would be able to overcome his academic difficulties, but he also talked about the difficulty he has dealing with the stress he experiences when he gets overwhelmed by the difficulty of assignments or by receiving poor grades. His tendency to shut down as a result of the stress hinders his goal of being a successful student. Steve could benefit from incorporating strategies that could help him cope with his stress and to realize that stress does not have to control his responses to academic struggle.

I found myself wishing that I had another year to work with Steve on his academic literacy needs. We had established a comfortable working relationship and I was impressed with the progress he had made. One year just was not enough time to provide the support Steve needed to experience academic success more often.

The lament of many teachers, whether their students struggle or not, is “if I only had more time”. Working with adolescents who struggle with academic literacy takes time and involves hard work for both the student and the teacher. If sharing the stories of Sam, Cody and Steve, along with the insights gained from their educational biographies, helps even one teacher facilitate growth in his/her students who struggle, then the most important purpose of this dissertation has been met.
Chapter 7

Cross-Case Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine the school experiences of students who struggle with academic literacy as a way to gain insight about how their perception of their experiences can inform the instruction and strategies teachers use to help students achieve academic success. In the quest to help struggling students the voice of these students is too often neglected or ignored completely. Looking across the stories of the three students provides the opportunity to examine the similarities and differences among their experiences with academic literacy. We are able to study “real cases operating in real situations” (Stake, 2006, p. 3). Cross-case analysis allows us to combine their experiences into “the most important experiential knowledge” (Stake, 2006, p. 44). This chapter is a cross-case analysis of the three case studies and examines their individual perceptions of their school experience within the context of the research questions: What can teachers do to help support students who struggle with academic literacy in secondary school settings? How do students who struggle with secondary academic literacy expectations view themselves as readers and as learners? How can we use insights we gain from listening to these students’ stories to inform and improve our approach to educating struggling students?

Themes Across Cases

The themes from this study are about the patterns that emerged from the statements the three participants made about their experiences with literacy education and with school in general. I approached the data I gathered, including the transcripts of the
interviews I conducted with each boy, with the intent to try to understand their experience and how what they expressed could help me with my problem of practice, which is how can I help students in my classes who struggle with academic literacy? Three themes or findings that inform my problem of practice emerged from my analysis of insights gained from the stories of each of the participants:

1. Students’ subsequent difficulties with academic literacy expectations are shaped by their elementary school experiences with literacy instruction, which influence their identities as readers and learners.

2. Adolescents’ academic motivation is shaped by whether they experience school as a nurturing or threatening influence as well as by the support they do or do not receive from parents and teachers.

3. Assessments and assessment driven curricula can profoundly shape students’ experience with academic literacy and school in general.

These three findings should not be viewed as causes of the students’ struggles with academic literacy. Searching for a cause for the three students difficulties with reading is not a purpose of this study. It is important to note that in case study research Stake (2006) cautions us “the search for cause is oversimplifying” (p. 13). Educators recognize that the reasons why adolescents struggle with academic literacy are complex and unique to the individual student. Rather than generalize, it is incumbent upon us to be cognizant of what impacts the findings of this study can have on individual students. This knowledge will allow us the opportunity to explore possible ways to mitigate
negative experiences and consider more holistic approaches to teaching adolescents who struggle with academic literacy.

**The Expanding Model of Students Who Struggle With Academic Literacy**

None of the case study participants fit commonly held stereotypes of struggling readers. These stereotypes include the idea that children who are raised in poverty with limited proficiency in English, or who come from homes with parents who have low reading levels, or who do not value literacy, are among the numbers of students most likely to have difficulty with attaining higher levels of academic literacy (Gallagher, 2009). Educators, school administrators and policy makers cannot ethically ignore the realities of the students who struggle for these reasons, nor can they ignore the growing numbers of struggling readers who do not fit within these parameters.

The three students in this cross case study come from backgrounds very different from the previously recounted descriptors. All of them have at least one parent who has a college or professional degree. The students come from solidly middle-class home environments, with families who value literacy, and parents who have a high level of reading practice. Two of the three students attended the same rural school district since Kindergarten with small class sizes and veteran teachers. Yet all three students were identified as struggling readers early in their elementary school experience, and all entered high school able to decode words, but still struggled with academic literacy.

This extended struggle has possible long-term consequences for the three students who participated in this study, as it does for all students who struggle with academic reading and writing. Reflecting on how each student’s story connects with the emergent
themes allows for both an appreciation of their unique experiences, but also an avenue to gain information that can inform our approaches to help address the issue of adolescents who have difficulty with academic literacy. I will examine each theme and how each participant’s story connects with these themes.

**The Influence of Elementary Age Experiences with Literacy Instruction**

Students’ experiences with literacy instruction in elementary school provide their foundation on which they build the skills they need to become proficient readers. Rarely do teachers find children who enter Kindergarten who are not eager to learn to read, and good teachers nurture this eagerness to foster the attitudes that support growth in reading skills (Caldwell & Leslie, 2013; DeVries, 2011). But elementary school experiences with literacy can also have the opposite effect with lasting negative consequences. Without an enriched, more personalized early literacy environment this burgeoning desire to read is compromised for some students. DeVries (2011) identifies some reasons for this decline:

Students become self-conscious about their lack of reading proficiency. Teachers emphasize competition, and rewards go to the good readers. [This exacerbates students’ struggles to attain a reader’s identity.] Assigned reading may not appeal to students’ interests. (p. 26)

Teachers and students describe enthusiasm about reading among Kindergarteners that changes to a mixed response among fifth graders that turns to exasperation, indifference or even hostility among high school students (Gallagher, 2009).

The experiences of the three participants in this study reflect what Beers (2003) and Duffy & Hofmann (1999) express when they iterate the research-supported knowledge that there is no single answer to understanding why an adolescent struggles with reading. All students learn differently and have different experiences, even those
who sit in the same classrooms. There are, however, similarities that the participants’ stories illustrate that can guide teachers as they address issues with students’ literacy and how important enriched literacy experiences are for all students.

**The lack of enriched reading curricula.** From his accounts of his elementary school experience there is no evidence that any teacher came forth with the idea that Sam could benefit from personalized reading instruction that was more enriched than what was offered by the core-reading curriculum. Sam was identified as a struggling reader in Kindergarten, and spent two years at this level before he advanced to first grade. He was eventually able to perform well enough on the district’s standardized tests to move out of the category of an at-risk reader. However, Sam’s expressed frustration with having to read his elementary language arts text aloud at a certain pace with no errors is indicative of his having established an early sense of reading as primarily a function of being able to pronounce words correctly and quickly. Sam’s account of his experience offers no sense of his having developed the excitement that reading to learn could offer him.

Reading fluently without errors is a purpose of reading instilled by a curriculum that focuses on explicit teaching of phonics as a method of decoding, and of reading at a normal pace with few mistakes as an end goal. While teaching phonics is an integral part of a comprehensive approach to reading instruction, a primary focus on decoding is not designed to communicate or foster the delight that reading can offer students. My sense is that Sam would have become a more engaged reader with enhanced, more personalized instruction that explored the meaning of texts that interested him, or better yet, books that he selected himself. This, along with an approach to decoding more attuned to his needs
would have nurtured Sam’s desire to read. He just needed the proper instruction for his specific needs.

Cody has no learning disabilities. I learned, however, that he struggled with reading from the beginning of his school experience. His naturally shy personality exacerbated his difficulties with elementary school literacy instruction because he was at first, emotionally shaken by the classroom environment and with the pace and method of instruction.

Cody attended school in a familiar environment with caring teachers, but they were tied to a curriculum and method of instruction that did not meet his needs. As explained earlier, Allington (2013) notes that there is no research to support the sole use of core reading programs in fostering reading growth, nor is there existing research that suggests that maintaining fidelity to a core reading program will provide effective reading lessons.

Rather than developing and supporting the expertise of teachers who know how to teach several approaches effectively in order to adapt to the individual needs of their students, too many districts focus on single, one-size-fits all approaches. This was the case when Glenley decided to adopt a scripted curriculum as the only method of teaching its students how to read.

These singular approaches have been marketed to districts in the name of scientifically based, reliable, replicable research, yet there is a lack of valid research supporting the efficacy of core curricula in early reading instruction (Allington, 2013). An unintended outcome of districts adopting such curricula as the only method of
instruction is to create missed educational opportunities with students such as Cody. Too many students like Cody reach high school able to pronounce words with fluency, but struggle with the real purpose of reading, which is comprehension.

These students also lack experience with knowing how to access meaningful connections with what they are reading and what they are learning (Elish-Piper et al. 2013). Fluency is an important characteristic of skilled readers, but having it as a primary focus of early reading instruction can cheat students out of the opportunity to experience and practice the broader aspects of what it means to be able to read.

As a young child, Steve felt as if he was being punished for not being able to read well. This punishment came in the form of being placed in reading intervention classes where he was drilled on specific easily tested skills to improve his reading fluency. Steve did not like these classes because he and the other students were required to perform the same tasks every day. Steve now understands that the class was the school district’s method of providing reading intervention for students who struggled to read, but at the time he was bored and felt punished. It is difficult to erase the impressions of early childhood emotional responses to school experiences.

Steve also remembers actually attempting to hide from his teacher so he would not have to participate in the customary round robin reading in his regular reading class. “Disfluency causes readers to become self-conscious of their reading, and they soon learn to avoid reading in public” (DeVries, 2011, p. 259). She also notes that the poor instruction given to struggling readers could be a source of their disfluency.
Experienced educators understand the relationship between reading fluency and the ability to comprehend. They also understand that helping students learn to read is never about the use of a single curriculum or a specific method of intervention (DeVries, 2011). Supporting students’ ability to gain a reader’s identity is facilitated by providing an enriched environment that enables all students to build on their existing knowledge by providing positive support, and having the expectation that all students can become active learners.

It appears that Steve was not encouraged or given opportunities to be an active participant in his process of learning to read, nor was he given any validation as an individual with specific needs. Since he did not respond quickly to the reading instruction, or to the interventions, he became discouraged and essentially numb to the real purpose of reading. He noted that he did not have negative feelings about his experience with reading intervention class. He just stopped caring. As Steve said, “I didn’t really feel anything, just had to go.” Students have a right to meaningful connections to what they are reading and learning (Elish-Piper et al. 2013), but it is becoming increasingly difficult for teachers to provide an enriched learning experience for beginning readers when districts that require them to use packaged curricula have essentially deskilled their teachers. Requiring the use of a one size fits all curriculum limits teachers’ instructional options, and decreases the opportunities for them to develop the knowledge of and experience with using the best methods of reading instruction for each child.
Nurturing or Threatening School Environments Shape Student Motivation

An element of students’ school experience that is inexorably intertwined with their response to instructional content and teaching methods, is whether students perceive the environment of school as one that is positive and nurturing, or one that is emotionally threatening, or even hostile. There are many factors that affect a district’s climate, but in individual classrooms, teachers can and do make efforts to establish positive, nurturing environments. If the teachers’ efforts are genuine, their classrooms allow all students an opportunity to thrive. Children often are astute enough to tell the difference quite accurately between teachers who genuinely care for their students and those who are not truly interested in them. (Van Manan, 1991).

The experiences of the three participants illustrate how unique each student’s interactions are, even within the same classrooms and with the same teachers. It is worth noting how each enacts his own agency in an effort to find a place in his school experience where he feels comfortable and valued.

Relational teaching and learning. Sam entered my Reading Enrichment class with a purpose. He knew he needed to improve in academic literacy skills, and he had the desire to do so. Sam’s motivation to do well in school appears to have two sources, both the support of his family and his commitment to becoming a top athlete. Sports are an integral part of Sam’s life, and one of his goals is to play football at the college level. In the big picture, he voices the recognition that academics is more important than sports are to his future, but in the present moment it is sports, particularly football, that gives him a sense of student identity and the motivation to do his best in school. It is primarily Sam’s
teachers who also happen to be his athletic coaches who appear to be who Sam looks to as providing the nurturing environment of school. This enables him to view school as a friendly, supportive entity.

Teachers and administrators cannot ignore the fact that for some students athletic participation can serve as a source of academic motivation as well as provide students a sense of place within the school environment. This source of motivation cannot be taken for granted, in large part because in urban school systems, students such as Sam might have difficulty making the team. Additionally, not all student athletes respond in the same way as Sam has by recognizing the importance of his academic performance. As Sam described, he has friends who are athletes who do not use their continued participation in sports as motivation to perform well in school. Sam’s individual experience is worth listening to and learning from in order to help educators provide a foundation on which athletes can build their own recognition of the long-term value of placing a priority on academic performance. The ways in which teachers who also coach athletics view academics and interact with students are an important piece of this foundation.

The support of his family that Sam experiences cannot be overlooked as an influence that provides him with a definite advantage. This support helps him view his current school experience positively and reinforces his motivation to achieve his athletic and academic goals. While strong parental support makes Sam a non-typical struggling reader, family support alone cannot guarantee that a child will not struggle academically, or that a student will experience school as a nurturing environment. It is Sam’s
involvement with extra-curricular sports that fosters his positive outlook on his experience with school.

An important insight to be gained from Cody’s experience is that of the critical role and influence of teachers who provide a classroom climate that is conducive to learning for all students. Cody made it clear that when he reached secondary school he had difficulty learning from teachers who became impatient and yelled in frustration, either at Cody or others in his class.

There are numerous reasons behind teachers’ frustration in the classroom, but an increasingly common reason is the pressure teachers experience because of the increased importance districts place upon the outcomes of instruction in the form of standardized tests (Van Manen, 1991). A consequence of this focus is that some teachers lose sight of the fact that education is, in its best forms, holistic, and takes into consideration the whole child. While many students are able to shrug off teachers’ negative comments, Cody could not do this, and in his case, teacher negativity hinders his desire and ability to learn.

Teachers at all levels of a student’s school experience must be mindful that the best literacy education happens when there is an atmosphere of mutual respect, and when instruction meets the needs of individual students (Moje, et al. 2008). Listening to the experience of students such as Cody allows educators to gain insight about how important it is to foster a climate of mutual respect in order to help students overcome the consequences of missed or ineffective instructional opportunities.

Steve’s current struggle to gain academic literacy is exacerbated by his initial experience of school as a depersonalized environment where, for all intents and purposes,
he was anonymous and invisible. Steve speaks of having teachers who, in his perception, were not connected to their students, either because of large class sizes, or because of their temperaments. For one person to feel invisible, “another must, due to neglect, intention, or hubris, refuse to see him/her” (Elish-Piper et al. 2013, p. 8). This does happen in classrooms, but it does not mean that in Steve’s case his teachers literally did not see him. It appears, however, that for much of his experience with school he did not have teachers who were able to see him as an individual learner in his own time and place. Nor was Steve seen as worthy of an approach to literacy instruction that would have provided him with personalized instruction that connected to his life experiences and interests.

Literacy educators who have the best interests of their students in mind realize that all students are capable of learning, all students are worthy of our respect and all students deserve instruction that meets their individual needs. There are many trends in education that prevent this from happening in many classrooms. Van Manen (1991) states:

Curriculum policy that is predominantly concerned with measurable learning outcomes, teachers who feel compelled to teach toward the exam, schools whose policies do not help kids experience a sense of community – these all tend to lose sight of the fact that all education is ultimately education of the whole person.

(p. 166)

When Steve attended school in large, urban districts he became accustomed to being invisible as an inefficient coping technique. It appears that he created his own comfort zone within this environment because when he moved to Glenley and began attending
school in a smaller, more personalized environment, his initial reaction was one of resistance to being held accountable for his level of performance in his academic work.

In time Steve began to respond in a more positive way to the lack of anonymity and to teachers and administrators who made a sincere effort to work with him as he tried to improve his academic agency. This was and is not an easy process for Steve. He had entered the Glenley school district with very poor study habits, and he did not read unless he had to, a pattern or habit that persists. Even now he often does not engage with required reading when the subject matter does not interest him.

Providing effective reading interventions for high school students is challenging because students like Steve have had years of unsuccessful, and sometimes unpleasant experiences with reading and with teachers. Steve’s growth in academic literacy as a result of taking the Reading Enrichment class was noticeable, though not in a measurable sense, because test scores were not a priority of this class. Rather, Steve’s growth in academic literacy skills was evident in his ability to connect with books he chose to read, and in his strengthening efforts to find his academic writing voice. In a more nurturing, personalized environment, Steve has begun to stop the downward spiral of the negative academic consequences of having become an uncommitted reader.

**Assessments and Assessment Driven Curricula**

A reality that surrounds every aspect of the three case study participants’ experience with school is that they are profoundly impacted by the consequences of the fundamental changes districts underwent when the intense focus on the results of student assessments began to influence the academic focus of public schools. According to
Brenner et al. (2007), there are many conflicting messages that teachers and administrators grapple with in dealing with the increasing emphasis on mandated tests as a way to measure students’ academic proficiency.

Many states’ assessments, which have become increasingly high-stakes, evaluate students using multiple-choice tests. More recently, in some states, these multiple-choice tests have been combined with performance-based assessments. On the multiple-choice tests, students are required to select a single correct answer, a test format that does not lend itself to having questions that require deeper levels of analytical thinking. This calls into question what it is that these tests actually measure. Regardless, in some states students must receive a pre-determined score on these assessments in order to receive a high school diploma and schools are rated based upon how well their students score on these tests. Administrators and teachers are particularly attuned to these ratings, as it is often considered a reflection of their competence as well. In some states data that includes the percentage of students who meet pre-set test score goals are included as part of teachers’ performance evaluations.

Teachers have traditionally used content area assessments as a method to communicate with students about their progress. Teachers also use results of content area assessments to plan what to teach, as well as how to teach individual students, and to communicate with parents about their student’s progress (DeVries, 2011). The results of state mandated standards based tests are often not available to teachers until the end of the school year, so their use becomes ambiguous, as teachers cannot use test results as a means to adjust their curriculum, or to plan instruction for a particular student. Too often
teachers feel pressure to tailor their instruction to the narrow areas covered on the assessments, and set aside ideas of enriched classroom experiences for their students.

Instead of providing information to help students and their parents understand what the student really knows about reading or other aspects of academic literacy, standardized tests provide numbers and graphs that rarely communicate what students actually know. How schools respond to the requirement of mandated tests affects how students now experience school, and this is apparent in the stories of the three case study participants.

A productive learning environment for students who are beginning to read provides students with the opportunity to engage in meaningful literacy activities, and to interact with their peers and teachers around varied texts, including print, media and digital (Elish-Piper et al. 2013). None of the case study participants experienced this kind of enriched environment in their literacy instruction because their districts chose, albeit with good intentions, a commercially marketed curriculum as a means of providing the only method of reading instruction, and teachers are expected to use it with fidelity. When the case study participants did not respond quickly to this singular method of instruction, they were identified as struggling readers, and it appears that any opportunity for them to develop a passion for reading was lost. This lack of passion for reading is something that now impacts their experience with secondary academic literacy expectations.

**Students’ experience with tests.** It is ironic that had Sam not been self aware of his continuing difficulty with the academic reading and writing requirements of high
school, he would not have received the additional support from the Reading Enrichment class. His standardized test scores were not low enough to indicate that his difficulties fell into the danger range of scores that is the usual impetus for districts to implement reading interventions for students.

As a low average reader, Sam’s scores did not threaten to undercut the school’s state assessment report. His test scores indicated that his performance met the standards that the state identified as proficient. This level of proficiency, however, does not reflect a high level of expertise in reading, a level students need to reach in order to read increasingly complex texts, both in high school and later in college. The level deemed acceptable by the state actually creates a model of low, or limited expectations for students.

When educators limit themselves to using the results of a standardized test as the only measure of student needs, students such as Sam become virtually invisible. In conversations with students about standards based classroom instruction, the students spoke of “feeling absent or invisible in the school literacy instruction and activities” (Elish-Piper et al. 2013, p. 5). Sam’s scores were good enough, but good enough does not equate with the level of reading expertise needed to make sense of difficult texts. Sam’s experience informed his understanding of this reality, and since he had an empty class period to fill in his schedule he voluntarily chose to take Reading Enrichment. Otherwise, Sam would have received no additional support to address his difficulties with academic literacy.
Faced with having to take tests of any kind, content area or standardized, is something that triggers differing degrees of stress and anxiety for Cody. This stress is a result of his repeated poor performances on tests and state standardized assessments, something he has dealt with since he was in elementary school. The language arts curriculum he experienced in the elementary grades assesses students regularly on specific reading skill sets, so Cody has had years of experience of failure to achieve by the criteria of this curriculum. Cody expresses that not doing well on tests still elicits a sense of wanting to give up.

Throughout Cody’s school experience, however, he has had the support of his parents and extended family, and as a high school student he has begun to develop concrete goals that provide a purpose for him to persevere in his efforts to overcome his difficulties with academic literacy. Cody is developing positive academic agency and does not resist reading, or learning and implementing strategies that will help his comprehension. These qualities and conditions put Cody outside the usual definition of a struggling reader, and illustrate the reality that there is no one, single way to define a struggling reader. This is all the more reason why educators need to discern and meet the specific needs of all students who struggle in order to avoid the assumption that one approach will work for all learners.

After being identified as a struggling reader early in his elementary school experience, Steve was placed in reading intervention classes that from his description, involved little teacher-student interaction. What he did experience was curricula that was evidently implemented, or at least supervised by an adult that repetitively drilled him, and
the other students in the class, on easily measured reading literacy skills. Although bored by the experience, after several years of this format of reading intervention, Steve felt he could read satisfactorily. His indifferent attitude toward reading for either pleasure or for content area knowledge, however, was an attitude shaped by this early experience. Additionally, his standardized test scores did not reflect his sense of mastery.

The anxiety Steve now experiences that impacts his growth in academic literacy is generated by his many years of low performance on all forms of assessments. This stress inhibits his ability to gain confidence in his ability to function academically. So much so, that as he expressed, he essentially shuts down and is unable find the motivation to complete homework that might support his ability to perform well on tests and assessments. Since assessments and low test scores have become the primary measure of Steve’s academic identity, this shapes Steve’s sense of being unable to view himself as a competent learner.

When the Glenley school district chose to adopt a commercial curriculum, a scripted curriculum, it was a choice made in a search for the best way to prepare their students to perform well on the mandated assessments. This choice was made with the best of intentions, but the process of making the choice involved just an examination of the curriculum and its claims of efficacy in enabling students to perform well on standardized tests. What were overlooked are both the complex process of actually providing students the personalized reading instruction individual learners need, and the eclectic nature of the students themselves. At risk are the academic literacy attainments of too many students, as illustrated in the stories of Sam, Cody and Steve.
In summary, when I asked all three participants about their earliest memories of reading, all three related good memories of being read to at home by either parents or older siblings. Sam and Cody both specifically remember already recognizing certain words when they began Kindergarten. The fact that all three were identified as struggling readers early in elementary shaped their self-perceptions of themselves as readers and it shaped the instruction they received. All three received instruction and interventions with the intent to facilitate their growth in literacy, yet all three reached high school still struggling with academic literacy.

All three students expressed that the best learning environment is one where they experience a sense of mutual respect between the teacher and students. Cody related how he virtually shuts down when a teacher begins yelling at students, and Steve appears to still be adjusting to a school environment where he is not invisible and where teachers work with him directly to help him with his academic difficulties.

Sam’s experience with standardized tests that addressed the state’s language arts standards left him with an unusual dilemma. He scored adequately to meet the standards, but still struggled to meet demanding high school academic expectations. Cody and Steve both experience a considerable amount of stress surrounding the outcome of standardized testing as well as regular classroom tests. Learning how to overcome the scholastic paralysis that this stress fosters is one of the hurdles both are trying to surmount as part of their efforts to improve their academic literacy. The elementary curricula and reading interventions the district provided was geared toward improving students’ test scores, yet did not appear to meet the needs of these three students.
The three case study participants are adolescents dealing in their individual ways with the difficulties they are experiencing with academic literacy. Their stories have much to offer those who look to students’ experiences, and to students’ voices to inform their decisions about how to develop effective literacy interventions for older students, and how to foster effective early literacy programs to help young students “come to see themselves as thriving readers . . . and to treat all as capable and competent [learners]” (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p. 12). There is no one size fits all solution for the difficulties that Sam, Cody and Steve have with academic literacy, or for the numbers of other students who have their own unique struggles. If we heed the insights gained by listening to students’ voices, however, solutions can be explored and tried, and tried yet again until teachers are able to provide the support each student deserves.
Chapter 8

Summary, Discussion, and Recommendations

Searching for the Key

The title of this final chapter comes from the introduction of a book, *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research* (Christenbury et al. 2009). In the book’s introductory remarks about research that focuses on the “multiple, complex and generous understanding of literacy” (p. 8), particularly as it relates to adolescent literacy, the authors use an old joke about the drunkard’s search for his lost key. They use this joke as an analogy for the quest to find reading interventions that will produce improvement in test scores in all students regardless of their individual environments or backgrounds. The joke reads that rather than searching for his lost key where he dropped it, the drunkard looks under a lamppost because the light is better. The authors then point out:

For many in the field of adolescent literacy research, looking for the key involves locating settings of adolescent literacy and then using investigatory approaches that permit the study to capture what happens there. Contrast that outlook with one that commits first to a set of research procedures considered scientific and an expectation that adolescent literacy will appear when bidden within a research study, *instructional treatment, or test administration* [emphasis mine]. The light may be good under such conditions, but that does not make such contexts the only places to search for the key. (Christenbury et al. 2009. p. 9)

I find that this statement encompasses the tension that exists in efforts to find the key to helping students who struggle with literacy. Do we find answers in scientific researched curricula or do we find answers within the student experience?

The purpose of this study is to gain and to share insight from three participants’ experience with school and of their difficulties with academic literacy in order to inform the practice of those who are searching for ways to support adolescents who struggle with
the literacy expectations of high school. As a teacher-researcher the location of this study, my classroom, is in a district that, like many other school districts, has been encouraged to look under the lamppost of marketed curricula for the lost key to help students who struggle, rather than where the key was dropped, among the experiences of the students themselves.

The fact that the three participants were successfully taught to decode words but still struggle with academic literacy underscores why educators need to avoid what Stake (2006) notes is a search for generalizations, because this often precedes the search for causes. In this study, there is not a causal search for the reasons the students struggle, because the danger then is to oversimplify their individual experiences with academic literacy. It is the effort to look for single causes that can lead to settling for one-size fits all approaches to help students who struggle with reading.

This study avoids looking under the metaphorical lamppost to attempt to find easy solutions to complex literacy problems. Instead it looks at the outcomes of what each student’s perception of his experience with literacy education has been within their own contexts. From this examination educators can extrapolate insight that will assist them in understanding other students’ experiences, as well as to find greater understanding as to why students enter high school and struggle with academic literacy. The search for efficacious ways to support struggling students begins with listening to and considering students’ perspectives of their experiences with school.
Summary

Chapter 1. Chapter 1 presented the context for this study, which is informed by my 25+ years as an English/Language Arts teacher, and my efforts to develop and teach a reading intervention class for high school students. My initial doctoral research for the study was guided by the following questions: What can teachers do to help support students who struggle with academic literacy in secondary school settings? How do students who struggle with secondary academic literacy expectations view themselves as readers and as learners? How can we use insights we gain from listening to these students’ stories to inform and improve our approach to educating struggling students? The initial research in adolescent literacy led to case study research that focused on the experience of three students in my Reading Enrichment Class.

Chapter 2. Chapter 2 surveys research that examines components of academic literacy, and how and why adolescents implement positive or negative academic agency and gain or do not gain an academic identity. Included in the review of research literature is that which supports the critical importance of personalized reading instruction at all levels for students who struggle to read. Chapter 2 also addresses research that reinforces the idea that an important element in creating an environment where the best teaching and learning occurs is that of establishing mutually respectful relationships between teachers and students. Research indicates that the inordinate focus on the use of standardized assessments that have emerged since the No Child Left Behind legislation has had adverse consequences for both student/teacher connections, and on the motivation of students who struggle with academic literacy.
Chapter 3. Chapter 3 explains the methodology and the theoretical framework of this study. The use of narrative inquiry within the context of case study research provided the framework to examine the school experience of three students who struggled with the academic literacy expectations of high school content area classes. I gathered data by conducting extensive interviews with three participants, and in addition took classroom observation notes and collected student work as artifacts.

Through cross case analysis, themes emerged which include the insight that the students’ early experiences with literacy instruction impacted how each responds to the literacy expectations of high school. Another theme involves the consequences of whether the students’ experiences with teachers are positive and nurturing. A third theme examines the consequences of the focus on standardized testing on the quality of instruction the participants experienced as well as on their motivation to persevere in their work to improve their academic literacy skills. The goal of this dissertation is to inform discussion about educational practice and policy, and to tell the stories of these three students so educators can gain insight about how best we can support struggling students.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are case studies of Sam, Cody and Steve, written as narrative biographies of each of the participants’ school experience. Each participant’s case study includes their accounts of early literacy instruction, and experiences with making the transition to high school academic literacy expectations. Each narrative also includes their experiences with academic motivation. All of the participants are enrolled in my Reading Enrichment class, a class I developed for Glenley
high school as a way to help support students who struggled with the reading and writing expectations of high school.

**Chapter 7.** Chapter 7 presents the cross case study analysis of the participants’ narrative school biographies and identified the following themes that emerged from this analysis:

1. Students’ subsequent difficulties with academic literacy expectations are shaped by their elementary school experiences with literacy instruction, which influence their identities as readers and learners.

2. Adolescents’ academic motivation is shaped by whether they experience school as a nurturing or threatening influence as well as by the support they do or do not receive from parents and teachers.

3. Assessments and assessment driven curricula can profoundly shape students’ experience with academic literacy and school in general.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

What made an indelible impression on me about the experiences of the three case study participants was the fact that none of them exhibited any learning disabilities, all of them come from middle-class home environments with parents who support literacy, yet all entered high school genuinely struggling to meet literacy expectations. These three students are not the only students I experienced during the time period of this study who have difficulty with academic reading and writing. There are other students enrolled with the participants in my Reading Enrichment class and a number of other students who
could benefit from more personalized literacy support, but the class was full after early registration.

The apparent student need for Reading Enrichment at Glenley reflects an unintended consequence of No Child Left Behind, which is more and more alliterate students, or those who are able to read but choose not to. “State and national initiatives linked to NCLB Act of 2001 created schools in which lessons are focused primarily on improving reading test scores. As a result, instruction has been narrowed and made even more mind-numbing than in earlier eras” (Gallagher, 2009, p. vii). None of my case study students gained a love of reading from their early elementary school experiences with literacy instruction. Without developing a well-established pattern of regular, voluntary reading, as happens with any unpracticed skill, their ability to read atrophies to a level where challenging academic texts are uninteresting and very difficult to decode and comprehend. This situation creates long-term academic consequences for all three students who have individual goals to attend college. The long-term consequences also have broader implications that deserve consideration.

**Study’s implications for literacy in a democratic society.** A bigger picture exists that makes the experiences of these three case study participants important stories to consider as we reflect on the critical impact of literacy in a democracy. Universal literacy is a key component of a well-functioning democratic society. A fundamental precept is that democracy works best when citizens are educated, informed, and willing to participate in informed discourse about issues that impact their society. Kuhn (2005) tells us:
To prepare our youth to engage in effective debate of the important issues that arise in their local and global communities is to prepare them to think well, individually and especially collaboratively, and to value doing so, as a means of maximizing individual and societal welfare. (p. 12)

Access to enriched literacy education is arguably the cornerstone of the ability of citizens to engage in self-governance.

John Dewey (2008) recognized this nearly 100 years ago when his classic work, *Democracy and Education* was first published in 1916. His philosophy on education included recognition of how important access to excellent schools and education that fostered critical thinking was for everyone in a free society.

No one doubts, theoretically, the importance of fostering in school good habits of thinking. Thinking which is not connected . . . with learning more about ourselves and the world in which we live . . . leaves a man at the mercy of his routine habits and of the authoritative control of others, . . . who are not especially scrupulous as to their means of achievement. (p. 135)

Current literacy research warns us that there are a growing number of people from all socioeconomic and educational backgrounds who are capable of reading but who choose not to. A non-reading society presents the danger of people moving away from being an engaged populace, an occurrence that could ultimately erode a well-functioning democracy.

Aliteracy reflects a change in cultural values and a loss of skills, both of which threaten the processes of a free and democratic society. Literacy . . . knits people together, giving them a common culture . . . and provides people with the intellectual tools used to question, challenge, understand, disagree, and arrive at consensus. In short, it allows people to participate in an exchange of ideas. A democratic nation is weakened when fewer and fewer citizens can participate in such an exchange. Aliteracy leads inexorably to a two-tiered society: the knowledgeable elite and the masses. It makes a common culture illusory or impossible; it erodes the basis for effective decision-making and participation in the democratic process. (Baroody, 1984, quoted in Beers 2005, p. ix)
Reading Baroody’s words reminds me of the aliterate society depicted in Huxley’s prescient novel *Brave New World* (1932), a book I shared with students in my senior English classes for 28 years. In this story, people were created and engineered to fit into a caste system where those of the lowest working classes were given only the intelligence necessary to work efficiently in menial jobs. Reading of any kind did not occur among the lower castes. Those in the two upper level castes were taught to read only what would allow them to function in their more sophisticated jobs, but they were systematically conditioned to despise all other kinds of reading. Only the ten World Controllers had access to literature and research and to ideas contained in these books. Even so, the books were kept locked up so no one accidentally gained access to them. This fictional brave new world is a very stable society where there is no crime or stress, but the people have become soul-less consumers of commercially produced forms of distraction.

While Huxley’s vision of an aliterate, consumerist society is dire, nonetheless the implications of the experiences each of the three case study participants have had with literacy education encourages educators to examine the divisions that exist in what constitutes effective reading instruction. I am reminded of a conversation I had with some of my colleagues who taught elementary school at Glenley about whether our scripted elementary reading curriculum was providing the best foundation for students to become skilled readers. One colleague commented that the elementary reading test scores were going up, which indicated the students were learning to read. My response was and is a phrase I heard first during a conversation I had with Dr. Kathleen Wilson: “This depends upon your definition of what it means to read”.
Sam, Cody and Steve were all identified as struggling readers because they did not respond easily to the only reading instruction their schools provided. As adolescents they are able to read, to pronounce words and to make meaning from these words, albeit with some difficulty, so from one perspective they were successfully taught to read. My sense is, however, having taught them in both English classes and in Reading Enrichment, they have yet to become fully aware of the possibilities that are open to them as independent readers and thinkers, and to the satisfaction that can result from using this thinking to become engaged members of our democracy.

It is this affective aspect of reading and literacy that was not fully addressed by the curriculum used in the early instruction the participants received, and an outcome is that three students now struggle to improve or even to attain higher levels of academic literacy. A similar consequence occurring nationwide is the challenge that needs to be addressed because, “This downward spiral is difficult to break especially as state-mandated minimum competency tests force many teachers to think they should focus more on reading skills than on reading pleasure” (Beers, 2007, p. 2). Recommendations on how to break this spiral constitute the remainder of Chapter 8.

**Good teaching eclipses commercial curricula.** Reading research overwhelmingly indicates that the best way to provide students with effective literacy instruction lies not in any one method or curriculum, but with the teacher (Allington, 2013; Duffy & Hoffman, 1999; Elish-Piper et al. 2013; Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009; Lenters, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, What Works Clearinghouse, 2012). The best instruction occurs when teachers are skilled in using various methods of reading
instruction, especially at the elementary level, and implement these methods based upon the assessed needs of his/her individual students. Districts need to allow teachers to become less dependent upon packaged, scripted curricula. Providing high-quality professional development that supports teachers’ acquisition and use of research supported literacy strategies and activities is an important step in providing all students with the literacy instruction that will meet each student’s needs.

It is adaptive teaching that extensive research recognizes as being the most effective for literacy instruction (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). Duffy and Hoffman acknowledge that in Duffy’s early research in the 1980’s, indicators pointed toward explicit instruction as an effective method of helping low-ability students. If explicit instruction could be packaged and required of all teachers, it appeared the light was shining on a key to effective universal literacy instruction. Further research, however, revealed that the most effective teachers used explicit instruction at times, and in other situations were less explicit. What made them effective was their ability to adapt to the situation, and to the specific needs of their students. The ability to adapt to students’ needs is not something that can be packaged, but it is a hallmark of excellent teachers and excellent teaching.

By its nature, teaching is not an exact science. Nor are children passive vessels that universally respond in the same way, every day to instruction. In this age of accountability, however, those involved in educational policy decisions, from politicians to principals, keep looking for a universal key under the lamppost of simplicity to make sure all children can read. This is much easier than it is to look within the complex,
somewhat messy, very human world that teachers and students inhabit every day in our classrooms.

People in government are particularly prone to the search for simplified ways to gain and process information about student and district literacy success because of the desire to have easy ways to account for the tax generated dollars involved in federal support to education (Christenbury et al. 2009). The research that is applied to support the use of singular approaches is what is referred to as the gold standard. Scientific research methods that are used effectively in medical research have been incorporated as the preferred method for educational research. It is this research that has precipitated the push for schools to adopt one-size-fits-all literacy curricula and reading interventions in efforts to ensure that the considerable amount of money spent will result in predictable results, not only on a local scale, but also on a national scale.

This approach to literacy education and interventions is seductive because of its simplicity, and unfortunately there are teachers who respond to these methods because this approach to instruction does not demand the critical thought and hard work that comes with recognizing that “one size does not fit all” (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999, p. 12). Essentially, all teachers are expected to do is to follow a script.

The problem is there is no valid research to support the claims that these commercially produced curricula and interventions provide the best or only answer to making sure our students develop the ability to read, and eventually to reach higher levels of academic literacy (Allington, 2013; Elish-Piper et al. 2013). The experiences of the three case study participants with curricula and interventions affirm this concern. Literacy
research is clear in its finding that the key to quality literacy education cannot be found in a specific method or curriculum, but with skilled teachers and their ability to assess and address the specific needs of their students.

**Provide teachers with what they need.** One reason why commercially produced curricula and scripted approaches to literacy instruction are seeing such widespread use and acceptance appears to be because of a public perception that many teachers are incompetent. Requiring all teachers to use pre-prepared teaching content and methods gives some policy makers the sense that a standardized approach takes the risk out of leaving teachers to their own devices (Hammerness et al. 2005). Teachers are complex individuals, just as their students are, and there is no realistic way to standardize either the ability or quality of literacy teachers. There are, however, ways to provide educators the foundation and support needed to bring out the best in them as well as in their students.

Effective university and college teacher education programs help pre-service teachers become professionals who are what they call “adaptive experts” (Hammerness et al. 2005, p. 359). This is especially important for literacy teachers. High quality teacher education programs help teachers learn the process of putting what they know into action. It would be nearly impossible for pre-service literacy teachers to learn every single research supported strategy and activity available to teach their students in the areas of phonics, word identification, comprehension, fluency and writing. However, it is possible and necessary that teacher education programs provide a solid foundation on
which pre-service literacy teachers can build their knowledge base and their sense of being lifelong learners.

Once teachers are in the classroom, school districts can provide working conditions that are conducive to teachers having the opportunity to work closely with individual students and, whenever possible, with master teachers. The opportunity for teachers to work closely with students involves districts ensuring small class size, especially at the lower elementary level. While classroom aides can be beneficial to teachers and students in many ways, their responsibilities should not include implementing literacy instruction or interventions, even if it involves simply reading a script. Too often struggling readers are placed with aides or paraprofessionals who administer reading interventions (Allington, 2013). This practice puts children who need the most help with literacy with people who are least expert in being able to provide this help. This is a human rights issue. Marginalized children who struggle with reading are subject to “mind-numbing drill and memorization, scattershot instruction ill suited to their strengths or to their needs” (Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009, p. 6). School districts need to allow teachers the opportunity to provide enriched literacy instruction for all students, but particularly for those who struggle.

Another important provision that supports the development of teaching excellence is to make sure teachers have access to high quality professional development in literacy instruction, and regular opportunities to collaborate with other teachers about instructional strategies and activities that work well for them in their literacy instruction (Gambrell et al. 2007). In larger school districts, if implemented well, Professional
Learning Communities can support this collaboration. In rural schools, districts could facilitate professional collaboration by creating on-line Professional Learning Communities among teachers in area districts.

Additionally, at the upper elementary and secondary level, content area teachers should understand that literacy is cross-curricular and disciplinary. Quality professional development can enhance literacy support in all disciplines and help educators incorporate reading and writing strategies into their content-area repertoire of teaching methods (Hynd-Shanahan, 2013; Jetton & Shanahan, 2012). Academic literacy is not limited to the Language Arts disciplines, and providing students with support as they develop their skills in academic literacy, and their overall academic identity is the responsibility of teachers throughout a school system.

**Teaching as relational.** Providing skilled teachers is an important first step in providing a quality education for students, but creating a nurturing educational climate, one based upon mutual trust and respect, is as important to student growth as are the skilled teachers and enriched curricula. The impact school has upon students’ lives cannot be underestimated, and much of this impact, positive or negative, is a result of teacher/student relationships (Elish-Piper et al. 2013). The quality of teacher-student relationships has a significant effect on students’ mental health. Teachers who create caring learning environments, and who model positive behavior are more likely to have students who experience less anxiety, have more positive attitudes toward school and higher achievement levels (Elish-Piper et al. 2013). Effective teachers exhibit genuine
interest in students and their lives, and use the knowledge they gain about their students
to help plan lessons and implement teaching strategies.

The current trend of school districts that compels teachers to prioritize test scores,
however, does little to foster healthy teacher/student connections. Making test scores a
priority shifts the focus away from students as individuals (Elish-Piper et al. 2013), and
subjects them to the sense that they are virtually invisible as people, and only important
as test score data. While the effects of prioritizing test scores can be difficult to work
around, there are excellent teachers all over the country who are doing just that, and
working hard to create classroom environments that are based on mutual trust and
respect.

Having true respect for children is to seek out and value their accomplishments
(Hawkins, 2002). Accomplishments are much more than students’ standardized test
scores, and children can tell the difference between teachers who genuinely care for
them, and those who are not interested (Van Manen, 1991). Students will respond
positively to a caring environment, and among other aspects of what Van Manen (1991)
refers to as pedagogical tact, he encourages educators to provide students a sense of
connectedness by providing them the educational space to make choices and decisions.
He also notes how important it is to allow students a chance to develop academic agency
with guidance from teachers rather than merely passively absorbing information in order
to score well on a given assessment. Teachers can focus on learning about individual
students by suspending their own beliefs, feelings and biases (Thayer-Bacon, 2004), and
using what they learn to help strengthen what is good in students and to sponsor students’ personal growth.

The participants in this study all experienced school in a small school environment where teachers, including myself, have opportunities to know students both inside and outside the school environment. While educators in large school districts must rely on opportunities within the school experience to know their students, the positive effects for teachers and students are worth the effort it takes to know and listen to students as individual learners. The positive effects for students who have teachers who are able to establish a trusting, respectful classroom environment are evident in the study participants’ response to their own experience with educators who genuinely care about their students, and those who do not. Creating a positive school and classroom climate is possible regardless of, or perhaps in spite of districts placing such high priority on test score results.

**Reassess the priority given to assessments.** Recommendations pertaining to reassessing the priority that schools, states and the federal government place on high-stakes standardized testing takes a first, necessary look at the purpose of assessments. In my experience, and that of millions of educators, assessments traditionally served the purpose of providing a way to gain diagnostic information about our students as (Ravitch, 2010). Educators use assessments to determine whether students need further instruction, or different instruction to meet our disciplinary instructional goals. Tests are a way to gauge learning and the level of knowledge our students have attained.
The current purpose of high-stakes assessments has now shifted into becoming a way to hold teachers and districts publicly accountable for whether their students are reaching arbitrarily established benchmark scores that rate skills in literacy and math (Ravitch, 2010). This shift has pushed schools into narrowing their curricula to fit the strictures of the standardized test that are by nature not precise instruments of student learning.

The goal of schools has now become the ability to produce higher test scores on these standardized tests in order to let the public know their children attend a successful school. The possibility of whether it is realistic to believe that a single test score can actually show what a student has learned, the worth of his/her teachers, and the worth of the school (Beers, 2013) does not appear to be under question. If we define what matters in education only by what can be measured in a multiple-choice test, we are in serious trouble. “When that happens, we tend to forget that schools are responsible for shaping character, developing sound minds in healthy bodies, and forming citizens for our democracy, not just for teaching basic skills” (Ravitch, 2010, p. 167).

If subjects are not included on the tests, they are not being taught (Au, 2010). In many districts this includes enriching classes such as art, music, theatre, and civics. He describes that what is now happening in our public schools, because of the institutionalized focus on high-stakes tests, is top down bureaucratic control that devalues teacher expertise, devalues the diverse experiences of students, and devalues the sense of importance of the individual students and teachers and their place in the context of their school experience. He views these developments as essentially undemocratic. These are
strong words, but the participants’ experience in this study reflect the consequences of narrowed curricula and an emphasis on basic literacy skills that has left them nearing the end of their school experience still lacking the higher level skills they need to function well in post-secondary education.

The issue of high-stakes testing is complex, and it is important that informed conversations about its impact on schools happen. These conversations need to include the voices of all stakeholders, including teachers and students. There is disappointment among students and teachers over the realization that schools now represent places where students are taught how to pass a test. No longer is it about “creating lifelong learners who are passionate about reading and writing, about science and math; who love the arts; who ache to know about the world, about our history, about our geography” (Beers, 2013, p. 266). I place myself with Beers and many other educators who want students to be able to pass any test put before them, but to have that happen because of what they learned in enriched, rewarding contexts.

**Opportunities for further research.** The keys to providing quality literacy instruction for all students can be found within the experiences of students. Insights from their experiences can guide high-quality teaching. Note that the word “keys” is plural. There is no one key, and the dictates of high-stakes tests of basic skills will not provide answers for what constitutes best literacy education practice.

Further research studies on how students who struggle with academic literacy experience school will shed more light on our search for keys to unlock each student’s potential. We need to move away from models of “teaching as covering rather than
discovering; and a top down model of education in which policy makers far away from classrooms impose their to do lists” (Kohn, 2015, p. 2). Teacher-research can provide a valuable and valid complement to scholastic research on exploring methods that can provide the best literacy support for students.

In the past year I have had the opportunity to develop and teach a class for a small university’s Masters in Education with Literacy Emphasis degree program. This class allows teachers to perform their own research on literacy theory and applications and to work one on one with a student to help him/her with literacy needs. The focus on test scores is set aside for sixteen weeks, and teachers work to develop a trusting, working relationship with a student, assess his or her literacy needs, and implement strategies and activities that address this student’s individual literacy needs.

The response from the teachers taking this class has been overwhelmingly positive as they reflect upon how they experience the opportunity to move away from a prescribed curriculum and discover ways to enrich their literacy interventions based on what they learn about their student through interviews, observations and formative assessments. From the teachers’ written accounts of their experiences, the responses of their students have been positive as well. More such practitioner research is possible in schools around the country, and could provide much needed student and teacher voice in the nationwide discussion on how we can best ensure a highly literate, civically engaged populace.

**Reflections on the warrant for conclusions.** My professional identity as a teacher provided me with the opportunity to work with hundreds of students over the 28
years I spent in secondary education. By the time these students reached my high school English classroom, each had been shaped and influenced by a number of experiences both in and out of school that impacted their literacy growth. I understood this then and I understand now that students are not mere producers of data, and because of their individual experiences, literacy education does not lend itself to one size fits all methods at any stage of a student’s education.

I challenge all educators to recognize the uniqueness of each of their students, and to understand that there are lasting consequences for these individuals if they acquiesce to the pressure to accept the status quo in literacy curricula, and forgo exploring methods and strategies that will address the individual needs of each student. What is expedient in today’s educational climate may not be advantageous for students in our classrooms.

Lest we forget for whom we work, teachers, administrators and policy makers must listen to our children, our students. I believe our children to be our nation’s most valuable, precious resource. As George Wood (Wood & Strauss, 2013) stated in remarks to his teaching staff “Schools should be a place for all sorts of kindness” (p. 2). What could be more kind than to genuinely listen to our students and allow their stories to inform our efforts to improve their school experience with academic literacy?
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## Sam: Reading Log

**Weekly Reading Log – keep track of pages read each day**

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**Notes:**
- He went to San Francisco, called Grandma.
- It was a long trip, but he enjoyed the view.
- He met some new friends on the way.
- He read a lot of books and learned a lot.
- He missed his family at home.
- He sent a letter to his mom and dad.
- He had a great time exploring the city.

**Book Title and Genre:**
- He found a great book about adventure and action.
- The story was full of twists and turns.
- He liked it very much.
- He couldn't put it down.

**Number of Pages:**
- He read every page with enthusiasm.
- He was very interested in the story.
- He wanted to finish it as soon as possible.

**Comments:**
- He found the story very engaging.
- He was impressed by the author's writing.
- He recommended it to his friends.
- He would definitely read it again.

**Period:**
- He read it during his free time.
- He enjoyed it very much.
- He couldn't put it down.

**Reading Log:**
- He wrote down his daily reading progress.
- He noted down the number of pages read each day.
- He kept track of his reading habits.
- He was very careful about his reading.
- He made sure to read every day.

**Conclusion:**
- He enjoyed his reading experience.
- He learned a lot from the books.
- He wanted to read more books.
- He was very happy with his reading progress.
- He was looking forward to the next book.

---

**Note:**
- He was very happy with his reading progress.
- He read every day.
- He was very interested in the story.
- He wrote down his daily reading progress.
- He noted down the number of pages read each day.
- He kept track of his reading habits.
- He was very careful about his reading.
- He made sure to read every day.
- He was very happy with his reading progress.
- He was looking forward to the next book.

---

**Summary:**
- He enjoyed his reading experience.
- He learned a lot from the books.
- He wanted to read more books.
- He was very happy with his reading progress.
- He was looking forward to the next book.

---

**Books Read:**
- He read a lot of books.
- He enjoyed every one of them.
- He was very happy with his reading progress.
- He was looking forward to the next book.

---

**Next Read:**
- He was very happy with his reading progress.
- He read every day.
- He was very interested in the story.
- He wrote down his daily reading progress.
- He noted down the number of pages read each day.
- He kept track of his reading habits.
- He was very careful about his reading.
- He made sure to read every day.
- He was very happy with his reading progress.
- He was looking forward to the next book.

---

**Books Read:**
- He read a lot of books.
- He enjoyed every one of them.
- He was very happy with his reading progress.
- He was looking forward to the next book.
Appendix B

Sam: Research Notes Using Graphic Organizers

Guided Practice - Compare and Contrast

Name: "Sam"

Date

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic One</th>
<th>Topic Two</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why animals become endangered</td>
<td>What we do to protect them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destruction of habitat</td>
<td>Endangered Species Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people destroy their habitats to build homes, roads, dams</td>
<td>legal safety net to prevent the loss of plants and animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollution</td>
<td>increased funding for private landowners, research and other conservation programs that benefit endangered species</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oil spills, water pollution</td>
<td>restoring the habitats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunting &amp; fishing</td>
<td>laws that protect them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>many animals are over hunted for meat and fur</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra Species</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new species can bring diseases, destroy their homes and eat them</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Similarities</th>
<th>Differences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>2.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>4.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**T-Chart Notes**

**Name:** "Sam"  
**Date:**

**TOPIC:** Indonesia's tsunami

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Giant forces that made building up deep in the earth for hundreds of years released on December 26</td>
<td>1.50,000 people were dead or missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Shake the ground and unleashed a series of killer waves that sped across the Indian Ocean as fast as a jet</td>
<td>- Millions were homeless in 11 countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sections of tectonic plates displaced enormous amount of water</td>
<td>- Travelled 3,000 miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Waves were 50 feet tall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Suddenly reading of the ocean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Sounded like 3 freight trains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- When the sea floor was exposed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Tourist ran out and when the wave hit they were swept back out of rush by building</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2004 was as big as 23,000 Hiroshima type atomic bombs
**Topic:** Huang He Floods

**Cause**
- Structures of flat lands surrounding the river
- 34,000 miles of land (1.65)
  were flooded in Aug 1931
- September 1931
- June 1932
- Destruction of dikes near Lo Yang by Chinese Nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-Shek to halt the advance of the invading Japanese troops
- Caused by overflown of water into the river

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 800 million hectares</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 950,000 to 4,000,000 people killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 1,000,000 - 2,000,000 killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 500,000 - 900,000 killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Dikes were rebuilt 1936-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Built overflow channels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Taller dikes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Made a 50-year construction plan to construct dikes, repair, and reinforce them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Hasn't flooded since 1945</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Sam: Formal Letter Assignment

May 10, 2013
Stephen Swidler
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Teaching Learning and Teacher Education
114A Henze Hall
Lincoln, NE 68588-0355

Dear Stephen,

A successful life starts with a successful learning degree. To be successful at learning you must have to be able to connect to the work, have parents, family, and friends to inspire you to do your best, and set expectations for yourself.

The successes I have had in academics are very pleasing to me. I have never failed a class, have never had late assignments, and most of my grade are A's. I feel like I have been successful because I try hard at everything I do and I hate failing at something no matter what it is. Every time I come to a change in school I relate it to sports and how my coaches tell me to never give up because the hardest working people will always end up on top.

Making sense of the work in school is just as important as learning it. A teacher may teach about a subject but you will not remember as much if you can not find a way to connect with the information. I try connecting to the work by relating it to something in my life, like farming, sports, or a description of a friend.

Cougars are not the only people that inspire me to do well in school. My parents are also a big part of this. They tell me mistakes they made in school and how it affected them later on so I know not to make the same mistakes as they did. My peers also help me push my self in school. When I see someone else doing well on a test or anything it makes me want to be just as good as them or better. If I do not make sense of the work I would not be able to do as good.

Goals that I have for my self for next year are very much like this years. I want to get all A's and pass every class I take. I will continue working hard at every assignment I do and every test I take.

My parents always tell me that all this hard work will pay off in the end. I hope they are right because I would like to go to a four year college and still get good grades there also. The hard work will help me get a good job and I will be able to live a fulfilled life of happiness.

Sincerely yours,

[Handwritten text]
Appendix D

Cody: Research Notes Using a Graphic Organizer and Paragraph Graphic Organizer

T-Chart Notes

Name: "Cody" Date:

**TOPIC: Role Models**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drew Brees</th>
<th>Grant Hill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>– Drew has a wife, Brittany</td>
<td>– Grant has a wife, Tamia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Sons: Baylen, Bowen, Collin in New Orleans, Louisiana</td>
<td>– Daughters: Taylor, and Lexie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Drew graduated at Purdue University</td>
<td>– Tamia is an American music artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– earned Bachelor's degree in Industrial Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Awards</td>
<td>– Awards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Maxwell</td>
<td>– 7-time NBA All Star</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Academic All-American Player of the Year</td>
<td>– NBA All-Tournament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– 2 Pro Bowls</td>
<td>– NABC All-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– 2004 comeback player of the year</td>
<td>– NABC Southeastern Regional MVP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– 2005 Walter Payton Man of the Year</td>
<td>– ACC Player of the Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Super Bowl MVP</td>
<td>– #1 pick 1994 NBA draft</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Founded the Brees Foundation in 2003 to help improve the quality of life for cancer patients. Provides care, education, and opportunities for children and families in need.

– Byron Whizzer White Award
– J8 Award
– Heart of the Game Award
– USJF Outstanding Young American Award

2011-12 Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame
Minnie Jackson-Basketball's Human Spirit Award
Hamburger Paragraph

Directions: Write a paragraph with 6-8 sentences.

Topic Sentence

There are some athletes that go beyond just athletes and are great role models.

Sentence

Professional athletes are not just experts in a sport.

Sentence (1-2)

They also need to be good role models to young kids. Lots of kids look up to this superstar.

Sentence

There are also some athletes that just try to be superstars and nothing more.

Sentence (1-2)

Many of these athletes are still a role model but are making the wrong appearance to young children.

Concluding Sentence

Some professional athletes make great role models, and others are just setting the wrong example by young kids.
Hamburger Paragraph

Directions: Write a paragraph with 6-8 sentences.

1. Topic Sentence
   Drew Brees is an athlete that sets an awesome influence on young children.

2. Sentence
   Drew has a wife Brittany with three sons, Baylen, Bowen, Callen and are living in New Orleans, Louisiana.

3. Sentence (1-2)
   Drew has had a great football career too, he is a seven time pro bowler, Walter Payton Man of the Year, and a Super Bowl MVP.

4. Sentence
   Brees founded the Brees Foundation in 2003.

5. Sentence (1-2)
   It tries to improve the quality of life for cancer patients, provide care, education, and opportunities to people in need.

6. Concluding Sentence
   Drew Brees goes way beyond just some ordinary super on the field.
Hamburger Paragraph

Directions: Write a paragraph with 6-8 sentences.

**Topic Sentence**
Grant Hill is also a player that goes beyond being just an athlete.

Hill has a wife Tamia with two daughters Myla and Laila.

Grant has had quite an amazing career as a basketball player too. He is a seven time NBA all star, two time NCAA champion at Duke, and won a gold medal in 1996.

Hill is also a winner of what he does off the court.

He has won three NBA Sportmanship Awards, two time Dan Majerle Hustle Award, and a Man in Black Award. Jackson - Basketball's Human Spirit Award.

**Concluding Sentence**
Grant Hill is a great teammate as long as a great person off the court.
Hamburger Paragraph
Directions: Write a paragraph with 6-8 sentences.

Topic Sentence
I would say Drew Brees is the best role model.

Sentence
Drew has founded the Brees Foundation for people in need.

Sentence (1-2)
He has also donated over $17 million to charities over the years. He won the Byron Whizzer White Award.

Sentence
Brees is a great football player too.

Sentence (1-2)
He won a Super Bowl with the New Orleans Saints. Drew has also been a Comeback Player of the year.

Concluding Sentence
Drew Brees is the definition of an amazing athlete.
Hamburger Paragraph
Directions: Write a paragraph with 6-8 sentences.

**Topic Sentence**
Athletes are all experts at what they do.

**Sentence**
But only a few show it off the court or field.

**Sentence (1-2)**
Drew Brees and Grant Hill are only two athletes that show their talent off the court.

**Sentence**
They both are great teammates and role models.

**Sentence (1-2)**
Drew has donated over 17 million dollars to charities around the United States. Grant Hill shows his support by helping out organizations around the U.S.

**Concluding Sentence**
They are two professional athletes children should always look up to.
Appendix E

Cody: Formal Letter Assignment

May 17, 2012
Stephen Swidler, PhD
University of Nebraska Lincoln
Teaching Learning and Teacher Education
114A Harliss Hall
Lincoln, NE 68588-0335

Dear Stephen,

I have always set goals in each class and try to reach them by the end of the first quarter or the end of the semester. I try to push myself as much as possible during that time period. I try to get as much help as I can get so I can pursue these goals over the last couple years in high school.

Teachers are also setting goals in their classrooms. I always try to reach but I am not always successful at that. I think teachers need to set goals more for certain students rather than just the whole class. Students are not all the same when it come to learning. Some students try all reach the teachers goal but sometimes those goals are just set a little to high for them. If teachers would set more goals for individual students it should help many more kids throughout their high school career.

I think most of the choices I make academically are pretty good but I know every once in a while I get lazy and decide to slack off. I usually start doing that at the end of the school year. They have focused much harder on not trying to do that and I think it will pay off. My parents influence lots of my choices so far through high school. They help me keep focused throughout the school year and through the summer so I’m ready when I go back to school in August.

I plan on raising some of my goals next year in some classes and reaching them as best I can. I have stayed focused throughout the year this year so hopefully next year I can do the exact same.

Sincerely yours,
Appendix F

Steve: Formal Letter Assignment

Date: 5-17-13

Mrs. Lois Meyer
Public Schools

Dear Mrs. Meyer:

When I look back on this past year, what I really wanted to focus on was working as hard as I can in classes. Freshman year changed the way I see school, test scores basically determine if you’re going to college. I try to work on what is going on right now then thinking of my future in college.

The first couple weeks I was doing pretty well in class, until my math grade went down then I began to stress out. I just basically stopped doing the homework. Mrs. _______motivated me with a contract that I signed saying, I will stay on top of my assignments, but if I didn’t I would have detention after school for 45 minutes. So I knew if I didn’t do what I was supposed to do I would be in trouble.

My hardest classes in school are math and science, subjects like that don’t really click for me. But they are required to graduate, so I need to pay attention and not goof off with friends in class to better my opportunities in the future. Something that balanced my day was having band, it allowed me to have fun and get a grade for it. Being able to be creative subsides when I struggle over math and science.

This year I noticed that grades mean way more than just a letter now. Freshman year to Senior year colleges look at your grades on your transcript. What I would’ve done instead of slacking off sometimes was study more, and ask more questions when I wouldn’t understand. Next year I am not going to be in Sutton, that kind of freaks me out, not really having that close relationship with teachers is going to be tough but I need to focus on what’s important…GRADES.

Sincerely,
Appendix G

Steve: Personal Narrative

Drumming

Sitting down staring at what lays in front of me, a complete perfect set of drums. Drums with crisp, tight heads, with glistening hoops that I can see my reflection in. Then I pick up the smooth wooden drumsticks. The flow of sound bouncing off the walls and into my ears, trying to decipher the intricate beat that one can only dream of mastering. Whenever I sit I down, plug in my headphones and pick up the worn down drumsticks. There are no problems when I hear the music and let loose on the drums. Sometimes I wish life could be as easy and care free like in music. Nothing could pry me away from drumming, because it seems when I play there is nothing else in the world. My mind goes blank to zero in on the rhythm of a song, or just creating whatever comes to mind. When I think of drumming I think of an escape from stress, from people arguing, basically from everything bad.

I always liked music, especially hearing the rhythms the drummer played. Whenever I would listen to music as a little kid I would try to tap the beats with my hands. And really wasn't my thing but growing up with two parents who were in band in high school, I thought maybe I should try playing an instrument. First I tried the cello, because my mom had played the instrument. After a year I never tried it again. The next year I thought maybe trombone, that's the instrument for me. Yet again I was wrong. I wanted something I could just do without learning notes and certain things to play the instrument correctly. Something I could play for hours and focus all my energy towards the music, just letting the music flow.
Maybe I should try drumming. I always loved listening to them in rock bands. This could be the instrument for me, to really let me come out of my shell and show people that I'm not just some quiet kid. When I told my parents, they didn't believe me, I never was interested in drums. But when I was really little, all the time my parents played old classic rock, and 90s grunge bands, when they did the music maybe sparked a love for music. Now I want to play the drums, not for any popularity but for love of music.

Another benefit that drumming can offer is a therapeutic affect when I can just bang as hard as I possibly can on the drums. My love for music changed when I heard a song from a great band by the name "Kings of Leon". I need to hear more from them. Just hearing that one song was like opening the gate to heaven. I have almost every one of their songs I on my Ipod, and I even got my dad to like them. What are the odds of that happening? Whenever I feel like I have had a bad day I start to play the drums, and I feel much better. There is one thing music has that no one can teach you. That's how to appreciate something so great, and something that relates to you on the deepest of levels.

Studying every little intricate sound that this band produced was like discovering an elephant in my backyard. Every time I hear any song from "Kings of Leon", I get butterflies in my stomach and it feels like the only way to get rid of them is by playing the drums. When I actually have time to play on a good trap set, it's like everything has come together for me. I'm listening to good music and banging away to get lost in my own world filled with endless musical creativity.
I asked my mom if she could take me to Guitar Center. Where they always have a great trap set on display that anyone can play on. The first time I set foot into the store it's like I changed into a different person. I scurried over to the drum section of the store to scan where the set is. I found it, seeming to levitate over to the drum set like something told me that this what I'm suppose to do in the world. I then lay down a simple groovy beat simple. I closed my eyes to visualize happy thoughts and then go all out. I got lost inside the beautiful melodies of "Kings of Leon". My mom had no idea I could play that well for never having any drum lessons or anything like that. I surprised myself as well. It didn't seem like it was that hard to play them, but oh, man, is it fun. Right there I knew I had something special. Not many people can just go to a drum set with no experience and throw down a good beat let alone play a whole song from memory.

Music at this point has changed how I go through the day. I can relate anything in my life to music. It creates a new perspective on how I think, helps the creative part of me and the productive side of things. Ever since I picked up drumsticks, I have been able to learn better and pay attention because I don't have to worry about everything. Drumming has been very helpful with being overwhelmed, stressed out, and just mad at the world. Now I like coming to school with all the opportunities it has to offer. Before drumming it's almost like I didn't care. But now I have something to release all my emotions into music. Everyone should have an activity of some sort to pour their heart, mind, and soul into, something that makes you happy and you're proud of doing.
Appendix H

Steve: Research Essay Draft

At young ages, members of The Beatles and Jackson Five loved music. Members of The Beatles grew up in the same general area. As teens, Paul McCartney and George Harrison were classmates in Liverpool. When Paul met John Lennon, they both had the passion for music and song writing was almost second nature. The drummer they had wasn’t good so Ringo joined the band. From an early start with music, the Jackson Five was destined for success. All of the members of the Jackson Five were related. Their manager was Joe Jackson, who was the father, and drove the group all over the country to shows. Between these two groups the sound and quality of music was absolutely game changing.

Five kids with one thing on their mind, music. It is hard to find kids with that sort of ability and talent. Early influences for this group would be the Temptations. With members Jackie Jackson, Tito Jackson, Jermaine Jackson, Marlon Jackson, and Michael Jackson, great things will come from this group. Michael was the one who stood out from the others with an amazing voice and ways to entertain the crowd. The Jackson Five would release many hit singles in America, but in 1975, their contract ended with Motown Records, and Michael signed to A & M records for a promising solo career.

The high pitch melody can only be produced so perfectly with The Beatles. With Paul and John working together only the best of songs will be produced. Early gigs in Liverpool’s club scene helped create a fan base and to get signed to a record label. Early inspirations for The Beatles was a local band, Rory Storm and the Hurricanes, and other British rock bands. The band fell in love with the stage presence and how females
were interested in bands. The Beatles released their first single on October 5, 1962 with 'Love Me Do', that launched Beatlemania. Releasing singles in Britain, they soon topped the British charts. After basically taking over Britain, The Beatles then released albums and singles in America. They opened up a new style of music, a sound that separates The Beatles from all the other bands at that time. Their songs had meaning and told stories with very simple but complicated lyrics. The Beatles changed music and single handedly could captivate countries. They would fight with each other and over the years they couldn’t go on as a band, on September 9th, 1969 split up to follow solo careers. Paul McCartney made a public announcement April of 1970.

Although The Beatles and The Jackson Five play two different genres they have similarities. Listening to a Beatles song, the lyrics and tone are peaceful, with catchy tunes that have meaning, that soothes people when under stress. The Beatles created their own image and style of music, dressing in suits and ties and basically changing the sound of rock. The Jackson Five were popular for great voices and up beat songs. People can relate to The Jackson Five to The Beatles for their happy/peaceful songs. Both groups were very popular. Amazing musical talent came from these two groups, and just playing music is what they loved.

Early music groups may have inspired the next generation to make and modify the unique melodies of past years. I think that The Beatles have influenced the way music sounds today. The Beatles displayed a different sound that would only start the generation of rock. Music like that isn’t just to listened to, you live it everyday. Every song tells a story, or can express emotions. Many bands today are influenced by the style of The Beatles. Nirvana, Kings of Leon, The Weeks, and The Airborne Toxic Event...
are just few bands that are inspired to play music because of The Beatles. With the simplicity of just laying down lyrics, and letting the music flow, no doubt that The Beatles are more influential on modern music than The Jackson Five.

Having a passion such as music is something that you can’t control, it’s your life sometimes. Today’s music has some kind of meaning to it. What you hear on the radio the songs have no real meaning, it’s not the same. With computers playing the role as the instruments, it’s not the same. Anyone can get famous today. Going to a studio, with a drum kit, bass guitar, rhythm guitar, lead guitar, and singer is what makes music feel special. It’s real emotion flowing through music. The Beatles were just stepping stones to the creation of a generation of rock, and to form a base to build off for today’s music.
Appendix I

Initial UN-L IRB Approval

By Rachel Wenzl on 04/30/2013 9:13 am

Dear Ms. Todd-Meyer and Dr. Swidler,

Project #13444 titled Reading Enrichment Cross-Case Study has been approved. You are authorized to begin your research.

Your stamped and approved informed consent form has been uploaded to NUgrant. Please use this form to make copies to distribute to participants. If changes need to be made, please submit the revised informed consent form to the IRB for approval prior to using it.

Your project was approved as an Expedited protocol, category 6 & 7.

Please allow sufficient time for the official IRB approval letter to be available within NUgrant.

Cordially,

Rachel Wenzl
Research Compliance Services Specialist
Human Research Protection Program
Appendix J

Interview Protocol

What I (research practitioner) will say to the student participant: As you know, the primary purpose of my study is to discover ways I can improve instruction in Reading Enrichment to increase students’ interest and engagement in academic reading and writing expectations. One way I hope to improve my instruction is to gain insight and understanding about your school life experiences with the reading and writing expectations you have encountered. I am interested in learning from your experience. I've planned that each interview will last no longer than one hour. With your permission, I will audio-record each interview. I will transcribe each interview and use the data for my research. Anything you say will be held in the strictest confidence, and no one besides my advisor, Dr. Stephen Swidler, and myself will have access to the recordings or the transcripts. In the transcripts, your name will be protected by a pseudonym as well as the names of the school and our community. They will be kept either locked in a file cabinet or in a password-sensitive file on my computer. After I finish writing my dissertation, all data will be destroyed. Do you have any questions? Remember, you may end your participation at any time with absolutely no penalty in grades or standing in the Reading Enrichment class.

To begin could you please recount the earliest memories you have about school.

What was your favorite subject in elementary school? What did you enjoy most about elementary school? Describe activities associated with reading and writing that you enjoyed. Describe any memories of experiences with reading and writing that you did not enjoy.

Questions for subsequent interviews could include:

What are your earliest memories of learning to read?
What are your earliest memories of learning to write for school?

What are the significant experiences you have had in school with reading and writing?

How have your experiences with reading and writing expectations changed from elementary school to middle school? From middle school to high school?

Explain your understanding of why academic reading and writing is a fundamental requirement for high school content area classes. How do you view the importance of what you do in the assigned reading and writing?

Based on the subjects’ answers to the questions in each interview, I will formulate follow-up, open-ended questions both for the current interview and for subsequent interviews with each participant. The purpose of these interviews is to allow each participant to communicate his experience with reading and writing throughout his school experience.