Struggling readers? Using theory to complicate understandings of what it means to be literate in school

Struggling Readers?: Using Theory to Complicate Understandings

of What It Means to be Literate in School

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Abstract

Theories guide many aspects of literacy research. In this article we describe four theoretical approaches that we have used in qualitative research with students who are perceived to struggle with reading in school, including: New Literacy Studies, Disability Studies in Education, Bioecological Systems Theory, and Cultural Historical Activity Theory. We provide a brief overview of each of the theories and then explain how we have used them to gain insights about students with whom we have worked in the context of our research. Although grounded in distinct perspectives, we argue that each of the theories are lenses through which we were better able to understand the complexities of students' struggles with reading. We further argue that the theories are united in their ability to broaden the perspectives of researchers and teachers to better account for the social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape literacy teaching and learning in schools. We conclude by questioning the use of the term "struggling reader" and highlighting the implications of our individual theoretical frames and analyses for both research and practice.

Keywords: literacy, reading, education, qualitative research, theoretical framework, struggling readers

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Theories are powerful lenses through which we make sense of the world. As qualitative literacy researchers, theories guide how we approach research and analyze data; they also guide our methodological decisions about what counts as evidence and where that evidence is located (Unrau & Alvermann, 2013). In our research with students who are perceived to struggle with reading in school, we have each used theory in ways that provide us with new understandings and insights into the circumstances of their individual struggles. We concur with Unrau and Alvermann (2013) who note that engaging with theory can "move us further toward understanding the issues that arise" while also "[perplexing] us in our investigation of literacy and reading processes" (p. 85). In this conceptual article, we discuss how we have sought out theories that challenge deficit perspectives on students as readers and expand the scope of research to include contextual factors that add complexity to our understanding of literacy teaching and learning.

We are acutely aware of the need to attend to the use of theory in literacy research. In a recent chapter on the ways that theory informs literacy research methodologies, Dressman and McCarthey (2011) observed:

> Although the use of theoretical frames in literacy research is becoming an increasingly frequent feature of literacy research and has considerable implications for many epistemological and methodological approaches to research, it has received little direct attention or systematic scrutiny as an investigative practice. (p. 442)

In this article, therefore, we begin to address this gap by bringing together four theoretical approaches – New Literacy Studies, Disability Studies in Education, Bioecological Systems

Theory, and Cultural Historical Activity Theory – in order to illuminate and interrogate our selection and use of theory as a tool for understanding the conditions under which students engage in reading practices in school. Although these particular theories are grounded in distinct perspectives, we argue that they are united in their ability to broaden our lenses as researchers to better account for the social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape literacy teaching and learning in schools.

Following the work of other literacy scholars (e.g., Alvermann, 2006; Bomer, 1999; Collins, 2013; Dudley-Marling, 2011; Hall, 2010), we contend that accounting for these factors is particularly important in considering literacy teaching and learning for students who struggle with reading in school because they add complexity to our understanding of the reading process. Allington and Walmsley (2007) note that, when it comes to readers who struggle, nothing—not explanations nor solutions—is ever truly simple. For this reason, theories that embrace the complexity of experience provide useful frames for understanding these readers. We believe that each of the four theories described below allow us, as researchers, to better embrace the complexities of readers' experiences in order to move beyond simple explanations and solutions (Frankel, Jaeger, & Pearson, 2013). We further believe that providing a forum through which to explore the various ways that we have used these theories to better understand the circumstances under which students struggle with reading in school is an opportunity to make visible some of the voices and perspectives on this topic and put them in conversation. As we examine spaces in which definitions of what it means to be literate are constructed, our intention is to contribute to a dialogue that extends beyond the confines of these pages.

In the sections that follow, we introduce four theories that we have used in our work with students who are perceived to struggle with reading in school. In each case, we selected the

theory because it allowed us to better understand the complexities of readers' experiences. In order to illuminate this process, we apply each of our theories to an analysis of a student with whom we have worked in the context of our research.

New Literacy Studies

The "literacy as social practice" perspective, often referred to as New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2012; Street, 2012), has its roots in anthropological research that challenged the deficit perspective of the Great Cognitive Divide theory.[1] Researchers who view literacy as a social practice study the *literacy practices* with which people make meaning in diverse contexts. Barton and Hamilton (2000) describe literacy practices as "what people do with literacy" (p. 7). However, they caution against the assumption that "doing literacy" is always observable. They highlight the significance of unobservable characteristics like social relationships, beliefs, and feelings. In order to understand literacy practices, researchers using this approach examine literacy events. Literacy events are those moments in which a piece of text is central to making meaning (Heath, 1988). It is through the investigation of literacy events that the socially, historically, and culturally situated nature of all literacy practices becomes explicit. In other words, examining "what people do with literacy" cannot take place in isolation; it must be understood within the sociopolitical context in which literate practices occur.

Maneka Brooks (third author) selected this theoretical approach because it shifted the focus away from individual students to an examination of the educational contexts in which students learn to read for academic purposes. In the following example, she uses the literacy as

[1] The Great Cognitive Divide theory posits a specific relationship among language, literacy, and thinking, in which orality, defined as communication solely through speech, and literacy, defined as the mastery of alphabetic literacy, are seen as having distinct consequences for cognitive ability (Bizzell, 1988).

social practice theoretical orientation to examine the reading practices of a student who was

positioned during her educational experiences as a struggling reader.

Bringing a New Literacy Studies Lens to Valeria's Reading Practices

At the time this research occurred, Valeria (all names are pseudonyms) was in 10th grade

and had been classified as an English learner since kindergarten. Valeria, an English-Spanish

bilingual who spoke both languages on a daily basis, was considered by her school to be a long-

term English learner (LTEL). Like the LTELs who are described in the research literature (e.g.,

Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2012), her "struggles" with academic literacy on standardized

assessments prevented her from being considered proficient in English. Rather than focus on

these test scores and their decontextualized measurement of Valeria's reading ability, Maneka

decided to investigate the dominant reading practices for content-area learning in Valeria's

biology and English language arts (ELA) classes. She wanted to describe Valeria's daily

experience of what it meant to read for academic purposes.

Describing the classroom reading practices of Valeria's biology and ELA classes

required a methodological approach that made context central through extended ethnographic

observations over the course of her 10th grade year, which were supplemented by audio-

recordings, interviews, and school records. (For a detailed examination of the methodology and

results of the broader study from which this research is drawn, please see Brooks, 2015.) As a

result of this extensive data collection and analysis, Maneka was able to put the focus on

understanding how Valeria was socialized into reading, not by focusing on her individual

participation in these practices but through documenting the practices that were employed by her

biology and ELA teachers as the appropriate ones for academic learning.

The reading as a social practice theoretical orientation moved the context of Valeria's reading experiences from the periphery to the center of the research. Maneka was able to document that reading in Valeria's biology and ELA classrooms took place in the following ways (Brooks, 2015): reading involved more than one person; reading entailed making meaning aloud; and reading meant that the teacher would provide (an) official interpretation(s). In other words, reading was primarily conducted aloud, in a group, and with the teacher providing oral interpretations of the meaning of the text. These findings are important because they illustrate the kinds of reading practices with which Valeria was familiar. They allow different questions to be asked about her standardized test score performance that move away from a perception of reading as a "fixed" ability. For example, it becomes important to understand: What reading practices were valued by the standardized tests that were used to assess Valeria's English proficiency? And, how had Valeria's classroom experiences contributed to her documented performance on these assessments? The significance of these kinds of questions is often minimized when reading is conceptualized as a decontextualized skill. The social practice perspective on academic literacy asks us not to focus solely on the individual student identified as "struggling" but requires an examination of the educational contexts that led to the positioning of her as "struggling" in the first place.

Disability Studies in Education

Disability Studies in Education (DSE) is an interdisciplinary field in which individuals with disabilities are identified as a minority group that has been and continues to be marginalized within educational systems (Gallagher, 2010). DSE-framed research pushes back against traditional definitions of disability, which conceptualize disability as a deficit that exists within an individual, and instead promotes the need to examine inequities in educational practices and

policies. These inequities lead to assumptions about individuals who do not meet expected norms

and who are further marginalized by disability labels (Gabel, 2005). A mantra of DSE is "nothing

about us without us"; therefore, research that includes individuals with disabilities as primary

informants is common.

Reading disabilities are considered to be particularly subjective disabilities (Harry &

Klinger, 2006), and the debate about how to define "reading disability" is ongoing. Maryl Randel

(fourth author) found that reading disability research rarely is framed by critical theories about

disability. Therefore, she selected this theoretical approach because it allowed her to interrogate

the socially constructed nature of "reading disability" and foreground individuals with reading

disability labels by honoring their unique expertise about their own educational experiences

(Connor, 2014).

A Lifetime of Reading-related Challenges: Mari

Mari identified herself as a 20-year-old, White, Jewish female from a middle-class

background. When Maryl interviewed her for this study, she was a junior at a large public

university in the Midwest. With a 3.9 GPA and several merit-based scholarships, Mari was a

member of the university honor society. She also self-identified as having a reading disability, a

label she had been assigned during middle school. This label was recognized by her university,

and Mari recognized it as a part of her identity as a student. (For a detailed description of this

case study, please see Randel, 2014.)

Mari recognized reading as an expected way for her to learn in college and as a means of

social acceptance in society. She did not typically discuss her dislike for reading. She believed it

was not socially acceptable to do so, particularly for a future educator like herself. This

reluctance was reflected in the lack of affective information about reading in the written reading

responses and essays she shared with Maryl. Mari never claimed to either dislike or enjoy

reading in these compositions. However, during interviews she told Maryl that she did not like to

read, eventually admitting that "reading is dreadful."

For Mari, identifying as both an individual with a reading disability and an academically

successful honor student resulted in specific tensions during her undergraduate career. First, as

an honor society member, Mari was expected to volunteer at the university's disability center.

The disability center was a familiar place for her; it was also where she went to receive

accommodations for her reading disability (e.g., digital texts, extra time on tests that involved

reading). On her first day as a disability center volunteer, the coordinator asked Mari and the

other freshman honor students if any of them knew someone with a disability. Mari recounted

that the assumption embedded in this statement – that honor students did not have disabilities –

caused immediate anxiety for her. Next Mari was told that, as an honor student, she would be

reading texts out loud to create audio texts for university students who had reading disabilities, or

who were blind or visually impaired. Ironically, although Mari was eligible to receive electronic

texts herself as an accommodation for her reading disability, she was also expected to provide

this service for others. As Mari explained to Maryl, she did not know what to do or say in this

situation. As a result, in negotiating her role as an undergraduate honor student, Mari decided to

try to pass as a nondisabled student. This decision resulted in 120 hours of reading books out

loud—a task Mari intensely disliked—to fulfill the service expectations of the honor society.

Two years later, Mari had a similarly uncomfortable experience at a disability center

awards reception, where she was recognized and awarded a fellowship because of her academic

success as an undergraduate student with a disability. Also at the reception was a fellow honor

student. When the two made eye contact, Mari felt her "secret identity" had been disclosed. Mari

explained, "I never told her that I had a learning disability, but I figured she kinda knew since I

was sitting there and I received an award." Mari chose not to take up her reading disability status

in certain situations, and commented that others had questioned her status as a student with a

reading disability in light of her academic success.

Utilizing a DSE theoretical approach allowed Maryl to develop this study using an

emancipatory and interpretivist research framework, which positioned Mari as an expert on her

own reading disability. Maryl also privileged Mari's narratives by using her words – both oral

and written – as the primary data sources for the case study. Analyzing Mari's experiences in this

way allowed Maryl to document the ways in which a reading disability label can marginalize a

student. From narrative accounts of Mari's reading history, the complexity of being a successful

reader at the intersection of what many people believed to be opposing identities emerged and

made visible the negative stigma surrounding reading disabilities. Maryl found that Mari made

choices to disclose or not disclose her reading disability based on a constellation of factors

related to context, reading task, and audience as she navigated her identity as a "disabled" reader

in a university setting. Maryl's findings suggest that reading disabilities are not necessarily

overcome, and may endure, even in the face of academic success. By framing this study with a

DSE lens, Maryl gained an understanding of some of the complexities that arose during one

individual's experiences as a successful undergraduate student with a reading disability.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)—an

approach to development that accounts for and integrates all aspects of the learner's

experience—is rarely employed to illuminate literacy practices, but Elizabeth Jaeger (second

author) argues that his recognition of the importance of a wide range of factors in tracing

development makes his work applicable to the field of literacy research. If we adapt his theory to

reference literacy specifically, Bronfenbrenner suggests that children exhibit a variety of

personal attributes, including demand characteristics such as age and gender which are

immediately evident; resource characteristics, ranging from chronic illness to writing skills; and,

most significantly, force characteristics such as persistence or impulsiveness.

Bronfenbrenner defined what he termed *proximal processes* as ongoing, reciprocal, and

increasingly complex interactions between the developing child and people, objects, and symbols

in his or her environment. During the act of reading, the nature of proximal processes is affected

by the texts the child reads, the type of activity (e.g., reading silently versus reading aloud), and,

if another person is involved, the quality of that relationship.

In terms of context, Bronfenbrenner discussed four types of systems: micro-, meso-, exo-

, and macrosystems. Microsystems are systems of which the child is a member, such as those of

family, school, peer, and community. The mesosystem is the overlap of microsystems, such as

the communication, or lack of same, between home and school. Elizabeth argues that, while a

given literacy event occurs physically in a single microsystem, it is located conceptually within

the mesosystem. For example, a child may experience her first read aloud at home, but then

encounter variations of that practice at school, at a friend's house, or in church. All of the

ensuing iterations of read aloud are colored by her initial experience in the home.

Exosystems are systems of which the child is not a member (such as textbook publishing

companies that provide curriculum for the child's school). The macrosystem is the all-

encompassing site of social structures and power relations—including everything from language

patterns to class, race, and gender discrimination.

Bioecological Theory and Readers Who Struggle: Sam

Elizabeth employs the term *vulnerable reader*, first coined by Bomer (1999), to refer to

readers who are most vulnerable to disruptions in their literacy ecology as a result of a range of

factors from personal characteristics such as impulsiveness to school microsystem factors like

limited interactions with text to exosystem factors such as lack of health care and poverty. As

she worked with several vulnerable readers, she was drawn to Bronfenbrenner's work because it

seemed to best explain the full range of data relevant to their struggles.

Sam, a Chinese-American young man, is a vulnerable reader. Sam was in fourth grade

when Elizabeth first knew him. In terms of personality, he exhibited low affect. In fact, the

woman who had taught him during second and third grades said she had never seen him show

any emotion in all the time she knew him. He was also unwilling to take risks, setting academic

goals for himself that were as low as possible. He had no favorite books and he did not seem to

have strategies to note comprehension breakdown. He had weak connections with his teacher

and peers (school and peer microsystems), but was well understood and well liked by his father

(home microsystem).

In terms of exosystem factors, Sam's father was present in the home a good deal since he worked only on weekends. Through third grade, Sam's teachers relied on a scripted reading program with a heavy phonics emphasis. Sam was a racial minority in his school (once referring to himself as the "only Asian friend") and, like nearly all his classmates, qualified for free lunch—demonstrating disruptions in the macrosystem. In September, he was reading between the first and third grade levels depending on the genre and length of text. He was an accurate decoder but struggled to retell what he had read.

Elizabeth tutored Sam twice per week, making an effort to craft an environment characterized by proximal processes. The tutorial routine consisted of collaborative goal-setting, strategy lessons organized like math algorithms because this was an area of strength for Sam, and reading of primarily non-fiction texts. Elizabeth also saw him once per week in a small group. In this environment, Sam conducted research on a topic of interest and wrote and illustrated a book on the topic. He also participated in Literature Circle discussions with his peers. His classroom teacher, while most certainly interested in his academic progress, chose to focus primarily on affective growth.

Data collected included audio- and video-tapes of tutorial and small group sessions; interviews with Sam, teachers, and parents; and observations of Sam in his regular classroom. All data were coded in two phases, beginning with initial inductive coding, followed by theoretical coding using terms related to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory.

By the end of the year, Sam had changed—as a learner, a reader, and a member of the school microsystem. His teacher, parent, and Elizabeth saw differences in Sam as a person, as well as in the ways he engaged in literacy practices in a variety of micro- and mesosystem contexts. He now frequently expressed both sadness, crying when peers were cruel, and delight,

laughing hysterically at the exploits of his favorite book characters. He was more willing to take risks, setting higher goals in the tutorial environment. He found books that he enjoyed— particularly the *Scary Stories* and *Sideways School* series. With minimal encouragement, he began to apply comprehension strategies, recognizing and addressing any difficulty he had. He began to seek out his peers and accepted hugs from his teacher each morning. The major change in exosystem factors was the administrative decision to abandon the rigid implementation of the scripted reading series; Sam's teacher focused more on meaning-making as a result. There appeared to be no major changes in Sam's macrosystem.

In June, Sam now read somewhere between the third and fifth grade levels and his ability to retell had improved dramatically. Sam continued to exhibit a range of vulnerabilities, but key changes in micro-, meso-, and exosystems helped him to become a stronger and more confident reader and person.

Cultural Historical Activity Theory

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) emphasizes the social and mediated nature of learning as it occurs over time and in particular contexts. As such, it is a lens through which to consider teaching and learning interactions as sites of *re-mediation* rather than *remediation*. Remediation is derived from the word remedy and implies that there is a problem within an individual that requires treatment (Johnston & Allington, 1991). Re-mediation (to "mediate again") focuses on the activities in which teachers and students engage in order to imagine new ways of teaching and learning. Cole and Griffin (1983) used the concept of re-mediation as a way to problematize traditional approaches to remedial reading instruction that focused on a student's ability to correctly read individual words in the context of an activity restricted to the student, the teacher, and the text. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) concept of mediation, Cole and

Griffin (1983) proposed an alternative approach that emphasized reading-as-interpretation, in which the activity of reading—"the image of reading as a whole" (p. 72)—was the focus. Re-mediation shifts the objective of the activity to focus on the activity of comprehension as the ultimate goal of reading and the process of joint activity between teachers and students as the means through which meaning making occurs.

Like all activities, re-mediation is highly context dependent; activities do not happen in a vacuum. Therefore, it is situated in a broader context, or activity system, like the one proposed by Engeström (1987). He expanded on Vygotsky's (1978) original concept of mediation in order to emphasize the more complex and contextually situated nature of human activity. His contributions include rules, the "norms and conventions that constrain actions within [an] activity system" (Cole, 1996, p. 141); community, the individuals who share the same objective within an activity system; division of labor, the distributions of actions within an activity system that are related to the objective; and outcome, the result of actions and interactions within an activity system. Kate Frankel (first author) used this framework because it was a way to examine the literacy practices in which a ninth-grade student named Nicholas engaged in his reading intervention class and to understand these practices as they unfolded over time and across contexts.

Nicholas and the Activity System of Enhanced Reading

Nicholas was a focal participant in a qualitative study that examined students' experiences with literacy in a reading intervention class called Enhanced Reading. At the time of the research—comprised of weekly participant-observation; student, teacher, and administrator interviews; collection of student work; and documentation of student demographic and academic

performance data—Nicholas was a fifteen-year-old ninth grader. He spoke Nepalese as his first language, and his high school identified him as an English learner.

As a result of scoring in the basic category on the ELA subject area of the state standards test, Nicholas was enrolled in Enhanced Reading, which met Monday through Friday for 60 minutes each day. Students typically spent 40-50 of those minutes reading, with an additional 30 minutes of reading assigned for homework every night. During the first 20 minutes of class, students read their independent reading books while their teacher, Mr. Taylor, circulated around the room and consulted with them individually about the books they were reading and the progress they had made in their books since the previous class. During the next 40 minutes of class, Mr. Taylor and the students read aloud together, discussed, and wrote about their group reading texts (i.e., books that Mr. Taylor selected for the class to read together to expose students to a variety of topics and genres and push them to read texts they might not choose to read on their own).

In the fall of his ninth-grade year, Nicholas did not have clear reading objectives. He told Kate that he did not read very much and that any reading he did occurred in school. By the end of the year, however, Nicholas had read over 50 books in Enhanced Reading. In his end-of-year letter to Mr. Taylor he wrote, "[50 books] is a lot of books because I don't usually read. I think I read more this year because I found a lot of interesting and unique books." Graphic novels comprised 18 of the 50 books that Nicholas read in Enhanced Reading. Nicholas explained that he enjoyed reading graphic novels because they had pictures, which helped him visualize what was going on and imagine what was happening, and because they were quicker and easier to read than other books. He also noted that reading comic books often led him to wonder how the illustrators made the characters look exactly the same throughout the book and explained that he

used the illustrations in these books to practice his own drawing. Indeed, in his introduction letter to Mr. Taylor, Nicholas wrote about his passion for drawing and told his teacher that he comes from "a long line of artists."

In our conversations over the course of the year, Nicholas attributed his reading accomplishments in large part to Mr. Taylor's pedagogical approach and the corresponding mediating interactions in which Nicholas and his peers engaged in the class. First, Mr. Taylor's approach was flexible enough to allow Nicholas to incorporate his strengths as an artist into his work in the class through creative art projects like creating bookmarks as a culminating activity for one of their group reading texts. Second, Mr. Taylor's approach was structured enough to support Nicholas through complex assignments. Nicholas explained this latter characteristic of Mr. Taylor's approach in this way: "He mostly tells you and he also gives you an example and he tells you everything, every step." Third, many of Mr. Taylor's activities were useful to the reading Nicholas did in other contexts. For example, Nicholas described how the vocabulary work he did in Enhanced Reading contributed to his ability to comprehend other texts.

At the end of the year, Nicholas demonstrated positive reading outcomes that were consistent with Mr. Taylor's expectations for his students. Nicholas reported that he still found reading difficult—particularly vocabulary he encountered in some of his content-area classes like biology, but he also noted the ways in which reading had become an important part of his life in school as well as outside of school. In school, Mr. Taylor observed that reading more had helped Nicholas to improve his fluency, comprehension, and confidence as a reader. Out of school, Nicholas explained that reading had become an important part of his relationship with his younger sister because he had started reading to her at bedtime. Ultimately, Nicholas articulated a shift in his understanding of the importance of literacy to his life beyond school, observing, "I

think [reading] is very important because…you're gonna be writing and reading your whole life."

Kate utilized CHAT because it was a way to analyze Nicholas's experiences in Enhanced Reading over time and in the context of his life in and out of school. Kate was able to document Nicholas's changes as a reader as they occurred through interactions with his teachers and peers in Enhanced Reading and as they related to his artistic interests and familial relationships. Although Nicholas continued to have difficulty with certain aspects of reading in particular contexts (e.g., his biology class), this difficulty could be juxtaposed with the extensive reading in which he engaged in Enhanced Reading and at home. Moreover, the concept of re-mediation was a lens through which Kate could document how Mr. Taylor facilitated a shift in Nicholas's understanding of the objective of reading from a school-centered necessity to an activity with legitimate connections to his personal interests. One important outcome of the orientation toward reading that Mr. Taylor fostered in his classroom was that Nicholas began to make connections between the work he did in class and his ability to use reading as a tool to achieve his goals in school and beyond.

Discussion and Implications

The four theories described above provided each of us with a lens through which to understand the reading processes and experiences of a particular student in a particular context. The first two theories were lenses through which Maneka and Maryl could better understand the contexts in which Valeria and Mari engaged in literacy practices and how those contexts contributed to their status as struggling readers. New Literacy Studies allowed Maneka to examine literacy events in Valeria's ELA and biology classes and identify the reading practices in which she engaged in school (e.g., reading aloud, in a group, and with teacher-guided oral

interpretation) that were different from the reading practices required for her to perform well on

standardized assessments of academic reading ability (e.g., reading silently, alone, and with no

scaffolding). DSE allowed Maryl to examine the contexts in which Mari was constructed as both

an honor student and a student with a reading disability, thereby exposing the tensions that arose

for Mari from the juxtaposition of the two labels and the assumptions that accompanied them.

The second two theories were lenses through which Elizabeth and Kate could better

understand some of the instructional factors that contributed to Sam and Nicholas's evolution as

readers over time. Bioecological Systems Theory allowed Elizabeth to consider the various

micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems of which Sam was part in order to design reading

instruction that helped Sam to improve his reading as well as his confidence as a reader and

person. CHAT allowed Kate to analyze Nicholas's reading practices more expansively, as they

evolved over time and in the context of the reading in which he engaged in his academic classes

(e.g., Enhanced Reading and biology) as well as at home. Each of these theoretical lenses

challenged the struggling reader label for the readers under consideration in the research,

prompting us to collectively question the use of the term to describe readers whose interactions

with text are much more complex than can be understood through the use of a simple label

(Dudley-Marling, 2011).

Each of the aforementioned theories provides insights about the four readers and these

insights have implications for specific action steps to facilitate their reading in school. Valeria,

for example, might have benefitted from reading instruction in her content-area classrooms that

followed the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), in which her

teachers reduced support over time to allow her to begin to construct meaning individually as

well as in collaboration with her peers. Mari might have benefitted from time and space

dedicated to the social, emotional, and identity concerns that individuals with reading disabilities

may face, even when they are academically successful, as well as additional experiences that

positioned her as expert. Mari and her peers might also have benefitted from explicit

conversations about the potential limitations of labels that define individuals in fixed ways.

In the context of Elizabeth's tutorial sessions, Sam benefited from reading instruction that

tapped into his strengths in math as well as his personal interest in Chinese culture. Similarly, in

Enhanced Reading, Nicholas benefitted from reading instruction that allowed him to draw from

and build on his expertise as an artist and that provided him with a way to augment his personal

relationship with his sister. While it is possible that other theoretical approaches may have

revealed similar insights for each of these students, we contend that the shared affordance of

these particular theories is that they broadened our perspectives as researchers so that we could

better take into account the social, cultural, and institutional factors that shaped the reading

practices of our participants and, in turn, better understand how to scaffold their growth as

readers.

At the same time, we acknowledge that our decision to utilize certain theories over others

influenced all aspects of our research, from our research questions and methodological decisions

to the implications that we identify as salient to our findings. We likewise acknowledge the

importance of interrogating the theories we choose to use in our research so that we can "engage

in dialogue about the assumptions, interpretations, and consequences" (Dressman & McCarthey,

2011, p. 461) of the theories and related methods we use to make sense of students' reading in

school.

Indeed, each of our theoretical orientations and goals for the work guided our

methodological choices. Elizabeth, for example, conducted observations and interviews and

implemented an intervention. She analyzed her data through a systems theory lens. This theory

also informed her understanding of what was important to know about Sam—that is, the

complexity of the various micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems of which he was a part—in

order to most effectively help him to read better. In contrast, Maryl attended to Mari's own

perspective on her experiences as an honor student with a reading disability by documenting

these experiences through oral and written narratives. Maryl approached her study through a

DSE lens, which meant that she privileged the voice and lived experiences of the case study

student as a central component of the research design and analysis.

Maneka and Kate took a third approach by combining ethnographic observations and

interviews over the course of a full school year with the goal of better understanding Valeria and

Nicholas's reading practices as they occurred in the context of classroom literacy interactions.

Maneka analyzed her data with an eye toward the literacy events that occurred in Valeria's ELA

and biology classes, while Kate used the theoretical constructs of subject, tool, object(ive), and

outcome, among others, in her analysis. Both of these analytic approaches privileged the voices

of the students and the contexts in which reading occurred for them in school. At the same time,

these approaches necessarily de-emphasized other information, such as students' standardized

test scores and, in Valeria's case, her out-of-school reading practices.

While we believe that these theoretically informed decisions are important and necessary,

we acknowledge that they shape our findings in important ways. Our collective decision to

emphasize students' lived reading experiences over their reading test scores, for example, does

not change the high-stakes role that those test scores play in students' lives. But therein lies the

importance of theory—to push us as researchers to understand readers who are perceived to

struggle in school from different perspectives, both to challenge how and why students are

positioned in this way and to inform our understanding of how best to teach them. By interrogating how we have used particular theories to make methodological decisions and analyze findings, it is possible to better understand how our theoretical conceptions of individual readers and the act of reading itself contribute to how students are positioned in both research and practice.

The four theories described previously are tools that we have used to uncover and document some of the social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape literacy teaching and learning in schools. Although they are not the only theories that may achieve this goal, we believe that together they effectively illuminate the important role that theory can and should play in future literacy research. In the spirit of the dialogic construction of literacies, we hope that this article will serve as a catalyst to ongoing discussion and critique about the role of theory in research on literacy teaching and learning, particularly as it relates to students who are perceived to struggle with reading in school.

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