Struggling Readers’ Engagement within a Middle School Reading Support Program:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

A thesis presented by

by

Gretchen (Lucille H.) Dempsey

To

The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

In the field of

Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
August 2018
Abstract

Adolescence is a developmental stage during which American students are typically disengaged (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012), yet learning depends upon engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). For middle school students who struggle to read, school-based reading support represents a last chance to help them succeed in high school and in the 21st-century economy (Gomez & Gomez, 2007). This qualitative study was conducted to explore the experiences of middle school students as they engage in a reading support program with services in and out of the literacy classroom. The study considered the experiences of six middle school students enrolled in either push-in or pull-out reading support program. Students’ experiences were considered through a theoretical framework incorporating engagement theory and stage-environment fit theory. The study was conducted as an interpretative phenomenological analysis focusing on students’ lived experiences with agency and teacher-relationships, malleable elements of the learning environment with import for adolescents. Student participants revealed that students’ voices are not often included in the decision-making process surrounding their own support. Findings suggest that by discussing support options with students, incorporating opportunities for them to set goals within the intervention program, and devising mechanisms to support reflection and evaluation, students will have more agency within their intervention experience. Findings also suggest that promoting conversations anchored around support among school staff, parents, and students, while providing professional development for teachers, will help promote more seamless school experiences for students and increase their sense of belonging within the school community.

Keywords: student engagement, middle school, intervention, reading support, push-in, pull-out
Acknowledgements

This thesis reflects a strongly held belief that great things are most often born of hard work. I am grateful to my parents and grandparents for helping me to trust in this wisdom. I thank my darling husband, Walter; while he does not always understand my choices, he always accepts that they are mine to make. He has been generous with the time he has afforded me in this pursuit, and I could not have accomplished this work without his *joie de vivre*. I also thank my children, Walter, Daisy, and Harry, for they are a constant reminder of how lucky I am.

I am grateful to my advisor, Dr. Carol Young, for her patience and constant support. She always seemed to know when I needed a pat on the back and when I needed a nudge. Her guidance throughout this process has been invaluable. I celebrate the many professors and colleagues at Northeastern University who guided me on this journey, with special thanks to Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters for serving as my second reader. Dr. Frances Wood, has been a friend and inspiration throughout. I thank her for her willingness to take a golf break to serve as my outside reader.

I will be forever grateful to the students and families who agreed to help me with this research. I began and ended this study believing in the voices of students. They have so much to teach educators about schooling … we just need to listen.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 2

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................ 3

Table of Contents ................................................................................................................... 4

Chapter One: Introduction ...................................................................................................... 6
  Overview ................................................................................................................................. 6
  Problem of Practice ............................................................................................................... 6
  Significance of the Research Problem .................................................................................... 8
  Personal Perspectives ........................................................................................................... 11
  Research Question ............................................................................................................... 15
  Theoretical Framework .......................................................................................................... 16
  Introductory Summary ......................................................................................................... 18

Chapter Two: Literature Review ............................................................................................. 19
  Adolescence as a Developmental Stage ................................................................................ 20
  Middle School as Construct ................................................................................................. 25
  Engagement within School Spaces ....................................................................................... 30
  Literature Review Summary ................................................................................................. 40

Chapter Three: Methodology ................................................................................................ 43
  Purpose and Design .............................................................................................................. 44
  Research Tradition ............................................................................................................. 45
  Procedures ............................................................................................................................. 48
  Methodological Summary .................................................................................................... 54

Chapter Four: Research Findings .......................................................................................... 55
Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings .................................................................77
  Revisiting the Purpose of the Study .............................................................................77
  Revisiting the Research Question and Methodology ..............................................78
  Major Findings ..........................................................................................................78
  Implications and Recommendations for Practice ....................................................91
  Implications for Future Study ..................................................................................99
  Conclusion ..................................................................................................................101

References .....................................................................................................................104

Appendix A ......................................................................................................................118

Appendix B ......................................................................................................................119

Appendix C ......................................................................................................................120

Appendix D ......................................................................................................................122

Appendix E ......................................................................................................................124

Appendix F ......................................................................................................................127
Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

Over the course of the last forty years the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has measured American students’ academic success in a number of content areas. Seemingly good news is that long-term trends for 13-year-old students in America, as measured by NAEP, indicate reading progress for all demographic groups; yet on the most recent administration of the assessment, only 34% of American eighth graders attained a score deemed at or above the level deemed proficient (The Nation’s Report Card, n.d.). Couple this with America’s 24th standing among the 73 countries participating in the 2015 administration of Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), an assessment that measures the skills of 15-year-old readers across the world (Business Insider, 2016), and it would seem that references to an American adolescent literacy crisis may not be exaggerated. And reading is not a skill whose importance is likely to diminish, as skills deemed important for success in the 21st century recognize the predictive link between reading and success in K-12 schooling and college (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2017). “Educators know that something needs to be done but are daunted, understandably, by the considerable task” (Kamil, 2003, p. 3).

Problem of Practice

The Topic

American public schools face greater accountability than perhaps ever before, as today’s educators navigate standards focused on increasing levels of rigor and the public’s expectation for strong performance data; one outgrowth of this has been an attention on academic intervention programs. Academic intervention programs often focus on specific content areas, one of which is reading. While many districts pay heed to the voices of teachers and reading
specialists in regards to schools’ reading support programs, students’ perceptions of their experiences within these programs has received far less attention.

The purpose of this research is to understand struggling adolescent readers’ perspectives of engagement-related factors impacting their experiences within the reading intervention program at Bernese Middle School (BMS).

**The Research Problem**

Adolescent readers in a middle school’s literacy intervention program struggle to keep pace with grade-level expectations. This can leave them behind in all areas of the curriculum and make them more likely to receive poor grades. Readers who struggle risk a compromised academic self-concept, and their future access to power and influence can be compromised. Notably, middle school is the last chance for students in the district to receive targeted reading support.

**Evidence Justifying the Research Problem**

School and/or classroom environments typical of middle school or junior high often do not support the behavioral, cognitive and emotional needs of adolescents in general, and struggling adolescent students specifically (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993). As students move from elementary to middle school and the focus of schooling moves towards knowledge construction and skill acquisition, there is an increase in students’ overall sense of disengagement and alienation from school (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). Students receiving late-intervention reading support in middle school are rarely asked how they “make meaning of learning supports” (Brion-Meisels, 2015a), suggesting a need to examine the contextual factors that impact middle school students’ engagement within their academic support setting.
Deficiencies in Evidence

Definitive, context-specific factors have been shown to have a direct link on students’ behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement with schooling (Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Farb, 2012). Chief among these for middle-school students are their perceptions of agency and control, as well as their sense of relatedness to teachers. Yet there has been minimal research focused on struggling adolescent readers’ perceptions of these factors within their reading intervention classroom experiences; nor has research focused on any variation of these perceptions across intervention models.

The Audience

By examining the experiences of middle school students in reading intervention, researchers can better understand influences on adolescents’ engagement within late-intervention reading support programs. Further understanding the factors that affect students’ behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement within varied models of intervention holds potential for teachers hoping to increase the engagement of at-risk adolescent students. Such knowledge helps position building and district administrators as change agents capable of making more well-informed decisions about the structure, staffing, and planning for middle school reading intervention programs in order to fully support all aspects of student learning. Parents, local communities, and policy-makers can also benefit from the results of this research, as literacy holds potential to influence students’ success in the world.

Significance of the Research Problem

Literacy has been an instrument of power throughout history. From the age when making a mark to denote one’s name was a means of separating those with influence from those without, to a time when a beautiful handwriting denoted discretionary time and afforded privilege (Beers,
people without the ability to read and write have long been marginalized. Ta-Nehisi Coates acknowledges this when he notes that an inability to read contributed to the loss of land by blacks in 1920’s Jim Crow Mississippi (Coates, 2014). And while the world today is vastly different than it might have been in the past, the power literacy grants is hardly likely to dissipate, for an ability to read is viewed as critical to success in the 21\textsuperscript{st}-century economy (Gomez & Gomez, 2007).

Despite 2018 federal court decisions to the contrary (Sawchuk, 2018), ethical educators who recognize the power that literacy conveys must acknowledge their responsibility to help all students learn to read proficiently. For if American public education promotes the equality that is purported to be at the core of the nation’s democratic belief system, each student is entitled to the power that literacy affords. Yet guaranteeing access to the power literacy provides is ever-more difficult the longer students struggle to learn to read. Sadly, students who have failed to reach grade-level reading proficiency by third or fourth grade often experience a gap that widens over their years in school, which statistically increases their chances of failing to graduate from high school, being on welfare, or being incarcerated (Connelly, 2015).

Literacy research is important to the future influence of entire communities and ultimately our nation. For an ability to read may be the first step towards positioning adolescents to take on full and equal participation in society. Yet “almost half of students of color … enter fifth grade with skills below the basic level” (Haynes, 2015, p. 3), and the 2013 NAEP results indicate significant reading gaps for grade 8 students continue between White and Black, as well as White and Hispanic, pupils (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2013). As 21\textsuperscript{st} century learning goals recognize the importance of communication (Partnership for 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Learning, n.d.), it is clear that denying groups of students the right to learn to read perpetuates a
hegemonic society. This underscores the impact that successful late-intervention reading support could have, and the value this research could add to the scholarly literature and educational practice.

The reading struggles of adolescents affect myriad content areas, as middle grade are called upon to read-to-learn across settings (Gomez & Gomez, 2007). And while struggling readers adopt a passive stance, disengaging from the act of reading (Dayton-Sakari, 1997), they do so realizing the value American society places on reading (Graff, 2009). It is therefore likely that, despite their disengagement, these students recognize the impact their struggles may have on their future selves. This research has potential to create change for academically at-risk adolescents who may believe their chance for reading success has evaporated.

This research can help change practice by offering educators greater insight into the perspectives of disengaged struggling adolescent readers in academic intervention. For an increased understanding of the factors affecting these students’ perceptions of their intervention experiences can position teachers to leverage context-specific factors impacting students’ school success, while positioning school administrators to make more well-informed decisions about programs, structures and placements. Most school districts face competing interests for limited program funds, and an increased ability to understand the context of late-intervention reading support will also help position educators to advocate knowledgably.

This research also holds promise to change policy. Enacted in late 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) expands federal accountability measures to include provisions aimed at facilitating context-specific interventions (United States Department of Education, n.d.). An increased understanding of factors influencing student engagement within late-intervention
reading support could well influence local policies designed to respond to this aspect of the new legislation.

Research has long-considered the importance of factors affecting student engagement, recognizing that engagement is crucial to learning and academic achievement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Yet engagement of struggling adolescent readers within late-intervention academic support has received minimal attention. If educators accept “the complexity of reading acquisition” (Coles, 2004) and the key role literacy plays in students’ lives, attention should be paid to every facet of the learning-to-read experience. This research supports that intent.

**Personal Perspectives**

The relationship between researcher and subject is never devoid of context, for any researcher’s unique microsystem coexists within larger meso, exo and macro systems, comprising realms of experience that define him/her (Carlton Parsons, 2008). Acknowledging this is imperative if the goal of research is an understanding of the topic or subject that is as unbiased as possible. I therefore begin this journey by heeding Fennell and Arnot’s (2008) advice to, “be prepared for the personal and professional consequences of turning one’s gaze within” (p. 533), recognizing that my own identity reflects circumstances of my choices, my achievement, and my birth (Bingham & Okagaki, 2012).

**Freedom of Choice**

Any consideration of identity construction must consider its temporal nature, as the process is ongoing. At this point in my life I celebrate the fact that I have been free to pursue my own personal, professional and educational interests throughout my adult life. I chose to move from a career as a systems analyst into education, a “critical incident” (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008, p. 19) that defines me. I consequently decided to move from teaching into
administration. I chose to complete two masters degrees and to pursue this doctorate. I firmly believe that the freedom to make one’s own choices is a motivator in and of itself.

The students I consider in my research have not reached a stage of life in which they are free to pursue their own courses of action. They are legally bound to attend school and have not reached a point in their schooling in which they have many course options. Though they are developmentally at an age when they seek autonomy, they are still dependent upon their parents for the majority of their wants and needs (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009). Their reading struggles are not the result of any purposeful decision-making.

When inviting students to participate in this research, I must remember that I am offering them a choice. While I may see this as an opportunity, I must avoid any actions or remarks that could be interpreted as coercive. For participation in this work is not a requirement for these students.

**Academic Success**

Throughout my experiences in K-12 schooling, college, and graduate schools I have been a successful student. I was the salutatorian of my high school graduating class and graduated magna cum laude from college. I have always worked hard and the effort I expend in academic pursuits has been personally meaningful and ultimately valuable. I have always felt that a direct link existed between my efforts and the results I sought.

For middle school students in reading support, this is most likely not the case. I must be careful not to let their reading struggles ‘other’ them in my eyes, for to do so risks marginalization and bias (Briscoe, 2005). This represents a potential blind spot that could stand in the way of my full understanding. Many of these students have been in reading support for years. I must assume that they have been attentive to teachers, parents, and tutors in their
struggles to master the skills necessary for grade-level, proficient reading. In purposely avoiding a deficit mindset, I actively accept that the responsibility for their learning rests squarely with the educational system (Dworin & Bomer, 2008).

**Always a Reader**

I have always considered myself to be a reader. I spend time reading novels for pleasure in my limited free time and have never gone on a vacation without a book. I spend time reading to gather information, whether at work, in the pursuit of this degree, or simply to inform my sensibility as a citizen of the world. And I am grateful for the comfort books have provided though difficult moments when I needed escape.

While I am fully committed to helping struggling adolescent readers realize all of these possibilities, I must recognize that there are students and families who may not value literacy acquisition in the same manner I do. I grew up having my reading skills reinforced and praised by parents who felt much as I do now. I have a vested interest in these skills and this research because I personally value literacy, and I must be mindful of the fact that others may feel differently.

**Value Systems in Sync**

My parents, my spouse, my children, and I have always been a strong support network for one another. Collectively we share a belief in learning, embracing a universal view of the educational system as one of promise. There has never been a point in my life where I had to navigate the disconnection that Carlton Parsons (2008) describes - one comprised of her parents, “high school noncompleters” (p. 1130), and the discordant expectations of her school system. The hopes of my family and friends dovetail easily with the goals of the public and private school settings I have engaged with throughout my life.
I must be mindful of the fact that the students I seek to understand will come from a variety of backgrounds. Some families may value the school experience and see their children’s struggles as a sign of failure or embarrassment within a community focused on success. Some may see school as something to be endured, without potential to improve lives. Families’ ideas about the potential of academic intervention programs most likely span a wide range as well, for many of these students have participated in some form of reading support for years yet still do not read on grade level. Children with two parents may not have parents that agree on any of these things either. I was fortunate to consistently inhabit a world in which the values of my mesosytems were in sync. This is not true for all, and I must be cognizant of a potential gap between my frame of reference and that of my research subjects.

**Potential Biases**

The process of “identifying and confronting” (Machi & McEvoy, 2012, p. 19) potentials for bias is an important step in the practice of research. Attachments to and views regarding research interests deserve to be fully explored if bias and opinion are to be controlled.

**Community connection.** I have lived in the town in which I now work for over 25 years. My three grown children all attended public school here. This is where I began my teaching career, leaving for a brief stint as an elementary level principal elsewhere and ultimately returning to serve as the middle school principal. My connections to families and students within the community run deep and my network connections cross many different arenas. It is important to this research that I acknowledge a potential for bias regarding my connections to certain students, families and members of the community.

The recently updated Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (2015) recognizes the importance that the larger community plays in supporting and defining the role of schools.
While educators are charged with serving students and their families, this service is not performed in isolation but rather within a mutually-accommodating system of spheres of influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this work I must acknowledge the potential of both my own bias, as well as the influence some families and community members may perceive they have; for bias on either side threatens to negatively inform the research being conducted.

**Literacy as a winning ticket.** “Particular facets of identity … may be more salient than others at any given time” (Kezar and Lester, 2010, p. 171). I recognize that at this point in my career as an educator, I place enormous value in students’ abilities to read critically. As an undergraduate math major and a former math teacher, this might not have always been the case for me.

The process of doctoral research begins with an interest. In narrowing this interest to a more clearly-defined research topic, pathways must be purposefully left unexplored and some stones must be knowingly left unturned. In focusing on late intervention reading support, I am choosing to recognize the value that literacy affords adolescents, both in their lives as students and in their futures as citizens. I must acknowledge that there are alternate paths for students’ success that are not wholly dependent upon their ability to make sense of text.

**Research Question**

This research will consider the following research question:

- What are the experiences of middle school students as they engage in a reading support program with services in and out of the literacy classroom?

The goal of the research will be to explore the perceptions of struggling adolescent readers participating in a reading support program in relation to factors impacting their engagement within the program. Participants will include students receiving services within
their literacy classrooms (i.e. push-in), as well as students receiving services in a separate classroom outside of their literacy classrooms (i.e. pull-out). Considering a unique population within specific settings will necessitate an in-depth study of participants’ relationships with their learning environments.

**Definition of Key Terminology**

**Pull-Out Reading Support** – Academic support provided during the school day to students identified by the Literacy Supervisor as reading below grade-level. This support is provided by a Reading Specialist and is delivered outside of the student’s double block of literacy, as an additional period of reading instruction every other day.

**Push-In Reading Support** – Academic support provided during the school day to students identified by the Literacy Supervisor as reading below grade-level. This support is provided by a Reading Specialist and is delivered within the student’s double block of literacy, every other day.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Engagement Theory**

While Reschly & Christenson (2012), editors of Handbook of Research on Student Engagement, indicate that definitional differences among varying research strands of engagement theory exist, certain common tenets can be identified. Student engagement (SE) is recognized as critical to learning, multidimensional and influenced by context. SE has been recognized for years as a key factor in learning; many researchers, in fact, have thought that student engagement not only contributes to learning, but that the very process of learning cannot take place without it (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). While the study of SE was initially limited to academic factors impacting students’ achievement, over time researchers’ attention broadened to include a multidimensional collection of overlapping
categories and factors thought to impact students’ school experiences. SE is currently understood to be malleable and influenced by definitive, context-specific factors (Fredricks, Blumfeld, & Paris, 2004; Mahatmya et al., 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Emotional, behavioral and cognitive aspects of engagement are considered to act in concert, collectively influencing students’ overall school experience (Bryant, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2012); most scholars today employ this three-pronged concept of engagement developed in 2004 by Fredricks et al., (Reschly, Christenson & Wylie, 2012), while others employ a broader definitional construct which also includes measures of social and affective engagement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Stage-Environment Fit

The conceptual theory is also informed by Eccles & Midgley’s (1990) theory of Stage-Environment Fit, which seeks to explain students’ school disengagement during adolescence. For despite the intentions of the middle school movement of the 1980’s, school and/or class environments typical of middle school often do not support the behavioral, cognitive and emotional needs of adolescent students, and students’ overall engagement with school is often negatively impacted during adolescence (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Regardless of the type of engagement considered, engagement in school generally begins to decrease with the transition to junior high (Eccles & Midgley, 1990; Griffiths, Lilles, Furlong, & Sidhwa, 2012; Lee, 2013; Mahatmya et al., 2012), and middle grade teachers perceive disengagement as a “major problem” (Elmore, 2009).

Complementary theories

SE theory focuses the study on adolescent struggling readers’ engagement within a specific context of middle school - one whose mission is to support their needs and growth. The
research question considers the engagement of these students; this is informed by Stage-Environment Fit, a theory that recognizes that the structures of schooling do not often support the developmental needs of adolescents. The methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an appropriate choice for this study, as it is defined by an attention to the examination of experiences, to the personal meaning ascribed to these experiences by individuals, and to the ways in which individuals make sense of these experiences (Smith, 2011).

**Introductory Summary**

Middle schools that offer support to struggling adolescent readers must have confidence in the efficacy of these efforts. The ability to read critically is a skill with a predictive influence over success across K-12 schooling and college (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, 2017), and there is little evidence that this influence will wane in the future. Engagement Theory recognizes the importance engagement plays in the learning process, and Stage-Environment Fit Theory recognizes that middle school settings do not always dovetail with the needs of adolescents. These theories will inform an IPA study to consider how struggling adolescent readers experience reading support both in and out of the literacy classroom and how participants make sense of these experiences.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This literature review is designed to provide a deeper understanding of struggling adolescent readers and the academic intervention spaces they inhabit within American middle schools. As educators navigate standards focused on increasing levels of rigor and the public’s expectation for strong performance data, America’s public schools have seen increased focus on academic intervention programs; yet the perceptions of students’ experiences within these programs has received scant attention. In order to meet the needs of struggling adolescent readers it is important to study the factors affecting their engagement within their reading support programs; for these students often struggle to keep pace with grade level expectations, leaving them behind in all areas of the curriculum while making them more likely to receive poor grades. Exploring students’ experiences within their reading intervention programs should provide needed insight into how they perceive and engage within varying models of intervention.

This review begins with an exploration of the literature regarding adolescence as a developmental stage with an eye towards understanding the unique needs of students at this age. A consideration of the literature regarding today’s American middle schools as a context for adolescents in general and struggling adolescent readers specifically follows. Lastly, adolescents’ engagement within American middle schools is considered; themes of student-teacher relationships and student agency are explored with an eye towards the ways in which disengagement can affect struggling middle school readers across realms of experience (Figure 1).
Adolescence is a stage of development defined by change. “Young people undergo more rapid and profound changes between the ages of 10 and 15 than at any other time in their lives” (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010, p. 5). During adolescence puberty triggers physical, hormonal, cognitive, and social-emotional transformations that affect individuals at different ages, different rates, and in differing sequences (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Kuhn, 2009; Mahatmya et al., 2012; Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). Together these changes define an amalgam of mutually-existing and jointly impacting systems of transformation that combine to define each student’s unique journey through adolescence.

Figure 1. Adolescents’ engagement within an academic intervention program and potential impacts of disengagement.
Biological Aspects of Adolescence

Adolescence is a developmental stage defined by high degrees of physical maturation (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Kuhn, 2009; Mahatmya et al., 2012; Soto et al., 2011). These physical changes are recognized to vary greatly by individual and can be influenced by experience. Despite that, there are certain commonalities across individuals.

Biologically, adolescence is largely defined by puberty. While many of the changes associated with puberty are physical, puberty includes coordinated hormonal changes; both physical and hormonal changes initiate within the brain (Susman & Dorn, 2009). Puberty is characterized for each individual by its timing (i.e. onset of physical changes), sequence (i.e. the order of the development or growth of secondary sex characteristics), and tempo (i.e. rate of advance of changes). The timing, sequence and tempo of puberty do not take place in isolation, as their progression are understood to exist within a complex interdisciplinary system impacting adolescents’ psychological and behavioral development (Susman & Dorn, 2009). Students within the same grade at middle school can display a wide variety of physical stages of development, with some seeming to have barely begun puberty while others seeming well into it (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Elmore, 2009). These uneven hormonal and physical changes during adolescence makes any assumption on the part of educators as to what “average” looks like dubious; the wide range of physical traits evidenced by middle grade students presents academic, social, and emotional challenges to the schools serving them (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010).

Cognitive Aspects of Adolescence

Just as with biological changes, there exists huge variability in cognitive development and functioning across groups of adolescents; however, certain shared traits can be described
Unlike younger children, adolescents are able to consider multiple ideas simultaneously, and they can be more deliberate and focused. Adolescents are able to monitor and manage their learning more efficiently than children, and they are more able to adjust their thinking when rules change midway through a game or exercise (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Mahatmya et al., 2012). While there is no proof that associative learning changes as children age, individuals’ ability to learn conceptually and reflect upon their learning increases as children mature (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Kuhn, 2009). Epistemological changes reveal a movement during adolescence away from absolutist stances that view knowledge as objective, and adolescent students’ understanding of the world develops a more multiplist or relativist outlook (Kuhn, 2009).

Current research regarding adolescent cognition seeks to identify “critical components of environments that will support the intellectual development of each individual” (Kuhn, 2009, p. 180). Researchers now accept a mutually-influential system between adolescents’ environments and their cognitive development. Firstly, environments providing a framework for the full cognitive development during childhood do not support the full cognitive development of all adolescents. In addition, brain development during adolescence is dependent upon experience (Kuhn, 2009; Thomas & Johnson, 2008). Recognizing this relationship, current research acknowledges adolescents’ role as perhaps unwitting partners in defining their own cognitive development (Kuhn, 2009).

Social and Emotional Aspects of Adolescence

Adolescence is recognized as a time in which individuals’ interactions with the world broaden (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Smetana & Villalobos, 2009). While parental detachment during adolescence was once thought to be normative and desirable, current
research considers the development of an adolescent’s healthy autonomy as an outgrowth of the quality of his/her parental relationship. Though some studies indicate that perceived closeness and support between adolescents and their parents decrease across the adolescent years, others indicate both parental and child reports of relationship stability (Laursen & Collins, 2009).

As their worlds widen, adolescents search for ways to express their independence. An outgrowth of adolescents’ desire for independence can be conflict with authority figures (Elmore, 2009; Laursen & Collins, 2009). Adolescents and their parents do not always view conceptions of issues of personal freedom similarly, e.g. adolescents may want to make their own choices when it comes to friends or clothes, while parents may not be ready to release their influence on these decisions. At school, adolescents often reject teachers’ authority over similar personal choices, e.g. where to sit during lunch. Overall, adolescence is defined by a renegotiation of authority, whether parental or school-related (Smetana & Villalobos, 2009).

Adolescents typically seek a sense of relatedness outside of the home. Peer relationships (whether platonic or romantic) become more relevant (Mahatmya et al., 2012). Over the second half of the twentieth century, generalized conclusions about peer relationships in adolescence include the notions that adolescents value peer relations more than they did in childhood, that friend groups can be characterized by similarity, and that social status influences adolescents’ choices in peer relations (Brown & Larson, 2009). With the onset of puberty, peer relations expand to include physical attractions and romantic relationships (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Notably, adolescents’ interactions outside of the home may also include relationships with non-parental trusted adults. This time spent with a non-parental caring adult has been linked to positive developmental outcomes for adolescents (Miranda-Chan, Fruith, Dubon, & Wray-Lake, 2016; Rhodes & Lowe, 2009).
Current research recognizes that an adolescent’s relationships with specific peers or adults cannot be viewed in isolation, for these relationships often impact one another (Brown & Larson, 2009; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Adolescence is a period in life during which personality traits such as openness, conscientiousness and self-discipline are negatively affected (Soto et al., 2011), and interpersonal relations are seen as critical factors in adolescents’ evolving social-emotional development. Experiences with parents, trusted adults, peers, or romantic interests, while existing within differing realms of experience, are accepted as overlapping and recognized as key contributors in the overall social and emotional development of an adolescent.

**Supporting Adolescents’ Development**

Scientific study considering adolescence as a unique stage of development can be traced back to the early 1900’s. While developmental scientists initially considered adolescence through a dichotomy-dictated lens of nature versus nurture, by the 1970’s developmental scientists viewed the ages from ten to twenty as a specific period of development defined by transition and interplay of context and biology (Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Relations were recognized as an important key to understanding the plasticity of adolescents’ development, and competing influences were accepted as factors that shaped growing individuals (Balsano, Theokas, & Bobek, 2009; Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009).

More recently developmental scientists’ perspectives have widened to consider biology, context and relations as levers to be employed in evidence-based applications. Today these are used to inform youth development programs both in and out of schools (Balsano et al., 2009; Lerner et al., 2009; Lerner & Steinberg, 2009). Recognizing the myriad biological, cognitive and social-emotional changes adolescents are experiencing, this positive approach focuses on adolescents as resources to be developed. In terms of schooling, experts purport environments
informed by the unique biological, cognitive, social, and emotional needs of adolescents, in order to “enhance their healthy growth as lifelong learners, … democratic citizens, and … self-sufficient individuals who are … prepared to succeed” (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010, p. 3).

**Middle School as Construct**

Classrooms, rather than mere physical environments, represent social spaces. Experiences taking place within these spaces are ultimately co-constructed, for as teachers and students jointly engage in dialogue and action they impact the shared space and one another (Baez, 1999; Balsano et al., 2009; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). As such, each middle school student’s experience within a classroom is unique and individual, influenced by a host of shaping factors.

**The American Middle School Movement**

During the 1960’s and 1970’s American secondary schools were largely restructured to embrace what has since become a traditional four year high school program (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Bryant, 2014; Groden, 1976). One outgrowth of this movement was a focus during the 1980’s on adolescent learners and their unique needs. Spearheaded by Dr. William Alexander, the country moved away from what were known as junior high schools towards what became known as middle schools- a move anchored by the goal of best meeting the psychological, intellectual, and social-emotional needs of young adolescents within a comprehensive age-appropriate school model (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Bryant, 2014; Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016).

The tenets of the middle school movement honor the notion of the whole child, recognizing that academic achievement is inevitably linked to all aspects of an adolescents’ development and “dependent upon … developmental needs … being met” (Association for
Middle Level Education, 2010, p. 5). The middle school movement’s platform challenges schools to craft learning spaces geared toward the unique needs of middle grade students.

**Characteristics of American Middle Schools**

It must be noted that there is a wide variety of grade-level configurations among American schools currently serving middle grade students. Some serve students in grades kindergarten through grade eight (K-8), others only serve students in the middle grades (typically thought of as grades six through eight), while others are defined by grade configurations that are more similar to traditional junior high (typically thought of as grades seven through nine) (Dove, Pearson, & Hooper, 2010; Elmore, 2009). While some studies have found students to be more engaged in K-8 schools, evidence for middle school structures has been mixed; this may be due to the fact that there is considerable variation in these structures (Elmore, 2009). This review will focus on students in schools identified as middle schools, without regard for the specific grade levels served.

Students entering middle school often find themselves in settings that seem large and impersonal as compared to their elementary schools. Nationally the average middle school serves about 600 students, while the average elementary school serves just two thirds of this number (Elmore, 2009). In addition to being physically larger, middle schools are often harder to navigate, and as large numbers of students move between classes at common intervals there is an increased focus on maintaining order. As adolescent students naturally begin to test acceptable boundaries against authority, adults focus more energy on discipline and control within school buildings and within classrooms (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Elmore, 2009).
Elementary students typically spend the bulk of their days in one classroom with one teacher, but when students move into middle school their time is usually divided among any number of content area specialists. Students spend limited time each day with these content area teachers, and the focus of schooling in middle school moves towards knowledge construction and skill acquisition (Pianta et al., 2012). In middle school, “the currency of exchange between teachers and students revolves around the students’ ability to convince the teacher that they have mastered a specific body of content” (Elmore, 2009, p. 197). In contrast to heterogeneous elementary classrooms, middle schools are more often characterized by ability groupings (Elmore, 2009). One result of this structure is that students’ learning differences are made public. As such, middle school students’ school-based status is largely an outgrowth of their success within classes and their placement within hierarchical academic levels (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993; Elmore, 2009).

**Literacy Intervention Spaces**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) posits that interactions across concentric circles of influence combine to define context. These circles of influence vary across time, so that in addition to influential factors among spheres of influence there is also a temporal factor. As humans age they are able to more fully understand the complexity and interrelationships of these systems, as well as their own ability to influence them. It is therefore logical that in considering a student’s experiences within school, the fit between the individual and the various systems or ecologies that define his/her environment warrant consideration (Balsano et al., 2009; Brown, Kanny & Johnson, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993).

Brown et al. (2014) stress the role of school setting in supporting adolescents’ needs, and their research reveals that struggling readers’ experiences within their classrooms is not only
determined by reading-related factors; environmental factors have been shown to influence the ways in which students interact with reading. In a yearlong case, the interactions between middle school content area teachers and struggling readers studied the ways in which struggling readers made sense of informational text, as well as their teachers’ roles in this process (Hall, 2006). In considering influences on student growth, Hall concludes that more than an educator’s instructional methodology is at play. She advises that conversations between teachers and struggling adolescent readers should explore “how the social … world[s] they occupy affect their decisions with text” (Hall, 2006, p. 426).

Struggling readers in American middle schools are considered fortunate if they have access to school-based reading intervention. Within these literacy intervention spaces support is generally provided by a certificated reading specialist in one of two formats: support may be provided within the literacy classroom, i.e. a push-in model, or in a separate class or small group, i.e. pull-out, model. Push-in support positions the reading specialist to serve as a literacy expert for the classroom teacher in a student-focused, coaching manner. Pull-out support affords the reading specialist the chance to group students by common need and provide support in a quiet, separate setting minimizing the social stigma that struggling readers may experience when help is provided within their literacy classroom (Woodward & Talbert-Johnson, 2009). While limited research is available exploring the benefits and drawbacks of each of these models, the research available is largely confined to exploring reading support in elementary settings, which would indicate a need to further understand how struggling adolescent readers experience their academic intervention spaces.
**Portrait of Struggling Adolescent Readers**

Students who struggle to read are often passive in their academic approach and hesitant to fully engage with the task of reading (Dayton-Sakari 1997; Stevenson 2016). In Dayton-Sakari’s (1997) study, findings consistently reveal that struggling readers touch reading materials less, passively relinquishing control of these materials to their teachers. They are seen as “work[ing] around the materials” (Dayton-Sakari, 1997, p. 297) rather than immersing themselves in the task of reading and their interactions with teachers are largely teacher-initiated. Instead of reacting to the subject of the text, readers’ emotional responses during reading are found to center on themselves and their feelings about the process of reading. Dayton-Sakari (1997) suggests that struggling readers adopt a passive stance because they view the reading process as one that is “fraught with the potential for failure” (p. 295).

The idea that struggling readers are passive is supported by motivational intensity theory, which conceptualizes that the perceived difficulty of achieving a goal is one factor that impacts the effort expended to achieve it (Silvia, Eddington, Beaty, Nusbaum & Kwapił, 2013). Struggling adolescent readers may then be less willing to expend the effort required to actively engage with their reading because they perceive reading as a difficult skill whose acquisition has proven hard for them to grasp. They may also be influenced by their sense that an increased effort implies they are less capable. For while younger students perceive ability and effort as working together, as pupils age they move to a state where they “think that trying harder means that one is less able” (Wigfield, Guthrie, Tonks & Perencevich, 2004, p. 300). When coupled with the fact that adolescents’ school-based status is largely determined by both their academic success within classes as well as their placement within hierarchical academic levels (Booth &
Gerard, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993; Elmore, 2009), it can be proposed that struggling adolescent readers may not see trying harder as worth the effort.

Struggling adolescent readers are reported to lack not only motivation for reading, but a sense of their own reading self-efficacy, a notion that predicts that students who doubt their own ability to perform at a certain level will try to avoid a task (Schunk, 1989). Struggling readers are known to engage in a host of avoidance, self-handicapping behaviors. These range from a complete lack of compliance, to task avoidance or longer-than-necessary transitions (Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Schunk, 1989; Stevenson, 2016). This is consistent with Dayton-Sakari’s (1997) portrait of struggling readers as passive and reluctant to engage.

Academic reading intervention typically focuses on developing the skills and strategies of competent readers. While this focus may well serve younger readers, adolescent students who have struggled to learn to read for some period of time present schools with additional challenges. In devising programs to help middle level struggling readers, attention should be paid to the developmental needs of adolescent students, as well as both the cognitive and affective aspects of reading (Roe & Goff, 2014). It is accepted that social spaces have an impact on reading acquisition (Hall, 2006); therefore, in supporting struggling adolescent readers middle schools’ reading support structures should seek ways to leverage adolescent students’ developmental needs to best to support them within the context of middle school reading intervention programs.

**Engagement within School Spaces**

Engagement is a well-recognized predictor of school achievement, and there is a close association between increased engagement and increased achievement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Griffiths et al., 2012; Stevenson, 2016). This relationship has been shown as reliable across a
host of demographic variables, including socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and gender, and engagement and achievement are positively correlated for struggling, at-risk students (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Though the link between achievement and engagement is recognized in primary grades, the consequences of disengagement are often more evident in middle and high school (Griffiths et al., 2012; Stevenson, 2016); therefore, exploring the engagement of struggling adolescent readers within their academic intervention programs is important if educators hope to impact students’ ultimate reading achievement.

**Struggling Adolescent Readers’ School Engagement**

One theme that emerges from the research is that, despite the intentions of the middle school movement of the 1980’s, school and/or class environments typical of middle school often do not support the behavioral, cognitive and emotional needs of adolescent students. Students’ overall engagement with school is often negatively impacted during adolescence (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). Students’ school disengagement during adolescence can be seen across behavioral, cognitive, and emotional spectrums. Behavioral disengagement is often determined by considering metrics such as discipline, attendance, truancy and dropout rates. Cognitive engagement includes measures linked to students’ value of learning, as well as their use of skills such as goal setting and self-regulation in schoolwork. Emotional engagement considers relationships and a feeling of belonging. Regardless of the type of engagement considered, engagement in school generally decreases during adolescence, beginning with the transition to junior high (Eccles & Midgley, 1990; Griffiths et al., 2012; Lee, 2013; Mahatmya et al., 2012). Disengagement is perceived by middle grade teachers as a “major problem” (Elmore, 2009).

Lower school engagement during adolescence occurs alongside decreases in school interest and motivation, which also typically wane for students in the middle grades (Eccles &
Since these trends have been found to exist for adolescents in general, it is reasonable to assume that they exist for struggling adolescent readers in support programs. Middle schools providing reading support to struggling adolescent readers should therefore explore students’ experiences within these programs, in order to understand how the frameworks of these programs can best engage struggling readers during a developmental stage in which their school interest, motivation, and engagement are typically declining. In considering elements important for reading instruction in grades four through 12, Faggella-Luby and Wardell identified “[i]mproving student motivation and engagement … as critical for struggling readers” (Faggella-Luby & Wardwell, 2011, p. 37).

Public schools capable of providing struggling adolescent readers with access to literacy intervention are usually considered fortunate. Yet given the challenges middle grade students face in American middle schools, it cannot be assumed that providing literacy intervention programming is sufficient in and of itself. Brion-Meisels (2015a) argues that more must be considered about how students access and make meaning of the learning supports at their disposal. “The absence of information about youth interpretations of learning supports is problematic” (Brion-Meisels, 2015a, p. 720). In Brion-Meisels (2015a) exploration of the manners by which middle school students in school-based intervention programs leverage their supports, she finds students seek intervention that provides them with agency within settings characterized by trust.

These environmentally-specific characteristics - students’ connectedness with teachers and students’ ability to share in decision-making processes - are each recognized as best practice for middle level educators (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Bryant, 2014; Lounsbury, 2000). These ideas are also supported by Connell’s motivational model, which seeks
to outline the means by which motivation impacts engagement; the model posits that students’ context-specific perceptions of autonomy and control, when combined with their sense of relatedness to teachers, have a direct link on all three types of engagement (Mahatmya et al., 2012; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990). Self-determination theory, in evaluating factors critical to motivation, considers autonomy, competence and relatedness to be most significant (Gnambs & Hanfstingl, 2016). Given that the struggles of adolescent readers may impact their sense of competence, middle school literacy intervention programs may benefit from considering ways to leverage adolescent students’ sense of relatedness and autonomy as a route to their reading success.

**Engagement as a Function of Adolescent Student/Teacher Relationships**

As compared to elementary teachers, middle school teachers are more likely to solely interact with students academically, viewing concerns outside of the academic as apart from their roles. Regardless of whether this is due to the number of students they teach, the size of school, or their training, middle school teachers are less likely to provide either academic or social-emotional support than elementary teachers (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). And middle school students are reported to have fewer opportunities for positive teacher interactions in middle school than they had in elementary classrooms (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993).

Yet relationships between teachers and students are at the heart of what happens in every classroom, and student engagement is nothing if not “a relational process” (Pianta et al., 2012, p. 366). The National Research Council (2004) recognizes that settings that support adolescents’ development of positive relational experiences engage their desire to feel connected. Yet when students move into middle school and their time is divided among any number of content area
specialists, instructional spaces become more isolated and there is typically an increase in students’ overall sense of disengagement and alienation from school (Pianta et al., 2012).

“Relationships between teachers and students reflect a classroom’s capacity” (Pianta et al., 2012, p. 366), and meaningful relationships with teachers support adolescent students’ engagement with school in a wide variety of ways. Research supports that middle school students have better attendance when their teachers create classrooms they perceive as caring. Students that relate to their teachers report feeling more connected to school, and a sense of school connectedness is linked to increased motivation and student achievement (Mahatmya et al., 2012; Martin & Dowson, 2009). Notably during adolescence, a developmental stage characterized by risk-taking, students able to name a person at school who they feel care about them are less likely to engage in dangerous behaviors (Brion-Meisels, 2015b; Griffiths et al., 2012). And this relational aspect of schooling is not only a component of students’ engagement and ultimate achievement; it is also linked to their overall sense of belonging within the school community (Griffiths et al., 2012; Schunk & Mullen, 2012). Positive adult relationships have also been shown to have a tremendous impact on adolescents’ burgeoning identity development, which is also linked to academic learning (Brown et al., 2014).

Middle school students in academic support are no exception to the impact of relationships. For adolescent students who struggle in school indicate they view support as more effective when it is provided by someone with whom they have a relationship. In fact, their ability to trust those charged with providing intervention actually influences whether or not they seek help (Brion-Meisels, 2015a).
Engagement as a Function of Autonomy-Supportive Learning Environments

School-wide cultivation of positive regard between adults and students is important, as it is integral to middle school constructs designed to support adolescents’ developmental needs. Yet these relationships should not be the end-game for educators if the ultimate goal of schooling is the learning that is born of student engagement and achievement. In addition to its other benefits, relationship-building sets the stage for self-disciplined and self-determined learning (Martinek, Hofmann, & Kipman, 2016).

Self-disciplined learning depends upon key features of personal agency, including ideas of individuals as intentional planners, self-motivators, and self-regulators. Ultimately agency speaks to each person’s abilities to make choices, devise and enact courses of action, and examine their own functioning – to act autonomously (Bandura, 2001). “Among the mechanisms of personal agency, none is more central … than people’s beliefs in their capability to exercise … control over their own functioning and over environmental events” (Bandura, 2001, p. 10).

This sense of personal agency has significant import for adolescents, for their sense of self-determined agency is found to be more similar to adults than to children (Kuhn, 2009). This notion is consistent with the fact that adolescents self-report they do not want to be treated as children (Freake, Barley, & Kent, 2007) and with the idea that as students move into adolescence they typically seek greater autonomy than they did when they were younger (Mahatmya et al., 2012). Yet as the number of years students spend in school increases, students’ perception of learning environments that support their autonomy decreases (Martinek et al., 2016).

Middle school students’ ability to share in decision-making processes is recognized as educational best practice, with latent power for adolescents (Association for Middle Level
Education, 2010; Bryant, 2014; Lounsbury, 2000). Unfortunately, adolescent students’ opportunities for autonomy within American middle school classrooms have become rare (Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Goodman & Eren, 2013; Mitra, Serriere, & Kirshner, 2014). Democratic classrooms, learning spaces characterized by opportunities for student choice and self-directed learning, provide students input into decision-making and promote their autonomy (Range, Carnes-Holt, & Bruce, 2013). It can be argued that these types of learning spaces hold noteworthy potential for middle-school students hungry for autonomy (Mahatmya et al., 2012) and for struggling adolescents in particular.

For adolescent students within support programs indicate that they want to be involved in constructing their classroom environment (Brion-Meisels, 2015a). Struggling adolescent readers are often disengaged students, whether due to their academic profiles or their developmental stage. Promoting a vision in which struggling students have opportunities for influence and agency within their intervention spaces holds promise; classrooms and schools providing these opportunities have been linked to increases in students’ engagement, their sense of belonging and their overall competence (Engle & Conant, 2002; Goodman, Hoagland, Pierre-Toussaint, Rodriguez, & Sanabria, 2011).

Potential Influences of Disengagement

If middle grade educators accept the importance of crafting learning environments geared towards adolescents’ needs, then middle grade reading support programs must leverage available context-specific factors to support struggling adolescent readers. For the potential risks of continued disengagement exist within literacy intervention spaces specifically and middle schools in general; these include the threat of students’ diminished academic self-concept, their
potential lack of success across content areas, and ultimately a marginalized role within an American society that values literacy.

**Self-Concept.** Academic self-concept and academic achievement reinforce one another (Preckel, Niepel, Schneider, & Brunner, 2013; Prince & Nurius, 2014). Students who have long struggled to read on-grade-level text have not experienced reading achievement, so it can therefore be argued that their literacy self-concept has not been reinforced. Adolescence is a time during which students’ self-concept is increasingly determined by their ability to achieve (Mahatmya et al., 2012), and students self-report that their reading confidence is tied to “comparing their own abilities to those of their classmates” (Butz & Usher, 2015, p. 56); struggling adolescent readers seem to be caught in an inescapable cycle where diminished achievement and diminished self-concept feed off of one another. Since self-efficacy predicts that students who doubt their own ability to perform at a certain level will try to avoid a task (Schunk, 1989), struggling readers must somehow be convinced that they can learn to make sense of text and enjoy the process of reading if they are to put forth and sustain the effort required to move from struggling readers to proficient readers. Notably, once discovered this enjoyment can be a powerful motivator, capable of empowering students to develop the task commitment necessary for success (Bell, 2004).

Yet students’ beliefs in their own competence within specific contexts often decline during adolescence (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010), and research demonstrates that students’ attitudes regarding reading generally become more negative as they age (Swinehart, 2011). This would seem to indicate that struggling adolescent readers, defined by a history of academic difficulty in what many educators consider a critical content area, may have diminished belief in their own capability as readers at a developmental stage during which their
self-concept is largely determined by their ability (or lack thereof). Already at an age characterized by decreased school motivation, engagement and an overall negative attitude for reading, a struggling adolescent reader may be particularly vulnerable to feelings of incompetence, especially when it comes to his/her own ability to make sense of text.

Thankfully reading is a content area in which perceived autonomy and self-direction are linked to students’ self-concept (Butz & Usher, 2015). Providing learning experiences within literacy intervention spaces that capitalize on students’ choices and voices may well provide a step along the pathway out of this negative cycle.

**Success across content areas.** The reading struggles of adolescents in late-intervention support affect myriad content areas, as students at this age are called upon to read-to-learn across settings (Gomez & Gomez, 2007). Students in middle school must read critically across content areas, an expectation that carries forward through high school and beyond. In order to meet the demand of reading texts of increasing complexity across content areas, all students in middle school must continue to develop their reading skills (Swinehart, 2011). As students in middle school reading intervention programs struggle to close the gap between their abilities and grade-level reading expectations, their on-grade-level peers continue to develop their abilities to read complex text across the curriculum.

Each discipline, be it mathematics, science or social studies, has its own unique content-specific vocabulary. In addition, academic disciplines may have patterns of language that are different from conversational language and from one another. It is recognized that adolescent readers may typically struggle with these nuances of non-fiction text (Barnes, 2015; Fang, 2006; Massey, 2015). Yet research specific to adolescents’ development in the area of reading comprehension is lacking. Further research into comprehension strategies specific to adolescents
and their nonfiction reading across content areas “would be informative for understanding … how to improve it[reading comprehension] in adolescent students” (Massey, 2015, p. 14).

Middle school students’ overall school success relies on reading informational texts across content areas. Since non-fiction reading in these subjects is more difficult for all middle grade readers, it can be surmised that this can be especially tricky for students reading below grade-level. Ensuring that reading support is provided by caring teachers that elicit trust and provide opportunities for student agency will help ensure that struggling adolescent readers in academic intervention actually seek the help they need (Brion-Meisels, 2015a).

**Power and influence.** Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) define social justice as “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 1). This two-pronged definition embeds language that speaks to process, as well as language that speaks to goal. The goal, a mutually-shaped society meeting the needs of all groups, can only be realized through the process, i.e. full and equal participation of these groups.

Social justice operates on many stages and across many institutions, one of these being public education in the United States. In serving all of the nation’s children, one of the key roles of public schools in America today is to prepare its future citizens in order to position them to take on this job of shaping society. 21st century career and college skills demand that public schools educate young people to be critical thinkers and communicators, capable of collaboration and creativity (Partnership for 21st Century Learning, n.d.). Yet lofty goals for 21st century learning are impossible to realize unless graduates are literate, for without the ability to read individuals’ attempts to voice their ideas regarding how best to shape their society are easily marginalized.
For literacy has been an instrument of power from the dawn of the nation. During the age of signature literacy, just making a mark to denote one’s name was a means of separating those with power from those without. Later, a beautiful handwriting was an indication of a literate mind; a skill that only developed with sufficient discretionary time. Literacy bespoke privilege and granted power, so that power and privilege were almost synonymous (Beers, 2015). Ta-Nehisi Coates acknowledges this when he notes that an inability to read contributed to the loss of land by blacks in 1920’s Jim Crow Mississippi (Coates, 2014). And while the world today is vastly different than it might have been in the past, this power is hardly likely to dissipate, for an ability to read is viewed as critical to success in the 21st-century economy (Gomez & Gomez, 2007).

Yet hope for significant improvement in struggling readers’ ability to make sense of text is slim, for American students who have failed to reach grade-level proficiency in reading by third grade often experience a gap that widens over their years in school. Below-grade-level readers at the end of third grade are four times more likely to leave school before graduating, and two thirds of similar fourth graders, if the numbers are to be believed, are headed for jail or welfare (Connelly, 2015). Based on these statistics, it seems unlikely that the reading difficulties of struggling adolescent readers will be reversed.

**Literature Review Summary**

Balsano et al. (2009) purport that “interactions between adolescents … and their contexts… provide … ideas on how to alter the direction of change in a positive way  (p. 623).” Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by specific markers, and the structure of today’s American middle schools does not always support the needs of these students. It can be argued that American middle school students are ready to participate in their educational
experiences to a greater degree than they most-often do currently. By adopting a school vision where relationships are prized and teachers embrace adolescent students’ desire for increased agency, educators can capitalize on adolescent students’ developmental needs for connectedness and autonomy. It would seem that this has the power to increase adolescent students’ engagement and consequently their achievement, developing and leveraging their trust in the adults that serve them and proving that shared decision-making has power for students.

While this may be true for all middle-grade students, it may prove especially potent for middle school students in reading intervention programs. Reading support in middle school is often a last-ditch opportunity for reading success, and statistics remind us that the odds are stacked against success for middle grade students who do not read proficiently. For students in middle school reading support, the risks are real and go beyond the four walls of the intervention space. For these students risk a damaged academic self-concept while their reading struggles impact their ability to do well in all areas of the curriculum. Ultimately, students unable to read on grade level may find their future selves marginalized in 21st century America. Educators owe it to these students to consider how teacher relationships and autonomy can help them be successful.

Examining the experiences of middle school students in reading intervention programs can position researchers to better understand factors that influence adolescents’ engagement within both push-in and pull-out reading support programs. Research considering middle grade reading intervention programs can also help change practice; understanding the factors that affect students’ behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement within varied models of intervention can help teachers to leverage context-specific factors impacting students’ school success, while positioning school administrators to make more well-informed decisions about programs,
structures and placements. Research geared towards understanding the experiences of middle school students in reading intervention programs also holds promise to change policy, for an increased understanding of factors influencing student engagement within middle school reading support programs could well influence local policies designed to respond to Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provisions aimed at facilitating context-specific interventions (United States Department of Education, n.d.). Overall, theory, practice and policy all stand to be served by an increased understanding of struggling adolescent readers’ experiences within American middle school reading intervention spaces.
Chapter Three: Methodology

American public schools face greater accountability than perhaps ever before, as today’s educators navigate the public’s expectation for strong performance data in a world defined by standards focused on increasing levels of rigor; one outgrowth of this has been an attention on academic intervention programs. While many American elementary schools provide academic support to students reading below grade level, fortunate school districts extend this support into the middle grades. This late intervention reading support is often viewed as a last-ditch opportunity for students to realize significant reading progress before the challenges of high school, college, and career.

Yet students receiving late-intervention reading support in middle school are rarely asked how they “make meaning of learning supports” (Brion-Meisels, 2015). Given that research has long-recognized that engagement is crucial to learning and academic achievement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012), this study considers the contextual factors that impact the engagement of struggling middle school readers within their academic support setting. Definitive, context-specific factors have been shown to have a direct link on students’ engagement with schooling (Mahatmya et al., 2012). Despite this, school and/or classroom environments typical of middle school or junior high often do not often support the behavioral, cognitive and emotional needs of adolescents (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993). There is also typically an increase in students’ overall sense of disengagement and alienation from school during the middle grades (Pianta et al., 2012). So, while many districts pay heed to the voices of teachers and reading specialists in regard to schools’ intervention programs, students’ perceptions of their experiences within these programs deserve consideration.
This chapter begins by recapping the purpose of the research study, as well as its overarching question. This leads into a discussion of qualitative design, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and the ways in which this approach supports the intent of the study. Theories influencing the development of IPA are presented, along with key scholars of the discipline. Research procedures are explicitly presented, including how participants were selected, ethical considerations, participant recruitment and access, and data collection and storage. Lastly, a discussion of data analysis considers how the trustworthiness of the analysis has been verified.

**Purpose and Design**

The purpose of this research was to explore how struggling adolescent readers understand and experience engagement-related factors within push-in and pull-out reading intervention at (pseudonym) Bernese Middle School (BMS). The research question asked, “What are the experiences of identified middle school students as they engage in a reading support program with services in and out of the classroom?”

This research employed a qualitative design. Sullivan and Sargeant (2011), in painting the differences between qualitative and quantitative research designs, stress that qualitative research is most often concerned with exploring “complex human intentions and motivations” (p. 449), specifically noting the value of qualitative research in understanding the unique process of learning. This is consistent with Creswell’s (2015) description of qualitative studies as providing a way to discover and gain insight into individuals’ perspectives, collecting data to learn from participants. As with most qualitative studies, inductive reasoning was employed in an attempt to move from the experiences of specific individuals within specific settings towards a broader recognition of patterns and generalizations (Trochim, 2006). Inductive reasoning used within
qualitative research is typically more open-ended and exploratory than the deductive, hypothesis-testing of quantitative research (Sullivan & Sargeant, 2011; Trochim, 2006); as such, it was well-suited to this research study.

**Research Tradition**

This qualitative research used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, a research methodology that primarily focuses on developing “interpretations of …experience” (Dowling, 2007, p. 137). It is defined by an attention to the examination of experiences, to the personal meaning ascribed to these experiences by individuals, and to the ways in which individuals make sense of these experiences (Smith, 2011). In contrast to traditional phenomenology in which researchers try to bracket, or set aside, the everyday world in their study, IPA accepts that experience is instead situated within the lived world and its interpretation cannot be separated from this context. Embracing a double-hermeneutic structure, IPA recognizes and accepts that researchers play a role in the interpretative process, so that studies are ultimately informed by the ways in which a researcher interprets the ways in which participants interpret the phenomenon under consideration (Smith, 2011; Smith & Eatough, 2011; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012).

IPA is a most-appropriate approach for the study. The research question focuses on how students understand and experience the phenomenon under consideration (in this case, reading support). This focus on students’ experience within a specific context aligns with the phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic elements of IPA. In addition, collecting and analyzing data to study this phenomenon involved the researcher’s interpretation of students’ personal experiences within a specific context; this is in keeping with the double-hermeneutic structure of IPA, in which a researcher interprets the ways in which participants interpret the
phenomenon under consideration. The researcher has purposefully acknowledged her positionality as part of this study, recognizing that it impacts all stages of the research process; this contrasts with reducing or bracketing his/her opinions to focus purely on the experience of the phenomenon (which would be more typical of a traditional phenomenological approach).

**Traditional Phenomenology**

Traditional phenomenology is generally considered to begin with Husserl’s idea of qualitative study of phenomena that is free from assumption; this approach demands that knowledge of the world be suspended through the process of eidetic reduction (aka époché/bracketing) (Dowling, 2007; Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). Husserl’s approach is often summed up by his words ‘Back to the things themselves,’ promoting an approach that puts aside the cultural or contextual aspect of understanding (Crotty, 1996). This descriptive version of phenomenology was later challenged by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre, as they argued for a closer consideration of the lived-in world and individuals’ involvement with it (Dowling, 2007; Lawthom & Tindall, 2011; Smith et al., 2012). Each of these approaches to phenomenology continue today, with Giorgi forwarding Husserl’s descriptive approach to phenomenology, and Smith (and IPA methodology) tracing back to Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre’s more interpretative approach (Lawthom & Tindall, 2011).

**Development of IPA**

Though phenomenology as a methodology encompasses a broad range of variations (Caelli (2000) counts 18 specific forms), they all share certain commonalities. All concern an examination of participants’ lived experiences, with a recognition that it is through experience that people come to know the world. Accepting that lifeworlds are subjective and unique,
personal meaning and sense-making are ultimately at the heart of all phenomenological methodologies (Lawthom & Tindall, 2011).

IPA as a cohesive discipline was first explicitly introduced by Jonathan Smith in a 1996 paper in *Psychology and Health*, in which he maintained that psychological research would benefit from an approach that recognized the value in experiential, qualitative approaches. Since that time Smith has been largely associated with the use of IPA, collaborating on the seminal text *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research* (Smith et al., 2012) in addition to publishing numerous journal articles.

Though the history of IPA itself only dates back about twenty years ago, IPA is informed by theoretical perspectives with a century-long history of firmly established theories, namely phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. The aspects of phenomenology that are most relevant to IPA can be traced to the early 20th-century work of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. Examining individual’s experiences as a philosophy was initially established in Husserl’s 1913 *Ideen* (Ideas), in which he purports that, when studying experience, the process of eidetic reduction (aka epoché/bracketing) should be used to suspend knowledge of the real world; Husserl believes this is necessary in order isolate a focus solely on perceptions of the world (Dowling, 2007; Larkin et al., 2011). Heidegger’s 1927 *Being and Time*, like the work of Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, move beyond Husserl’s sole concern with perception to more closely consider the lived-in world and individuals’ involvement with it (Dowling, 2007; Smith et al., 2012).

Heidegger’s *Being and Time* also forwards hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation. Heidegger speaks to the nature of phenomenon, asserting that it has both a visible meaning and an invisible meaning. Heidegger, and later Gadamer, speaks to the hermeneutic aspect of
phenomenology, putting forth that any examination of experience must recognize the invisible meaning embedded in the phenomenon and, as such, must include an interpretative component (Dowling, 2007; Smith et al., 2012). The hermeneutic circle, the idea of studying the whole to understand the part and vice versa, is a key component of hermeneutics.

Lastly, IPA is informed by the theory of idiography. Idiography, a concern with the particular, contrasts with the psychological notion of making claims at the group level to develop general statements about behavior. This commitment to the particular in IPA is evidenced by a focus on detail, as well as an attempt to understand “how particular experiential phenomena … have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 29).

Procedures

Choosing Participants

As is typical for IPA, the sample for this study was selected purposively; the phenomenon under consideration, BMS students currently enrolled in reading support, naturally defined sample boundaries. The school serves 525 students in grades five through eight, and in any given semester approximately seven percent of the student body is enrolled in reading support.

The researcher’s intent was to identify a relatively homogeneous sample within possible participants. After receiving parental permission (Appendix C), an initial survey (Appendix D) was used to quantify students’ engagement within reading support, and scores were used to select study participants. Survey questions are informed by Fredricks’ theory of engagement, which spans cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Students appearing to be least engaged within their reading support setting were invited
to participate in the interview portion of the research. In keeping with the idiographic aspect of IPA, sample size was limited to five to eight participants; this helped ensure a focus on specific students. The setting in which reading support is provided also influenced the choice of participants. Participants were chosen from both push-in and pull-out intervention models, and efforts were made to balance the number of participants chosen from each group. All of these decisions are in line with advice regarding how best to conduct IPA research studies. IPA’s idiographic influence dictates that this research tradition values particular phenomena, for particular participants, within a particular context; as such, generalizations were proposed cautiously, as they must be understood to exist within the particular (Smith et al., 2012).

**Ethical Considerations**

As children these research participants are a vulnerable population, so the researcher carefully considered her rationale for choosing these subjects, as well as issues of consent, level of risk, and potential coercion. Students identified as potential research subjects were those enrolled in reading support. These students were invited to participate not because they were easily available for research, but because the research directly pertains to their experiences. Both written parental approval and verbal assent of the participant were required, and parents and students understood that participation was entirely voluntary. Minimal risks were involved, and to help students feel comfortable during interviews they were provided options in terms of where and when interviews were conducted. All interviews were witnessed by an adult (either the Language Arts supervisor, or a teacher). Throughout the interview process, the researcher was attuned to any sign of discomfort on the part of student participants; students were asked about their comfort periodically throughout the interviews, and processes for their withdrawal from the study were in place. Though the researcher, as the school principal and a figure of authority,
might be viewed as someone who has the power to coerce students into participation, she had no control over students’ grades; it was clearly explained to students that they had free will when choosing whether or not to participate, so as to avoid any unintended sense of coercion. As students ranged in age from ten to fourteen and attended a local public middle school, these students had the cognitive capacity to understand what the research involved (Northeastern University, 2012).

The research study was not launched until Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained through Northeastern University’s documented process.

**Recruitment and Access**

All students in grades five through eight who were enrolled in either push-in or pull-out reading support at BMS were invited to participate in a survey to gauge their levels of engagement within these settings. Parents and students initially received a recruitment email (Appendix A), and those parents responding with interest were sent the parental permission form (Appendix C). After parents signed permission forms, potential participants were then asked to provide verbal assent (Appendix B) prior to taking the survey (Appendix D); the study only considered those students who had verbally assented and submitted written parental permission. A translator was in place to explain the parental permission form to students’ parents who did not read English, but this did not prove necessary. Surveys took approximately five minutes and were administered on paper in a neutral context, i.e. not within reading support or the literacy classroom. As the principal of the building, access to the research site was easily obtained. The district superintendent had already approved of the research and was aware of each step of the data collection process.
Once all survey responses had been received, selected students were invited to participate in the interview phase of the research. Students within each reading support model (push-in and pull-out) were selected based on their aggregate engagement scores, beginning with those students with the lowest scores; every attempt was made to include participants from both push-in and pull-out support. Students interviewed received a Northeastern University T-shirt to thank them for their willingness to engage in the interview process.

**Data Collection**

Once participants were identified, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted, as this is the recommended method for collecting data in an IPA study (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005; Smith et al., 2012). This method satisfies the need for “rich, detailed, first-person account(s) of [participants’] experiences” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 56) and supports IPA’s *emic* goal of finding an insider’s perspective (Reid et al, 2005). Smith (2011) recognizes that the quality of an IPA paper is largely dependent upon the quality of the interviews conducted. An interview protocol (Appendix E) was developed, including open-ended questions designed to provide the participants with opportunities to share thoughts, feelings, and stories about the phenomenon under consideration (Smith et al., 2012). Data collection overall focused on sense-making, i.e. in soliciting participants’ “interpretations of … experience” (Dowling, 2007, p. 137).

Initial interviews lasted about 45 minutes. These were conducted in a variety of locations at a time agreed upon by the researcher and the parent. All interviews were witnessed by another adult. To promote their comfort, students were asked if they had a preference regarding the adult who witnessed the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed (Creswell, 2015). Students were invited to bring an artifact to the interview. Though the interviewer
invited students to bring their favorite text or memory from reading support to the interview, none did; this request may have been difficult for participants given that literacy is an area of struggle.

**Data Storage**

Results from the initial survey were entered into a spreadsheet and kept on a password protected computer. Results were copied to a USB device that will remain under lock and key, and then deleted from the computer. Interviews were audio recorded. Recordings were maintained on a password protected iPad and iPhone. After transcription recordings were erased, and transcriptions are maintained on a password protected computer.

Pseudonyms were established for each interview participant. Parental consent forms, as well as hardcopy documents linking pseudonyms to student names, are secured in a locked cabinet. These documents will be kept for three years; after three years, documents will be shredded.

**Data Analysis**

As with most qualitative studies, inductive reasoning was employed in an attempt to move from specific observations towards a broader recognition of patterns and generalizations (Trochim, 2006). IPA is categorized as an approach that seeks to balance the *emic* insider’s perspective with the *etic* interpretative stance (Reid et al., 2005), and as the interview process supports the *emic* goal the analysis process supports the *etic*.

Once interviews were transcribed, each transcript was reread multiple times by the researcher; audio files were also listened to more than once before being destroyed. This process focused on actively engaging with data in a “free textual analysis” (Smith et al., 2012, p. 83). As
Smith et al. (2012) recommends, an attempt was made to identify descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments. Emerging themes were sought.

The analytic process encompassed both first and second cycle iterative coding procedures. Saldaña (2016) recommends a number of first cycle coding methodologies for questions exploring “personal, interpretive meanings” (p. 70). Verbatim excerpts were coded using In Vivo Coding, as this approach recognizes the power inherent in using the words of participants. First cycle coding combined this methodology with Emotion Coding, which supports an analysis of participants’ perspectives (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Second cycle coding then employed Pattern Coding in an attempt to identify the themes that are contained within the data.

Smith (2011) reminds IPA researchers to ensure their analysis is interpretative in nature, and not simply descriptive. Maintaining this stance requires each theme to be thoroughly developed, and the ways in which each extract contributed to each theme were explicitly discussed. IPA analysis attempted to point out both convergence (i.e. patterns of similarity) and divergence (i.e. the ways in which an individual participant’s experience is unique) (Reid et al., 2005; Smith, 2011).

**Trustworthiness**

Interview questions were piloted with reading specialists prior to the interview process. As staff members who are familiar with participants’ language arts skills, the reading specialists were asked to consider the verbiage of the questions to ensure that the interview questions could be fully understood by participants. To confirm that coding results were accurate after all initial interviews have been completed, member checking was employed; interpretations and themes were taken back to participants for their evaluation and comment. Asking participants to provide
feedback on findings helped ensure findings were presented clearly and fairly. Written
descriptions strived to be rich and thick, in order to inform attempts to transfer and generalize.

In identifying evidence to document codes or themes, participants’ contributions were
naturally triangulated to substantiate the validity of the researcher’s findings (Creswell, 2013).
Triangulation was further supported by the researcher’s memos, which took note of impressions
and emotions throughout the interview process. Participants’ verbal responses were compared to
their facial expressions and body language. Memos helped substantiate the conclusions that
were drawn.

**Methodological Summary**

This research aimed at learning more about the experiences of struggling adolescent
middle school readers as they engaged in a reading support program with services provided in
and out of the literacy classroom. Its approach was qualitative, as qualitative approaches are
useful in discovering and gaining insight into individuals’ perspectives. The study employed
IPA, a methodology whose attention to the examination of experiences, to the personal meaning
ascribed to these experiences by individuals, and to the ways in which individuals make sense of
these experiences (Smith, 2011) dovetails with the study’s intent.

This study ultimately tried to collect thick, rich data on the reading support experiences
of six middle school student participants. Once data was collected and analyzed, findings were
prepared and are presented in Chapter 4.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to report and discuss the findings of this study, which explored the ways in which struggling adolescent readers understand and experience engagement-related factors within both push-in and pull-out reading intervention at (pseudonym) Bernese Middle School (BMS).

This chapter begins with a brief review of the study’s context. The results of the pre-study surveys are then described, and the process by which interview participants were selected is detailed; study participants are individually introduced. Common themes and subthemes, as well as themes unique to specific individuals are presented. The chapter concludes with a summary of research findings.

Study Context

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of struggling adolescent readers as they engage in a reading support program with services in and out of their literacy classroom. A qualitative study, it employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology. IPA explores lived experiences, and the interview process captured the meaning making among these adolescent participants, the researcher, and the information that was shared (Smith et al., 2009).

This study considered the lived experiences of struggling readers in middle school. A pre-study survey was completed by eleven students in grades five through eight in a suburban middle school in New Jersey; this middle school serves grades five through eight. Six students enrolled in reading support at the research site were then selected for the interview process based on the data collected from the pre-study survey. Each of the six invited students agreed to participate in a one on one interview.
Pre-Study Survey Results

Recruitment emails were sent to the forty-nine BMS students currently enrolled in reading support, as well as to their parents. Fourteen parents responded to the recruitment email to express interest in the study, and a total of eleven of these fourteen parents returned signed parental permission for their children to participate in the study. These eleven students were comprised of five students in fifth grade, four students in sixth grade, and two students in eighth grade (signed permissions slips were not returned from any seventh grade students). These eleven students completed pre-study survey data.

Survey questions are informed by Fredricks’ theory of engagement and span cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects of engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The survey posed twenty-four statements pertaining to engagement within both reading support and the literacy classroom (Appendix D); students responded to each statement using a Likert scale with scores ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 signifying Never, 2 signifying Hardly Ever, 3 signifying Sometimes, 4 signifying Most of the Time, and 5 signifying All of the Time. Students’ survey responses were aggregated to determine overall engagement scores, employing reverse coding for appropriate questions. Seven students with the lowest aggregate engagement scores were considered potential interview participants; this limited sample size is in keeping with the idiographic aspect of IPA. One potential participant was eliminated from consideration due to an ongoing medical condition, so six of these seven students were invited and consented to participate in the interview portion of the research.

Participants’ survey responses revealed certain commonalities and other areas in which responses were notably dissimilar. Despite their low overall engagement scores, all six students believed they exhibited behaviors typically associated with good students. Scores for “I work
hand,” “I listen carefully,” and “I follow the rules” were all fours (*Most of the Time*) and fives (*All of the Time*); however, survey responses linked to engagement were strikingly divergent, with responses to “I am excited by what I do in support” and “I check my work for mistakes in support” ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*All of the Time*). Responses that would indicate enjoyment (“I like being in support”, “I like learning from books I read in support”) fluctuated slightly less, ranging from 2 (*Hardly Ever*) to 5 (*All of the Time*). Complete survey results for all participants are included in Appendix F.

One-on-one interviews provided opportunities for each participant to share his/her own feelings related to the reading support program at the middle school. The interviews were generally structured around the ten questions included in the interview protocol in Appendix E. Given that IPA recognizes that each individual’s experience is unique in relation to the phenomenon being studied, each of the six conversations was distinctive and followed its own course.

**Participants**

**Caroline**

Caroline is a fourteen year-old eighth-grade student who shared that she has attended district schools since kindergarten. Caroline talked about the fact that she has been in reading and math support on and off throughout the years, and that her parents have provided her with outside tutoring for many years. Caroline also shared that there are years where she is invited to enroll in support and she chooses not to, and other years in which she is invited and participates. Caroline received reading support in eighth grade through a push-in model; i.e. by a reading specialist who came into her literacy class.
Caroline talked about her parents having meetings at school to discuss her academics. She said she likes to write more than she likes to read. When asked about a favorite book, she recalled a book called *Five Little Kittens* from when she was younger. She was able to name all of the literacy teachers she has had in middle school easily. She indicated that her favorite teacher is the French teacher, but she said this did not mean French was her favorite subject.

Caroline said she has many friends and enjoys sports. Caroline presented as completely comfortable within the interview setting, expressing her thoughts clearly and in detail. The interviewer taught her older sister years ago, so Caroline and the interviewer have some familiarity with one another. Her interview lasted over fifty minutes, and her answers presented a depth of experience that was unmatched by the other participants. During the final few minutes Caroline shared a personal sense that her teachers this year do not care about her as a person, indicating “They’re just like us [the 8th grade students] … they are just waiting for the day to be over.” After sharing this, her response to the interviewer’s body language and facial expression (“You look so sad”) was considered by the interviewer as indicative of Caroline’s sensitivity and social awareness.

**Alan**

Alan is a thirteen year-old eighth-grade student who indicated he has attended district schools since kindergarten. He readily admitted that he likes math because he enjoys doing it, but that he does not enjoy any element of literacy. While he acknowledged receiving reading support in both elementary and middle school, Alan was only able to recall the names of two reading support teachers throughout his school career.

During eighth grade Alan received reading support during the first semester in a pull-out setting. During the second semester Alan received reading support in a push-in model i.e. within
the literacy classroom. While Alan acknowledged the support teacher’s presence in the literacy classroom, likes him and recognizes that he is a reading support teacher, Alan did not perceive that the reading support teacher was in the classroom to work with him. He remembered the teacher from their work together in pull-out support during the first semester, yet Alan insisted during the interview that he was “not in it [reading support] anymore.”

While Alan and the interviewer were known to one another by face, they had never spoken before the day of the interview. Alan presented during the interview as a man of few words. Alan’s responses to many open-ended questions were largely minimal (e.g. “Okay,” “All right,” “Yeah”), though he was animated and verbose during one section of the conversation. More than once the interviewer found herself restating her perception of Alan’s comments, in order to ensure she understood his intended meaning. Alan’s longer responses were sometimes grammatically incorrect, and he asked for questions to be repeated. Though about to head off to high school, Alan’s verbal contributions were unsophisticated. It is unclear whether this was due to Alan’s speaking and listening skills, his comfort in the interview setting, disinterest in the study process, or some combination of these factors.

**Lucas**

Lucas is a twelve year-old sixth-grade student who shared that he has attended district schools since kindergarten. He indicated that he has received reading support in both elementary and middle school. The reading specialist who sat in on the interview, thought she has never taught Lucas and claimed to have no relationship with him, described him afterwards as someone teachers perceived as a “good boy” who is eager to please. He told the interviewer he likes reading, “but not to the point where I’m gonna read like three hours a day every single day.” It would seem that Lucas’ family most likely values reading, in that he referenced receiving books
as Christmas and birthday presents; yet when pressed for a favorite book, he could not name a current favorite or one from his earlier years. The interviewer’s impression was that Lucas wanted her to think he liked reading more than he might actually like to read.

During the second semester of sixth grade Lucas received reading support from both of the school’s reading specialists; one teacher provided support in a pull-out session and another provided support within Lucas’ literacy classroom. He indicated during the interview that he had no preference for either model of reading support, and that he was a student who viewed every period as “just … another classroom.” He indicated that during the school day he did not look forward to any class more than another, and that his attitude entering any classroom was, “All right, here I go.”

**Tommy**

Tommy is a twelve year-old sixth-grade student. He shared that he attended a local parochial school through the end of fourth grade, joining the public school system in middle school. He and the interviewer were completely unknown to one another prior to the interview. Tommy’s verbal contributions during the interview were perceived by the interviewer as somewhat exaggerated and disjoint. For example, when asked about his transition to middle school, he initially indicated that the parochial school he attended was “horrible.” When asked what was “horrible,” he indicated there were good and bad things. The interviewer then asked for clarifications, and Tommy recited a litany of factors in a monotone voice (“had recess, started at 8 AM, wore uniforms”), but it was unclear to the interviewer which of these he perceived as good and which he perceived as bad. Tommy also contradicted his anecdotal comments, at one point indicating he was watching a movie that he later said he hadn’t seen.
Tommy currently receives reading support in both a pull-out session and within his literacy classroom; all of this support is provided by the same teacher. During the interview he indicated that he had no preference for either model of reading support. Tommy indicated he had also worked with this same teacher while in fifth grade. Though Tommy has known this teacher for the last two years, he indicated that he never talked about his feelings with her, or with any other teacher at school.

Sam

Sam presented as a very polite, young boy. He is ten years-old and in the fifth-grade, and he indicated that he has attended district schools since kindergarten. He shared that he has received reading support in both the elementary school and the middle school, and that he has also had tutors provided by his family after-school to help with his reading. The interviewer taught his older brother years ago, so Sam and the interviewer have some familiarity with one another.

To the interviewer, Sam seemed by far the youngest of the interview participants. Unusually small in stature, Sam is the youngest child in his family and could easily pass for a third grader. He was sweet and accommodating, and indicated he was excited to be part of the study. Despite this, he seemed a bit nervous during the beginning of the process. He indicated that he might “seem like I’m crying … because I have allergies. It makes me cry sometimes when I’m actually not.” He repeatedly told the interview that he wanted to continue and “you’re not making me cry,” even as he reached for the tissue box.

During the second semester of fifth grade Sam received reading support in a pull-out session. He indicated during the interview that he felt good about the support, thinks “it’s a fun
class” and thinks the teacher “is a really nice teacher,” adding “I just feel like he gets me more than other people.”

**Madalyn**

Madalyn is a ten year-old fifth-grade student who shared that she has attended district schools since kindergarten. She shared that she is the third child in a family of four, and is the only girl in her family. While the interviewer has spoken to Madalyn’s mother over the years in various capacities, Madalyn and the interviewer have never spoken to one another. Despite this, Madalyn presented as self-assured and completely comfortable in the interview setting. She came in smiling and left the same way, indicating she was eager to participate in the process.

It must be noted that Madalyn was the only student who took the survey who responded to the Likert scale in numbers that were not whole. Rather than limiting her responses to the whole numbers that were offered, Madalyn indicated 1.5 or 4.99 for some responses. In scoring her responses, numbers that were midway between other alternates were kept as-is, while numbers that were exceptionally close to more-acceptable values were changed for scoring e.g. 4.99 was changed to 5. Madalyn’s survey responses created the impression of a girl who is not afraid to color outside of the lines.

**Thematic Coding**

The idiographic nature of IPA speaks to an approach which values the particular i.e. IPA studies interpret how particular people within a particular context understand and make meaning from particular events, processes or relationships (i.e. the phenomenon under consideration). Smith et al. (2012) recognize that in studies with sample sizes greater than one, “patterns of meaning” should be sought as participants reflect upon shared or similar experiences. The authors remind researchers that solid IPA studies should seek for shared themes without losing
distinct voices, in that IPA analysis should point out both convergence (i.e. patterns of similarity) and divergence (i.e. the ways in which an individual participant’s experience is unique) (Reid et al., 2005; Smith, 2011).

What follows explores themes revealed through participants’ interviews. Participants all felt that reading support teachers demonstrated understanding and caring, and they described varied ways their personal agency was leveraged; Figure 2 presents convergent themes that emerged across interviews specific to issues of teacher-student relationships and student agency.

Figure 2. Means by which adolescents in reading support experience relationships with support teachers.

Common Themes and Subthemes

“He’s generally just really nice” (Lucas). All participants’ remarks revealed a simple notion: if a teacher was perceived as nice or kind, the student believed the teacher cared about him/her. This was certainly true for reading support teachers. For when asked why they
believed their support teacher cared about them as people, the first response offered by all participants was that they thought their reading support teachers were nice.

During the initial phase of the interview participants were also asked questions designed to build rapport. One question asked about a favorite teacher, and participants again spoke to perceptions of teacher kindness; so it would seem that nice or kind teachers are not only perceived as caring about students, but that students like them in return. Tommy named a science teacher as his favorite and spoke about the fact that she gave him an extra day to turn in a permission slip for an end-of-year pool party. Caroline also intimated that perceiving a teacher is nice is enough of a reason for choosing him/her as a favorite, indicating that she chose one particular teacher as her favorite solely because she “just” found her to be nice.

Younger students seemed more likely to link their feelings about a teacher to their feelings about the class or a content area that teacher taught. Madalyn, a fifth grader, said she was excited about going to pull-out reading support because she knew the teacher already (the teacher had pushed-in to the classroom in a previous semester) and “I liked her … she’s nice.” She also likes her literacy teacher and believes her feelings about the work she does in the class and her feelings about the teacher are “kind of both together.” Similarly Sam, the other fifth grade participant, indicated that his favorite teacher taught his favorite subject, math. He too thinks that “reading is a better thing” because of his support teacher.

Yet the link between seeing a teacher as nice and favorably viewing the content the teacher is responsible for teaching may become more tenuous as students age. Caroline, an eighth grader, indicated that she liked to write in fifth grade specifically because of her feelings about the teacher, but this was no longer true for her in eighth grade. Alan named math as his favorite subject because “It’s something I enjoy doing,” though his reading support teacher is his
favorite teacher (though he said he didn’t like any part of literacy work). At the time of their interviews neither eighth grade participants saw a link between their favorite teachers and their favorite subjects.

Caroline also spoke about her need for teachers to be consistently nice. When asked how any teacher in any subject area shows that he/she cares about a student, she replied “they just need to be very friendly even if they have a bad day. I think they should be nice to the kids.” It was clear that for this eighth grade young woman, teachers that are perceived as nice on a daily basis are the teachers that she thinks care about her. Sam echoed this need for consistency when he said that he trusts his support teacher because he is “always” nice.

Sam’s comments also revealed that his sense of a teacher’s niceness is influenced by his perception of the interest the teacher has in his life. He said that his reading support teacher is nicer than other teachers. When asked to explain why he thought this, he shared that his reading support teacher asks him about his day and his weekend, something his other teachers do not do. Alan echoed this sentiment.

**Personalizing learning.**

*The teacher notices my needs – “She knew I already read that book” (Madalyn).*

Teachers that notice a student’s personal need are perceived as understanding and caring. When asked about why she thought her reading support teacher understood her, Madalyn referenced a situation in which her small group was reading a book she had already read. The fact that her reading teacher recognized that Madalyn had already read the text was interpreted by Madalyn as a sign that her support teacher cared about her. Sam talked about the ways his reading support teacher “listens” to him, indicating that he perceived this as a sign of caring. He said he believed his support teacher did this so that, “he always knows it for the next time”
For students noted a temporal aspect to teachers’ recognition of their needs, in that remembering needs across classes was further interpreted by students as an indication of caring. Madalyn spoke of a time when her teacher knew that she needed a new book to read and helped her find one in a later session. Sam spoke about his support teacher referencing work they had done previously together – comments he perceived as a sign of his support teacher’s understanding of him personally. He also mentioned that in anecdotal conversations about social occasions outside of school, his support teacher would reference things Sam had previously shared, which he believed meant his teacher cared about him.

Participants seemed to count on their support teachers to know which specific skills they needed academically. When asked about why he believed his support teacher cared about him, Tommy talked about the fact that his support teacher recognizes he has to work on his writing more than his peers do, a need he described as “mainly [for] me.” Similarly, Lucas shared that his support teacher knew he had to work on vocabulary and to increase his reading level. Interestingly Caroline, in speaking of a teacher in another discipline, mentioned that he “probably doesn’t even know what my problem is.” It was clear that Caroline believes a teacher has a responsibility to diagnose a student’s personal learning needs; while she said she did not see this teacher as a “bad person,” she interpreted the fact that he did not know her personal academic needs as indication that he did not care about her.

*The teacher addresses my needs – “The kid needs help in something else, but the other kid in class doesn’t” (Caroline).* Once a student perceived that the teacher knew of his/her particular need for assistance, he/she interpreted targeted attention for this perceived personal need as an additional sign of the teacher’s caring. For example, Lucas saw reading support as an intervention designed to “get his [reading] level up.” He referenced how he might be reading
with the reading support teacher while other students were working on other tasks, and saw his reading support teacher’s efforts to help him improve in his own area of need as evidence of his teacher’s caring. Caroline thought everyone deserved “their fair share of help for what they need,” believing that the support teacher should “help the other kid and then go back to the other kid.” She perceived that in elementary school the whole class needed help with a common topic, but saw middle school as a time where students’ academic needs were more disparate. Hence if a support teacher cared about a student, he/she should address that student’s specific needs.

Students’ perception of personalized attention seemed tied to their understanding of their own needs. As a fifth grade student, Sam perceived his support teacher’s mission broadly (“He wants me to get better in reading and writing”), and believed that all of his support teacher’s efforts were tied to this goal. As a sixth grade student, Lucas was more specific about his needs, clearly linking his work in reading support to his perceived deficits. He spoke of quarterly assessments in the literacy classroom that gauged his progress toward grade-level expectations, and believed his work in reading support provided him with additional opportunities to close the gap between his reading skills and those of his more-successful peers. He also spoke of vocabulary assessments and the ways in which reading support provided him with time to study, which he did not have outside of school due to social and sports commitments.

In considering how well support targeted their perceived needs, there was evidence that older students also internally weighed the overall efficacy of the support that was provided to them i.e. they did not just consider how well the help provided matched their perception of need, but whether they thought support was working to help them improve. Alan, an eighth grade student, spoke about his increased confidence on reading assessments as a result of support (“I think I can do better on them”). He shared that he considers literacy as an important content
area, because you need to know how to “write and read in real life, so like for a job” and credits support with helping him to become a better reader. The other eighth grade participant, Caroline, while acknowledging that she reads more because of the time she spends reading in support, shared that she did not find reading support as helpful in eighth grade as it had been in the past:

[I]n middle school I just don’t think it was that effective. She [the reading support teacher] always asks us about our [literacy] class that me and the one other kid [are enrolled in], and we tell her we don't really have that much work in this class or we finished that in this class and then she just lets us read our independent book the whole time, so that's all we do.

Caroline’s narrative reveals that her reading support teacher calls upon her as the student to articulate what she needs; her ability to do so is both linked to how well she understands these needs, as well as her understanding of how the support program can address them. Caroline is presented with many signs of her reading struggles – her reading level is considered below the target for the grade, she receives bad grades in literacy, and she has never passed a standardized test. Yet she has limited understanding of why she is in support (“There’s no big problem to help out with”). This limited understanding of her own needs ultimately impacts both her personal sense of the efficacy of reading support, as well as her feelings about her support teacher.

**Personalizing experiences by leveraging agency.**

**Choice – “I think they should ask the kids” (Lucas).** Teachers’ successful efforts to personalize the learning experiences of participants often recognized adolescent students’ need for increased agency. As young as fifth grade, Sam told me that he didn’t want to be “forced” to do things in support. Lucas thought that students should be given choices “because they’re [the
ones] doing it.” Caroline, in thinking back to life in elementary school, indicated that middle grade students benefit from more options because “it’s different in middle school.” And Alan, in explaining why as an eighth grade student he preferred a teacher that was less directive, said “eighth graders can be hard to tell what to do. Sometimes they like their own …mindset.”

Many students indicated that generally they were provided choices in terms of activities within reading support. Madalyn referenced a poster her teacher had with writing options, and that her teacher allowed her to “pick” which writing activity she wanted to complete. Lucas shared all of the ways that his reading support teacher provided opportunities for him to choose between reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities; while Lucas shared that sometimes choices were left up to the students, there were times that the choice was more teacher-guided (in that the support teacher offered options, but suggested which choice made the most sense for that particular day). He also talked about times when he was forced to go along with something that was not his choice. Though compliant, he indicated that this negatively colored his feelings about the teacher and the time he spent in support for the day. While eighth-grade Alan indicated initially that he did not perceive having choices, he did think that options were more important for middle school students than for elementary students, sharing “we're getting into high school, so you want these things to succeed.” It was clear that Alan thought making choices was an aspect of agency linked to his future success.

**Independence – “I prefer doing it by myself” (Sam).** When selecting texts for their reading, students spoke to a desire for freedom. Fifth-grade Sam, in comparing text choice within both his support classroom and his literacy classroom, told me he didn’t mind when his teacher presented him with a set from which to choose. While his classroom teacher offers him a choice between two books, he said he prefers the “opportunity” to pick books in his support
classroom, where he is offered a wider range of choices. Lucas said he feels very comfortable choosing books for himself and said he “likes to be independent,” describing himself as “self-aware” of his reading level and what makes a good fit. Alan too spoke about his own comfort choosing books to read, describing the process of reading blurbs and have the chance to “see which one picks you.”

Examining – “If you really did ask the student what the problem was, then maybe you could figure it out” (Caroline). Agency is not only defined by abilities to make choices and act independently. For inherent in the notion of agency, in addition to determining one’s course of action and acting upon it, is the processes of reflection or self-examination (Bandura, 2001). To discover students’ thoughts around this concept, the interviewer explicitly asked participants to reflect upon why they had been placed in reading support and what they thought about the different models of support. Students’ comments generally revealed they had little understanding of why they had been selected for support.

Fifth-grade student Sam was unsure of why he was “assigned” to the class, indicating that this could have been at his father’s request or at a teacher’s; he mentioned other students who had exited or entered the program, stating he did not know why. “Nobody talks about that part.” While Madalyn, also a fifth-grade student, did not question her presence in the support class, she believed that middle school students should be asked whether they preferred support within the literacy classroom or in a pull-out setting. As a sixth grade student Lucas said he “kind of” understood why he is in reading support. He talked about comparing his literacy skills to those of his classmates in Social Studies:
Sometimes I’ll see some other person’s essay that’s not in reading support and be like, "Wow, that's really good." But then there's some people I see and then I wouldn't generally think that they're smarter than me at literacy stuff.

Older students were no different. While eighth grade student Caroline believed she was in reading support because she does not do well on tests, she shared that she has never been asked by teachers or guidance counselors if she wants to be enrolled in the support class. She thought teachers just asked her mother. She also shared that there is no questioning around what she should be specifically working on: “no one really asks me, ‘What do you have a problem with?’ Maybe you don't need to be in the [support] class.” Her comment was that “they” want her in reading support, but when asked who “they” are, Caroline was unsure; she did not indicate that she fought the decision, only that she did not know how it had been made. Alan too indicated that he had been “told” to take the class.

“She makes me want to be more” (Tommy). When a teacher conveys a sense that he/she is rooting for a student’s success, the student’s sense is that a teacher cares wholeheartedly. Students had mixed success with describing the ways by which teachers promote this sense. Individual students also shared that when they felt this way they enjoyed learning more and felt more positively about reading.

Students’ developmental stage seemed to play a part in how well they could express their sense of how much they thought their teacher believed in them. Sam believed that his teacher was “rooting” for him simply because he was “trying to help” him. Tommy said it was just a feeling he had, and that he couldn’t explain it. By contrast, Caroline did not see any teachers go “all out” for her in eighth grade the way they had when she was in earlier grades. Only Alan clearly contrasted his experiences with two different teachers to explain his ideas.
Alan sees both his literacy teacher and his reading support teacher as adults who direct his actions and “tell him what to do.” Yet it was clear that the ways in which they go about this, to Alan, are very different. His literacy teacher is seen as someone who “blame[s] …us” and is “always there like ‘Sit down.’” While he only mentioned this teacher once, his remarks painted a picture of a teacher that Alan sees as somewhat of an adversary. By contrast, Alan shared that his reading support teacher is “energetic,” “walks around the classroom,” and tells students “C’mon, we’re a team.” Alan said that this support teacher, unlike his literacy teacher, “make[s] students get into it.” Alan was more animated during the portions of the interview when he described this teacher’s enthusiasm and his sense that this teacher “rooted” for his success. Not only did he share an unquestionable belief that the teacher cared about him, but his affection for this support teacher was quite apparent.

Individual students also shared that when they felt this level of caring from their reading support teacher, they enjoyed learning more and some felt more positively about reading overall. Sam repeatedly used the word “fun” to describe his experiences in reading support, indicating that his reading support teacher “makes me feel that reading is more a better thing, and how writing could be more fun.” Madalyn too talked about specific games that were played in support, again using the word “fun.” Alan talked about the fact that he enjoyed learning with his support teacher, though he shared that he only felt an increased urge to read when in his presence (and that he did not believe that there was anything his support teacher could do to change this). By contrast, Tommy said he thought his teacher’s belief in him not only convinced him that she cared, but changed the way he felt about reading overall.
Individual Themes

“I was hoping that maybe the teachers would then come and talk to me” (Caroline).

Most participants spoke honestly about their feelings about all aspects of reading support, but Caroline was the only student who spoke at length about feelings that could be considered negative. She receives reading support (and, quite coincidentally, math support) in a push-in setting. While Caroline believes her support teachers understand and care about her, she clearly does not feel this way about her classroom literacy and math teachers.

Caroline explicitly spoke about the resentment she feels for both of these teachers. She perceives they don’t “come out of [their] way” to find out and address her needs. It was apparent that Caroline, a struggling student who says she wants to do well in school, has the sense that her teachers don’t care about her because she perceives they have not taken efforts to diagnose and address her areas of need. It must be noted that Caroline does not present as a negative or unhappy person (traits often ascribed to adolescents). While the interview questions focused on Caroline’s feelings about reading support, the conversation’s focus on feelings about relationships with teachers continually brought her back to her feelings about these classroom teachers; as such, her comments are worthy of consideration:

I’m really bad in math, so I feel like he never comes one-on-one to talk to me. He probably doesn't even know what my problem really is in the math class, so I think it's just he sees that I'm not getting good grades and he doesn't want that to reflect on him, so he gets like, "Oh, let's put her there [in support]." It's a way to show that they think they're doing something about it because they want it to just be like, “Oh, it's not me. It's the student.”
Caroline’s sense is that her classroom teacher knows she is experiencing learning difficulties, but seems unable or unwilling to address them … hence she is placed in support. She later referenced this as the reason she and her family had refused support services in prior years. She explicitly stated that she refused to avail herself of additional support in reading and math in the past, in the hope that her classroom literacy and math teachers would work with her on her individual needs. Given that this did not happen, she agreed to be enrolled in support classes in eighth grade.

“The part of being social is important” (Alan). Alan has experienced reading support this year in both push-in and pull-out settings. As an eighth grader with a long record of receiving reading support, he was well-positioned to compare and contrast the different possible support models. Interestingly, though he currently receives support in a push-in setting, he held firm to the idea that the reading support teacher is not in the room to support him. He was unemotional and matter of fact when he said, “I’m not in it anymore,” and the interviewer had no sense that Alan was trying to kid himself or her. Questions posed to Alan around push-in support were reworded to simply reference the reading support teacher’s presence in the classroom.

Alan clearly indicated that at this age he prefers receiving support within his literacy classroom as opposed to the support he received earlier in the year in a pull-out setting. He appeared most comfortable during the interview while speaking of the social aspect of this support. He indicated that he works well in an atmosphere of “friends and teachers,” and prefers this to working in a separate space with a small group. Alan shared that he feels he is more productive in this setting, stating “you can get stuff done because it like spreads around.” When asked to clarify what “it” referenced, he said “what to do and not to do.” It would seem that
Alan was trying to articulate that he feels more supported in a bigger group because he can learn from more people; this would seem to imply that he is learning as much from peers as from teachers, for he said “you can … talk to …know what you're doing.” He said this social part had become more important as he got older, which he attributed to the time he spends with peers both in and out of the classroom. He also referenced that fact that students moved from classroom to classroom, and there was a sense on the part of the interviewer that Alan enjoyed spending time with peers that he might not see in other classes.

   Not only does Alan think he is more productive in these settings, but he claims to learn more and enjoy learning more in this setting. He links this to the availability of help: “It's the environment with people around me, so it's like there's always people wanting to help you.”

   **Summary of Findings**

   This research considered the perspectives of middle school students as they engaged in a reading support program with services in and out of the literacy classroom. The interview questions focused on teacher relationships and student agency within models of push-in and pull-out literacy support, as these were identified as environmental-specific, engagement-related factors with influence over adolescents’ experiences in school. Participants all felt that reading support teachers demonstrated their caring in generalized ways, in that teachers behaved in a kind manner.

   Student participants interpreted their teachers’ personalized attention to their needs (whether by noticing what they needed or addressing those needs) as evidence of their kindness. As part of this personalized attention, students described specific ways that support teachers provided them with choices. Students also described their feelings when they perceived that teachers rooted for their success; students interpreted this as further evidence of caring.
These themes will be further developed in chapter five with an eye towards the ways in which the literature, research questions and theoretical frameworks informed conclusions.

Implications for practice and future study will also be developed.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Research Findings

This chapter begins by revisiting the purpose of the research study, its overarching question, and the methodology employed. This leads into a discussion of major findings. The study revealed that students’ engagement within reading support at this school is influenced by: their feelings about both support teachers and classroom teachers, their sense of agency within the support environment itself, and their sense of agency within the school structures managing reading support.

Revisiting the Purpose of the Study

Students’ overall engagement with school is often negatively impacted during adolescence, and American middle schools typically do not typically support the behavioral, cognitive and emotional needs of adolescent students (Eccles & Roeser, 2009). While academic reading intervention focuses on developing the skills and strategies of competent readers, programs serving struggling adolescent readers may benefit from recognizing and addressing their specific developmental needs. For cognitive and affective aspects of reading (Roe & Goff, 2014) and the social spaces struggling readers inhabit (Hall, 2006) impact students’ experiences and skill acquisition.

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of struggling adolescent readers in a reading support program in relation to factors impacting their engagement within the program. The study focused on student-teacher relationships and student agency; for among the definitive, context-specific influences on students’ behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), students’ perceptions of agency, as well as their sense of relatedness to teachers, are identified as key (Mahatmya et al., 2012). Both stage-environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1990) and engagement theory (Fredricks et al., 2004) provided the
study’s framework. The study was grounded in a review of the literature on adolescence as a developmental stage, American middle school learning environments, and engagement within school through the lens of struggling readers.

**Revisiting the Research Question and Methodology**

The research question for this study asked, “What are the experiences of identified middle school students as they engage in a reading support program with services in and out of the classroom?” The study sought to explore the perceptions of students receiving services within their literacy classrooms (i.e. push-in), as well as students receiving services in a separate classroom outside of their literacy classrooms (i.e. pull-out). This necessitated an in-depth study of participants’ relationships with their learning environments.

This qualitative study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology, considering the lived experiences of participants in relation to the phenomenon of middle school reading intervention (Smith et al., 2009). Interview participants were six middle school students between fifth and eighth grade; participants were chosen for interviews because they were identified as less-engaged through a survey containing questions informed by Fredricks’ theory of engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The analysis focused on how each participant made sense of his/her lived experience within the program in regards to relationships with teachers and student agency.

**Major Findings**

The findings presented in chapter four were informed by the chosen theoretical frameworks and the relevant literature. The consideration of how participants’ experiences within the learning environments of push-in and pull-out reading support meshed with their developmental needs was supported by stage-environment fit theory. In addition, engagement
theory informed a consideration of the characteristics of the support environment found to impact students’ experiences and engagement, supporting a study of students’ relationships with teachers and their opportunities for agency. The literature review considered adolescence as a developmental stage, American middle school learning environments, and engagement within school through the lens of struggling readers; this served as a foundation for understanding how these participants understood their experiences within school-based reading intervention programs.

Through this study it became clear that there are myriad factors influencing participants’ understanding of their experiences within this academic intervention program. There is evidence that participants’ engagement within reading support is related to each of the following: their feelings about both support teachers and classroom teachers, their sense of agency within the support environment itself, and their sense of agency within the school structures managing reading support. It should be noted that while some of these findings speak to aspects of the learning environment, others may be qualities common to struggling adolescent readers or unique to a specific participant.

**Students’ Feelings About Teachers**

Students’ connectedness with teachers is recognized as an important component of best practice for middle level educators (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Bryant, 2014; Lounsbury, 2000). Though emotional engagement specifically considers feelings of belonging and relationships (Eccles & Roeser, 2009), this study did not discern between behavioral, cognitive and emotional engagement as the three are considered to act in concert, collectively influencing students’ overall school experience (Bryant, 2014; Fredricks et al., 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). The importance of relatedness in engagement is ubiquitous and
is supported by other theories as well; e.g., Connell’s motivational model posits that students’ sense of relatedness to teachers actually has a direct link to all three types of engagement (Mahatmya et al., 2012; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990), while self-determination theory considers relatedness to be among the three most significant influences on students’ motivation, (which is often considered the more-visible cousin to engagement) (Gnambs & Hanf stingl, 2016). As such, relatedness within the intervention environment warrants exploration for middle schools committed to the support of adolescents’ literacy needs.

**How important are relationships with support teachers for struggling adolescents in middle school?** Engagement theory recognizes that engagement is malleable and influenced by myriad elements of the learning environment (Fredricks, Blumfeld, & Paris, 2004; Mahatmya et al., 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). While relationships are considered a potential influence on engagement throughout school settings, it can be argued that their potential impact on learning is heightened within an academic intervention space where the primary goal is to help struggling students close the gap between their abilities and those of their peers.

Firstly, adolescent students who struggle in school indicate that when support is provided by someone with whom they have a relationship they view support as more effective (Brion-Meisels, 2015a). So without solid relationships between struggling learners and their support teachers, schools risk intervention efforts that are perceived by students as ineffective. Secondly, American middle schools provide fewer opportunities for positive teacher interactions than elementary classrooms (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993), so it can be harder in middle school for students to develop positive relationships with teachers; however, students’ ability to trust those charged with providing intervention actually influences whether or not they seek help (Brion-Meisels, 2015a). Taken in concert it would seem that, with limited
opportunities to engage with teachers, struggling adolescent students cannot realize the benefit of the academic support schools provide unless this support is provided by teachers they trust. Ultimately relatedness may not simply be a factor influencing engagement within an intervention setting, but its own type of “fundamental support” (Pianta et al., 2012, p. 369) for engagement.

**Feelings about support teachers.** Intervention programs that cultivate positive social and emotional relationships are often found to benefit the adolescents they serve (Brion-Meisels, 2015), and all study participants shared positive feelings about their support teachers. Chapter four details a host of ways participants expressed this idea to varying degrees. Students thought their support teachers were generally nice. Students believed their support teachers noticed and responded to their personal learning needs. And students thought their support teachers believed in their abilities and rooted for their success. Regardless of the model of support employed or the age of the student participant, there was little doubt that all participants believed their support teachers cared about them and their success.

*Does sharing a relationship with a support teacher provide enough relatedness for struggling learners?* In this study all participants clearly stated they trusted their support teachers and were comfortable seeking help from him/her. While Caroline questioned the degree to which she was asked to guide that help, it did not change the fact that she trusted the teacher and was at ease asking for help. Yet despite older students’ solid relationships with their support teachers, there was evidence that they did not always think reading support was “working” for them; this serves as evidence of their perception that reading intervention was not as effective as it could be.

Stage-environment fit recognizes the gulf between middle school spaces and students’ developmental needs. This study would indicate that the model of support employed can
perhaps address some of this divide. Eighth-grade Alan was vocal in his preference for receiving
support within his literacy classroom, explaining that he believes he enjoys learning more and
actually learns more when surrounded by peers. His perceived preference for leveraging the
social aspects of learning is consistent with the social and emotional needs of adolescents. In
addition to considering how the model of support employed dovetails with students’ needs and
feelings, the researcher was left to wonder whether attention should be devoted to the ways in
which relations with other teachers, i.e. those teachers other than support teachers, influence
students’ overall sense of relatedness.

**Feelings about other teachers.** Younger participants generally perceived that classroom
literacy teachers were “nice” and their classrooms were “fun.” Specific classroom activities
were shared as evidence of this. The positive feelings these students shared about their
classroom teachers largely mirrored what they shared about their support teachers. Younger
study participants spoke to the help they received from support teachers and from classroom
teachers in similar terms.

This was very different for older participants; as compared to the positive feelings they
shared about support teachers, both eighth grade participants perceived their classroom teachers
to be less responsive to their academic and social-emotional needs. Eighth grade study
participants spoke to a large disconnection between the attentive and trusting help provided by
support teachers and their perception of classroom teachers. They explicitly spoke of classroom
teachers they thought either did not understand them (and their peers), or did not care enough
about them to provide the help they needed. This is consistent with notions of stage-environment
fit, which recognizes that middle school teachers are less likely to provide either academic or
social-emotional support than elementary teachers (Eccles & Roeser, 2009).
Overall meaningful relationships with teachers support adolescent students’ engagement with school. Students that relate to their teachers report feeling more connected to school, and this sense of school connectedness is linked to increased motivation and student achievement (Mahatmya et al., 2012; Martin & Dowson, 2009). If the goal of intervention is ultimately to develop students’ abilities and increase their achievement, there is evidence that middle schools’ intervention programs would benefit by considering students’ relational experiences not only in support spaces, but also in the classroom settings that support these content areas.

**Feelings about relationships impact one another.** The study of engagement theory expanded from an initial consideration of purely academic factors impacting students’ achievement; it currently includes a multidimensional collection of overlapping categories and factors thought to impact students’ school experiences. Inherent in this development is an acceptance of the complexity of influences and an appreciation for interrelatedness. This is supported by research which recognizes that an adolescent’s relationships with specific adults or peers cannot be viewed in isolation, for these relationships impact one another (Brown & Larson, 2009; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009).

The extent to which students’ feelings about classroom teachers and support teachers influence one another is impossible to determine within the confines of this study. All that can be shared is the interpretation of the researcher; acknowledging this interpretation is consistent with IPA. There was a palpable difference in older students’ affects when sharing positive narratives regarding relationships with support teachers and the negative aspects of relationships with classroom teachers. When sharing positive feelings about support teachers’ caring and attention, eighth grade students’ body language was relaxed and at ease. When talking about feeling uncared for or ignored in regards to their classroom teachers, these students were
markedly more animated. They seemed to lean further over the table, to speak louder, and to sustain eye contact longer. Whether these two students felt more strongly about the negative feelings they shared, or whether these feelings eradicated or lessened the positive feelings these students had for their support teachers cannot be determined here.

Stage-environment fit posits that the increase in adolescents’ overall sense of disengagement and alienation from school (Pianta et al., 2012) is attributable to a gap between students’ needs and the attributes of schools (Eccles & Midgley, 1990). Students in middle school spend less time with individual teachers than their elementary counterparts, so middle schools’ instructional spaces are more isolated. Given the influence that relationships have over one another, there is evidence that middle schools’ intervention efforts should not simply consider students’ relational experiences in each separate educational setting. This study would indicate that intervention would benefit from staff work around the developmental needs of adolescents to engender common understandings of relatedness. In addition, structures that support the ways these relational experiences influence one another may have to be developed. This has potential to not only impact students’ engagement and ultimate achievement, but their overall sense of belonging within the school community (Griffiths et al., 2012; Schunk & Mullen, 2012).

Students’ Sense of Agency Within the Support Environment

In addition to students’ connectedness with teachers, students’ ability to share in decision-making processes is recognized as important for middle level educators (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Bryant, 2014; Lounsbury, 2000). For middle school students seek intervention that provides them with agency (Brion-Meisels, 2015a). Recognizing that participants in this study were struggling readers whose scores on an accepted engagement
instrument indicated they were largely disengaged, it is important to note that when teachers are faced with students they perceive as disengaged, they typically react with a more controlling style rather than a more autonomy-supportive style (Reeve, 2012). This control can limit all aspects of students’ agency – their abilities to make choices, devise and enact courses of action, and examine their own functioning – to act autonomously (Bandura, 2001).

In this study, agency as the ability to make choices within the support environment was chiefly revealed through students’ freedom in choosing texts and activities. Evidence of agency as independence within the support environment (i.e. charting one’s course and following it), though not spoken of explicitly, was partially revealed through students’ references to their independent reading levels. Evidence of reflection within the support environment (i.e. examining one’s functioning) was partially revealed through students’ comments surrounding their perception of the efficacy of their academic support.

**Choices.** Participants at all grade levels indicated they were provided opportunities for choice. They were given options for activities to complete, as well as the ability to choose texts to be read. This was consistent across all grade levels and models of support, clearly creating an impression that support teachers were leveraging students’ opportunities for choice within the support setting.

Choices were often provided within parameters. In speaking of options for activities to complete, students recounted being explicitly provided “either this … or that” tasks by their support teachers. In choosing texts, students described the ways their support teachers guided selections; most often this was done by providing the student a limited number of teacher-selected texts from which to choose. Students did not question these methods, though one
student explicitly commented on preferring the wider choices of texts he was presented in support than the narrower number of choices he was offered in his literacy class.

Stage-environment fit recognizes that as adolescents renegotiate power dynamics at school, students are apt to reject teachers’ authority over what they view as personal choices (Smetana & Villalobos, 2009). Engagement theory, in recognizing that there are specific, changeable elements of learning spaces with influence over students’ overall engagement (Fredricks, Blumfeld, & Paris, 2004; Mahatmya et al., 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012) would acknowledge that providing choices for students is something over which teachers have control. It is encouraging to see that within the intervention spaces explored in this study, support teachers are crafting and leveraging opportunities for students to make choices. Overall, reading support settings at this site seemed to respect adolescent students’ need for autonomy through choice.

**Independence.** Independence as it relates to agency speaks to students’ opportunities to set goals, establish a course of action, and put this course of action into effect. It was clear that reading instruction within support at this research site assesses and tracks students’ independent reading levels, as multiple participants mentioned these levels during the interview process. Many understood their participation in reading support to be something designed to increase this level; this speaks to participants’ recognition that the overarching goal of the program is to develop students’ ability to read text of increasing complexity independently, i.e. without teacher support. Yet study participants were unsure of how this was to happen, and they certainly did not see themselves as having a role in the process.

Stage-environment fit recognizes that adolescents’ search for independence can create conflict with school authority figures (Elmore, 2009; Laursen & Collins, 2009). As adolescent
students naturally begin to test authority’s boundaries, adults in middle schools typically focus more energy on maintaining control within school buildings and within classrooms (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Roeser, 2009; Elmore, 2009). And when teachers are faced with students they perceive as disengaged, they react with a more controlling style rather than a more autonomy-supportive style (Reeve, 2012). This study would indicate that the developmental need these students have for independence is not being leveraged within the reading support program. Support teachers and their colleagues should develop structures and processes to provide for this independence, an idea that engagement theory supports in its recognition that engagement is influenced by specific elements of learning spaces (Fredricks, Blumfeld, & Paris, 2004; Mahatmya et al., 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

**Reflection.** Reflection as it relates to agency speaks to students’ opportunities to examine their own functioning. No evidence was provided to indicate that this was happening routinely for all participants within this support program. Yet without explicitly being asked, both older, eighth grade students spoke about whether they thought reading support was “working” for them. This provides some evidence that these participants are reflecting upon their experiences within the frameworks of academic support.

As children grow into adolescents, their ability to consider multiple ideas simultaneously enables them to monitor and manage their learning in ways that younger children cannot (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Mahatmya et al., 2012), and their ability to reflect upon their learning increases as they mature (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Kuhn, 2009). This developing ability to reflect is in keeping with the fact that, unlike their younger counterparts, adolescents view knowledge as objective rather than absolutist, and their understanding of the world develops a more multiplist or relativist outlook (Kuhn, 2009). The
fact that the older, eighth grade participants seemed to reflect upon their perceptions of the efficacy of their experiences within support without being explicitly asked is interpreted by this researcher as evidence that older adolescents may naturally engage in the act of reflection, while younger students may not. This is solely the researcher’s interpretation, as she acknowledges her interpretative role in the double hermeneutics inherent in IPA.

Brain development during adolescence is dependent upon experience (Kuhn, 2009; Thomas & Johnson, 2008), and current research acknowledges adolescents have a role in defining their own cognitive development (Kuhn, 2009). As stage-environment fit recognizes the disconnection between adolescents’ developmental needs and school structures (Eccles & Midgley’s (1990), there is evidence that reading intervention could benefit from providing additional structured opportunities for adolescent students to reflect upon their experiences within the program. This is supported by engagement theory’s notion that what teachers do within these spaces has impact on students’ engagement and achievement (Fredricks, Blumfeld, & Paris, 2004; Mahatmya et al., 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). It must be noted that any plan to provide additional opportunities for reflection must consider that students’ ability to engage in this work may be dependent upon factors that are not completely within their control, as cognitive changes during adolescence affect individuals at different ages, different rates, and in differing sequences (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Kuhn, 2009; Mahatmya et al., 2012; Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011).

**Students’ Sense of Agency Within the Structures of Reading Support**

Brion-Meisels (2015) notes that students’ voices are not often included in decisions surrounding the systems of support. Participants in this study spoke to their individual thoughts and perceptions regarding their experiences in the reading support program; however, there is
evidence that their sense of agency within the structures that manage the reading support program is also worthy of consideration. Overall, students did not seem to completely understand how they were chosen for support, or what they were trying to accomplish within the program.

**Do students understand why they are in reading support?** When participants were asked why they were in the reading support program, there was evidence that most students just assumed they needed help and support. Some participants tried to anchor the decision to participate in reading support to a perceived need; they spoke of needing to increase reading levels, or requiring help with skills, such as vocabulary mastery or elements of writing. Other students talked about being “signed up” by parents, or by teachers who believed they were not keeping pace with their peers. One student tried to understand his need for support by comparing his efforts in other classes with those of his peers, in an attempt to explain where he thought his work fell short; this comparison is evidence of his internalization of the “middle grades as sorting institutions” (p. 198) that Elmore (2009) believes typical of American middle schools.

Yet none of the participants seemed completely convinced that they understood the specifics of the decision-making process behind their own need for reading support, and the researcher believes they seemed comfortable taking a back seat in this regard. When one participant spoke of other students who had entered or exited while he remained, the researcher asked what he thought governed these decisions. He shrugged his shoulders without visible emotion. This perceived willingness to let others decide these things may be viewed as part of the passive behaviors typical of struggling readers (Dayton-Sakari, 1997).
Overall there was limited evidence that students had a clear understanding of why they were in reading support, and there did not seem to be any opportunity for students’ voices in the decision-making processes that enrolled students in the program. Processes to put students in support or remove them from support in this school do not acknowledge or address adolescent students’ burgeoning need for autonomy. None of the aspects of agency - making choices, devising and enacting courses of action, or examining functioning (Bandura, 2001) – are incorporated or addressed by the current system. This speaks to the notion of stage-environment fit (Eccles & Midgley, 1990), for the gap between approaches that might benefit adolescents and what is currently employed is notable.

**Do students understand what they are trying to accomplish within reading support?**

Cognitive engagement in the middle grades is more self-directed and self-regulated (Mahatmya, et al., 2012) than it is in earlier grades, and adolescents are more able than younger students to reflect upon their learning (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Kuhn, 2009). Yet all types of engagement in school generally decrease during adolescence, beginning with the transition to junior high (Eccles & Midgley, 1990; Griffiths et al., 2012; Lee, 2013; Mahatmya et al., 2012). If the participants in this study are disengaged (which is what their survey responses indicate), the question must be posed - How can the opinions and voices of students in reading support be honored in order to channel both the increased self-direction and self-regulation associated with middle grade students, along with adolescents’ increased desire for agency?

It must be assumed that processes exist within reading support that measure students’ progress within the program, as students’ reading levels were mentioned by participants throughout the interview process. It can also be assumed that students are not part of these processes. For while students spoke to perceived personal goals within the program, these needs
were shared as desired broad outcomes. There was no evidence that students actively participated in tracking their progress towards these desired outcomes. None of the participants spoke about their participation within any systemic processes measuring progress towards goals within the reading support program.

Goals are recognized as powerful external events within classrooms, with the power to support student engagement (Reeve, 2012). Including reading support students in on-going, explicit processes designed to track their progress towards measurable goals warrants consideration. This would provide students with opportunities to engage in all aspects of agency – to devise and enact courses of action, to make choices as paths are devised, and to reflect upon progress at predefined points along the way. This has the power to respect students’ developmental needs while leveraging the control that teachers have over engagement within the learning spaces they lead (Fredricks, Blumfeld, & Paris, 2004; Mahatmya et al., 2012; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012).

**Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The purpose of this study was to understand struggling adolescent readers’ perspectives of their engagement within both push-in and pull-out reading support at this site. Specifically, this study sought to answer the research question: What are the experiences of middle school students as they engage in a reading support program with services in and out of the literacy classroom? The study focused on relationships with teachers and opportunities for agency, as these were revealed to have import for adolescents. The methodology employed by this study considered the phenomenon of engagement in learning at the middle level through the lived experiences of six middle school students enrolled in the reading support program. Participants were identified as less-engaged than other students enrolled in the program through a survey
informed by Fredricks’ theory of engagement, containing questions which spanned cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Engagement theory and stage-environment fit theory were combined to create a lens to understand the perspectives of these struggling adolescent readers. The literature review considered adolescence as a developmental stage, American middle school learning environments, and engagement within school through the lens of struggling readers; this served as a foundation for understanding how these participants understood their experiences within school-based reading intervention programs.

Findings from this study can provide insight for middle schools who want to fully realize the latent benefits in their academic intervention programs. Based on these findings, implications include myriad ideas for building opportunities for agency; these opportunities include changes to the process controlling the reading support program as well as what happens within reading support itself. Once enacted, these changes will provide new pathways for inclusive conversations that should develop shared understandings among trusted adults regarding students’ needs, as well as more seamless experiences for adolescents. When combined with focused professional development around adolescent development, students’ experiences within intervention should be positively impacted.

The following implications for practice should be considered:

**Implication #1: Building Opportunities for Agency**

“Autonomy support involves …creating …conditions … in which students feel free to ask questions, express opinions, and pursue interests” (Reeve, 2012, p. 165). The system that is currently in place to manage reading support does not provide adolescent students with sufficient opportunities to exercise their autonomy, both within the structure of the system and within the
space of reading support. Figure 3 summarizes the current system, which reinforces the passive behaviors typical of struggling adolescent readers, and the proposed changes which would create conditions to afford adolescent students in reading support opportunities to play a greater role in their intervention experience. By building structures that offer students the chance to make choices, to devise and enact courses of action, and to reflect upon the realization of their plans, all aspects of student agency will be strategically put into play.

**Figure 3.** Study findings in comparison to alternatives informed by literature and theoretical framework.

**Discuss support options with students.** Firstly, the thoughts and ideas of adolescent students who are candidates for intervention services deserve to be solicited and respected. When students are identified as candidates for the reading support program, the adults responsible for their schooling owe them honest conversations. Parents, teachers, and guidance counselors should talk to each student about why he/she is considered a candidate for reading
support, the specific goals that will drive his/her participation in the program, and mechanisms in place to move the student towards exiting from the intervention program.

Secondly, students should have some voice as to which model of support might best fit their needs. Participants had strong opinions about this issue. One younger student shared that he wanted to have the additional opportunities that he believed were afforded him through pull-out support, adding that it was easier for him to concentrate in a smaller, more-quiet setting. An older student specifically spoke to learning within the social environment of his literacy class, not only preferring the company of peers but believing that he learned more when support was provided within the more social setting of the literacy classroom. Middle school students who are ready for increased agency deserve some choice in this matter, recognizing that possible scheduling constraints may limit the type of support available.

Putting these changes into effect will transform the existing system. The current system is one in which students do not have any understanding of why they are in support. The proposed system is one in which students’ voices and choices can be incorporated into the decision to have them participate, and the model of support they prefer.

**Incorporate opportunities for students to chart and enact their own course of action.** Once students have decided that they will participate in a particular model of reading support, the student, his/her teachers, and the support teacher should partner to establish specific, measurable goals for the student. Charting and enacting one’s course of action is a key component of agency, and setting goals is a concrete means to manage this process. This will promote students’ ownership over desired outcomes.

This change will alter the role of the support teacher and the adolescent student in support. The support teacher moves towards the role of facilitator, responsible for helping the
student set goals, and craft and enact plans to achieve them. The adolescent struggling reader will become more engaged and independent as a result of these changes, which should help him/her discard more passive learning behaviors.

**Incorporate opportunities for students to reflect and evaluate.** Once students have set learning goals and devised plans to achieve them, support teachers should partner with students to establish timelines and structures to support reflection. Monitoring progress towards goals is not only an important component of meaningful goal-setting, but a recognized component of agency. This progress monitoring should not only be linked to measurable interim goals that were set, but to evaluate the student’s progress towards the plan that was established governing an exit from support. This will further contribute towards promoting students’ agency and their ownership over desired outcomes.

This change further alters the role of the support teacher and the adolescent student in support. The support teacher continues to help the student while encouraging the student’s active and more independent participation in the learning process. The adolescent struggling reader will most likely become more engaged as he/she exercises all aspects of agency. He/she should be in the driver’s seat of the intervention experience, and when taken altogether, these systemic changes support students as the owners of their learning.

Brion-Meisels (2015a), in presenting the work of Mirón & Lauria (1998), reminds researchers that student resistance is in and of itself a form of agency. Support teachers working to help struggling adolescent students can find themselves continually and consistently working unsuccessfully to entice disengaged students. It is recognized that when students resist their teachers’ efforts, teachers typically react with a more controlling style than an autonomy-supportive style (Reeve, 2012). Taking the steps outlined here holds promise to break this cycle.
Implication #2: Supporting Students’ Sense of Belonging

**Developing a shared understanding of the student.** Taking the proposed steps will not only provide students enrolled in reading support increased agency. For the devised mechanisms will create opportunities for conversations. Parents, support teachers, classroom teachers, and guidance counselors will now engage in focused conversations with the student around his/her individual needs. For struggling students this should lead to a feeling of support provided by a team.

Yet these conversations will not only contribute towards the student’s sense that he/she is supported by a trusted group of adults. For in discussing the choice to participate in intervention, the differences between push-in and pull-out support, personal goals for the program, and paths to reach these goals, a more complete understanding of the student should result—what he/she prefers, what he/she needs, and what he/she believes about himself/herself as a learner. This understanding of the learner will not only be more complete, but will be shared by all who have participated in the process.

**Developing more seamless school experiences.** This common understanding of the student as a learner should then be shared with all teachers with whom the student comes in contact. For the potential in this plan is greater than merely providing struggling readers with more developmentally-appropriate control over their intervention experience or developing a greater understanding of the student by the adults upon whom he/she relies. It is to break down the barriers that exist among the isolated learning spaces of American middle schools.

Perhaps less tangible than other positive outcomes, these new expectations for the intervention experience and the conversations they require can ultimately lead to an increased understanding on the part of the school community regarding the needs of adolescents in general,
and struggling adolescent readers in particular. Each student is unique, and the puberty-triggered changes affecting adolescent students do so at different ages, different rates, and in differing sequences (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010; Kuhn, 2009; Mahatmya et al., 2012; Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011); however, there are certain commonalities to the middle grades that, if understood by all staff, can inform school decisions so that student experiences are based on shared understandings of what it means to be adolescent.

**Supporting teachers’ professional growth.** Lastly, this work to develop shared understandings of what adolescent students need and deserve should be broad. For once these conversations are launched, they should extend beyond concepts of relatedness and agency to include all aspects of adolescent development. By expanding this work beyond a single student, a single structure (i.e. reading support), or specific engagement-related factors such as relatedness or agency, students’ overall engagement, their resultant achievement, and finally their sense of belonging within the school community (Griffiths et al., 2012; Schunk & Mullen, 2012) can be impacted. This cannot rely simply on what happens within the intervention space.

Instituting these changes will require a commitment to ensuring that professional development efforts are approached from an asset-based mindset, for this work must focus on broadening staff’s appreciation for all the skills and talents students possess. Rather than solely relying on reading levels, staff must learn to appreciate that there is value in students’ voices and their need to make decisions for themselves. Support teachers seem positioned to take the lead in some of this work, as this study reveals that they currently understand the students in reading support in ways that classroom teachers currently do not. Structures and schedules to connect support teachers with classroom teachers, whether through dedicated common planning time, devoted professional value hours, or Professional Learning Community (PLC) initiatives should
be developed. Notably, providing students with a voice in the planning of these endeavors would be wise, as it will help ensure that their ideas and needs remain at the nexus of this effort. Next steps for this researcher will include all of these recommendations to ensure that student support in literacy meets the needs of struggling readers.

**Why Does This Matter?**

Disengaged, struggling adolescent readers run great risks, and middle school is the last chance for students in this district to receive targeted reading support. The research problem spoke to the fact that students who struggle to read in middle school can be left behind in all areas of the curriculum, for students in the middle grades are called upon to read-to-learn across settings (Gomez & Gomez, 2007). Not only does this impact their grades in many subjects, but it often draws peers’ attention to their reading difficulties in a variety of classes, risking their academic self-concept.

Adolescence is a developmental stage during which students’ self-concept is increasingly determined by their ability to achieve (Mahatmya et al., 2012), and students self-report that their reading confidence is based on a comparison of their abilities to those of their classmates (Butz & Usher, 2015). So struggling middle school readers can seem caught in an inescapable cycle where diminished achievement and diminished self-concept feed off of one another.

Left unchecked students’ future access to power and influence can be compromised. For an ability to read is still viewed as critical to success in the 21st-century economy (Gomez & Gomez, 2007). Despite 2018 federal court decisions to the contrary (Sawchuk, 2018), ethical educators recognize their responsibility to teach all children to read critically, for their future and the future of our nation may depend on this ability. Given that middle school reading
intervention may be the last hope for many students to meet grade-level expectations for reading independence, this research study holds promise.

**Implications for Future Study**

This study contributes to the literature on both learning engagement in middle school, as well as on middle school reading intervention programs. The results of this study also suggest several considerations for future research. These are based on both the results of the study and on its identified limitations.

**Contribution to Literature**

This study was grounded in literature about adolescence, American middle schools, and engagement within schools. The study’s findings surrounding relatedness and autonomy clearly connect with the literature regarding all three of these topics.

The consideration of literature regarding American middle schools was anchored by a focus on literacy intervention programs and a portrait of struggling readers. This study contributes to the existing research regarding the ways in which individual students make sense of and engage with the experience of intervention. The research design notably gives voice to middle school students enrolled in an intervention program. This study also broadens the scope of existing literature regarding models of intervention; available research does not currently speak to adolescents’ perceptions of push-in and pull-out reading support models, which this study begins to explore.

The literature suggests that adolescents seek greater autonomy than younger children (Mahatmya et al., 2012), yet students’ perceptions of autonomy decreases as the length of time they spend in school increases (Martinek et al., 2016). This study highlights school intervention structures that could support adolescents’ agency. The literature also suggests the importance of
relationships in the intervention paradigm (Brion-Meisels, 2015a). This study highlights struggling readers’ perceptions of the interrelatedness of relationships with teachers, suggesting that the efficacy of intervention depends upon more than students’ feelings about teachers within the intervention space.

**Limitations and Future Studies**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis in order to focus on the lived experiences of six individuals in reading support at this particular site. Interpretative phenomenological analysis appreciates a small sample size in order to position the researcher to thoughtfully interpret the ways in which participants make meaning while engaging with the phenomenon under consideration. This small sample size is a recognized limitation of the study.

This study was conducted at one suburban school in New Jersey. Participants ranged in grade level from fifth to eighth, though there were no participants in seventh grade. Participants were invited to be interviewed based on low scores on a survey designed to measure engagement, and the study’s intent was to solely rely on the voice of these students. Information regarding the students’ grades and test scores were not considered, nor were ideas from teachers or parents. There was no attention paid to race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

With these limitations in mind, future studies might:

- Repeat the study in another suburban middle school in New Jersey
- Repeat the study in another suburban middle school elsewhere in the country
- Repeat the study in an urban or rural middle school
- Repeat the study with a single grade level
- Repeat the study limiting students to a single gender
- Repeat the study with a case-study approach, limiting consideration to one
participant and including additional data sources (teachers, parents, grades, test scores, reading levels)

- Implement the study’s recommendations at this site and repeat this study

While some students did not indicate a strong preference for one support model or another, students with strong preferences for push-in or pull-out models seemed to vary by age. The student who preferred pull-out support, perceiving it as more quiet and providing additional “practice,” was in sixth grade. The student who preferred push-in support, perceiving it as more social and more effective, was in eighth grade. It would be interesting to consider more closely whether this is coincidental, or if there is evidence that students’ perceptions do vary by grade-level. For students participating in intervention over the course of years, it would also be interesting to consider more closely whether their perceptions seem to change over time.

**Conclusion**

This study’s intent was to explore struggling adolescent readers’ perceptions about their experiences within reading support. The findings from this study were informed by the six participants. While it cannot be assumed that their contributions represent the voices of all students in reading support, their ideas should help ensure that middle school literacy intervention efforts are better informed. There were a number of findings that emerged from this study.

First, students’ feelings about support teachers and classroom teachers are interrelated. This is supported by engagement theory’s evolution from an initial consideration of purely academic factors to a theory that recognizes the host of overlapping factors influencing students’ school experiences. It is also consistent with stage-environment fit theory’s acceptance of the relationship between students and their learning environments. This finding is also supported by
Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) notion of context as multiple spheres of influence, and the literature supporting struggling readers’ experiences as being influenced by environmental factors unrelated to literacy. While this study did not attempt to tease apart the extent to which participants’ feelings about support teachers and classroom teachers influenced one another, it was clear that they combined to influence students’ engagement within their intervention program.

Secondly, engagement within reading support is related to all aspects of students’ sense of agency within the support environment itself - the ability to make choices, to devise and enact courses of action, and to examine or reflect. Engagement theory recognizes that elements of the learning environment can be changed to influence engagement, and opportunities for autonomy are malleable aspects of the learning environment. Stage-environment fit recognizes that middle schools do not often support the developmental needs of adolescents, and adolescents’ increased desire for agency is one of these needs. The literature further supports this finding, in that it recognizes that adolescence is a time of renegotiation of power and testing of boundaries, a process that often leads middle schools to focus efforts on controlling students rather than granting them opportunities for autonomy.

Thirdly, engagement within reading support is related to students’ sense of agency within the school structures managing the intervention process. Engagement theory recognizes that there is a host of overlapping influences surrounding students’ school experiences. Stage-environment fit recognizes that structures common to middle schools do not often support the behavioral, emotional, or cognitive needs of students. This is consistent with reminders from literature regarding the negative impact on school engagement that begins during adolescence, and the idea that middle school learning spaces are more isolated than the spaces students
inhabited in elementary school. The literature also recognizes that students’ voices are not often included in the decision-making process surrounding their own support.

These findings are all clearly linked to the theories of engagement and stage-environment fit, as well as to the literature surrounding adolescence, the American middle school, and school engagement. Findings from this study suggest ways in which middle schools can structure intervention to provide increased opportunities for student agency. Discussing support options with students, incorporating opportunities for them to set goals within the intervention program, and devising mechanisms to support reflection and evaluation, all hold seem to hold promise. In addition, findings suggest steps that middle schools can take to support students’ sense of belonging. Promoting conversations anchored around support among school staff, parents, and students, when combined with professional development for teachers, should help promote more seamless school experiences for students and increase their sense of belonging within the school community.

There are myriad ways in which this research can be furthered. Extending this work to include other voices would be valuable. Focusing this work so as to include a more focused study on a single participant, while including other data sources, might also have merit. It would also be interesting to consider whether there is a discernable pattern to students’ preferences for specific models of support, or whether these preferences vary for one student over time.
References


Association for Middle Level Education. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young Adolescents* (4th ed.). Westerville, OH: Association for Middle Level Education.


Booth, M., & Gerard, J. (2014). Adolescents' stage-environment fit in middle and high school: The relationship between students' perceptions of their schools and themselves. *Youth and Society, 46*(6), 735.


doi:10.1177/0272431613480271


doi:10.1080/01443410.2015.1113236


Northeastern University. (2012). Human subject research protection. Retrieved from

[http://www.northeastern.edu/research/hsrp/](http://www.northeastern.edu/research/hsrp/)


doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2013.09.001

doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.05.003


doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.neu.edu/10.1037/0022-0663.82.1.22


doi:10.1111/j.1467-8721.2008.00537.x
http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/dedind.php

https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=ft


doi:10.1598/RT.63.3.2
Appendix A

This is the recruitment email that was sent to parents and students

Hello at home –

You know me as your principal, but I am also a student. I am in a doctoral program at Northeastern University and conducting research about reading support at BMS. I am interested in students’ thoughts and opinions so that I can make reading support at BMS as positive an experience for students as it can be. I am inviting your child to be part of this research study, since he/she is currently a student enrolled in reading support.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. It includes taking a 5-minute survey. Some students will then be invited to also participate in an interview, which will take about 45 minutes. Participants’ identity will be confidential and anonymous, as pseudonyms will be used.

If you have any questions or would allow your child to participate in the research, please respond to this email or give me a call at 908-285-1094. Please do not call or email me at work, as our communication regarding this research must go through my personal phone and/or Northeastern email address. If you email me at work or call me at work I will need to delete the email with no response and I will have to cut the phone call short for your protection in accordance with Northeastern guidelines. If you let me know that you agree with the study, I will explain the study in more detail, give you an opportunity to ask any questions and have you sign a permission form.

Thank you for considering my research study on reading support for students.
This is the script that was used to obtain verbal assent from participants after signed parental permission had been obtained (Appendix C).

You know me as your principal, but I am also a student. I am in a doctoral program at Northeastern University and I would like you to invite you to be in a research study. I am trying to learn more about how students who are in reading support at BMS think and feel about their experiences in the program. I am interested in your thoughts and opinions so that I can make reading support at BMS as positive an experience for students as it can be.

I would like for you to take this quick survey. After you complete the survey, I may want to interview you for about 45 minutes. We will just be talking, and you won’t have to read or write anything. No one else will know what you share, so this is completely confidential. Your teacher, your friends, and other administrators will not know what you tell me, and there will be no impact on your grades. If I interview you, I will audio-record our conversation and keep all of the information you share private and locked up. If it makes you feel more comfortable, you can invite any grown-up you want to sit with you while we talk. You do not have to participate, so this is completely up to you. Even if you say yes now, you can change your mind later. You don’t have to answer all my questions, and you can skip any that you don’t want to answer. There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study, but if you are interviewed I will give you a Northeastern University tee shirt. This would just be to thank you for your help, because I can’t learn more about the reading support program without the help of the students who are in it. Are you willing to participate in my research study?
Appendix C

This is the parental permission form that was used to obtain permission for students to be interviewed. Students’ verbal assent was also procured (Appendix B).

PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM FOR CHILD’S RESEARCH PARTICIPATION

You know me as your principal, but I am also a student. I am in a doctoral program at Northeastern University and I would like to invite your child to be in a research study. I am trying to learn more about how students who are in reading support at BMS think and feel about their experiences in the program. I am interested in their thoughts and opinions so that I can make reading support at BMS as positive an experience for students as it can be.

If you grant permission and your child agrees, I would like to ask your child to complete a 5-minute survey. The survey questions are attached for your review. I will eventually choose 6 students to interview from the survey respondents; the questions I will ask are aimed at learning more about how your child experiences reading support at BMS. The interview will take about 45 minutes. Your child may stop the interview at any time. To make sure I remember everything accurately, I would like to audio record the interview. Once the audio recording has been transcribed, this recording will be deleted. Your child can invite you, or any trusted adult, to sit in on the interview if he/she would be more comfortable.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and participation in this study will not involve any physical or emotional risk to your child beyond that of everyday life. Your child may withdraw from this study at any time -- you and your child will not be penalized in any way or lose any sort of benefits for deciding to stop participation. If you and your child decide not to be in this study, this will not affect the relationship you and your child have with BMS in any way. Your child’s grades will not be affected if you choose not to let your child be in this study. If your
child decides to withdraw from this study, I will ask if the information already collected from
your child can be used.

Taking part in this research study may not benefit your child personally, but his/her
participation will help me learn things that will help improve BMS’ reading support program. I
will use a pseudonym for your child and our school in my dissertation, so his/her identity as well
as our school’s identity will not be revealed. Participation in this study will involve no cost to
you or your child. Your child will not be paid for participating in this study, though if
interviewed he/she will receive a Northeastern University tee shirt as a thank you gift from me.

If you or your child have any questions, please reach out to me at
dempsey.lu@husky.neu.edu or 908-285-1094. I am most willing to discuss any and all aspects
of this research study with you.

**Parental Permission for Child’s Participation in Research**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the
opportunity to ask questions. I give permission for my child to participate in the research study
described above and will receive a copy of this Parental Permission form after I sign it.

_________________________________________________________  ______________________
Parent/Legal Guardian’s Name (printed) and Signature               Date
Appendix D


*This survey was used for students to report out on their self-perceived engagement.*

For each statement, please rate yourself on a scale of 1-5

1=Never, 2=Hardly Ever, 3=Sometimes, 4=Most of the Time, 5=All of the Time

1. I work hard to do my best in reading support ________
2. When I am in reading support, I listen very carefully ________
3. When I am in reading support, I just act as if I am working ________
4. I follow the rules in reading support ________
5. I get in trouble in reading support ________
6. I feel bored in reading support ________
7. I like being in reading support ________
8. I am interested in what I do in reading support ________
9. I feel excited by what I do in reading support ________
10. When I read a book in reading support, I ask myself questions to be sure I understand what it is about ________
11. I like learning things from books I read in reading support ________
12. I check my work for mistakes in reading support ________
13. I work hard to do my best in my literacy class ________
14. When I am in my literacy class, I listen very carefully ________
15. When I am in my literacy class, I just act as if I am working ________
16. I follow the rules in my literacy class ________
17. I get in trouble in my literacy class ________

18. I feel bored in my literacy class ________

19. I like being in my literacy class ________

20. I am interested in what I do in my literacy class ________

21. I feel excited by what I do in my literacy class ________

22. When I read a book in my literacy class, I ask myself questions to be sure I understand what it is about ________

23. I like learning things from books I read in my literacy class ________

24. I check my work for mistakes in my literacy class ________
Appendix E

Interview Protocol Form

Institution: Bernese Middle School (pseudonym)

Interviewee: Student’s pseudonym (Xxxx) Students will be offered the opportunity to self-select pseudonyms to increase their engagement within the interview process.

Date:

Push-In or Pull-Out Support?

Interviewer: Gretchen Dempsey, Doctoral Student at Northeastern University

RESEARCH QUESTION: What are the experiences of identified middle school students as they engage in a reading support program with services in and out of the classroom?

Part I:

Introductory Session Objectives (5-7 minutes): Build rapport, describe the study, and answer any questions.

Introductory Protocol

Hi, Xxxxx. I have asked you to speak with me today because you are in reading support and I believe you have a great deal to share about the program. My research project focuses on students’ experiences in reading support. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which both push-in and pull-out reading support can best support BMS students.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [If yes, thank the participant and turn on the recording equipment]. I may also be taking written notes. I assure you that all your responses will be kept confidential. When I write about you in my research, I will call you by a different name, a pseudonym. I will be the only one who has access to the recording, which will be destroyed after it is transcribed/changed to text. Before we begin I would like to confirm again that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) I do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?
Our conversation should last about 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of the participant’s general background with the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background

1. What grade are you in now? (Possible Prompts: Favorite teachers? Favorite subjects? Literacy as a content area?)
2. Have you ever been in reading support before this semester? (Possible Prompts: At this school? Push-in? Pull-out? Teacher?)
3. Do you have reading support now in your literacy class or as a separate class? (Possible Prompts: With what reading specialist? What period? Who is your literacy teacher?)

Part 2:

Xxxx, my primary interest today is learning about how you feel when you are in your reading support program. I am going to ask you some open-ended questions about your thoughts and experiences, and I hope you will share your thoughts honestly. If you talk about specific people (like teachers or other students) I will give them pseudonyms too.

1) When the bell rings and next period is reading support, how do you feel? (Possible prompts: Do you look forward to it? Why/why not?)
2) Do you feel like the reading support teacher understands you? (Possible prompts: What makes you feel that way? Do you trust him/her? Can you share your feelings with him/her? Does he/she try to understand how you see things? Do you think he/she cares about you as a person? Does what he/she does change how you feel about reading?)
3) Do you feel like the reading support teacher provides you choices and options? (Possible prompts: Do you think your reading support teacher listens to how you want to do things? Does it matter to you if your reading support teacher picks the text? Do you get to pick your own text more often than the teacher picks it, or vice versa? Does what he/she does change how you feel about reading?)
4) Can you tell me about a time in reading support where you were really into what was happening in the class? (Possible prompts: Do you usually feel that way, or was that day different than usual? What do you think made that moment so engaging?)
5) Can you tell me about a time in reading support where you were not really into what was happening in the class? (Possible prompts: Do you usually feel that way, or was that day different than usual? What do you think made that moment so disengaging?)

6) Would you rather have reading support in your literacy class or in a separate class? (Possible prompts: Why do you feel that way? Do you wish someone talked to you about this before you were in the class?)

7) Was there a question that I didn’t ask you today that you wish I had asked you?

Xxxx, do you have any further questions for me?

I am so grateful for your time today and your willingness to help me with this assignment. If you have any questions after you leave here today, please don’t hesitate to reach out to me. Thank you for your participation and for all you shared.
Appendix F

Participants’ Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Number (See Appendix D)</th>
<th>Caroline</th>
<th>Alan</th>
<th>Lucas</th>
<th>Tommy</th>
<th>Sam</th>
<th>Madalyn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Not answered</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shaded questions were reverse coded