

The duality of reading and writing development in middle-school students

by

Kendra J. Preston

B.A., Carroll University, 2011  
M.S., Kansas State University, 2015

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2021

## **Abstract**

This was a qualitative case study that focused on the discrepancy of literacy development at the middle school level of average students. The longitudinal case study expanded the course of one and a half academic years; beginning in August 2019 and concluding in January 2021. The study focused on two male participants who exhibited incongruent literacy development; therefore, one was categorized as a strong reader and poor writer, and the other was categorized as a strong writer and poor reader. The findings suggested that reading motivation is highly individualized, but was fostered prior to entering the school environment. Writing, however, was taught and reinforced in the school setting, but was deemed an enjoyable experience when it was creative in nature. Additionally, traditional measures of literacy proficiency, such as standardized assessments, do not accurately convey the whole picture as it contrasts the theoretical underpinnings suggested by Vygotsky and Piaget's Social Constructivism. Thus, this study explored how to best support the literacy development of students at the middle school level in both the home and school setting.

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Approved by:

Major Professor  
Dr. Lotta Larson

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all educators in the field of literacy instruction who continue to ask the tough questions and look for ways to better support their students. Your dedication to your craft is honorable and your commitment to the betterment of the lives of your students is greatly appreciated. I am honored to walk alongside you.

## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

As a secondary English teacher, I have witnessed a variety of literacy needs during my ten years in the classroom. As a result, I begin each year with a writing prompt before ever looking at the previous year's reading data. Why? This written response reveals more to me than a standardized number ever will. Through students' writing samples I am able gauge their understanding syntax, see their development of thought, and assess the extent of their vocabulary. After spending time reading each student's response, I finally pull out their previous year's reading state assessment scores. Most of the time it lines up; the student responses that are disjointed and mumbled are linked to my watchlist readers and my expressive narratives are linked to my proficient readers. However, every year without fail, I have students who surprise me; their written expression is nuanced and beautiful, yet their reading scores indicate they are remedial; then I have those who exhibit choppy, rushed, and limited writing, yet are a proficient reader (according to the data). Every year, while I sit at my desk, I wonder what causes this juxtaposition in my students' literacy development.

### **What is Literacy?**

Literacy, while a widely accepted term, does not have a universally accepted definition. Literacy, while a frequently used term, is quite difficult to define. Vygotsky (1978) defined literacy as playing a vital role in the cognitive process because it is "extending spoken language to a symbolic visual representation" (Ardila, 2016, p. 10). In its simplicity, literacy is "...the mechanics of reading and writing. It provides the structures and patterns— the engineering—that enable literature to exist. Literacy is the foundation for all word- based communication" (Cronin, 2014, p. 46). When looking at how literacy education in the United States is



implemented from kindergarten through twelfth grade, it is evident the definition in that term greatly varies, which leads to confusion and varied teaching practices.

Although literacy is “the mechanics of reading and writing” (Cronin, 2014, p. 46), literacy conversations have not always been balanced between reading and writing development. Literacy publications geared towards primary education focus on reading acquisition; it is not until looking at publications for high school and post-secondary does literacy tackle writing as well. This should come as no surprise, however, when looking at federal curriculum guidelines; for many years, reading skills were at the forefront of literacy development because they were under constant scrutiny as evident by the implementation of high stakes testing (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010; Shanahan, 2014).

As a result, when one says literacy, it is most commonly associated with reading development. Consequently, primary classrooms dedicate more instructional time to reading development as opposed to writing development. Since writing is not nationally tested, it is not as heavily regulated at each grade level; there are no consistent rubrics, assessments, or expectations. This causes too much subjectivity to enter writing instruction and assessment, which leads to teacher discomfort, leading to an avoidance of teaching writing skills (Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Herbert & Morphy, 2014; Gillespie, Graham, Kiuvara, Hebert, 2013; Graham & Perin, 2007; Nicholas, 2017; Ravitch, 2010).

Unfortunately, if a student experiences several years with minimal-to-no writing instruction, then they will experience unbalanced literacy development (Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Bazerman, Graham, Applebee, Matsuda, Berninger, Murphy, Brandt, Rowe & Schleppegrell, 2017; McCarthey, 2008; Ravitch, 2010). As a result, some students transition from elementary to middle school with discrepant literacy skills. Unfortunately, middle school is

a time where students are being asked to write across the curriculum on a regular basis for the first time in their academic career (Brozo & Flynt, 2007; Faulkner, Rivalland & Hunter, 2010). In order to engage in a balanced literacy discussion, it is important to have a clear understanding of students' reading and writing development.

### **Research Problem**

Current literacy research conflicts on how reading and writing skills impact each other. Some researchers (Feldman, 2012; Graham & Herbert, 2011; Joshi, Aaron, Hill, Ocker, Boulware-Gooden & Rupley, 2007) conclude that writing practice has a direct impact on reading development. What researches can agree upon is that reading and writing require time and space (Feldman, 2012; Liu, 2017) within the classroom, along with direct instruction (Feldman, 2012; Graham & Herbert, 2011; Simpson, 2015) in order for a skill to be fully cultivated.

While researchers (Ahmed, Wagner & Lopez, 2014) have found direct correlations between reading and writing, some researchers (Loban, 1963; Shaw, Mattern & Paterson, 2011; Stotsky, 1983) have noticed that students can experience isolated literary development. Loban (1963) conducted a thorough study analyzing the language development of 338 students as they progressed from kindergarten through sixth grade. In the end, Loban (1963) concluded that students who possess higher language skills demonstrate higher reading abilities, whereas students who possess lower language skills demonstrate lower reading abilities. Not only that, but this ability gap appears to widen as students progress through their education.

More recently, Shaw et al. (2011) broke down reading and writing into three combinations: 1) good reader-good writer, 2) good reader-poor writer, and 3) poor reader-poor writer (p. 146). Their study does have its limitations because nowhere does it suggest the possibility of a poor reader-good writer combination. This study is important because unlike

Loban's (1963) longitudinal study, it revealed how strong readers have the ability to be poor writers. Stotsky (1983) emphasized the necessity to have conversations and further explore the relationship between good readers-poor writers and poor writers-good readers because it is widely unacknowledged within the field, yet it can have a profound impact on instruction and curriculum design. While this statement was written in the early 1980s, little has been done since to highlight the discrepancies in student literacy development.

Literary research (Shaw et al., 2011) has shown the impact of literacy discrepancies on students' success during key transitional times in their life. Most research focuses on the major transition from secondary to post-secondary schooling. The Shaw et al. (2011) study concluded that stronger writers actually fared better during their first year at university than stronger readers as predicted on the SAT. Knowing how literary skills impact students during each developmental stage is important so they can be adequately supported during these transitional times during their academic career.

Another pivotal transitional time period during a student's academic career is from their primary education to secondary education; which based on nationally written standards is from fifth grade to sixth grade. For many American institutions, this transition is marked by the leaving elementary school and entering middle school. For the purpose of this study, middle school is classified as grades six through eight. Although this is an important educational milestone, the advancement is marked with no pomp and circumstance. While the literature reveals the importance of strong literacy skills in order for students to achieve optimal success when transitioning from a secondary to post-secondary career (Shaw et. al, 2011), there is little known about the necessity of foundational literacy skills as students transition from primary to secondary education.

## **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study was to investigate if reading and writing development in middle school students occur in isolation or interdependently. To help address this topic, key research questions were designed. First, what do students' expository writing samples show about the relationship between student reading and writing proficiencies? Second, what prior personal and educational experiences seem to shape students who are disproportionately skilled in reading and writing?

## **Methodological Framework**

Literacy development is a juxtaposition because it is a deeply individualized cognitive phenomenon, while being cultivated in a highly collaborative environment. Walk into any American classroom and you will hear noise; students reading, laughing, and collaborating all with the purpose of gaining new knowledge. Students are learning new skills as well as deepening and broadening the skills they currently possess, including literary skills of reading and writing. Vygotsky saw communication being derived out of necessity: “Language arises initially as a means of communication between the child and the people in his environment” (1978, p. 89).

As humans age, however, language becomes “a developmental process in which concepts are internalized through social interaction” (Nordlof, 2014). Reading and writing are a part of what Vygotsky defined as the internal process. As a result, literacy development in this study was interpreted through the lens of social constructionism (Tracey & Morrow, 2017; Crotty, 1998). Constructionism requires students to be active in the construction of new knowledge because learning “takes place through internal mechanisms that are often unobservable to the external viewer” (Tracey & Morrow, 2017, p. 58).

In literacy research (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Tracey & Morrow, 2017), literacy has been used as an all-encompassing term to describe reading and writing development. When looking at the skills shared between reading and writing acquisition, Fitzgerald & Shanahan (2000) articulated four shared knowledges between the two: 1) metaknowledge (the function and purpose), 2) domain knowledge (prior knowledge and knowing how to interact with a text), 3) text format (grammar, structure, graphics, etc.), and 4) procedural knowledge (how to generate new knowledge while interacting with the material). While these knowledge skills are foundational, how students engage with these skills will look differently depending on whether they are being accessed for the purpose of reading or writing. Understanding 1) how students access each skill and 2) that each skill is a unique phenomenon is vital when considering a students' literacy development.

As students transition from the primary to the secondary classroom setting, they are unable to heavily rely on their background knowledge to fill in their gaps. In reading, for example, students have familiarity reading informational texts, but few students are well versed in non-Western civilizations, religion, and governments which is a part of secondary Social Studies curriculum in the United States (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) explained this time period as “reading and writing for learning the new: A first step,” which encompasses grade four through eight. This timeframe is considered learning for new because “readers and writers focus more deeply on the understanding and interpretation of ideas and thoughts” (p.46). During this time period, students are being asked to engage more regularly with informative texts and more critically with narrative texts (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000). As a result, students have no prior experience to draw upon; this is when visuals, mentor texts, and

other examples are vital for their success (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000; Tracey & Morrow, 2017).

Since background knowledge is not enough, schema theory falls short for this study. Schema theory suggests that people have categories (schema) for everyday knowledge, which is how they organize and structure information. Schema theory implies that “without existing schemata it is very hard to learn new information on a topic” (Tracey & Morrow, 2017, p.62). With no prior knowledge, students need abstract examples to be made more concrete. Two other constructivism literacy theories (engagement theory and inquiry learning) were also considered for this study, but were quickly discarded. Engagement theory operates under the notion that students who are engaged, learn. However, reading and writing are essential literacy skills that need to be accessible to all learners, not just a select few. Low-level students can easily remain disengaged, which is part of the fundamental problem. Inquiry learning, a Dewey-inspired theory, is highly collaborative, but too student-centered. Under inquiry learning, students are creating and driving their learning experience. Inquiry learning becomes risky when students begin engaging with reading and writing material and skills they have little to no familiarity with.

## **Methodology**

This was a case study rooted in grounded theory for the purpose of understanding the development of literacy skills at the middle school level. A case study was selected because it allows for the researcher to investigate contemporary issues to seek answers to specific questions (Hays, 2004). In theory, if student reading scores increase, their writing should show improvement; if their reading scores decrease, their writing should also decline. A case study

also allows for a researcher to look at interactions, which is foundational to the research (Hays, 2004).

Although theory would suggest literacy skills are interdependent, research has shown that is not always the case (Loban, 1963; Shaw, Mattern & Paterson, 2011; Stotsky, 1983). This case study focuses on students who are literacy outliers; their reading and writing skills appear to not develop in tandem with each other, but rather appear to experience isolated development: students can be categorized as either a 1) good reader and poor writer or 2) poor reader and good writer. Through grounded theory this study was able to further investigate why some students fall outside the traditional literacy mold (Loban, 1963; Shaw, Mattern & Paterson, 2011; Stotsky, 1983).

While part of literacy development can be observed, the majority of literacy acquisition is an internal process (Nordlof, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). Since language and language development are a highly individualized experience, a reading lesson might make sense to student A, might be too easy for student B, and might be too overwhelming for student C. To better understand what students are thinking, the pool of participants was ultimately narrowed to only two focus participants to allow for data-rich, semi-structured interviews (Gillham, 2000) (see Appendix A). Since the study was conducted in the school where I teach, interviews were more attainable (Gillham, 2000).

The focus participants were enrolled in my sixth-grade English Language Arts class as sixth graders. The purpose for this is to ensure the gathering of documents and recording of data, which is essential to the completion of a case study (Hays, 2004). Although these participants were former students, they received no specialized instruction outside of the traditional curriculum.

## **Research Limitations**

The experimental design greatly limits which students were considered for this study; first, in order to be considered I must have taught the participants. This means in order to be considered, students must attend a specific academic institution and had me as their sixth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, which greatly narrows the participant pool. Secondly, there were parameters set around the scores and grade-levels of the participants. In order to be chosen for this study, proficient reading scores were required. The parameter of what makes a proficient reader was limiting; it only takes into consideration how students performed on their 2019-2020 reading state assessment as well as fall 2020 Interim KAP (Kansas Assessment Program) assessment. As a result, students who did not test well, but were proficient readers were not considered for this study.

Along with reading achievement, writing development was analyzed through a narrow scope. Writing is broken into narrative, argumentative, and informational writing at the sixth-grade level. While students are comfortable with narrative writing from their elementary experience and engage with narrative expression across the curriculum, it is not the type of writing being analyzed in this study. As a result, students might experience growth in one form of written expression (such as narrative), but not another (such as argumentative).

For this study I chose to focus on expository writing as it serves as a bridge between elementary and high school. If students did not experience growth in expository writing, then it will appear as though their writing skills have not developed throughout the course of the academic year, when in reality, that might not be the case. Also, only a snapshot of writing was examined. Students who did not perform well on the selected pieces will be considered poor



writers, when in reality, there might be extenuating circumstances for why they performed poorly that have nothing to do with their writing ability.

A third limiting factor to this research study is time. Ideally, this study would be a longer longitudinal case study that would allow for the focus participants to be followed for the duration of their middle school career and possibly into high school. This would allow for a complete picture of their literacy experience at the middle school level to be documented.

Finally, as a qualitative research study, the primary limitation is that this research is not generalizable. Each student shared his unique literacy experience, which cannot be generalized to the masses. While commonalities found between the two students, one being a strong reader/poor writer; one being a strong writer/poor reader, it is imperative to remember these commonalities are just for these two students. Further investigation needs to take place before generalizing these results to the masses.

### **Research Possibilities**

In conjunction with my final limitation, this study will be able to inform future research. Since this study is not generalizable, the goal would be to conduct a future qualitative study where the results would be more generalizable and accessible to secondary teachers, especially at the middle school level. First, it is important to begin to understand that students might enter middle school at the proficient level, but it does not guarantee they will continue to perform at that level. Further investigation is needed to understand why students' literacy skills regress at the secondary level in order to implement successful interventions.

Also, by further investigating the differences in reading and writing development in middle school students, educators would know how to appropriately support students in the acquisition of each of their reading and writing skills. Specifically, looking at how to better

implement instructional strategies that address students who experience varied literacy development (poorer readers or poorer writers). By moving away from theory and into practice, it will work to benefit more students within the educational setting.

### **Purpose of the Study**

While literacy development is a blanketed term, the nuances are broad and muddy, which means the application in the classroom and curriculum design is inconsistent. As a result, students are transitioning to middle school with varied literacy skills. Seeing the development of each literacy skill as an independent entity is vital in order to begin how to better support middle school students and their literacy needs. Hence, I conducted a case-study rooted in grounded theory.

The purpose of this study was to better understand students who are classified as literacy outliers. A literacy outlier is a student who experience interdependent literacy growth and is classified as either a 1) good reader and poor writer or 2) poor reader and good writer.

The boundaries of the case study was at an affluent middle school in a midwestern suburb of roughly 600,000 people, spanning three semesters: Fall 2019-Fall 2020. The participant pool was narrowed from 40 to two focus participants; one classified as a good reader/poor writer and the other classified as a good writer/poor reader. In the end, I triangulated student assessments (KAP Interim Assessment scores & FastBridge aReading scores), classroom samples (expository writing samples), and coded-interviews to understand why their literacy skills developed in isolation.

### **Definition of Terms**

For optimal success in understanding interdependent literacy development, it is essential to understand the term literacy in the context of this research. For the purpose of this study, the

research utilizes Cronin's (2014) definition of **literacy** that focuses on the building of reading and writing skills. Cronin explained literacy as, "...the mechanics of reading and writing. It provides the structures and patterns—the engineering—that enable literature to exist. Literacy is the foundation for all word-based communication" (p.46).

To break down Cronin's definition further, it is important to understand the difference between reading and writing. **Reading** is defined as, "A complex cognitive process that has five essential components built on brain development and experience" (Sprenger, 2013, p.75).

**Writing**, however, is an intentional act that is used to communicate understanding (Rowe, 2018).

From there, it is imperative to understand the dichotomy of the two secondary national literacy curricula eras that have shaped the literacy development of young adults in America. The two eras are: 1) No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and 2) Common Core State Standards (CCSS):

**No Child Left Behind (NCLB):** The accountability for proficiency regarding reading and math fell to the states and children were assessed annually in grades three-through-eight (Ravitch, 2010).

**Common Core State Standards (CCSS):** A focus on a national set of standards that allow states to determine the meaning of proficiency that are designed to get students ready for college or the work force post-graduation (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

The commonality between both national sets of national curricula is that they require standardized assessment to determine proficiency. The standardized assessments for this research are: 1) Kansas Assessment Program (KAP); including the Interim Reading exam and 2) FastBridge (aReading, specifically).

**Kansas Assessment Program:** Curriculum-aligned assessments are developed by University of Kansas' Achievement and Assessment Institute (AAI) in conjunction with the Kansas Department of Education for Kansas students (Kansas Assessment Program).

**FastBridge** (Adaptive Reading): An individualized, computer assessment that range in literacy skills “including concepts of print, phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, and vocabulary” (“A-Reading-FastBridge Reading Assessments”).

## **Summary**

Chapter 1 defined literacy as reading and writing. The chapter explained how the misinterpretation and application of the term literacy, specifically at the secondary level, applies to the overall research problem. The research focuses on middle school students who experience interdependent literacy development during their middle school career. Therefore, the focus participants are categorized as either a: 1) good reader/poor writer or 2) poor reader/good writer. The chapter concludes by highlighting how literacy acquisition is a highly social, yet individualized process, which requires a social constructivist approach, which finds the study to be anchored in grounded theory.

Chapter 2 will discuss the theoretical underpinnings of Social Constructivism, highlighting Vygotsky's Zones of Proximal Development and Piaget's Literacy Development theory. These theories will be applied to the related research, including discussion about national curricula, which has made a profound impact on literacy development at the middle school level. As a result, middle school students can experience unbalanced reading and writing skill acquisition as they progress throughout their middle school career.

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

Literacy development consists of two major components: reading and writing. How to best guide students in the development of each skill has been a topic of literacy conversations in the United State for over 100 years (e.g.; Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Bazerman, Graham, Applebee, Matsuda, Berninger, Murphy, Brandt, Rowe, & Schleppegrell, 2017; Applebee & Langer, 2009; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Cronin, 2014; Dennis, 2016; Faulkner, Rivalland, & Hunter, 2010; Graham et al., 2014; Layne, 2009). Considering Cronin's (2014) definition of literacy, students are expected to "decode text and to produce text to make meaning" (p. 46). However, instructional strategies often change as a result of national policy, making what is at the forefront of literacy instruction continuously in flux (Ravitch, 2010; Russell, 1991; Shanahan, 2014). Over the past 50 years, education has experienced an increase in national oversight, which only put literacy instruction under a more critical microscope (Shanahan, 2014).

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

As this study is rooted in the individual's experience, it is vital to understand the theoretical influences of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1954), who contributed to the notion of the student being at the center of their educational experience. The convergence of their philosophies in social constructivism helps shape the understanding of how students who have the same educational experience can yield highly different results.

#### **Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development**

Although literacy instruction is taking place in a classroom setting, students' retention of the material is highly-individualized (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's (1978) research acknowledged how internal processing - known as inner speech (Blake & Pope, 2008) - and

social interactions - known as social speech (Blake & Pope, 2008) - are critical contributors to literacy acquisition. Vygotsky (1978) is famously associated with The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Blake & Pope, 2008; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Blake & Pope (2008) explained, “When students are in this zone, they can be successful with instructional help” (p. 60). When focusing on literacy development, students need to be appropriately challenged; if they are able to complete tasks on their own, learning is not taking place as they are in the Zone of Actual Development (Blake & Pope, 2008). However, if students are being challenged, but teachers are not “explaining, modeling, and using guided practice in the classroom,” students run the risk of falling behind (Blake & Pope, 2008, p. 63).

### **Piaget’s Literacy Development**

Since a large component of literacy acquisition is internal, it is important to consider the role cognitive development plays in the acquisition of literacy skills. Piaget (1954) identified four stages through which children progress with the final stage, the formal operational period, beginning when a child enters middle school at age eleven (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). The formal operational period is defined as the stage where “the child moves beyond the concrete to use language in an abstract way” (Tracey & Morrow, 2017, p.86). However, “if students lack this [cognitive] ability, they will not benefit academically” (Blake & Pope, 2008, p. 62). In order for students to be able to think in the abstract, they first need to have a solid foundation of concrete knowledge. For literacy skill development, this requires a concrete knowledge of both reading and writing skills. If students transition to the middle school level lacking foundational skills in either reading or writing, then they are not going to be able to successfully apply abstract concepts to those skills.

## **Convergence of Vygotsky & Piaget-Social Constructivism**

Vygotsky's (1978) and Piaget's (1954) theories converge under the theory of social constructivism (Blake & Pope, 2008; Pennell, 2014). Social constructivism acknowledges that students do not learn in isolation; rather, the environment has a direct impact on student learning (Blake & Pope, 2008; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Enter any American classroom and social constructivism is coupled with literacy instruction; students are participating in guided instruction, centers, small group work, individual practice, etc. Although the classroom fosters learning from social interaction, it is evident no two children internalize a lesson the same. If all students internalized lessons in the same way, then student performance would be equivalent on assessments, rendering national assessments irrelevant. Obviously, this is not the case as interaction and retention of material varies from student to student.

Although Vygotsky's (1978) and Piaget's (1954) work varies in its application to the field of education, there are some fundamentals to their research that conspire to help facilitate literacy development in middle school students. First, both researchers believe students' need to be active participants in their learning experience (Blake & Pope, 2008; Liu & Chen, 2010; Pennell, 2014; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Vygotsky believed social interaction was a vital component for students to create new knowledge (Blake & Pope, 2008; Liu & Chen, 2010; Pennell, 2014). Piaget believed play was "a kind of scientific rehearsal" that allowed children to think and act in more complex ways (Pennell, 2014, p. 47). Both Vygotsky and Piaget acknowledge the contribution of an environment to a student's learning; this environment can expand beyond the school setting (Tracey & Morrow, 2017), which is important when considering the literacy skills of middle school students.

Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1954) also shared a belief that students need to be developmentally ready to tackle challenging tasks (Blake & Pope, 2008; Gredler, 2012; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). As students enter middle school, they should be able to “abstract, compare, and differentiate various characteristics of concepts and begin to develop relationships among them” (Gredler, 2012, p. 127). However, some students, while being biologically of age, are not cognitively ready to tackle some of these challenges. If students are not cognitively ready to transition from concrete to abstract learning, curricula and instruction begin to surpass them at the middle school level. For example, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have students engaging in complex analytical thinking in connection to their reading and writing (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). While reading and writing are separate literacy skills, students who are not cognitively ready for the academic rigor are in jeopardy of falling behind (Gredler, 2012; Pennell, 2014; Tracey & Morrow, 2017).

### **Cognitive Demand of Writing at the Middle School Level**

Understanding the cognitive demands of literacy skills at the secondary level is essential. Writing is a tool required for effective interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. However, when writing begins is unclear. Rowe (2018) proposed that writing starts when a child has intention behind the symbols they are constructing. For the purpose of this study, writing was considered an intentional act that is used to communicate understanding with the outside world (Rowe, 2018). Under that definition, proficient writers need to be able to clearly organize their thoughts into sentences. In this study, to assess proficiency in writing, I utilized current writing standards outlined by the CCSS (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Graham et al. (2014) defined proficiency as “solid



academic performance.” A solid academic performance requires students to properly embed evidence to support their claims, logically develop their writing in order to not confuse their reader, and compose their writing utilizing proper grammar and syntax (Applegate & Langer, 2009; Gaga, 2016; Gallagher, 2017; Graham et al., 2014; Warne, 2008).

### **Cognitive Demand of Reading at the Middle School Level**

Reading is defined as “a complex cognitive process that has five essential components built on brain development and experience” (Sprenger, 2013, p.75). The five essential components are, “phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and reading comprehension...” (National Reading Panel, 2000). Although reading consists of five essential components, reading at the middle school level no longer focuses on the acquisition of reading skills, but rather the application (Valencia & Wixson, 2013). If a student is lacking in one component of reading, especially phonemic awareness or phonics, they will struggle to demonstrate proficiency in reading (Grossen, 1980; Sprenger, 2013; Valencia & Wixson, 2013). The reason is, beginning in sixth-grade, students are required to read across genres and for a variety of purposes (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; Valencia & Wixson, 2013). With an increase in text-complexity and text-variety across all subject areas, students who experience reading deficiencies are at a greater risk of falling behind (Grossen, 1980).

### **Understanding Incongruent Literacy Development**

With what classifies proficient reading and writing clearly defined, students who showcased discrepant literacy abilities at the middle school level became the focal point of this study. While students might enter middle school with proficient literacy skills, they are not guaranteed to remain at that level as they progress through their middle school education.

## **NCLB and Literacy Instruction**

The era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, a national education policy implemented in 2002), drew a clear connection between policy (Reading First) and funding (McCarthy, 2008; Shanahan, 2014). Although Reading First initiatives tied school performance to Title I funds (McCarthy, 2008; Shanahan, 2014), supporters of the program explained the instructional practices were implemented in a majority of American schools because “large numbers of research studies had found that such instruction [phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension] could help children to learn to read” (Shanahan, 2014, p.10). In essence, proponents argued evidence-based reading practices should be implemented across all American schools, not merely isolated to low-performing academic institutions (Shanahan, 2014). Critics, however, argued that under Reading First reading instruction became disjointed because instructional emphasis was placed on phonetics and reading skills in isolation in order for students to perform well on the national assessment as opposed to cultivating authentic reading skills (Cummins, 2007; Dennis, 2016; Ravich, 2010).

Research revealed (e.g., Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gallagher, 2017; Graham et al., 2014; Rowe, 2018; Ravich, 2010), however, that writing is just as critical as reading for long-term academic and professional success. Prior to the implementation of NCLB, Applebee and Langer (2009) examined how American students exhibited writing gains between 1988 and 1998. During this time, many educators utilized a writer’s workshop (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1994; McCarthy, 2008) or Six-Trait writing (Applebee & Applebee, 2010; Bazerman et al., 2017; Spandel, 2005) instructional approach to guide students through the writing process. Nevertheless, writing instruction has played a minor role in education reform policies over the last century. While reading instruction was pushed to

the forefront of literacy instruction during the NCLB era, writing instruction was placed on the backburner (Ravitch, 2010; Gallagher, 2017).

During NCLB teachers began minimizing the amount of classroom instructional time dedicated to writing instruction in order to secure federal funding by emphasizing reading instruction (McCarthy, 2008). The pressure felt across many American schools was not universal; teachers from high-performing districts expressed feeling less pressure, which allowed them to dedicate more classroom time to writing instruction (McCarthy, 2008). To help teachers address a compacted curriculum, pre-packaged writing curricula were designed, such as Calkins' (1994) *Art of Teaching Writing* program, which became more popular in under-performing districts (McCarthy, 2008). Higher-performing districts, however, incorporated more varied writing instruction, ranging from formative to summative writing practices (McCarthy, 2008).

Although the amount of instructional time dedicated to writing instruction varied across American classrooms during the time of NCLB, the impact was noticeable. Applebee and Langer (2009) noted that “more recent results, however, suggest these [writing] gains may be eroding in the face of an increased emphasis on reading skills” (p. 21). Between 2002 and 2007 there was a drop in the frequency and complexity of what students were expected to write in eighth grade (Applebee & Langer, 2009). Although reading skills were being taught, it was evident that the skills being obtained were not transferable across all literacy domains.

### **CCSS: New Standards, New Stakes**

Once the nation adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010 (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), literacy standards were reimagined, but with a twist. Shanahan (2014) noted a major design difference between NCLB and CCSS; NCLB served as a scope and sequence providing

the how and when, whereas CCSS provided a goal, but allowed teachers to make instructional decisions in order to obtain that goal. Unlike NCLB where students were required to demonstrate mastery of reading skills (Shanahan, 2014), CCSS demanded students read and comprehend more complex texts (Shanahan, 2014; Valencia & Wixson, 2013) and emphasized informational texts over narrative texts (Shanahan, 2014; Valencia & Wixson, 2013).

The CCSS wove rigorous reading standards across the curriculum (e.g., Cronin, 2014; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; Pennel, 2014; Valencia & Wixson, 2013), presenting a new challenge for all secondary educators. It is important to note that rigor does not equate to “piling topic upon topic”, but rather refers to the expectation that “students develop a depth of understanding” and are able to apply that understanding to the various concepts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Under the CCSS, all secondary educators were expected to be facilitators of literacy development (Cronin, 2014; Pennel, 2014). The reality was, most secondary educators had minimal literacy training, which placed the burden of responsibility on the English teacher (Cronin, 2014; Pennel, 2014). Valencia & Wixson (2013) explained how expecting English teachers to be at the center of literacy instruction became problematic because in order for students to achieve reading success beyond the English classroom, they “need to be taught how to ‘think with text’” (p. 184).

Each content area approaches reading in a unique way, and students need to be taught appropriate analytical reading strategies across all subjects in order to achieve optimal success (Pennel, 2014; Valencia & Wixson, 2013). While students should be guided in how to tackle complex information across all subjects, it is important to remember that reading goes beyond informational texts. In an English classroom, students are exposed to a rich tapestry of literature

that requires them to go beyond basic comprehension in order to derive a deeper meaning (Cronin, 2014). Engaging in this level of reading is not natural; again, students need this process modeled to them by their teacher. Students need to be taught how to engage with literature in order to think more critically and derive deeper meaning (Cronin, 2014; Pennel, 2014). If students are not actively taught literacy skills across a variety of subjects at the secondary level, they are not achieving the rigor and complexity set forth by the CCSS.

Not only did the CCSS increase the rigor of reading, but it also brought writing to the forefront of literacy education (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The writing standards are complex and nuanced. Little has changed in regards to how writing is being taught at the secondary level (Graham et al., 2014; Soiferman, 2017; Troia & Olinghouse, 2013). Again, the CCSS provided the writing goals, but it did not instruct teachers or administrators on how to make students proficient writers (Troia & Olinghouse, 2013).

According to the CCSS, secondary students are expected to develop in their argumentative, informational, and narrative writing (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Studies at the secondary and post-secondary level (e.g., Applebee & Langer, 2009; Gallagher, Woodworth & Arshan, 2015; Graham & Perin, 2007; Soiferman, 2017) highlighted how critical it is for students to 1) write for a variety of audiences and 2) manipulate information into new knowledge in order to achieve long term success.

In order to achieve this goal students must learn how to effectively access knowledge, be asked to engage in critical thinking skills, and learn how to effectively transfer their thoughts to the written word. Unfortunately, this was not happening on a regular basis across American

secondary classrooms (e.g., Applebee & Langer, 2009; Gallagher, Woodworth & Arshan, 2015; Graham & Perin, 2007; Soiferman, 2017; Toria & Olinghouse, 2013). As students progressed through their secondary education, the necessity for students to express their ideas in the narrative form decreased, while their need to effectively pen an argument citing evidence from multiple outside sources increased (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

It was evident that students were not meeting the rigorous demand of the CCSS because in 2015, “only 38 percent of [writing] assignments were aligned with a grade appropriate standard” (Gallagher, 2017, p. 25). Key evidence-based practices that were missing from many classroom instruction were pre-writing (e.g., Faulknew, Rivalland & Hunter, 2010; Graham & Perin, 2007; Grossen, 1980; Toria & Olinghouse, 2013), process-writing instruction (e.g., Bazerman et al., 2017; Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016; Gallagher, 2017; Graves, 1994; Irwin & Knodle, 2008; Toria & Olinghouse, 2013; Warne, 2008) and comprehensive writing instruction (e.g., Bazerman et al., 2017; Calkins & Ehrenworth, 2016; Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Toria & Olinghouse, 2013).

If writing assignments were not standard-aligned, and students were not receiving evidence-based instruction, it should be of no surprise that “70 percent of students in grades four through twelve in this country have been designated as low-achieving writers” (Graham & Perin, 2007, p. 5). In this study I examined how these shifts to national curricula impact the literacy development students. Students are asked to perform annually to demonstrate their reading abilities, but not their writing abilities.

## **How does Writing fit into Secondary Curricula?**

The discussion to keep writing instruction during high-stakes testing has been heavily researched by scholars in the literacy community (e.g., Bazerman et al., 2017; Feldman, 2012; Gallagher, 2017; Joshi, Aaron, Hill, Ocker, Boulware-Gooden, & Rupley, 2007; Liu, 2017; McCarthy, 2008). Through writing students are developing new thoughts, which help them think about the material in a new way (Gallagher, 2017). Liu (2017) expanded on this notion and concluded that as students become better writers, they also become better readers. The act of writing is not an isolated experience; rather, “each act of writing involves multiple processes, each of which draws on different domains of development, which may interact among themselves” (Bazerman et al., 2017, p. 355). By dedicating time to writing, teachers are dedicating time to critical thinking (Bazerman et al., 2017; Gallagher, 2017), which can positively impact reading performance (Liu, 2017).

Joshi et al. (2007) tested the positive correlation in literacy instructional practices at the elementary setting with fourth graders. The objective of the study was to determine if students who engaged in only written communication for thirty minutes a day, four days a week, for ten weeks would experience growth in their reading and/or writing. The results were impressive; not only did students experience gains in their written communication, but they also experienced gains in their normed reading assessment. These results are not in isolation; Feldman (2012) produced similar findings when looking at the impact of writing on remedial reading scores at the high school level. Although her findings examined more informal writing (such as journaling), just having students engage in written expression positively impacted their reading scores. Shaw et al. (2011) found that students who were stronger writers than readers on the SAT actually performed better during their first year at the post-secondary level. While the direct

correlation between reading and writing development is unknown, it has been shown that students who have the opportunity to work on developing their writing skills can experience gains in their reading scores.

However, while writing's impact on reading during high-stakes testing has been researched, the impact of national policy on writing instruction has not (McCarthy, 2008). Although research might show the positive impacts writing instruction can have on reading (e.g., Feldman, 2012; Joshi et al., 2007; Liu, 2017; Shaw et al., 2011), the implementation of writing instruction is up to the individual teacher. Teachers need to work in an environment where writing instruction is valued; this is demonstrated through professional development (Gallagher et al., 2015; Graham, 2007) and access to current resources (Graham, 2007). If teachers do not feel supported or comfortable teaching writing, then writing instruction will be minimal (Gallagher et al., 2015; Graham, 2007).

### **Heart of the Issue: Inadequate Literacy Development**

As literacy discussions remain at the center of national curriculum conversation, many students continue to suffer from inadequate literacy development (e.g., Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Gallagher, 2017; Jung, McMaster & delMas, 2017; Soiferman, 2017). It is important to note inadequate literacy development is not limited to a particular demographic or socioeconomic status; students from suburban and high-performing schools can also struggle in their reading and writing acquisition (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). This illuminates the importance of understanding and identifying literacy inequities early because students who struggle with writing in the early years are at a higher risk of experiencing long-term academic failure (Jung et al., 2017).



Students who have inadequate literacy skills struggle to adapt to the academic challenges at the post-secondary level (e.g., Gallagher, 2017; Moore, 2016; Soiferman, 2017). High school writing instruction lacks the critical thinking and evaluation skills necessary to be a successful analytical writer at the post-secondary level (Soiferman, 2017). In order to be successful at the post-secondary level, students need to be comfortable transforming knowledge as opposed to retelling it; this requires going beyond narrative writing and focusing on informational and argumentative writing (Soiferman, 2017). Students with inadequate writing skills in high school struggle to meet the writing demands at the post-secondary level because the writing is “no longer formulaic” (Soiferman, 2017).

If students struggle in the transition between secondary and post-secondary education because of inadequate literacy skills, it is not surprising they struggle upon entering the professional realm (e.g., Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Gallagher, 2017; Moore, 2016; Soiferman, 2017). According to a study conducted by the CollegeBoard, businesses view writing as one of the skills needing the remedial training, costing corporations upwards to 3.1 billion dollars annually (Moore, 2016). Gallagher (2017) referenced Bob Kerry, chair of the commissions for the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges (2004), on the urgency of developing proficient writers in America’s schools because “writing is both a requirement of high-skill, high-wage, professional work and a gatekeeper skill with clear equity implications” (Gallagher, 2017, p. 26). Ultimately, “All young people should graduate from high school able to read and write, so they can earn a good living and lead richer intellectual lives” (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, pp. 9-10).

The overall objective of literacy education outcomes in American schools is agreed upon: students need to emerge from the K-12 education system being able to read and write. Fractures

emerge regarding 1) how literacy skills should be taught (Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Brozo & Flynt, 2007, Faulker et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2014) and 2) how to best determine if students have learned those skills (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fewster & MacMillan, 2002; Nichols, Glass & Berliner, 2012; Shanahan, 2014). Literacy instruction has risen to national importance through the implementation of NCLB and CCSS, yet it is evident that students continue to graduate from high school with inadequate reading and writing skills.

### **High-Stakes Tests as Decision Making Tools**

While debates endure regarding best practices for teaching reading instruction (e.g., Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Brozo & Flynt, 2007; Herman & Wardrip, 2012; Ivey, 2002; Layne, 2009) and writing development (e.g., Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Gallagher, 2017; Graham & Harris, 2016; Heartwell, 1985; Irwin & Knodle, 2008; Spandel, 2005) at the secondary level (e.g., Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Gillespie et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2014; Grossen, 1980), the deciding factor that carries the most weight for what transpires at the classroom level is student performance on national assessments (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Shanahan, 2014; Ravitch, 2010). Since the establishment of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 1969, little progress has been made in national reading scores (NAEP Report Card: Reading, 2019; Shanahan; 2014).

Proponents of high-stakes testing argue that schools need to show student growth, particularly if they are going to procure federal funding (Shanahan, 2014). Opposers of high-stakes testing note, “The research on the impact of accountability-based policies and student achievement is varied, limited, and relatively inconclusive” (Nichols et al., 2012, p. 26). Amrein-Beardsley & Berliner (2003) argued that states with high-stakes testing are not being out

performed by those who do not have it. Nichols et al. 's study (2012) could not find the correlation between test scores, teaching methods, and classroom content.

What can be agreed upon is that students are taught specific literacy skills necessary to perform well on a high-stakes assessment (Amrein-Beardsley & Berliner, 2003; Nichols et al., 2012). However, these are not authentic literacy skills as they are applicable to content, or even audit tests (such as the ACT or SAT) (Amrein-Beardsley & Berliner, 2003; Nichols et al., 2012). Therefore, if high-stakes assessments do not clearly and accurately reflect the literacy outcomes of the secondary classroom, what is the literacy experience at the secondary level?

### **Discrepancies in Reading Instruction at Middle School Level**

It is noted that the literacy gap widens for students as they progress through their education (e.g., Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Feldman, 2012; Grossen, 1980; Loban, 1963). One reason for this trend is that the transition from primary to secondary education is a major academic leap; especially for literacy instruction (e.g., Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, Grossen, 1980; Herman & Wardrip, 2012; Ivey, 2002). Grossen (1980) explained how reading instruction at the secondary level shifts from decoding to comprehension. In basic terms, it is explained as the transition from learning to read to reading to learn (Herman & Wardrip, 2012; Ivey, 2002). Once students enter middle school, they are no longer learning literacy fundamentals, but rather are being asked to implement the skills to facilitate, or show mastery of, learning (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). As a result, many students are able to read the text before them, but are unable to comprehend the material (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). If students are unable to comprehend the material they are reading, they will only continue to fall behind.

## **Teacher Expertise**

Students need explicit instruction and guidance from their teacher on how to interact with content-specific text (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Brozo & Flynn, 2007; Hermin & Wardrip, 2012; Ivey, 2002). Unlike their elementary teacher peers, most middle teachers are secondary certified; as a result, most middle school teachers are content-specific. While secondary-certified teachers might have a wealth of knowledge in their content area, it does not mean they know how to help their students derive meaning from print resources written about that subject. Since students enter the secondary classroom with basic literacy skills, students are assumed to know how to interact with the text in order to extract meaning (Hermin & Wardrip, 2012). However, if students are not provided with guidance and instruction in every class, then literacy gaps will only increase as students progress through their secondary education career (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Brozo & Flynn, 2007).

While content literacy allows students to better generalize reading skills, the CCSS require disciplinary literacy (Fang & Coatoam, 2013; Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2015). Disciplinary literacy helps students gain a specialized skill that “tries to engage them in exploring content in the way that insiders would” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2015, p. 12). As a result, students approach the text like a scientist in their science class, or a historian in their history class. Under disciplinary literacy, students cannot take a reading strategy they have learned in English Language Arts (ELA) and apply it to their social studies textbook. As a result, students need to receive strong literacy instruction in every class in order to achieve optimal success.

Unfortunately, disciplinary literacy is not generalizable the way content literacy is (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2015). Heller (2010) claimed that secondary students are not cognitively

ready for disciplinary literacy; instead, they should be focusing on developing generalizable literacy skills. Under content literacy, students develop fundamental reading and writing skills that can be generalized across all subject areas (Brozo & Flynt, 2007). This means they can develop and practice foundational literacy skills in their English class, then apply these skills while in other content courses.

### **Rigor Across the Curriculum**

Students are required to engage in reading to learn in all subject areas, which can be problematic (Brozo & Flynt, 2007; Hermin & Wardrip, 2012; Ivey 2002; Shaw et al., 2011). Since middle school focuses on reading to learn, reading is taught from a top-down approach (Shaw et al., 2011). At the secondary level, reading focuses on the big picture; students look at a piece of literature or informational text as a whole to draw conclusions and extrapolate meaning (Shaw et al., 2011). This presents a unique challenge because the material with which students are engaging with is no longer written in a singular structure. Content might be written in a linear, narrative structure in ELA, but the majority of content students read and are required to extrapolate meaning from is written in an informational structure (Ivey, 2002; Shaw et al., 2011). Ivey (2002) explained, “Textbooks continue to dominate content-area classes as the primary -and often the only- reading material despite students’ and teachers’ complaints that textbooks are too difficult, too boring, or both” (p. 20).

In response, teachers try to diversify their curriculum to include high-quality instructional resources (Ivey, 2002). When discussing the diversification of text, it means providing students with access to literary material beyond the textbook; this can include narratives, poetry, and articles. The diversification of resources requires a significant amount of funds (Ivey, 2002). With multiple units per subject to be taught each academic year, the ability to diversify each unit

is not always feasible as funds are typically limited (Ivey, 2000). Each text type requires students to engage with the material in a different way; text format, vocabulary, and concepts are developed in vastly different ways depending on the author's purpose and text type. If students are not taught how to extrapolate meaning from each type of text, there is a chance they will begin to fall behind (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

## **Motivation**

Many secondary educators are fighting the invisible literacy battle of motivation (e.g., Applegate & Applegate, 2009; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Brozo & Flynt, 2007; Layne, 2009). Reading instruction at the elementary level focuses on foundational reading skills including: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Layne, 2009). Unfortunately, as students transition to the secondary level, many have the foundational skills, but lack the interest to read (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Brozo & Flynt, 2007; Layne, 2009). Layne (2009) categorized unmotivated students as aliterate because they have the ability to read, but choose not to. Biancarosa & Snow (2006) noted that students in upper grades are less motivated to read, which only serves to widen the literacy gap. One reason students are less motivated to read is because of increased academic rigor (Brozo & Flynt, 2007). If students do not regularly engage with diverse texts that are appropriately challenging, they will not improve their literacy skills. In fact, some students are in jeopardy of experiencing regression in their literacy development if they choose not to read at all (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Layne, 2009).

While students might enter middle school as proficient readers, it is not guaranteed they will remain at that level (Brozo & Flynt, 2007). Combining an increase in academic rigor, a lack of motivation, and being required to read complex text across the curriculum without clear guidance, it is not surprising why some students regress in their reading development as they

progress throughout their middle school career. One of the primary objectives of this study was to better understand why these literacy discrepancies occur. It is important to remember that each child is unique; their home and school experience is woven into their literacy foundation.

### **Discrepancies in Writing Instruction at Middle School Level**

Just like with reading, understanding the shifts regarding writing demands as students transition from their primary to secondary education is essential. A deeper understanding of writing during this transitional time can help educators better understand why students might develop discrepant literacy skills. The four main reasons students display poor writing skills as they transition to middle school include: 1) an increase of expectations, 2) writing is used as a tool to demonstrate knowledge, 3) long-term impact on student achievement, and 4) teacher competency.

#### **Intensification of Expectations**

Just like in reading, students are no longer learning the fundamentals of writing when they transition to middle school; instead, they are expected to use their writing skills to demonstrate their learning. This educational shift is critical, but it is unclear exactly when this transition happens. Using writing as a tool to assess knowledge seems to happen during high school, because middle school continues to implement some fundamental writing instruction in the ELA classroom, while college requires mastery of these techniques in order for students to succeed (Graham et al., 2014; Rogers, 2010; Soiferman, 2017). It is essential that students are able to effectively communicate their thoughts through the written word at the secondary level (Graham et al., 2014; Graham & Perin, 2007; Russell, 1991; Stevens, 2006; Vermont Writing Collaborative, 2016; Warne, 2008).

As students progress in their education, the depth and rigor in which they are expected to write expands. The focus moves away from narrative (a linear story structure), to informative and argumentative (a complex and subdivided structure), which can be difficult to follow. For example, just look at the wording of CCSS.ELA.Literacy. W.1 from fifth-to-sixth-grade. In fifth-grade it states, “Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information” (English Language Arts Standards, 2020). In sixth-grade, the standard changes to: “Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence” (English Language Arts Standards, 2020). The sixth-grade wording changes from “opinion” to “argument”, which changes the formality of the piece.

Secondly, in fifth-grade students need to be able to support their opinion, but in sixth grade they need to be able to do so “with clear reasons and relevant evidence” (English Language Arts Standards, 2020). While this may appear to be a subtle shift, many skills are required to achieve this writing objective. To demonstrate proficiency, students must be able to: 1) evaluate and comprehend a text 2) identify appropriate information from the text to defend their opinion 3) embed outside evidence within their own writing 4) appropriately credit outside sources within their writing.

### **Tool for Demonstration of Knowledge**

With the implementation of the CCSS, students are now required to utilize writing as a tool to show mastery of their learning across a variety of subjects at the secondary level (e.g., Applebee & Langer, 2011; Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Gillespie et al., 2013; Grossen, 1980). However, writing instruction is “rare both within and outside of the middle and high school English/language arts classes” (Gabriel & Dostal, 2015, p. 66). Students are most likely to engage in any form of writing in their humanities courses (ELA and social studies), and least



likely to engage in writing in a math class (Gillespie et al., 2013). Most composition writing takes place in the ELA classroom (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Gillespie et al., 2013; Graham & Perin, 2007), even though students are required to engage in formal, processed writing across the curriculum (Soiferman, 2017; Troia & Olinghouse, 2013).

The type of writing to learn activities that are most common across the curriculum are note taking, completing worksheets, and responding to short answers prompts (Gillespie et al., 2013). Although any form of writing is considered positive, when students are denied the opportunity to engage in the formal writing process, it takes away their ability to practice “analysis, interpretation, and personalization” (Gillespie et al., 2013, p. 1067). When students engage in composition practice, they experience growth in their writing (Gallagher et al., 2015). For example, The National Writing Project’s College-Ready Writers Program (CRWP) has students engage in short argumentative mini-units (lasting four-to-six days). Participants saw growth in their argumentative writing skills; including content, structure, stance, and conventions (Gallagher et al., 2015).

Unlike reading, when students engage in writing they are taught from the bottom-up; students focus on the syntax, vocabulary and the nuance of a piece as opposed to looking at the piece as a whole (Shaw et al., 2011). An argument that gets made is that if students are not taught the mechanics of writing, how are their thoughts going to be understood? The root of this argument connects to the role and place of grammar instruction (Heartwell, 1985; Shaw et al., 2011). The role of grammar instruction has been at the center of writing conversations since it was first introduced as part of the English curriculum by the Committee of Ten in 1893 (Heartwell, 1985). Grammar, Heartwell (1985) argued, “improved the ability to think critically” and was not to be taught rigidly (p. 126). Over the years, however, grammar discussion has fallen

into two camps: the formal teaching of grammar as an isolated step in the writing process (Heartwell, 1985) and the informal teaching of grammar that sees it as an integrated part of the literary experience (Heartwell, 1985; Gallagher, 2017). While researchers have fallen on both sides of the grammar debate for decades, neither side of the argument has yielded results that show a profound impact (positive or negative) on student writing (Heartwell, 1985).

### **Long Term Impact**

Students who struggle with writing in their early academic career are at a higher risk of experiencing long-term academic failure (Jung, McMaster & delMas, 2017). As students advance in their secondary education, there is a Multi-Tier System of Support (MTSS) to help support students who lack foundation skills, but only in nationally tested subjects: reading and math (Harn, Basaraba, Chard, & Fritz, 2015). If students enter middle school with writing deficits, there are few solutions to help build their skills outside the traditional classroom setting. Some schools have implemented their own writing intervention program (Jung et al., 2017), but unlike programs for reading and math, there is no nation-wide program like MTSS to help struggling writers. Thus, schools must be cognizant of how they implement writing instructions to ensure writing skills and growth is achievable for the majority of their student population as opposed to a select few.

### **Teacher Competency**

Although it is evident students need access and support in writing, many teachers lack the confidence to engage in explicit writing instruction (Graham et al., 2013; Nicholas, 2017; Soiferman, 2017). The research shows that teachers feel a lack of confidence because of 1) a lack of teacher preparation (Graham et al., 2013; Nicholas, 2017; Soiferman, 2017) and 2) a lack of professional development, specifically in how to implement effective writing instruction

(Applebee & Langer, 2009; Gallagher et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2013; Nicholas, 2017; Soiferman, 2017; Vermont Writing Collaborative, 2016).

One reason teachers need explicit guidance and resources in how to teach writing is because so much time was focused on reading instructional strategies during NCLB. Through teacher surveys administered in various studies across both primary and secondary levels, teachers expressed how they feel inadequately trained to facilitate writing instruction (Graham et al., 2013; Nicholas, 2017). Once the CCSS became the national curriculum, unless schools spent time implementing professional development that focused on writing instruction, or hired new educators who received substantial training in writing instruction, nothing was changing in the American classroom (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Gallagher, 2017; Graham et. al, 2013; Vermont Writing Collaborative, 2016).

### **Achieving Adequate Literacy Development**

Literacy research (e.g. Bazerman et al., 2017; Grossen, 1980; Herman & Wardrip, 2012; Shaw et al.; Vermont Writing Collaborative, 2016) has revealed several strategies that help students maintain proficiency in both reading and writing when they transition to the secondary level including 1) time and space and 2) explicit instruction.

#### **Time and Space**

What can be agreed upon is that in order for literacy skills to flourish, students need dedicated time within the academic day to practice their reading and writing skills (e.g., Bazerman et al., 2017; Irwin & Knodle, 2018; Ivey, 2002; Layne, 2009; Rowlands, 2016; Vermont Writing Collaborative, 2016). Students need time not only in ELA, but time across the curriculum to engage in meaningful reading and writing activities (Brozo & Flynt, 2007). Like

any skill, without the proper setting, guidance, and dedicated time to practice, that skill is unlikely to flourish.

Reading instruction can, and should, appear in a variety of formats; some of the most popular are read alouds and independent reading (Ivey, 2002; Layne, 2009). Reading should not be reduced to homework at the secondary level; instead, students should have the opportunity to explore and practice their reading skills within the classroom setting. By dedicating class time to reading, students are able to collaborate with peers (Stevens, 2006) and practice comprehension strategies (Stevens, 2006). These activities are proven to have a positive impact on students overall reading development (Stevens, 2006).

With regards to writing, students need the encouragement from their teacher to write to experience growth (Liu, 2017). Informal writing such as bell work, journal prompts, and reflections can help students achieve growth in word recognition, sentence structure, and sentence complexity (Feldman, 2012). Rowlands (2016) bluntly stated, “If students are going to learn to write well, schools and teachers simply have to find ways to provide routine writing time...” (p. 54). Providing time and space is critical not only for writing development, but also for the development of other essential skills. For example, through writing students are dedicating time to critical thinking and evaluation of information, which leads to the creation of new ideas (Feldman, 2012; Gallagher, 2017).

### **Connection Between Strong Readers and Strong Writers**

Expert readers and writers engage with literacy skills differently from their developing peers (Ahmed, Wagner & Lopez, 2014; Grossen, 1980; Herman & Wardrip, 2012; Shaw et al., 2011). Students who are classified as good readers and good writers are able to 1) draw meaning

from a text and write about it using their own words, 2) understand sentence structure, and 3) invest time in the planning process (Shaw et al., 2011).

Strong readers know how to approach a text in order to achieve optimal success (Ahmed et al., 2014; Grossen, 1980; Herman & Wardrip, 2012). Prior to reading, they set the purpose of their reading (Herman & Wardrip, 2012). Then, throughout the reading process, strong readers are able to monitor their understanding and adjust their reading accordingly. Comprehension goes beyond decoding, fluency, and breaking down of syntax (Ahmed et al., 2014; Grossen, 1980). When students connect their reading to their life experience and other background knowledge, it makes their reading more genuine and purposeful (Herman & Wardrip, 2012). Reading is an active process that requires continuous check-ins and adjustments on the part of the reader.

Strong writers go beyond being error free in their writing (Gaga, 2016). From the start, strong writers identify their task as meaningful (Gallagher, 2017; Gaga, 2016). Strong writers do not perceive writing as linear, but rather view it as a process (Gallagher, 2017; Warne, 2008). It is no longer merely a series of boxes that must be checked off; instead, writing spirals and students come back to multiple steps in the process to improve and revise their work (Warne, 2008). Writing is a time-consuming task, and strong writers are not afraid to dedicate time to their craft in order to evolve and expand their work.

### **What Needs to be Discovered**

It is clear that middle school is a key transitional time in a students' academic journey, specifically with regards to their literacy development. If students do not receive deliberate reading and writing instruction at the middle school level, they are in jeopardy of experiencing regression in their literacy development (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Layne, 2009). While

research (e.g., Bazerman et al., 2017; Gallagher, 2017; Joshi et al., 2007; Liu, 2017; Shaw et al., 2011) shows a positive correlation between writing practice and reading assessment scores, it would be false to claim that reading and writing skills are interdependent literacy skills. Yes, some students experience parallel growth in their reading and writing development; they can be categorized as good readers/good writers or poor readers/poor writers. However, as research (e.g., Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Gallagher, 2017; Jung, McMaster & delMas, 2017; Shaw et al., 2011; Soiferman, 2017) has shown, there are students whose literacy development appears to progress incongruently. For example, some students can be classified as good readers/poor writers or poor readers/good writers. This study explores these literacy outliers, those who experience incongruent literacy development at the middle school level.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the theoretical underpinnings that guided this study, including the convergence of social constructivist theorists Vygotsky's, and his Zones of Proximal Development, and Piaget's, with his Literacy Development theory. In addition, related research was presented including discussion about national curricula that has made a profound impact on literacy development at the secondary level, highlighting the dichotomy of the middle school in the field of literacy development. While literacy encompasses both reading and writing, it is clear there continues to be discrepancies in both reading and writing instruction at the middle school level. These literacy discrepancies can result in interdependent literacy acquisition in students' skills as they progress through their middle school career.

Chapter 3 will discuss the methodology of the case study. Rooted in grounded theory, the chapter will further examine the boundaries of the case study by: 1) providing greater insight into the setting, 2) explore the parameters of what classifies someone as a proficient reader, 3)

the qualifying factors necessary to be determined a focus participant, and 4) the coding process, which is essential for grounded theory research.

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

Middle school is a pivotal time in students' literacy development (Brozo & Flynt, 2007). One of the reasons middle school is a transitional time in a student's academic career is because of the shift from primary to secondary literacy standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). This shift requires secondary students to engage with reading and writing skills at a deeper level with increased academic rigor. Unfortunately, if students are not engaged with (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Brozo & Flynt, 2007; Layne, 2009) and actively developing each literacy skill, they are in jeopardy of falling behind (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Layne, 2009). While multiple studies (e.g., Applegate & Applegate, 2010; Applebee & Langer, 2009; Gallagher et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2014) have discussed what teachers can do to better facilitate middle school literacy development, students' voices remain absent from the conversation. Therefore, this study primarily focused on the students' perspective of their personal literacy development.

When seeking to understand inadequate literacy skill development at the secondary level, Biancarosa & Snow (2006) highlighted urban settings and minority students as being subject to these inadequacies. Although students in these settings can experience interdependent literacy development in reading and writing, it is important to recognize how all students, no matter their background or location, are at risk of developing inadequate literacy skills (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Hence, I focused on general education students who did not experience an equal development in both reading and writing skills as they progress through their middle school career. For this study, the location of the setting was a high-achieving suburban middle school to illustrate how all students are at risk of experiencing interdependent literacy development.



By highlighting the student perspective in a setting that is often overlooked in research, the study aims to contribute to existing secondary literacy research by expanding on who is at risk of experiencing unparalleled literacy development at the middle school level.

## **Research Design**

This study was a qualitative case study. Qualitative educational research is concerned with the study of human beings in their natural setting (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Gillham, 2000). Therefore, qualitative researchers must engage in careful planning, be realistic in their research design, base research in verifiable evidence, generate applicable outcomes that can enhance the current practice, and remain honest in their practice (Atkins & Wallace, 2012, p. 20).

In order to achieve this goal, the investigation into incongruent literacy development was rooted in grounded theory. Grounded theory allowed for the research data to drive the conversation (Gillham, 2000). The conversation was driven through the use of codes (Urquhart, 2013). Urquhart (2013) explained, “One of the major strengths of grounded theory is that it results in a chain of evidence” (p. 159). This chain of evidence was procured from two distinct coded sources: 1) In-class expository writing samples (see Appendix B) and 2) focus participant interviews. These sources were triangulated with raw reading data (Interim Reading Scores and FastBridge Scores).

Middle school students are often studied in a school setting in order to best understand their literacy development, which serves as the foundation for the case study (Gillham, 2000). In order to create a more holistic picture of each student’s literacy development, I triangulated the data (Gillham, 2000). Triangulating the data allowed a more accurate construction of each student’s literacy development because there tends to be a “discrepancy between what people say

about themselves and what they actually do” (Gillham, 2000, p. 12). After combing through the data, I allowed the data to guide the research finding.

I deviate from grounded theory in the sense that I have heavily researched my topic prior to beginning the interview process (Urquhart, 2013). However, I utilized semi-structured research questions to guide my interviews and did not proceed further; the purpose was to allow the theory to emerge from the codes (Gillham, 2000; Urquhart, 2013). Codes were derived from the interview transcripts of the focus participants (Gillham, 2000; Urquhart, 2013).

Multiple components of thoughtful qualitative educational research have been taken into consideration in the design and preparation of this study. Planning took the duration of one academic year (2018-2019) as it required research into reading and writing development at the middle school level in order to determine the best course of action. Next, the research design required refinement in order to best meet the needs of students and their current learning situation. The onset of Covid-19 caused a disruption to the learning environment beginning March 2020; therefore, the research design changed from focusing on state assessment and survey data of a large sample population to interviews of two focus participants.

While both surveys and interviews are research designs that are classified as qualitative research, understanding the learning environment of students is crucial in terms of wanting to extrapolate meaningful data. The nuances of each participant's journey were derived from their personal interviews (Gillham, 2000). Due to the limited amount of time for this study, each focus participants participated in three interviews over the course of four months in the fall of 2020.

To begin to understand the literary development of each student, I engaged in axial coding (Urquhart, 2013). By utilizing this process, I was able to comb through each transcript multiple times; each time for a specific purpose. The first time I reviewed a transcript I was able

to look for categories that emerged from the data (Urquhart, 2013). Later, I spent more time hypothesizing what might impact these categories such as conditions, contexts, interactions, strategies and consequences (Urquhart, 2013). Unlike open or selective coding, axial coding allowed me to investigate and integrate literacy development at a deeper level. Through the coding process I was able to see trends emerge, then triangulate those with reading scores and in-class expository writing samples.

This inductive process served as the foundation of grounded theory (Gillham, 2000; Urquhart, 2013). Where commonalities occurred across datasets, that is where more time was spent seeking clarity (Gillham, 2000; Urquhart, 2013). For example, when a student repeated an answer multiple times throughout an interview in various ways (such as family involvement in various aspects of their life), the repeated topic served as the foundation for some of the next round of interview questions. Through follow-up questions such emerging themes were either confirmed or denied. During the interview process, commonalities were either solidified, and added as themes in the study, or they were discarded and new themes emerged to take their place. The themes centered on the participant's personal experience were: 1) background and interest, 2) family, 3) future goals/aspirations 4) memories with reading, 5) memories with writing. The themes centered on the participant's academic experience were: 1) elementary reading experience, 2) elementary writing experience, 3) middle school reading experience, 4) middle school writing experience, 5) learning habits, and 6) evolution as a student.

### **Research Questions**

While interdependent literacy development at the middle school level is the foundation of the study, the nuanced research focused on students who were 1) identified as average readers when they entered middle school and 2) experienced unparalleled literacy development as they

progressed throughout their middle school education. Although the participants began middle school identified as proficient readers, the objective of the study was to further understand what caused the discrepancies in their reading and writing skills as they transitioned from sixth-through-seventh grade. Therefore, the research aimed to answer the following questions:

**Research question 1:** What prior personal and educational experiences seem to shape students who are disproportionately skilled in reading and writing?

**Research question 2:** What do students' expository writing samples reveal about the relationship between student reading and writing proficiencies?

### **Research Setting & Participants**

The case study spanned the course of one and half years; beginning in the fall of 2019 and concluding at the end of the fall 2020 semester. The setting and participants remained the same for the duration of this study.

#### **Setting**

The case-study took place in a school located in an affluent suburb of a Midwestern city of approximately 600,000 people. The middle school served roughly 670 sixth-through-eighth graders during the 2019-2022 academic year. In the same year, it was estimated that roughly 84% of the population was White. According to the website Niche.com, the school received an A ranking based on state assessment data coupled with community feedback. The school was selected because it is where I serve as an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, which readily provides me with access to students and staff.

The case-study spanned two academic years: 2019-2020 and 2020-2021. It focused on student learning in their natural environment; therefore, the expository writing samples gathered

as part of the study were assignments already administered by the participant's teacher (Gillham, 2000).

Written permission was obtained from the district in March of 2019 (see Appendix C). Letters explaining the nature of the study along with permission forms were sent to all families in August of 2019 (see Appendix D). Families had the ability to opt out of the study at this time.

## **Participants**

Permission forms were gathered in the fall of 2019. For initial consideration, students needed to: 1) complete the form correctly and 2) be a sixth-or seventh-grader during the 2019-2020 academic year. First, the permission form had to be completed and returned correctly during the fall of 2019. Accurate completion required both the student and at least one legal guardian to sign the form and check the yes portion of the form. If a form was returned, but the yes box was not checked, it was considered as a denial of consent. Second, eligible students needed to be enrolled as sixth-or-seventh-graders at the designated middle school for the 2019-2020 school year; therefore, eighth-graders were not considered for this study. Eighth graders were dismissed because they would be enrolled as freshman for the 2020-2021 academic year, resulting in half of their data falling outside of the grade-level parameters for this study.

These factors yielded a large number of participants, so a secondary parameter was put into place: students either needed to be currently enrolled, or previously enrolled, in my ELA class. Consequently, half of the sixth grade was eliminated (as we have two sixth-grade teams) and half of the seventh-grade (as I did not teach half of them when they were sixth-graders). This parameter was established to help with rapport, observations, and data collection; when transitioning to interviews and follow-up questions in the later part of the study, the foundational

rapport generated with students and families allowed for more time to be dedicated to literacy discussions as trust was pre-established.

Finally, the last factor was having a pool of participants who shared similar reading scores. To remain objective, I utilized two sets of data: 1) Spring 2019 Kansas State Reading Assessment (KAP) and 2) Fall 2019 Kansas Interim Assessment (KAP) scores. In order to be considered, students needed to score a level 3 or 4 on their Spring 2019 KAP reading assessment. In addition, they needed to score within the 80th percentile (between 80-89%) on their fall 2019 Interim Reading assessment. The Interim assessments are a normed assessment in conjunction with the Kansas State Reading Assessment (KAP). Students who met all five parameters: 1) permission form, 2) grade level, 3) sixth-grade ELA teacher, 4) 2019 KAP Reading Assessment score, and 5) Fall 2019 KAP Interim score, were eligible for the study.

All participants share key environmental and educational factors. For example, all students spoke English as their native language and do not speak a second language. All participants attended a feeder elementary school; this means they have all received their formal schooling from the same district. In terms of academic achievement, all students are also considered proficient readers by the state of Kansas (as a level 3 is the level of proficiency for the state). While their literacy development might progress at different rates, they all began the study identified as proficient readers.

Data collection began in the fall of 2019 with both standardized assessment data and writing samples. One expository writing sample was gathered each semester for each of the 40 participants. All standardized reading data (KAP interim and FastBridge scores) were recorded as well. This data was kept on a password-secured laptop. While the study began with 40 participants, it ended up being narrowed to two focus participants.

## **Focus Participant Qualifications**

After gathering and analyzing data over the course of the 2019-2020 academic year, patterns began to emerge. In order for face-to-face interviews to be successful, there needed to be a small number of participants (Gillham, 2000). Therefore, students who experienced parallel literacy development were no longer considered for this study. Paralleled literacy development was classified as students who either made continued gains in both reading and writing skills, stagnation in both reading and writing skills, or regression in both reading and writing skills.

Due to COVID-19 shutting down schools for fourth quarter beginning March 2020, adjustments needed to be made to the interviewee criteria. Therefore, a strong reader was classified as a student who: 1) exhibited growth between at least one set of Interim Assessment scores and 2) if their ELA teacher categorized them as being a strong reader based on classroom performance and in-class observation. The classification of a poor reader was a student who: 1) exhibited consist drops in all three Interim Assessment scores of at least 10% between each assessment (this means there is at least a 20% difference between the first and third assessment score) and 2) had their ELA teacher categorized them as a poor reader based on classroom performance and in-class observation.

The parameters of a strong writer were a student who: 1) either maintained high writing abilities (scored a 9 or 10) or experienced improvement in their writing based on pre-established codes (see Table 3.7) and 2) had their ELA teacher categorize them as a strong writer based on classroom performance and in-class observation. The parameters of a poor writer were a student who: 1) either maintained low writing abilities (scored a 6 or lower based on pre-established codes) or experienced regression in their writing and 2) had their ELA teacher categorize them as being a poor writer based on classroom performance and in-class observation.

To meet the needs of this study, the interviewees needed to be categorized as either a 1) good reader & poor writer or 2) poor reader & good writer. To provide depth to the narrative, only two students were selected. Limiting the number of participants to two was implemented because interviewing is a time-consuming process, especially if it is being conducted by only one researcher (Gillham, 2000). Therefore, both participants chosen were in the same grade-level, which helped for generating codes as it provided a similar perspective.

**Covid-19 Impact on Focus Participants.** In the fall of 2020, I reached out to families through email to confirm they granted permission for their child to continue to participate in the study, including recorded Zoom interviews, and both families agreed. After the first interview, the pool went from three participants to two participants. This was my choice as a researcher; in the end, I chose to narrow the focus to the two-seventh grade males who experience incongruent literacy development. Both participants were male and on the same seventh-grade team, which helped to eliminate other extenuating circumstances as I only had to work with one outside teacher and could look at the dynamics of one grade-level team.

During the final interview, each student was asked to provide me with a pseudonym for this study, which will be used throughout the remainder of this study. Student A is going by the chosen name of James Hemmings and Student B is going by the chosen name of Max Powers. Student A's (James Hemmings) was classified as a strong writer and poor reader. Student B's (Max Powers) was classified as a strong reader and poor writer.

**Covid-19 Impact on Setting.** While the academic institution remained the same, the location of the learning differed throughout the course of the 2020-2021 academic year. The first day of the academic year was postponed by three weeks to September 8, 2020. The participants in this study opted to learn in whatever mode the district chose, which resulted in them beginning



the academic year in a hybrid learning model. This meant the students attended school in person either Monday & Tuesday (Cohort B's in person learning days) or Thursday & Friday (Cohort A's in person learning days). Cohort A was comprised of students with last names starting with A-through-K; Cohort B was comprised of students with last names starting with L-Z. Wednesday was a Zoom learning day for both cohorts and was designated as a C Day by the district calendar (see Table 3.1). If students were not at school, they were learning independently at home and were only required to check-in with their homeroom teacher at 2:35pm.

**Table 3.1 Hybrid Learning Model**

<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
<b>Cohort A</b> <b>Last name: A-K</b>	<b>Cohort A</b> <b>Last name: A-K</b>	<b>C-Day</b> <b>Zoom for both</b> <b>Cohorts</b>	<b>Cohort B</b> <b>Last name: L-Z</b>	<b>Cohort B</b> <b>Last name: L-Z</b>

*Note:* This table outlines which cohorts learned at the building on which days of the week. Wednesday, however, was the only day everyone learned from home via Zoom.

This was the learning model until Monday, November 30, 2020. On this date the district transitioned to remote learning for all students until Friday, January 15, 2021, which marked the last day of the first semester. This meant students would follow their traditional bell schedule, only on Zoom, five days per week.

### **Data Collection & Methods Analysis**

Prior to securing the data, the Internal Review Board (IRB) granted permission for the proposed study (see Appendix E). Data collection began during the fall semester of 2019 and continued through the fall semester of 2020. Data collection included: 1) standardized reading data (Interim & FastBridge scores), 2) classroom expository writing samples, and 3) focus participant interviews. Reading interim scores, in-class expository writing samples, and interview transcripts had identifying information removed to protect student anonymity.

## **Reading Data Collection**

Standardized reading data consisted of Interim KAP scores and FastBridge aReading scores. These assessments were administered three times per academic year: fall, winter, and early spring as outlined in Tables 3.2 and 3.3. The first KAP and FastBridge assessments were administered in the fall of 2019. The Interim assessment is designed by the state of Kansas and is used as a predictive assessment; it indicates how students will perform on the upcoming state assessment. FastBridge, however, is a screener. It looks at students who are at risk of falling behind. Both assessments are utilized as an objective tool to show how students are progressing in their reading development.

Interim assessments were administered in students' ELA class. However, in the fall of 2020, the seventh grade Interim Assessment was given while students were at home during remote learning. Their scores were gathered by the building's School Improvement Specialist (SIS) from the state. Scores were gathered by grade-levels and sent accordingly to be discussed. For the purpose of this study, during the 2019-2020 academic year I received the focus participants scores as I was their teacher. I received focus participants' scores during the 2020-2021 academic year from their ELA teacher through email. The acquisition of data occurred after each Interim Assessment cycle.

FastBridge assessments were also administered in students' ELA class. The Fall FastBridge of 2020 was not impacted by the hybrid learning environment as students were still able to complete the assessment within their classroom. The scores for the focused participants were gathered by ELA teachers and sent to me through email during the 2020-2021 academic year.

## Reading Data Analysis

I recorded each participant's reading data on a spreadsheet. Since the study was narrowed to two participants, I used the student's chosen pseudonyms on all spreadsheets regarding their data. Each team has a table that consists of students (row), and time of year the Interim assessment (column) and FastBridge (column) was taken (see Tables 3.2 and 3.3).

**Table 3.2 Focus Participant Interim Scores**

	State Assessment (2019)	Fall Interim-2019	Winter Interim 2019	Spring Interim 2019	Fall Interim 2020
<b>Max Powers</b>	4	85%	88.3%	76.7%	99%
<b>James Hemmings</b>	3	80%	50%	46.7%	68%

*Note:* Participants' percentages on reading interim scores over the span of one academic year.

**Table 3.3 Focus Participants FastBridge aReading Scores**

	Spring 2019	Fall 2019	Winter 2019	Spring 2019	Fall 2020	Fall 2020
<b>Max Powers</b>	549 (88th)	567 (99th)	564 (98th)	OMIT	577 (99th)	564 (95th)
<b>James Hemmings</b>	526 (51st)	535 (72nd)	536 (68th)	OMIT	540 (68th)	541 (62nd)

*Note:* Participants' percentages on FastBridge scores over the span of one academic year.

Both Interim percentages and FastBridge percentiles were recorded for each student. As indicated in Tables 3.2 and 3.3, the scores are color-coded based on the assessment's proficiency rating system: green indicated proficient, yellow indicated cautionary, and red indicated warning. There is no information for Spring 2020 as a result of Covid-19; no state assessments were administered during the spring semester of 2020. Student scores were only compared against themselves; students were not compared against each other. The primary objective was to

ascertain growth and trends in their scores in order to triangulate the data with their writing samples and interview codes.

### **Writing Data Collection**

Similar to reading, writing samples were gathered three times throughout the course of the study; once per semester. The timeline of each expository sample acquisition is broken down in Table 3.4.

**Table 3.4 In-Class Expository Writing Samples**

	<b>Fall 2019</b>	<b>Spring 2020</b>	<b>Fall 2020</b>
Writing Data= Expository writing samples	1. Gather “Charles” Writing Samples	1. Gather in-class writing sample  Teacher Observation	1. Gathered in-class writing sample

*Note:* Table outlines when participant’s in-class expository writing samples were gathered over the course of the proposed study.

All writing samples were short, expository compositions. Short is defined as one-to-two paragraphs. Expository writing samples were deliberately chosen because they bridge primary and secondary curriculum standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). In the primary grades, students were accustomed to composing narratives, whereas high-schoolers were asked to focus on argumentative analysis; expository writing served as a bridge between the two types (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Middle school is a transitional time for writing skill acquisition as students are engaging in more complex, research-based writing. It is vital the writing samples reflect these elevated writing demands. The gathered samples address both literary and informational prompts as well

as required students to go through the writing process. Each expository writing sample requires students to: 1) answer a prompt, 2) embed appropriate textual evidence from an outside source, and 3) explain how that evidence supported, or proved, the question being asked. The purpose of looking at in-class writing samples as opposed to a normed writing sample was that Kansas currently does not have a standardized writing assessment at the middle school level. Also, the setting of the case study did not participate in any normed writing curriculum that would lend itself to a more objective analysis of student writing.

During the course of the 2019-2020 school year, two writing samples were gathered. One from the first week of the academic year, and one halfway through. The third writing sample was gathered during the first semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. The parameters of the writing sample were that it was an in-class assignment created, taught, and assessed by their ELA teacher. The only clarification I have sought from teachers has been with regards to the purpose of the writing assignment; this has been so I better understand the samples I am reading.

### **Writing Data Analysis**

In order to evaluate student writing, codes were generated. Codes allowed for critical and objective analysis of each student's writing development and how it played into the greater context of writing proficiency at the middle school level (Glaser, 2005). Codes were based on the R.A.C.E. writing format. The R.A.C.E. acronym stands for: Restate questions, Answer question, Cite evidence, and Explain evidence. This was used for the base of the coding because this is the format used to teach expository writing across the building. Beyond the basic R.A.C.E. structure, fundamental writing skills need to be coded, including grammatical structure and development of ideas (Applebee & Langer, 2009; Bazerman et al., 2017). Coding student writing allowed for a more objective analysis of growth, stagnation, or regression in their writing progress.

Writing codes were established to serve as a consistent measurement tool for all expository writing samples. The writing codes, as outlined in Table 3.5, were applied to all expository writing samples gathered throughout the duration of this study. Student samples were scored against themselves. I did not group students based on their coded scores; instead, I identified students whose writing scores varied greatly from their reading scores.

**Table 3.5 In-Class Expository Writing Codes**

Code	Point Value	Content
Orange Highlight	1	Restate question as a statement/Topic sentence address prompt
Blue Highlight	1	Answers question in own words
Lead In (circled) Pink Highlight Citation boxed	2	Lead in (½ point) Evidence (1 point) *Original; Must build/support answer. Cannot merely repeat the answer from the previous sentence. Citation (½ point)
Yellow Highlight	2	Explanation of citation is provided (1pt) Explanation goes beyond restatement of facts (1pt)
Underlined	1	Wrap-up *Writer ends their writing appropriately. No blunt ending.
☑ will be indicated for errors	1	Grammar (punctuation, capitalization, 3rd person) Spelling  *When calculating both spelling and grammar errors: -Less than 10% of the total piece has errors = 1pt -10.01%-20% of the total piece has errors = 1/2pt
SF	1	Sentence fluency *Use of transition words *Sentences are fully developed.
D	1	Development *Ideas are original *Progress logically throughout the paper
TOTAL	10	

*Note:* Table indicates the codes that will be utilized to score each participants' in-class expository writing sample.

Each sample was gathered, printed, and coded by hand. It received a total score out of 10. The score did not equate to a letter grade; for example, a 9 out of 10 was not equivalent to an A anymore than a 5 out of 10 was equivalent to an F. Instead, the purpose of the coding served as a singular measurement tool to better standardize the data. For this study, the main goal was to assess students' progression in their writing development.

### **Interviews Data Collection**

As a result of Covid-19, the interviews for this study were conducted utilizing the Zoom software that was adopted by the district in March of 2020. As outlined in Table 3.6, the first interview was conducted at the beginning of the academic year (September), the second was conducted in the late fall (October/November), and the final interview was conducted in early winter (November/December).

**Table 3.6 Interview Calendar**

	<b>Interview 1</b>	<b>Interview 2</b>	<b>Interview 3</b>
<b>Student A: James Hemmings</b>	<b>September 1, 2020</b>	<b>October 22, 2020</b>	<b>November 18, 2020</b>
<b>Student B: Max Powers</b>	<b>September 17, 2020</b>	<b>October 27, 2020</b>	<b>December 8, 2020</b>

*Note:* The table includes the dates for each Zoom interview for each participant.

Interviews were conducted using Zoom and were recorded utilizing the QuickTime player software. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and was conducted immediately following the school day (starting roughly at 3:10 pm). Following each interview, the video file was uploaded to a private YouTube account and transcribed from there.

The interviews were semi-structured in format. The baseline questions for all three interviews were the same. From there, the questions became individualized to better clarify and

understand each student's experience. By having a baseline of questions, it served to have a primary objective for each interview (whether that be learning more about school habits, personal experience, etc.), but the questions became individualized to reflect each participant's unique experience.

There was at least one month between each student interview. This time allowed for transcription and coding of interviews. These codes were gathered on a table after each interview. These codes allowed for themes to emerge in relation to reading and writing acquisition for each participant. The themes centered on the participant's personal experience were: 1) background and interest, 2) family, 3) future goals/aspirations 4) memories with reading, 5) memories with writing. The themes centered on the participant's academic experience were: 1) elementary reading experience, 2) elementary writing experience, 3) middle school reading experience, 4) middle school writing experience, 5) learning habits, and 6) evolution as a student. Codes were charted and color-coded to help generate new interview questions. While interviews were semi-structured, follow-up questions were asked throughout the interview depending on student response to dig deeper to seek the why behind the student's response.

Each participant was given a ten-dollar gift card to a store of their choice after the conclusion of the final interview. The gift card was accompanied with a thank you note for their time, perspective, and insight. Both the gift card and thank you note were mailed to the participant's home address in December of 2020.



**Table 3.7 Semi-Structured Interview Question Guidelines**

<b><u>Research Question 2</u></b>	<b>Personal Experience</b>	<b>Educational Experience</b>
What prior personal and educational experiences seem to shape students who are disproportionately skilled in reading and writing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interests</li> <li>• Family</li> <li>• Extra-curriculars</li> <li>• Goals/Aspirations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elementary experience</li> <li>• Perceptions of reading (past, present, future)</li> <li>• Perceptions of writing (past, present, future)</li> <li>• Engagement with reading (in and out of school)</li> <li>• Engagement with writing (in and out of school)</li> </ul>

*Note:* The table breaks down two key components of the research question to serve as a guide for interview questions.

### **Interview Data Coding**

Student interviews were transcribed utilizing YouTube transcription software after each interview (Gillham, 2000; Urquhart, 2013). Each interview was listened to multiple times to 1) ensure the transcript matched the audio and 2) generate codes. The coding process is where I the commonalities began to emerge (Gillham, 2000; Urquhart, 2013). Each interview was transcribed and coded prior to conducting another interview with that specific participant, which resulted in roughly one month between interviews. I utilized axial coding because it allowed for core themes to emerge across the transcripts (Urquhart, 2013). While combing through the transcripts, recurring terms and phrases were highlighted and categorized onto a digital table (Urquhart, 2013).

Themes made up the rows of the table while the student's name and date of the interview created the title. I made a row for each participant on the same chart so I could better assess commonalities and differences. These observations were noted at the bottom of the table and were used to help create interview questions for the following meeting. Based on follow-up

questions, themes were either confirmed or denied. If codes were denied, they were removed and no longer investigated. Codes that were confirmed became themes and were further investigated regarding each participant's unique literacy development journey (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Gillham, 2000; Urquhart, 2013). By using codes to form the basis of future interview questions, it allowed students to clarify developing themes and clarify inaccuracies.

The raw data provided one layer of literacy development, but the story was incomplete. The interview personalized the literacy experience and gave meaning behind the numbers.

### **Addressing Research Questions**

Literacy development at the middle school level is being evaluated through two distinct research questions. Both questions, as illustrated in Table 3.8, require data to undergo its own distinct analysis process. Each question requires its own set of distinct codes and themes to be generated in order to yield the most accurate results.

**Table 3.8 Process of Analysis for Each Research Question**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Data Collected</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
#1: What prior personal and educational experiences seem to shape students who are disproportionately skilled in reading and writing?	1. Student interviews  2. Standardized Reading scores	Coded transcripts  -Use Interim Reading & FastBridge scores, writing samples to facilitate discussion
#2: What do students' expository writing samples reveal about the relationship between student reading and writing proficiencies?	1. In-Class Writing Samples  2. Student Interviews	Coded Writing  Coded Transcripts -Themes

*Note:* The table indicates how data will be collected and analyzed to answer each proposed research question.

**Research Question 1:** Student interviews in conjunction with their standardized reading scored were used to answer the question: *What prior personal and educational experiences seem to shape students who are disproportionately skilled in reading and writing?*

In order to fully address the question, interview questions focused on four main components: 1) personal experience with reading, 2) personal experience with writing, 3) educational experience with reading, and 4) educational experience with writing. To help establish rapport and see each student as a complete being, it was important to also ask questions about interests, perspectives, family, and how they spend their down time. While these questions might appear to delineate from the original purpose, they often held the key as to why students experience incongruent literacy development.

**Research Question 2:** In order to best answer the question, *How do students' expository writing samples reflect students' attitudes about writing?*, triangulation of data was critical (Gillham, 2000; Urquhart, 2013). As highlighted in Table 3.8, the triangulation of data was derived from 1) coded writing, 2) coded interviews, and 3) theme discrepancies that emerged between good writers and poor writers. While the information gathered in this study was not generalizable to all students, finding recurring themes within a singular category (strong writers or poor writers) served to spark conversation for future inquiry.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Student participants were not of legal age to give consent, which added a layer of ethical responsibility to this research. Students and families had the ability to opt out of participation in the study twice. The first time was in August of 2019 with the signing of the permission form. The second time was in August of 2020 through email after reaching out regarding participation

in the interview process. The study did not alter the students' natural learning environment in any way.

Since literacy is a highly individualized process, student scores were not in direct comparison with each other. Instead, patterns were compared. Since this is the unique literacy journey of specific middle school students, it is important to remember that this case study is not generalizable (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). While themes emerged that were similar between both participants, it would be presumptuous to assume these themes are applicable to students who exhibit similar traits.

### **Informed Consent**

Permission was granted from both the school district and building prior (see Appendix B) to submission of an IRB form (see Appendix D). Middle school students and families were provided with written information with regards to the study in the form of a letter in August 2019. In order to be eligible for participation, the student and at least one guardian needed to indicate approval by checking yes, sign, and date the letter. Not returning the letter, or not signing the letter correctly, rendered the student ineligible for participation. Prior to beginning the interview process, students and parents were contacted to obtain permission for continued participation.

### **Confidentiality & Anonymity**

Confidentiality of participants is paramount throughout the research process (Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Gillham, 2000). Therefore, pseudonyms were used for all participant names, locations, and identifying features in all study-related materials. In addition, all data were kept confidential. All data were stored in secure locations outside of the research location and on

secure platforms. All data were coded using the participants' chosen pseudonyms or pseudonym initials.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As their former English teacher, I must fully disclose my position within this study. As an English teacher, literacy development and acquisition are topics I am heavily invested in. While national curriculum expectations evolve and instructional trends change, the conversation rarely centers around students. What do my students need in order to achieve optimal literacy success? Years of secondary teaching experiences have yielded aggregate data, but not an explanation for the numbers.

Having taught all involved participants, I acknowledge that I truly wanted to see them all experience academic success. Acknowledging my bias, I made it my responsibility to take a step back, remained reflexive, and took time to learn from their experience. By taking the time to learn the unique literacy journey of each student, I provided the time and space to answer some of the deeper issues.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 outlined the design of the study. Qualitative data collection began in the fall of 2019 and concluded in the winter of 2021. In the aftermath of Covid-19, the focus participant pool was limited to two students that met the following requirements: 1) strong reader and poor writer and 2) strong writer and poor reader. The two focus participants participated in three interviews over the course of the fall 2020 semester. Coded interview data was triangulated with expository writing samples, Interim reading scores, and FastBridge reading scores to determine themes and draw patterns. These themes and patterns were used to answer research questions. Additionally, chapter 3 addressed ethical considerations and acknowledged my potential bias.

Chapter 4 will discuss the results of the study. First, time will be dedicated to discussing the academic and personal background of each focus participant. From there, similarities and differences will be delineated between each participant's reading and writing abilities. The focus of their literacy development is on their transition to the middle school setting.

## **Chapter 4 - Results**

Chapter four will present the findings of this case study that explored variables impacting discrepancies in two middle school male-students' literacy development. By coding student interview transcripts and comparing them against standardized reading scores (Kansas Assessment Program (KAP) and FastBridge aReading), themes regarding personal and academic literacy experiences began to emerge. This chapter will show how the findings of the study were highly nuanced and specific to each participant.

### **Research Questions**

This case study focused on answering two questions:

- **Research Question 1:** What prior personal and educational experiences seem to shape students who are disproportionately skilled in reading and writing?
- **Research Question 2:** What do students' expository writing samples reveal about the relationship between student reading and writing proficiencies?

In order to best address the first research question, it was necessary to begin with a commentary regarding the personal and academic background of each participant.

### **Participant 1: James Hemmings**

Based on classroom samples, teacher observation, and standardized reading data, James Hemmings was classified as a strong writer and poor reader.

#### **Academic Background of James Hemmings**

James Hemmings was enrolled in seventh grade during the 2020-2021 academic year. Although he attended the same school district for his entire academic career, he attended three primary schools: one school for kindergarten, a second for first-through-third grade, and a third

for fourth-and-fifth grade. Even with multiple moves, James recalled positive memories from his time at his various elementary schools.

James described himself as a good student who enjoyed collaborative and hands-on learning. He preferred working with peers and being with the teacher in the classroom; as a result of Covid-19, a transition to remote learning after Thanksgiving Break, November 30, 2020, made him nervous (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). Fortunately, his family had the resources to provide him with a regular tutor (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). This support was also provided to him when school abruptly changed learning models during the spring semester of 2020 as a result of Covid-19, forcing students to complete the 2019-2020 academic year remotely with limited access to his classroom teachers. Being provided with a tutor continued access to one-on-one academic support in a collaborative environment. James was reflective throughout the three interviews. He understood that not all students had the financial means to be provided with such resources and considered himself fortunate. He saw access to such resources as opportunities and wanted to use these opportunities to their fullest potential.

### **Personal Interests of James Hemmings**

Along with holding himself to a high academic standard, James also considered himself a highly skilled athlete. During the fall of 2020, James participated on the school's cross-country team. When asked how the season went he stated, "Well, I didn't win any meets for the school, but I did come in first place twice for seventh-grade boys" (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020). This humility was echoed again when discussing his other athletic passions: basketball and baseball. James participated on a traveling baseball team during the summer of 2020 that was coached by his dad. During the summer he participated in thirty-



eight baseball games, but was disappointed because his team did not repeat their undefeated 2019 sports season (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020). Through our conversations it was evident that he held himself to a high athletic standard. His high standards for academics and athletics were cemented early in life by his family.

### **Family Background of James Hemmings**

In every interview, James wove family throughout the conversation. It was evident that family played an integral and active part of his daily life. James spoke not only about parents, who are together and play an active role in his upbringing, but his younger brother as well. He is the oldest of two children; both children are males. He discussed playing with his brother and helping his brother with school work (J. Hemmings, September 1, 2020; M. Powers, November 18, 2020).

James also spoke extensively about his maternal grandmother. When asked what he enjoys doing in his free time he stated, “I go to my grandma's house like three times a week and we play games” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020). As a retired English teacher, she has played an active role in his schooling; she is someone he admires and seeks guidance from regularly. It was clear that he was comfortable asking her advice on assignments and for book recommendations (J. Hemmings, October 22, 2020 and November 18, 2020). She regularly attends his sporting events and is over to their house, making her an active, positive presence in his daily life. Not only did he come from a strong, supportive family, but a family rooted in faith.

Through our conversations, it became clear that Christianity helped serve as the anchor for the family's core values. For example, in the summer of 2020 his mom implemented a new routine where “my mom, my brother, and I will go out to our porch and we'll do our devotions.

We will eat our breakfast and we will read a chapter of a book. Uh we're reading the Tim Tebow book” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020). This book was chosen because it was the type of “book that can inspire us” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020). As previously stated, church and Christianity served as the nucleus for his family. When churches were closed during the 2020 lockdown, his family turned to books to share inspirational examples for their boys.

James strove to do what he perceived to be right and good in all aspects of his life. For example, his favorite memory associated with elementary school was in fourth grade when he received the school’s highest honor, which was a character trait award (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020). While a talented athlete and coming from a family that has financial resources, he took deep pride in being perceived as a good person who was able to give back to his peers and school. He also articulated wanting to do what is perceived as right in the eyes of his parents and teachers (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). He considered himself a rule follower and wanted to do what was expected of him in the classroom (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020).

## **Participant 2: Max Powers**

Based on classroom samples, teacher observations, and KAP Interim data, Max Powers was classified as a strong reader and poor writer.

### **Academic Background of Max Powers**

Max Powers was a seventh-grader during the 2020-2021 academic year. Max attended one elementary school from kindergarten through fifth grade. For Max, memories associated with elementary school were positive; he recalled the simplicity of elementary school with a sense of nostalgia and had nothing negative to discuss.

Max described himself as an independent learner who was good at reading, math, and listening (Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). While he perceived himself as a bright student, he admitted to struggling with organization (personal communication, December 8, 2020). Subsequently, he was relieved when the district made the transition to remote learning after Thanksgiving Break due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He explained that he had less homework because of the consistent remote learning model; therefore, he experienced more academic success (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). Prior to going remote he forgot to submit assignments on time, which was getting overwhelming (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020).

### **Personal Interests of Max Powers**

Max considered himself an active student; he was highly involved in various physical activities both in and outside of the school setting. Max decided to join the school's cross-country team in the fall of 2020. He also participates in soccer and taekwondo outside of school; these are activities he has participated in since elementary school (M. Powers, personal communication, September 17, 2020). While Max was an active student, he preferred more low-key activities with close friends. For example, he spent most of his summer days of 2020 swimming in his friend's pool and being outside in the neighborhood (M. Powers, personal communication, September 17, 2020). While Max explained that he did spend some time on video games, he articulated how he would much rather interact with his friends outdoors (M., Powers, personal communication, September 17, 2020).

When alone, he described how he enjoyed reading and exploring YouTube. He stated, "I really like mythology. My YouTube homepage is actually just like a bunch of history. Or not history, but mainly mythology channels" (M. Powers, personal communication, September 17,

2020). Through our three interviews, it was evident that he was a curious student who was willing to explore his interests beyond the confines of a classroom. Since Greek mythology was his passion, it was not surprising when he said in September that he spent his summer starting the *Percy Jackson* series (M. Powers, personal communication, September 17, 2020).

### **Family Background of Max Powers**

Max was more reserved when it came to talking about his family, but gradually opened up during the three interviews. He is the youngest of two siblings; having an older sister in high school (M. Powers, personal communication, September 17, 2020 and December 7, 2020). Both parents live in the home and have been active in his upbringing. When discussing his parents, he spent more time expounding on the various activities he did with his dad (M. Powers, personal communication, September 17, 2020 and December 7, 2020). The praise he received from his parents regarding his literacy development had been profound. Positive reinforcement from family was a source of pride; Max strove to be the best he could be both in and out of the classroom (M. Powers, personal communication, December 7, 2020).

It became clear from our conversations that education was valued in his household and was a regular topic of conversation at home. Max regularly discussed his future plans and goals over the course of our three interviews. His ultimate goal was to graduate from high school and attend college in hopes of becoming an engineer (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020). Education, it appears, had been communicated as a tool to help achieve future goals. Therefore, college was an educational goal for this student, and he had begun to look at how to make that dream a reality, even as a seventh-grader. For example, Max referenced taking math, design, and English courses in high school to better prepare for college (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020). He also discussed the necessity of having neat penmanship

every time we spoke; one of the reasons being for college and needing to take good notes in class (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020), then being able to write legible plans as an engineer (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020). It was evident that he was focused on long-term goals and believed strong literacy skills would help him achieve future success. Figure 1 illustrates the unique background traits of James Hemmings and Max Powers.

### **Commonalities**

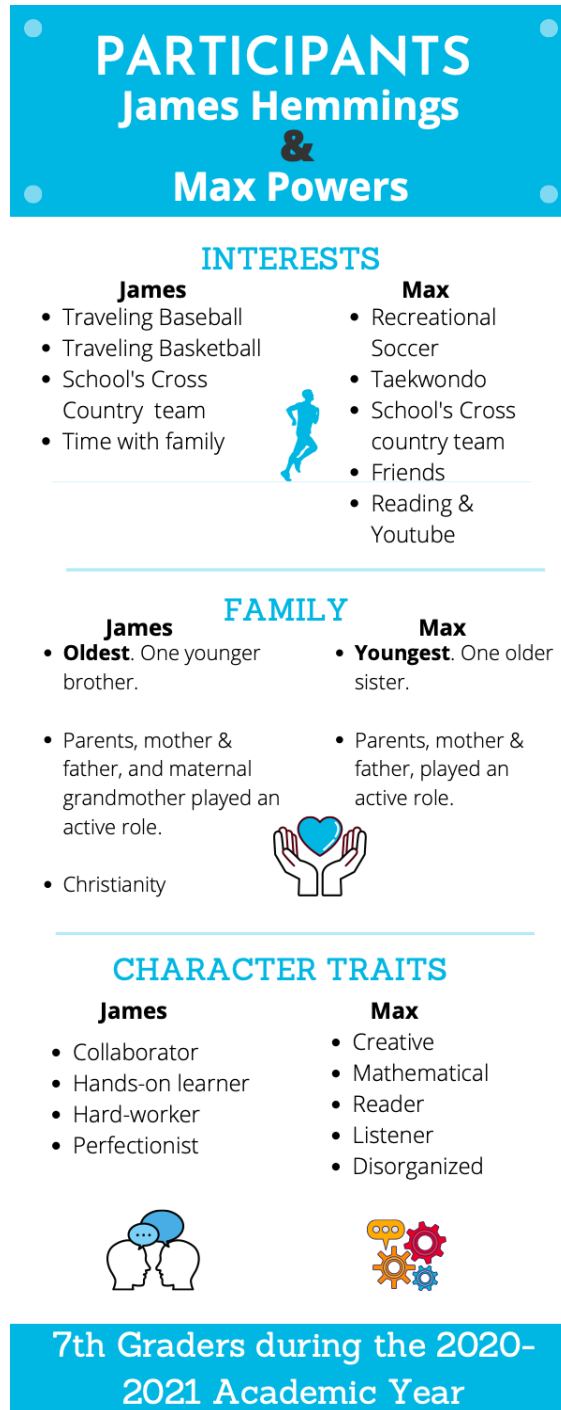
Throughout the coding process, several commonalities emerged between James Hemmings and Max Powers. For instance, both students were enrolled on the same grade-level teams in both sixth and seventh grade. Both boys were active as they both participated on the seventh-grade boys cross country team and other extra-curricular activities. Finally, both boys held themselves to a high academic standard. Beyond their similar educational and personal interests, themes emerged surrounding their reading and writing development. Similarly, a final major theme emerged regarding the involvement of the participants' families, being a contributing factor in their literacy development.

#### **Commonalities in Reading**

Memories associated with reading acquisition preceded the start of formal schooling. Both participants recalled fond memories of being read to as a child. Hemmings (personal communication, November 18, 2020) and Powers (personal communication, December 8, 2020) had access to books in their home and were read to prior to the start of their formal academic career. Although the boys did not recall specific titles they were read, they reminisced with fondness being read to as young children. James remembered being read to by his mother and grandmother; his memories were more distinct when it came to spending time reading to his younger brother (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). He explained the

repetitiveness of reading a beloved book essentially caused him to memorize it (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020).

**Figure 1 Focus Participants: James Hemmings and Max Powers**



*Note:* The infographic summarizes the background of James Hemmings and Max Powers.

Max was also read to as a young child, but he more frequently discussed being read to by his dad. Unlike James, reading aloud with a parent lasted beyond the preschool years. He recalled reading aloud books like the *Harry Potter* series until he was eleven years old (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). He clarified his experience by explaining, “I don't think I would have liked reading if my parents didn't read books to me” (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). While both boys were read to, the duration for the read alouds were much longer for Max than they were for James.

Both boys grew up in environments where they witnessed family members reading. James explained, “My grandma always reads. Like, she'll be reading between my sports games or when she is picking me up in the car. My brother, no. My mom, no. My dad...um, sometimes. He reads a lot about sports, but only articles and stuff” (personal communication, September 1, 2020). What was interesting regarding my conversation with both participants is they did not regard reading newspaper or magazine articles or on a digital device (such as a phone or tablet) as reading (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020; M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020). They only considered a physical book as reading. So, while James stated that his mom and brother did not read, that was not entirely accurate. Upon further inquiry, I learned that they read, but in the form of magazine articles and on digital devices (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). Max also grew up in a house of readers. He explained that reading in his house was an independent experience; people read their own book choices separately (personal communication, October 27, 2020). It was evident through our conversations that both students grew up immersed in reading-rich environments.

Both boys discussed the necessity of being consistent with reading in order to experience reading growth. While the motivation to read for each boy differed, both deemed regular reading

as a vital component of being a successful reader. When asked what students should do who are looking to improve their reading skills, Max explained, “I recommend them [students] trying to do like a couple chapters, like two chapters a day” (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). When I asked for his reasoning he elaborated with, “because you know you don't want to fall behind” (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). James echoed this sentiment in his interview when he replied to the same question with “just read a certain amount of pages each day so you make sure you understand it like we did in sixth grade with the library book” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020).

Unlike Max, however, James did better when the expectation to engage with daily reading was set by the school and his teacher. James was not required to complete independent reading for his English class during the fall semester of the 2020 academic year, and he admitted to not being consistent in his reading while at home. Max, on the other hand, had continued to read consistently, even though it was not formally assigned. He explained how he read roughly every other day for 15-20 minutes (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020). As a result, he was finishing up the *Percy Jackson* series in December 2020, when at the beginning of our time together in September 2020 he had just started the series.

When reflecting on the common themes that emerged with reading, it was evident that reading was a literacy skill that was fostered by both families prior to the start of formal schooling and was nurtured throughout their academic career. Growing up in households that modeled and actively engaged in reading helped foster positive relationships with the skill. This translated to their positive engagement with reading in the school setting.



## **Commonalities in Writing**

Unlike reading, memories associated with writing development were directly correlated with the classroom setting. James' earliest memory of writing was in kindergarten (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November, 18, 2020) and Max's earliest memory with writing was in middle elementary with spelling tests (M. Powers, personal communication, December 7, 2020). When asked if they wrote at home, both boys expressed that they did not; this response was followed up by me with specific examples such as lists, notes, emails, and texting. Surprisingly, both boys were confused by this question as neither one believed these formats should be considered writing. Writing, in their minds, required detailed responses that must equate to a complete paragraph (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020; M. Powers, personal communication, September 17, 2020). They both believed writing required a formal process of drafting and revising for a set purpose.

Unlike their experience with reading, writing conjured up negative memories. For James, the memories began with the workbooks he received in kindergarten and first grade "to work on all your spelling and then it worked in, like, sentences trees" (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). Max recalled practicing spelling at home with his dad (M. Powers, personal communication, December 7, 2020). Negative memories with writing were associated with rote memorization and kill-and-drill tasks. These activities lacked imagination and creativity, which rendered them boring in the minds of the participants.

Both boys emphasized the necessity for creativity in writing, especially when students are first learning how to write. Creativity with writing allowed both boys to see writing as an enjoyable experience. Max said, "It'll make kids like writing. It's what made me like to write" (Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). This was fostered in the later elementary

grades, specifically in third through fifth grade, when students were asked to write detailed responses for the first time. James stated, “I wrote some about sports, which I know very well. So I had a lot of information... I could really write a good paragraph and it was fun” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). Max echoed the necessity of creative writing in schools, especially when learning how to write.

In order to be a good writer, both participants believed evolution of writing must occur as students progress throughout their educational career. This perceived change in writing was based upon what was assessed at each grade level. In early elementary the emphasis was placed on penmanship; penmanship was assessed in their early academic career and was associated with their writing development. James explained, “I remember some of my teachers getting after some kids who didn't really care and were just scribbling over their paper, writing words. The teacher really couldn't understand it so they just gave you a bad grade” (J. Hemmings, personal commentary, November 18, 2020).

In later elementary school, the emphasis was placed on the development of ideas through the creative writing process. Both boys recalled the transition to creative writing with fond memories. For James, his positive recollection was in fifth grade, whereas Max had his positive memory in third grade. Both boys associated creativity with 1) being able to select a topic they were interested in (for James it was sports and for Max it was dragons) and 2) being allowed to write freely about their topic.

Once the boys transitioned to middle school they were asked to transition to more complex writing. The focus was placed on 1) grammar and 2) being able to use evidence in their writing. Writing in middle school was no longer fun because it was not imaginative. The purest response was given by James on how writing in middle school differed from elementary school:

“I could really write a good paragraph and it was fun [in elementary school] since it wasn't like reading um on a website and then summarizing it [in middle school]” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020).

In elementary school, the content was derived from their imagination, whereas the content for middle school writing was derived from research or literature. Middle school also marked a shift back to grammar, which is evident in Max's response when he explained, “I've gone much better with my grammar and my sentence structure” (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020). When pressed further, this response made sense because these were the assessed writing skills at the seventh-grade level. Both participants emphasized a different writing skill at each part of their education. Early elementary conjured memories of penmanship (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020; M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020), upper-elementary had participants recalling their creative writing (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020; M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020), and middle school writing was a transition to analytical writing and grammar (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020; M. Powers, personal communication, September 17, 2020). Through the interviews, it became evident that what each participant recalled regarding their writing development was based on the specific skills that were emphasized and assessed at each grade-level.

When looking at the commonalities between both boys in regards to writing development, it is clear they are more nuanced. First, writing was developed and nurtured within the school setting. Writing was an enjoyable experience for each participant when they had a say in what they were writing and were allowed to be creative in their written expression. Unlike reading, their opinions of what defines a good writer changes depending on the grade-level of the

writer. For example, Max would encourage a younger student to focus on good handwriting if they want to become a better writer, but would encourage a middle schooler to focus on writing longer pieces with strong grammar (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020 and December 8, 2020).

### **Commonalities with Family Involvement Regarding Literacy Development**

A unifying factor in both participants' literacy development was active family involvement and acknowledgement. Both boys received acknowledgement and praise from family members throughout their literacy journey. Specifically, both boys had their skills acknowledged repeatedly throughout their education. For example, while in fourth grade, James' creativity was acknowledged by his mother while decorating during the Christmas holiday (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). Although the comment had nothing to do with literacy, acknowledging his creativity helped foster his confidence, which translated to the classroom. He felt confident engaging in a creative writing prompt in fifth-grade, which was later turned into a gift for his maternal grandmother (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). This culmination of recognition followed by praise within the household helped instill confidence James. As a result, he continued to view himself as a strong writer within the classroom as he transitioned to middle school.

Similarly, Max received praise from his family for his reading skills. He explained, "Well, my parents are really proud of me" (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). This pride was communicated to him when he performed well on FastBridge and State Assessments along with classroom performance. As a result of his parents communicating their pride in his reading performance to him, he explained, "it makes me like reading more" (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). Acknowledgement of

his literacy growth on both classroom and standardized assessments encouraged the student to strive to be the best he could be and took pride in his accomplishments.

### **Commonalities in High Academic Standards**

Max and James held themselves to high academic standards. Both students stated how they worked to achieve A's and B's in their ELA classes; both have achieved this goal since starting middle school in the fall of 2019. Table 4.1 shows their letter markings and percentages for ELA since starting middle school in the fall of 2019.

**Table 4.1 Grade in ELA class for Max & James**

	<b>Fall Semester 2019: 6th Grade</b>	<b>Spring Semester 2020: 6th Grade</b>	<b>Fall Semester 2020: 7th Grade</b>
<b>Max Powers</b>	<b>A</b> Quarter 1: 95.44% (A) Quarter 2: 87.13% (B+)	<b>A-</b> Quarter 3: 90.04% (A-) Quarter 4: 93.75% (A)	<b>B</b> Quarter 1: 77.32% (C+) Quarter 2: 91.13% (A-)
<b>James Hemmings</b>	<b>A</b> Quarter 1: 97.40% (A) Quarter 2: 88.89% (B+)	<b>A-</b> Quarter 3: 92.39% (A) Quarter 4: 90.96% (A-)	<b>A</b> Quarter 1: 95.85% (A) Quarter 2: 97.58% (A)

*Note:* The table shows the grade percentages and their grade-letter equivalent for each quarter to better understand the total semester letter-grade breakdown.

When interviewed, it became clear each student equated their reading and writing skills to the letter grade they received in their English (ELA) course. The setting where the study took place had the ELA course as the primary course where students received direct reading and writing instruction. This course was taught by a secondary-certified English teacher; I served as their sixth-grade teacher and another secondary-certified English teacher served as their seventh-grade instructor. As their educators, it was our responsibility to cover the literacy standards addressed by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Therefore, if students received an A in their English course, it was assumed they had demonstrated mastery of the reading, writing, speaking, and listening standards for that particular quarter or semester.

Not surprisingly, both students classified themselves as good readers and good writers because they consistently received high marks in their English class throughout their middle school career. James received an A every semester since beginning middle school, with his lowest quarter grade being a B+ the fall of his sixth-grade year. Max received an A both semesters of sixth-grade and a B the fall semester of seventh-grade. His quarter grades during sixth-grade range from B+ to A, while they dropped to a C+ the first quarter of seventh-grade. This lower-mark is not surprising as the academic year began in a hybrid model, which Max admittedly struggled with. The lower first quarter grade during the fall of 2020 was what resulted in a lower first semester grade. See Figure 2 for a synthesis of the commonalities shared by James and Max.

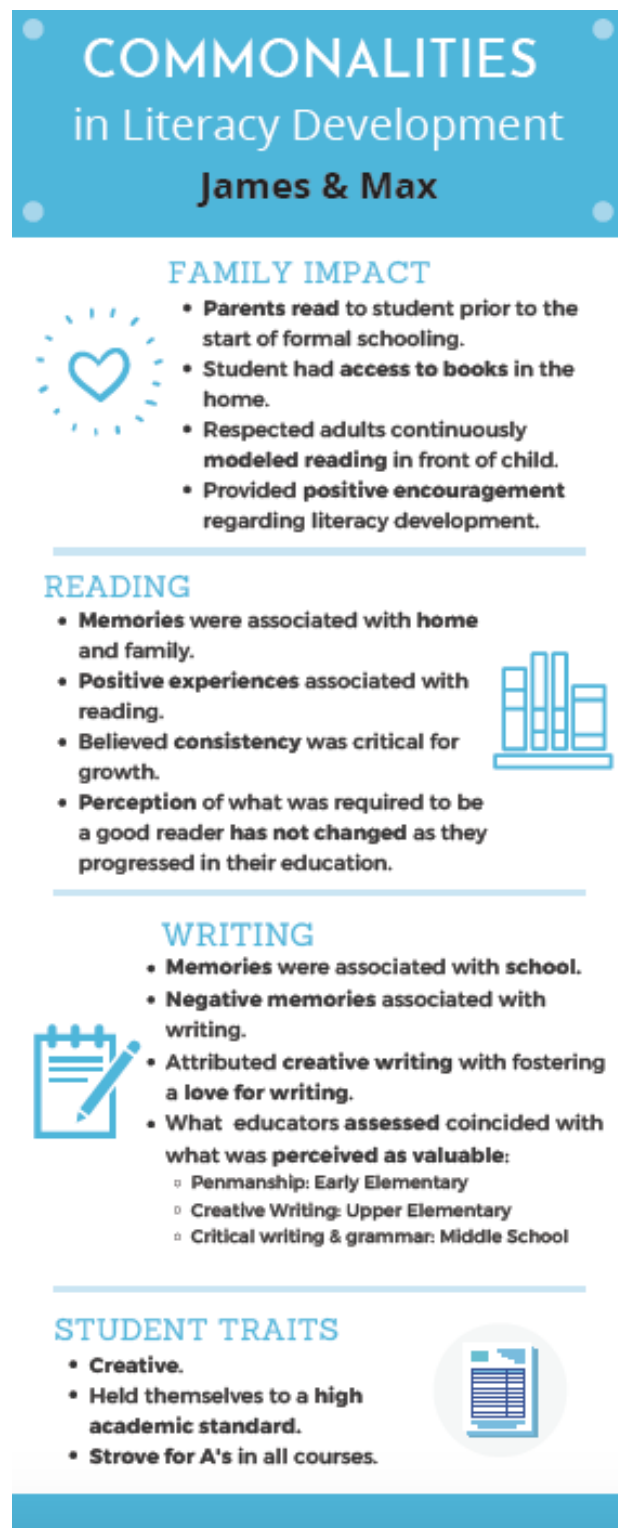
### **Discrepancies in Literacy Development**

While Max and James attended the same district for their entire educational career, they did not have the same primary education experience as both boys attended separate elementary schools. Nuances to their upper-elementary experience, specifically with fifth grade, had an impact on their literacy development as they transitioned to middle school. Nuances in their learning styles and perspectives also contributed to discrepancies in their literacy development.

#### **Discrepancies in Reading: Learning Style**

Based on his experiences as an athlete, James emphasized the need for collaboration during the learning process. In order to achieve success as an athlete, “You have to work with a lot of teammates and all that. That sometimes gets hard, but you still have to, like, work through it” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). For him, the need for collaboration transferred to the classroom; specifically, when it came to engaging with reading activities.

Figure 2 Infographic of Commonalities Between James and Max



*Note:* The infographic summarized the commonalities shared between James Hemmings and Max Powers.

James explained, “If you are reading something and something doesn't quite make any sense to you and somebody else really understands it and if you're by yourself you'll never know what it is. It could be a key part in the story and if you work in a group, and you talk about it, you'll fully understand what the problem was about” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). From James’ perspective, collaboration provided clarity in plot, character development, and other academic concepts.

While completing reading assignments at home, he preferred utilizing the audio version while listening with a parent. This was highlighted when he stated, “Me and my mom just sat down in our lounge chair and just listen to the audio of it. If we ever didn't understand anything, we liked to rewind it and then go through it again” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). Whether it was engaging with the material in the classroom or at home, James preferred and sought out the ability to learn in a collaborative space.

Unlike James, Max did not rely on collaboration; instead, he preferred working alone. He explained reading as being a more imaginative and personal experience (M. Powers, personal communication, September 17, 2020). In order to grow as a reader, he stated that students need to engage with material they are comfortable with. While he enjoys “books with darker and more mature themes” (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020), he explained not all students are at that level. He did not understand why lower-level books were not allowed or encouraged by teachers. He clarified, “They [teachers] should recommend chapter books, but like smaller and easier chapter books” (M. Powers, personal communication, December 7, 2020). The reason being he associated *The Magic Tree House* series with helping to develop his love of reading, even though it is considered a lower-level book. For Max, reading is a highly personal experience that he would rather partake in alone.



## **Discrepancies in Reading: Fifth-Grade**

The literary skills that flourished in fifth-grade was directly correlated with the literacy skills that flourished in sixth-grade. James explained that reading in elementary school was vastly different to his experience with reading in middle school. He stated, “In fifth grade you... have this like library time where you'd go... and the teacher just had us read or do a Google Slide about your learning” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020). In middle school, however, he said that reading was more intense because you would “put all the information out on a paper” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020). Reading was more independent and guided in fifth grade for James as the novels were preselected by the teacher; choice reading was not a major focus outside of the designated library time. However, fifth grade had a profound impact on his writing. In fifth grade he did several creative writing projects, which he greatly enjoyed (J. Hemmings, personal communication, December 8, 2020). For him, creativity with writing is most important; James explained, “You have to have a creative mind to be like a really good writer” (Hemmings, personal communication, December 8, 2020).

For Max, however, fifth grade was a monumental year that positively shaped his reading. He said that his fifth-grade teacher was a good teacher and that was the year that reading clicked for him. When asked what his teacher did to help make it click, he stated, “We did a lot of reading in class” (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). Through direct instruction and guidance, Max experienced growth in his reading and felt successful with his reading skills prior to entering middle school. While he felt fifth grade greatly shaped his reading, he did not feel like it shaped his writing. He explained how in fifth grade he did not have to write extensively (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020), but that was

the expectation in sixth grade; therefore, he did not believe his skills as a writer improved until he got to middle school (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020).

### **Discrepancies in Writing: Personal Philosophy**

When it came to the rigor of writing at the secondary level, what was deemed essential differed between each participant. In this study, Max was categorized as a poor writer and James was categorized as a strong writer. James believed that in order to meet the writing demands of seventh-grade he must be more descriptive with his writing: “You have to really explain what you think or the answer. It needs to be at least 5 sentences” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, October 22, 2020). In order to achieve this type of writing, he emphasized the necessity of being a critical reader (J. Hemmings, personal communication, October 22, 2020). Since the writing demands of seventh grade required him to connect back to the text, he believed being a critical reader was just as important as being a descriptive writer.

Unlike James, Max believed stamina was critical when it came to being a successful writer. He explained how in “Elementary English classes, we really didn't have to write too many big paragraphs, besides in like fifth grade and fourth grade...Now we're writing like paragraphs daily” (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020). As a result, the stamina of being able to write regularly and for an extended period of time was essential. Max stated, “I'm pretty good at thinking of stuff to write and like writing for a long amount of time” (M. Powers, personal communication, September 17, 2020). When asked how he was able to achieve writing for an extended period of time, he equated his reading skills to improving his writing: “Reading has helped because I've been able to read bigger sentences and better sentences, so then I've been able to write better sentences” (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020). When reflecting on the connection between reading and writing, Max saw literature as serving as a

mentor text for how to approach writing. It served as a tool to model sentence structure and organization of thought.

James emerged as the stronger expository writer between the two students. James' approach to writing helped him write more detailed and descriptive pieces. Max, conversely, focused on length, which was emphasized over substance. James' ability to slow down and examine a text critically greatly benefited his writing abilities. Max's inability to see beyond creativity and length rendered his expository writing weaker.

### **Discrepancies in Assessment Scores**

The state of Kansas required middle school students to participate in the KAP assessment annually; the assessment is typically administered in early spring for reading. In addition, the district administered two intermittent assessments to monitor student reading progress: 1) KAP Interim exam and 2) FastBridge aReading. The interim exam coincides with the state assessment; it shows what skills the students are meeting that are directly assessed on the assessment. This was chosen by the district to assess the progress of all students. FastBridge, however, is a screener used to determine what students are at risk of not meeting proficiency. These results are then used to create district watchlists to determine whether or not students require tiered reading support. Tables 4.2 and 4.3 outline each student's standardized reading data for the duration of this study.

Interim assessment from the fall of 2019 when they were sixth graders through the fall of 2020 when they began their seventh-grade year are indicated in Table 4.2.

## Interim Scores

**Table 4.2 Interim Scores of Max & James**

	Fall Interim Score 2019	Winter Interim Score 2019	Spring Interim Score 2019	Fall Interim Score 2020
<b>Max</b>	85%	88.3%	76.7%	99%
<b>James</b>	80%	50%	46.7%	68%

*Note:* This table shows the comparison of Max and James' reading scores on the KAP Interim Assessment.

Looking at the standardized reading assessment data, it was evident that Max consistently scored higher than James. Max's lowest score was a 76.7% in the spring of 2019, which still kept him in the green category for the KAP assessment. The green category meant that he was predicted to score proficient on the spring 2019 KAP assessment. However, as a result of Covid-19, the 2019-2020 KAP assessments were cancelled. Looking at Max's fall 2020 Interim data, it was evident that he continued to trend towards proficiency by scoring a 99% on the assessment.

Reviewing James' interim reading data, his highest score was in the fall of 2019 with a score of 80%. This was the only interim score that put James' in the proficient level for the KAP assessment. For the remainder of his sixth-grade year, James' interim scores only declined; his winter and spring scores placed him in the cautionary category. James did raise his score from a 46.7% to a 68% at the beginning of seventh-grade in the fall of 2020, but this score continued to put him in the cautionary category.

## FastBridge Exam Scores

FastBridge was adopted as a screener by the district to monitor student progress in reading and math. Students took the screener three times per academic year. Max Powers and James Hemmings scores are indicated in Table 4.3 for the duration of the study.

**Table 4.3 FastBridge Scores of Max & James**

	<b>Spring 2019</b>	<b>Fall 2019</b>	<b>Winter 2019</b>	<b>Spring 2019</b>	<b>Fall 2020</b>	<b>Fall 2020</b>
<b>Max Powers</b>	549 (88th)	567 (99th)	564 (98th)	OMIT	577 (99th)	564 (95th)
<b>James Hemmings</b>	526 (51st)	535 (72nd)	536 (68th)	OMIT	540 (68th)	541 (62nd)

*Note:* This table shows the comparison of Max and James' reading scores on the FastBridge Assessment. This is a screening tool utilized by the district and is color-coded to match the colors of the FastBridge screener.

The patterns of the FastBridge screener were similar to that of the Interim assessment for each participant. Max Powers scores were consistently high; consistently performing above the ninetieth percentile nationally. This put him in the blue category, which indicates high reading performance; high reading performance on the FastBridge screener was anything over the 85th percentile nationally. James' scores were consistently lower than Max's. Unlike James, his scores fell within the average reading range, which was from the 31st to 85th percentile. Also, James experienced a steady decline in his FastBridge scores since beginning middle school; his highest score being in the fall of 2019 with a score of 535. Max, however, scored in the 99th percentile both the fall of his sixth grade and seventh grade years.

It is important to note that the Winter 2020 FastBridge assessment was administered during remote learning. This means that students completed the assessment at home instead of at school. Traditionally, the screener is monitored by a teacher in the school setting. Also, neither student has a score for spring 2020 as a result of Covid-19 impacting the learning environment in March. All screeners and state administered assessments ceased in the spring of 2020 as a result of the impact of Covid-19 on the learning environment. See Figure 4.3 for a compellation of the discrepancies between James and Max.

Figure 3 Infographic of Discrepancies for James and Max



*Note:* The infographic summarized the differences between James Hemmings and Max Powers.

## Connecting Findings to Research Question 1

The first research question asked: *What prior personal and educational experiences seem to shape students who are disproportionately skilled in reading and writing?* After conducting and coding interviews, it became evident that the family of each participant was an integral part of their literacy development. The stronger reader, Max, was more intrinsically motivated to read, which resulted in him reading regularly on his own outside of school. In this study, James was identified as the poor reader based on KAP Interim data was more externally motivated by grades. Both students also had different fifth-grade experiences; Max believed his fifth-grade year to have a profound impact on his reading development whereas James believed fifth-grade has a profound impact on his writing.

Writing had been shaped by educators; those who flourish were able to adhere to the guidelines and requirements of that particular grade-level. James, the strong writer, saw the necessity for going deeper with content and being thorough in his response; Max, the poor writer, equated length to quality. While both students referenced reading with writing development, James equated the ability to read critically to helping him achieve writing success. Max referenced sentence structure and literature serving as a mentor for the formation of ideas.

## Connecting Findings to Research Question 2

The second research question stated: *What do students' expository writing samples reveal about the relationship between student reading and writing proficiencies?*

In order to begin the analysis of expository writing samples, a table was created (see Table 3.5 in chapter three) to generate a singular scoring guide across all writing samples. The writing samples for each student were scored out of a possible 10 points. Table 4.4 indicates the

student scores for the three-expository writing samples gathered throughout the course of this study.

**Table 4.4 The results of students' writing using the expository writing codes.**

	<b>Sample 1: August 2019</b>	<b>Sample 2: December 2019</b>	<b>Sample 3: October 2020</b>
<b>James Hemmings</b>	<b>6/10</b>	<b>7.5/10</b>	<b>8/10</b>
<b>Max Powers</b>	<b>2/10</b>	<b>6/10</b>	<b>6.5/10</b>

*Note:* Table indicates each student's total score per assignment out of a possible 10.

The table indicates the positive progression in both students writing throughout the course of the academic year. It also highlights how James Hemmings is a stronger writer than Max Powers based on the pre-established expository writing codes.

### **Traits of a Strong Expository Samples**

All writing samples gathered were expository, which required students to read and interpret text prior to responding to a prompt. In order to adhere to sixth-grade CCSS, students were required to begin embedding their evidence into their writing using proper MLA formatting (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers). Therefore, some commonalities emerged between both students' writing samples.

**Understanding of a Prompt.** In order to have a successful writing sample, students were required to understand the writing objective. The objective for each writing sample could be found in the prompt. The prompt provided the roadmap for students as they developed their ideas and searched for evidence. If students did not have a clear understanding of the prompt, or the question being asked, they were unable to effectively develop their response.

By analyzing student writing, it was evident that both boys understood the primary objective for each writing purpose. The first writing prompt asked students to analyze the



development of the protagonist, Laurie, from Shirley Jackson's short story "Charles." The second prompt was based on their nonconformist research project; therefore, the primary objective differed slightly for each student. James focused on the background and legacy of Branch Rickey, while Max focused on the established laws and rules during the time Marie Curie lived and worked. It was clear both students understood the prompt because they were able to find evidence in either the story or their research that accurately answered the prompt. For example, the prompt about "Charles" focused on the character development of the protagonist, which was what both students' responses focused on. The final writing prompt asked students to analyze the central idea of Ernesto Galarza's "Barrio Boy" during the fall of their seventh-grade year.

**Importance of a Topic Sentence.** When analyzing the writing samples, the stronger the topic sentence, the higher the score. A strong topic sentence clearly connected back to the writing objective.

Max received the lowest score with a two-out-of-ten on his first writing prompt. One reason being he did not have a clear and defined topic sentence. Without a clear topic sentence, his opinions blended into his first sentence and the direction of his paragraph was lost (M. Powers, personal communication, August 2019). By the time he got to his first expository writing piece in seventh-grade, *what is the central idea of Ernesto Galarza's "Barrio Boy"?*, he wrote, "In Ernesto Galarza's 'Barrio Boy,' the central idea is starting a new school is Challenging" (M. Powers, expository writing sample, 2020). By establishing a clear focus in the first sentence (in this instance, that school was challenging), he created a strong foundation for his paragraph. It created a clear direction for the remainder of his paragraph, which contributed his "Barrio Boy" paragraph receiving a higher total score with an 6/10.

James, on the other hand, established clear focus in his paragraphs that more closely aligned with the writing objective than Max on a consistent basis. For example, the first writing sample coincided with the short story “Charles” by Shirley Jackson. The prompt stated: *The protagonist in the short story Charles is the young boy, Laurie. Using evidence from the text to support your claim, how would you describe Jackson’s development of Laurie (use literary terms when appropriate)?* James began his paragraph by writing, “In the story Laurie is complaining to his parents about this boy named Charles” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, August 2019). By restating the character’s name and continuing with a specific character trait, it set the writer up for success because he had a clear focus for his paragraph.

**Development: Chronological or Sequencing of Ideas.** The strongest writing samples had a clear organization of key events. Typically, the paragraphs were organized in chronological, or sequential, order and focused on utilizing key details. James, for example, explained the character development of Laurie from the short story “Charles” sequentially. Instead of narrating every detail, he focused on four key details: 1) Charles’ disruptive behavior, 2) his parent’s desire to meet Charles’ parents, 3) learning there was no Charles, and 4) realizing that Laurie was Charles. James concluded his piece by stating, “I think that Jackson did a good development on saying that Laurie was a nice kid and then at the end say that Laurie lied to his parents” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, August 2019). The author clearly summarized the events in a conclusive statement after recounting key details pertinent to the prompt.

This development differed from Max who simply described the character development of Laurie broadly. He recounted the story in two sentences; the first sentence stated that Laurie was a good kid who liked kindergarten except for a student named Charles (M. Powers, expository writing sample, August 2019). The paragraph ends with an inaccurate statement when the author

writes that Laurie “became the teachers helper in the end” (M. Powers, expository writing sample, August 2019). Such broad statements caused the author to miss crucial details pertaining to Laurie's character development. By eliminating key details, the writer did not accurately explain how Laurie developed throughout the story, which prevented him from accurately addressing the prompt. Without following the development of the story in their own writing, Max received a deduction of points for missing key events and accuracy.

The ability to discuss events in a chronological order was essential in seventh grade as students were required to embed more textual evidence into their writing. While in sixth grade students were only required to cite one piece of evidence to support their claim, the students were required to utilize three pieces of evidence to support their claim in the fall of seventh grade. Without a clear sequencing of events, the student struggled to articulate their thoughts in a cohesive way to their audience. This caused both participants to repeat themselves as they would state evidence from the story sequentially, then provide their commentary at the end. Formatting their writing as such caused their writing to be developed in a circular way; evidence would be in chronological order, then analysis of evidence would go back to the beginning and repeat the story. As a result, both students got lost in their writing when it came to their analysis section.

### **Traits of Weak Expository Samples**

While both boys exhibited traits that show what is necessary to produce a strong, expository writing sample, there was also evidence of what students need in order to achieve greater success. Even James, the strong writer, did not receive a perfect score. This revealed what support was needed to help students achieve stronger writing gains as they transitioned from primary to secondary writing standards.

**Embedding Outside Information.** Unlike narrative writing, it was mandatory for student to embed outside evidence to support their opinions for their expository writing prompts. This process entailed several skills. First, it was necessary for students to comprehend the original source. Second, students must be able to understand the writing prompt. Third, students must be able to revisit a reading piece with a critical eye in order to ascertain relevant evidence to support or defend the prompt. Finally, students needed to artfully balance their thoughts and opinions with the words of the original source. Therefore, in order to be a successful expository writer, a student must be a successful critical reader (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

The higher-scoring writing samples knew how to accurately embed outside information. To clarify, the author 1) was able to identify key information from an outside 2) was able to effectively incorporate the information into their writing. Effective integration was the utilization of an outside source to enhance understanding or provide clarity, not merely to repeat information or dominate the conversation.

James was able to embed evidence directly from his resource with signal phrases and proper MLA citations that enhanced his ideas. Max utilized paraphrasing of evidence throughout his research. While both take skill, the ability to properly embed and cite evidence required a higher level of skill. The reason being it required the author to 1) have an understanding of proper MLA formatting and 2) it required the author to balance their ideas with an outside source. The citation of outside sources would appear in the middle of the writing, which allowed the writer to introduce the reader to the topic prior to utilizing outside information and conclude their writing in their own words. Looking at James' sixth grade writing samples, his outside evidence was properly formatted, which meant he had a lead-in, or signal phrase, and citation:

“The source says, ‘He invented the modern farm system and the batting helmet, was an advocate for expansion into new markets and most notably broke the color barrier when he brought Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947’ (‘Branch Rickey’).” Personal commentary was used to clarify or expand on the original source to clearly connect the evidence to the prompt.

Transitioning from sixth to seventh grade, the stronger writer (James) knew how to use commentary after each outside source more effectively than the poorer writer (Max). However, this skill remained under developed for both students. Since the students were asked to incorporate more outside evidence into their writing in seventh grade as compared to when they were in sixth grade, both students tended to utilize a list format at the beginning of their paragraph with outside sources and concluded their paragraph with personal commentary. James’ expository writing piece over “Barrio Boy” was stronger because he proceeded and concluded the outside citations with personal commentary. While he did attempt to provide personal commentary for each piece of outside source, none of his outside sources were formatted correctly.

The increase of outside sources from one to three resulted in lower marks for sentence fluency and development. Max would repeat himself in his writing as he did not know how to effectively transition from the source’s wording to his own. Essentially, he wrote the answer twice; once using evidence from the story and a second time repeating the original source’s ideas, just in his own words. James, however, attempted to provide new insight. He, too, listed the evidence from the story, but he did try to explain how that evidence answered the prompt. For his three outside pieces of direct evidence, he provided one piece of clarifying commentary in his own words.

**Editing and Revising: Sentence Complexity.** While spelling and grammar are a recurring topic when it comes to analyzing writing, spelling and grammar errors were shared by both writers. Both students struggle with capitalization, spelling, and punctuation, but the greatest discrepancy between the two writers was their sentence complexity. While James scored higher on the rubric as a result of having less spelling and grammar mistakes, his sentence structure was basic. For example, all sentences were roughly the same length; ranging from five to twenty-two words in length. James was cautious and utilized shorter, more exact sentences; sentences he was confident with executing.

Max, by contrast, focused on longer sentences. By experimenting with longer sentences he had more grammatical errors, which resulted in a lower total score. His shortest sentence was nine words, with most of his sentences being over twenty words. While he was willing to take risks, the sentence structure served as a distraction. Without proper editing (punctuation, word choice, etc.) his message was lost within the long sentences. This distracted the reader from his primary objective: showing his understanding of the content.

**Development: Staying on Topic.** While understanding the prompt and having a strong topic sentence were paramount for initial success, remaining on topic distinguished an exemplar paragraph from an average paragraph.

James had the ability to remain on topic throughout each expository writing sample. Whatever was presented in his topic sentence was addressed in the body of his paragraph. For example, in his expository piece regarding the background and legacy of Branch Rickey, his first paragraph focused on the background of Rickey, specifically his religious beliefs; the second paragraph focused on breaking the color barrier in baseball (J. Hemmings, expository writing

sample, December 2019). The content was singularly focused on his writing objective and did not stray to include superfluous information.

Max sometimes struggled to remain on topic, even though he could present a strong topic sentence. For instance, his paragraph was supposed to explain how the laws and rules during Marie Curie's life did not allow women to attend certain universities because of their gender (M. Powers, personal communication, December 2019). In the midst of explaining this topic he included how she "had to tend to soldiers with radiotherapy" (M. Powers, personal communication, December 2019). This information was never explained how it connected to her educational pursuits, but rather served as a sidebar statement. As a result, Max did not stay singularly focused while developing his paragraphs. This caused Max to have loose ends in his paragraphs as he did not fully address all concepts brought up in his paragraph.

### **Summary**

Chapter four outlined the findings from the study in order to best address the two research questions:

**Research question 1:** What prior personal and educational experiences seem to shape students who are disproportionately skilled in reading and writing?

**Research question 2:** What do students' expository writing samples reveal about the relationship between student reading and writing proficiencies?

The study utilized standardized reading assessments scores, the KAP Interim Assessment and FastBridge, gathered over the course of the 2019-2020 academic year and the fall semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. It compared those scores with themes that emerged over the course of three twenty-five to thirty-minute interviews with two seventh-grade male participants. Several themes materialized pertaining to these two students as to why there were discrepancies

regarding their reading and writing development. A commonality was both students coming from highly supportive homes regarding their literacy and academic development. While both students are at a baseline of average, there are nuances to their reading and writing performance that differentiate their abilities. Max, the strong reader, read consistently and preferred to learn independently. James, the strong writer, had a critical eye and understood the importance of taking the time to thoroughly explain his thoughts through the written word.

Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of the study. It will highlight how this study aligns with current literacy research in the field. From there, it will discuss what can be done in both an academic and home environment to help ensure a greater amount of literacy success as students transition to the secondary level. Along with proposed implementations, it will acknowledge and address the limitations of the study.



## **Chapter 5 - Discussion**

This chapter discusses the major takeaways from this study regarding how disproportionate literacy development presented itself in two seventh-grade males. While each participant's experience was unique, they attended the same district for their K-7 education and have been on the same grade-level team for both sixth and seventh-grade. Data discrepancies illuminated variances in reading behaviors, writing strategies, and personal philosophies between the two participants who were classified as either a strong reader (Max) or strong writer (James). These findings contribute to previous literacy research in five key areas: 1) literacy demands in transitional curricula, 2) motivation to read, 3) student perception, 4) grades v. high stakes assessments, and 5) the value of writing in the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum. Based on the findings and connections to previously established research, recommendations for educators and families to help limit discrepancies in literacy development as students transition to the secondary level will be provided. In addition, this chapter concludes by providing implications for future research in the field of literacy development.

### **Implications**

This study aims to contribute to the conversation of how to help assist in the developing literacy skills as students transition from elementary to middle school. While students might be labeled as average students based on standardized assessment scores, it is important to note that their literacy skills can be incongruent. During the middle school years, students are at risk of experiencing disproportionate reading and writing development. After analyzing the themes that emerged from a student who is classified as a strong reader and poor writer (Max) against a student that is a strong writer and poor reader (James), there are five key areas of literacy

research this study contributes to: 1) literacy demands of middle school, 2) motivation to read, 3) student perception, 4) grades v. high stakes assessments, and 5) the value of writing in the curriculum.

### **Literacy Demands of Middle School**

This study highlighted how essential it is to provide scaffolds in both reading and writing instruction to ensure the literacy success of students as they transition from primary to secondary curricular standards. Middle school, or sixth-through-eighth grade as defined by the parameters of this study, is the first-time students have interacted with secondary curriculum standards. Consequently, increased demands are placed on their reading and writing abilities. While the demand increases, it is imperative for educators to be aware of the educational needs of their students. Vygotsky (1978) discussed the necessity for students to be educated in their zone of proximal development. In order for this to be achieved, instruction “should be aimed not at what the child can already do without help, but proximally, at the abilities that are developing, that can become manifest only with help from others” (Moll, 2014, p.34).

As students transition to middle school, they are no longer engaging with reading and writing fundamentals. Therefore, educators need to be mindful of where students are at in their literacy journey to ensure the instructional chasm is not too great for any student to cross. For example, students are expected to take their skills to the next level through analysis and expression of thought (Graham et al., 2014; Graham & Perin, 2007; Russell, 1991; Stevens, 2006; Vermont Writing Collaborative, 2016; Warne, 2008). Some students are not ready to make this educational leap in both their reading and writing journey, which can result in disproportional reading and writing development.

This study revealed that writing is taking place in elementary and middle school, but the expectations for writing at these two levels drastically vary. Creative writing was the predominant form of writing in upper elementary school for these two participants. Through this form of writing, the participants (James and Max) began expanding their writing by learning how to write complete sentences and construct a complete paragraph (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020; M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). Considering sixth-grade standards, the focus was placed on argumentative and research writing, requiring students to embed evidence across multiple sources (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). A dramatic shift from narrative to argumentative writing could leave students reeling.

No longer was their writing expounding on their opinion; instead, students were expected to read critically to implement evidence that best supported their opinion. Both participants expressed being taught the R.A.C.E. (Restate question, Answer question in own words, Cite evidence, Explain evidence) structure in sixth-grade as a format for structuring an expository response (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020; M. Powers, September 17, 2020). While formulaic, this structure provided guidance for students. Both participants explained how this format was continued into seventh-grade, but was built upon with more complexity. While the system was in place, neither student (even the strong writer) had it mastered. The rigor at which students were required to write required them to engage with writing on a regular basis under the guidance of their instructor.

In order for a student to be a successful expository writer, they had to know how to properly read a text. The student writing samples from this study revealed the level of critical reading required in order to be a successful expository writer. Before they could even express

their thoughts, they needed to be able to effectively interpret the prompt. If students did not comprehend the prompt, they would not be successful in their response because they would not know where to begin. The poorer writer received a low score for his first expository sample because he did not address half of the prompt. Once a student understood the prompt, they were required to pull relevant evidence from the text while simultaneously conveying their thoughts in a logical and sequential way. Each step of this process must be modeled in order for students to achieve success.

Reviewing students' expository writing samples, this study suggested that students at the middle school level benefit from continued guidance in how to effectively structure their thoughts through the written word. The expository writing samples from this study showed that the organization of ideas is an area that students were lacking, whether they were classified as a strong or poor writer. Learning how to organize their writing was a critical first step in learning how to transition from narrative to expository writing. Students could not effectively communicate their thoughts if they do not first know how to structure their ideas.

The study also revealed the value of having students engage critically with texts. In order to be a successful writer at the secondary level, students needed to know how to read with a critical eye, not just read for enjoyment. The stronger writer, James, was able to read critically and knew how to change his approach to reading when it came to writing (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). Therefore, engaging in close reading activities and asking higher-level questions helped him engage in more meaningful discussions. The study suggested that students who were asked to interact meaningfully with the text had the potential to achieve a greater amount of success as they progressed throughout their middle school career.

## **Motivation to Read**

This study aimed to contribute to a growing body of research that highlights the motivational components to reading at the secondary level (e.g., Applegate & Applegate, 2009; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Brozo & Flynt, 2007; Layne, 2009). The difference between the strong reader, Max, and poor reader, James, in this study was the frequency in which they engaged with independent reading. Max read on a more consistent basis, whereas James read more infrequently. Interestingly, both participants articulated how essential it was for students to read consistently if they wanted to experience reading growth and success, yet only one implemented this behavior. That begs the question, why?

Beginning with upbringing, both participants grew up in households where they had access to books and had positive experiences with reading. In fact, all reading memories revolved around the home. Max associated reading with his parents (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020), while James associated reading with his mother, younger brother, and maternal grandmother (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). Both boys were read to while they were young; however, Max, who was classified as a strong reader, was read to until he was eleven years old (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). These positive interactions with texts fostered an enjoyment for independent reading. Max further explained how his parents celebrated his reading achievements, which also motivated him to continue reading (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020).

Another factor in the motivation to read that was supported by this study was what materials were being recommended and encouraged by educators and parents. Brozo & Flynt (2007) concluded that students in upper elementary and middle school are less motivated to read because of an increase in academic rigor. The increase in academic rigor was a recurring theme

in academic literature. As a result of the increased rigor, students were recommended and encouraged to read more challenging books in their spare time. Max Powers explained how this can be discouraging to students. He articulated how students should be allowed to read what they want in their free time (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). As a result, he wished students were provided with a wide array of recommendations, not just the challenging ones (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). Helping students learn their interests and finding books they enjoy should be a primary objective of educators and families.

### **Student Perception**

James believed that of the two literacy skills, reading was more important than writing. This perception was formed based on what tasks are assigned: “Our teachers assign a lot of reading assignments, so reading is important” and “we do it a lot more often in classes” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, October 22, 2020). Since reading was perceived to be more important to teachers, he believed it to be the more valued literacy skill. When asked about future goals, James indicated that he believed reading would play a more monumental role in his daily life. His desire is to become a professional athlete. He explained, “If schools or teams send you a contract, you need to read all of it. If you only see what’s good, you might sign something bad. You need to understand all of the parts. It’s important” (J. Hemmings, personal communication, October 22, 2020). Since being a critical reader is a skill he deemed valuable for future success, it is understandable why he saw it as essential to being successful.

Although James placed more emphasis on reading than writing, his writing was stronger than his reading. Prior to beginning middle school, his writing was the literacy skill that was fostered in the classroom setting. As a result, he entered middle school with strong foundational writing skills.

Unlike James, Max believed that, “you can't grade someone on reading” therefore deemed writing the more valuable skill (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020). When asked to clarify this statement, he explained how writing can be graded on ideas and grammar (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020 and December 7, 2020). He perceived to engage in writing across all classes on a daily basis: “Every day we have to write a lot. We do a lot of Surveys for the CNN thing saying what was this mainly about. Then we also have had to do R.A.C.E. paragraphs for ELA. Then we also have to do these assignments in the social studies book” (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020).

When discussing future goals, Max explained how he believed his writing skills will set him apart to make him successful. His desire is to become an engineer. Strong writing skills are deemed necessary because, “Well, for the career I'm going for I'm probably gonna have to write down a lot of stuff, and I'm not gonna really have to read. I'm gonna have to write down all my plans and stuff like that” (personal communication, October 27, 2020). Similar to James, since Max saw writing as playing an integral role to his future success, he deemed it the more imperative literacy skill.

Similar to James, Max valued his weaker literacy skill. Max was classified as the stronger reader, but he puts a stronger emphasis on his writing abilities. Interestingly enough, along with James, what was prioritized during his fifth-grade year was the literacy skill that was his strength. He believed to blossom as a reader during his fifth-grade year with an increase in both speed and comprehension (M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). Since then, Max experienced gains on standardized assessments as he progressed through both sixth and seventh-grade.

Interestingly, both participants were on the same seventh-grade team. Consequently, they had the same teachers and were given the same assignments. Also, interestingly, the skill they have identified as their most essential literacy skill was their weaker skill. James was a poorer reader than writer, yet deemed reading the more essential skill for future success. Max was a poorer writer than reader, yet deemed writing the more essential skill for his future success. It is important to note that both boys perceived reading and writing to be personal strengths, so they did not see either literacy skill to be deficient. However, the literacy skill they deemed essential was the literacy skill they identified as being most essential in their future career. Max's goal was to be an engineer; as an engineer he saw value in being able clearly execute a design with no room for misinterpretation (M. Powers, personal communication, October 27, 2020). James, however, had the goal of becoming a professional athlete. He deemed it essential because he would need to be able to read contracts with a critical eye (J. Hemmings, personal communication, October 22, 2020).

### **Grades v. High-Stakes Testing**

This study shed light on the emphasis placed on high-stakes testing. High-stakes testing continued to be a tool that carried the most weight when it came to making policy decisions regarding literacy education in 2020 (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Shanahan, 2014; Ravitch, 2010). The findings of this study coincided with Nichols et al.'s (2012) findings; ultimately, it was unclear how the test scores correlated with teaching methods and classroom content. Both boys were conscientious of their academic performance and strove to do their best. As a result, they equated their reading and writing abilities to their ELA letter grade. Both students received high marks (A or A-) in their ELA class each semester since entering middle school (see Table 4.1), so they defined themselves as good readers and writers.



Max received his lowest academic marking the fall of 2020 with a C+ for the quarter. However, when looking at both his interim and FastBridge reading data for the quarter, his grade does not reflect his abilities. Both interim and FastBridge reading data indicated that he was scoring in the 99th percentile. Based on his assessment data, Max Powers exhibited a solid reading foundation, but it is important to note that ELA curriculum encompasses more than reading standards. The CCSS required students to develop and show mastery of reading, writing, speaking and listening standards. Not only that, but the grade did not take into consideration the changes to the learning environment and how that directly impacts students' ability to learn. Therefore, the standardized assessments did not accurately reflect what was being taught in the classroom nor the learning environment of the students, which echoes the findings of Nichols et al. (2012).

Although this was an unintended finding, the classroom environment was established to be a highly collaborative place (Blake & Pope, 2008; Tracey & Morrow, 2017), which vastly differs from the environment cultivated for high-stakes testing. In order to meet the demands of the CCSS, students might be exposed to texts that are beyond their developmental scope; as a result, they were in an environment that encourages collaboration through verbal and written discussions to help all students experience academic success. However, this collaborative environment is not allowed when it comes to high-stakes assessments.

The environment of high-stakes testing goes against the theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Piaget (1954) who believed social interaction was essential for learning (Blake & Pope, 2008; Liu & Chen, 2010; Penn, 2014). During high-stakes testing, students who are used to thriving in a collaborative environment are required to go about the journey alone; which is unlike any other time during their educational career. Therefore, students who might excel in the classroom

setting might flounder on standardized assessment. This study supports existing research (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Ravitch, 2010; Shanahan, 2014) that found a discrepancy between normed assessments and classroom practices.

### **The Value of Writing in the Curriculum**

This study confirmed that dedicated time to writing is paramount in the secondary ELA classroom setting. While reading is the tested skill, writing is the skill that is formed, nurtured, and expanded upon by educators. If writing was not taught in the classroom, this study showed that students do not write. Bazerman et al. (2017) and Gallagher (2017) explained how dedicating time to writing was dedicating time to critical thinking, which was supported in the findings of this study. James Hemmings, the strong writer, identifies himself as a critical reader (J. Hemmings, personal communication, September 1, 2020). He believed being a critical reader helps with comprehension (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020). As students were required to engage in more nuanced writing at the secondary level, such as embedding textual evidence to support a claim, they are required to utilize outside sources in their writing. This required critical reading and thinking in order to select meaningful evidence to support their opinion, which ultimately answered the prompt.

While some research suggested that the mere act of writing is valuable (e.g., Applebee & Langer, 2011; Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Gillespie et al., 2013; Grossen, 1980), this study exemplified the necessity for students to engage with explicit writing instruction in their English class (e.g., Applebee & Langer, 2009; Gabriel & Dostal, 2015; Gillespie et al., 2013; Graham & Perin, 2007). The participants involved in this study did not see note-taking and worksheets as writing. For both, writing required a longer process involving multiple sentences explaining their thoughts. For them, true writing required time and space. The most successful writers, in the

minds of the participants, are creative and original thinkers (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020; M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). Originality and creativity cannot be taught; however, providing guidance with sentence structure, grammar, and guidance are teachable skills. Explicit guidance and instruction in developing ideas can help students achieve a greater amount of writing success.

James and Max echoed a finding by Liu's (2017) study that concluded the necessity for students to receive encouragement from their teacher in order to experience writing growth. In order for students to grow, time to write had to be given in the academic setting. Feldman (2012), Liu (2017), and Rowlands (2016) explained how the type of writing was not nearly as important as the act of writing. This, too, was supported by my findings. In fact, students preferred to have more informal writing activities at the secondary level where they could explore, be creative, and engage in free thinking.

Both participants explained how creative writing fostered their love for writing (J. Hemmings, personal communication, November 18, 2020; M. Powers, personal communication, December 8, 2020). Embedding more informal or creative writing into the classroom can help make writing more accessible to students. Feldman (2012) supported the act of informal writing in the classroom because it assisted with word recognition, sentence structure, and sentence complexity. While the rigor of the CCSS deems the necessity of writing persuasive and argumentative texts, the implementation of consistent creative, yet informal writing can help prepare them for a more rigorous writing pursuit.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

What follows is a conversation regarding the limitations and delimitations of this study.

## **Limitations**

The study touched on participants' fifth-grade experience, but this was not a focus of the study. As a result, the conversations and data are limited. Having a deeper insight into students' strengths as they transition from elementary to secondary education would help paint a more accurate picture.

It is important to remember that this is a focused study on only two male participants of average academic performance. While the findings allow for initial conversations, it would be irresponsible to generalize the findings as the participants are homogenous and came from the same setting.

Covid-19 altered the setting and parameters of the study, impacting how students engaged in the learning process as a whole. While the impact of Covid-19 on learning has yet to be determined, it must be noted that this is an extenuating circumstance that can greatly impact, both positively and negatively, students' classroom and assessment performance.

## **Delimitations**

The study focused on students who were initially identified as average readers based on assessment data. As a result, it limited the students who were eligible for observation; broadening the scope of participant eligibility would help to create a more conclusive picture of literacy development. The study only incorporated three interviews as a result of time and participant availability. Incorporating more student voices with literacy research can help paint a more inclusive picture of students' literacy needs.

## **Recommendations for Educators and Families**

The data from this study can be divided into two major categories: the roles of educators and the roles of families. As a result, the recommendations set forth are divided to best services these two sectors.

### **Educators**

- Reconsider the parameters of a strong reader. State assessments have become the normed, common tool to generalize conversations regarding student growth and achievement in the area of reading. However, one must consider if this tool accurately reflects the learning style and learning environment of the students. As a result, should reading assessments, such as the Kansas Assessment Program (KAP), be given less weight than classroom assessments or district common assessments when determining what defines a good reader?
- Explicit teaching of writing. Begin by teaching students how to structure their writing through the sequencing of events. Grammar is important, but this can only be taught once students are able to fully express their ideas through the written word.
- Engagement in critical reading. Critical reading of both fiction and nonfiction is necessary for students to not only improve their reading skills, but to also be strong writers. Taking time to teach students how to critically examine a text is paramount for their success as they progress in their education through the secondary setting.
- Broadening reading recommendations to be inclusive to all reading levels. Encouraging not only grade-level novels, but graphic novels, nonfiction, and

novels of various abilities to help all students be able to identify with literature. This means including some lower-level novels in the middle school library for students who are not at grade-level.

- Implement writing regularly. Writing does not need to always include formal, processed pieces. Instead, implement short, creative pieces that allow students to practice expressing their thoughts through the written word. Students express enjoyment in being able to engage in creative writing prompts. Just like not all reading skills are assessed, not all writing practice needs to be assessed.

## **Families**

- The enjoyment of reading is fostered before starting school. Having access to books at home and reading with children has a positive impact on their academic future.
- Supporting and encouraging students' academic success. Students internalize what they hear from their families, so hearing positive readback regarding their education inspires students to strive for academic success.
- Students model what they see. Students who grow up watching parents read are more inclined to read. The participants of this study did not see reading on a tablet or other digital devices as reading, so taking the time to read print text is important. Modeling reading inspires and motivates students to read.

## **Implications for Further Research**

While current literacy research serves to better understand the literacy development of students, this study revealed that future research regarding discrepant literacy development could seek to:

- Broaden the research to encapsulate a more representative sample. By focusing on students who are a baseline of average, but are of diverse backgrounds, from various demographics, will begin to help researchers understand what causes discrepancies in literacy development as students transition from primary to secondary education.
- Explore the perspective of literacy development with female participants. While this study focused on two male participants, it would be beneficial to examine the transitional literacy journey of female participants to have a more accurate and inclusive sample.
- Identify what causes students to be intrinsically motivated to read. While both students were eager to excel academically and came from literacy enrich households, only one participant was intrinsically motivated to read.
- Inclusivity in the definition of struggling readers and writers. When looking at discrepancies, current research tends to focus on students who require remediation or special education services. While these concerns are valid, research also needs to have a stronger understanding of why good students begin to struggle as they transition from primary to secondary education. If research can begin to include what causes students to differentiate when they are still academically average, or above average, it will help educators better know how to adjust instruction at the middle school level to better service all learners.
- Provide alternative tools for evaluating high-stakes testing for evaluating reading proficiency in the classroom. What other normative tool, or triangulation of data, can help yield a more inclusive picture of student abilities.

## **Conclusion**

This study will add to the body of preexisting reading and writing research that looks at literacy discrepancies as students transition from primary to secondary literacy standards. The strong reader, Max, was intrinsically motivated and engaged with reading on a consistent basis. The strong writer, James, was able to express his ideas logically and thoroughly while being able to engage in critical reading. However, the use of standardized assessments can skew data if the student's learning style differed from the format of the assessment. Also, students who were explorative in their writing style received lower marking because they were unable to clearly communicate their thoughts through the written word. This study emphasized how essential reading comprehension was for effective expository writing. While this study was conducted on a small scale with only two participants, the data from the study show how vital explicit writing instruction paired with critical reading skills are for students as they progress in their education throughout the secondary level.



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# **Appendix A - Interview Questions**

## **Interview Questions-Round 1**

**Purpose: General background, history, and learning about each focus participant's academic interests and goals.**

### **Background**

- How are you doing?
- How was your summer? What did you do?
- Did Covid-19 change any of your summer plans? If so, how?
- What are you most excited about for the upcoming school year?
- What are you most nervous about for the upcoming school year?

### **Education History**

- Where did you go to Elementary school?
- What is your favorite memory from elementary school?
- What is your least favorite memory from elementary school?
- What grade are you currently in? What team are you on?
- How would you describe yourself as a student?
- What subject is your favorite? What makes it your favorite?
- What subject is your least favorite? What makes it your least favorite?
- How do you prefer to learn (ex: independently, small group, choice activities, hands-on, videos, lectures, notes, reading, etc.)? Explain.
- What learning approach is the least helpful? Explain
- When I say reading, what comes to your mind?
- When I say writing, what comes to your mind?

### **Goals**

- What do you see yourself doing after high school?
- What skills do you think you need in order to be successful in that field?
- What skills do you think you will gain out of middle school and high school that can help you accomplish your goals?
- What do you think you have learned in middle school that will not help you accomplish your goals?
- What do you wish teachers knew about you so you could achieve optimal success?

## **Appendix B - Student Writing Samples**

### **Charles Prompt: August 2019**

#### **Max Powers:**

The author described Luare like a good as a good kid that just got started with kindergarten and liked kindergarten a lot except he didn't like Charales. At the end it reveals that Luare is actually who was described as a bad kid who became the teachers helper at the end

#### **James Hemmings**

In the story laurie is complaining to his parents about this boy named charles. It says in the text that charles is a really bad kid and always disrupts class. "He told a girl to say a word and she said it and the teacher washed her mouth out with soap" laurie told her parents. Laurie also came home and complained to her parents that charles "...Charles hit the teacher." so after all the stuff bad that happening Charles started to get better. He got all sorts of special privileges and then Charles got bad again. So at the P.T.A. meeting laurie's parents wanted to meet Charles parents. During the talk nobody mentioned Charles. So after the meeting laurie's mom got a glimpse of laurie's teacher and asked her how hard it was to deal with Charles. The teacher responded "We don't have any Charles in the kindergarten". I think that Jackson did a good development on saying that Laurie was a nice kid and then at the end say that Laurie lied to his parents.

### **Nonconformist Paper: December 2019**

#### **Max Powers→ Laws/Rules for Marie Curie**

Marie Curie was not allowed to attend the school of her choice because it was men only. Marie Curie also had to help pay for her sister's school so her sister could pay for hers in the future. She also had to tend to soldiers with radiotherapy. In the article it says that Marie Curie went to an underground version of Warsaw school which was not allowed and she could get punished for it but it helped her later ("Marie Curie Biography"). This proves that Marie Curie would do anything to get a better education. It also shows how determined and smart Marie Curie is and how she has a true passion for learning.

#### **James Hemmings→ Background & Legacy of Branch Rickey**

During his childhood Branch Rickey grew up with religious beliefs believing black people should have equal rights as Rickey who was white. Branch rickey went to law school which also may have persuaded him on everyone was equal. College also gave him the education he needed to become a manager. The source says, "He invented the modern farm system and the batting helmet, was an advocate for expansion into new markets and most notably broke the color barrier when he brought Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947" ("Branch Rickey"). This followed his religious beliefs. That is also why he broke the color barrier ("Branch Rickey").

Branch Rickey broke the color barrier for baseball he also gave Jackie Robinson a chance and Robinson left a good legacy and it allowed other African Americans to play Major League baseball. He did this because it followed his religious beliefs. The text states, "He grew up in a strict religious family, this likely caused him to believe everyone was equal" ("Branch Rickey"). Because he grew up in a strictly religious family he let Robinson in the MLB cause it followed his beliefs. Robinson left a good impact a Rickey got other Africans on his team Americans.

## **What is the central idea of Ernesto Galarza's "Barrio Boy"? Fall 2020**

### **Max Powers**

In Ernesto Galarza's "Barrio Boy," the central idea is starting a new school is challenging. *It says that* "what Ms. Hopley said to us we did not know". It also says that "the questions began by way of our interpreter" *it also says that* "Miss Ryan overcame my fear of tall energetic teachers" *and my final example is that he said that* "I notice other differences none of them reassuring. It says that Mrs. Ryan overcame my fear of tall energetic teachers which means he was scared of tall teachers which being scared is a challenge. It also says he didn't know what Mrs. Hopley was saying. He had to get a translator for them to talk with, which I bet was tough on him. He also says that he sees a tone of differences which were not reassuring. In the book, it also says that he is 4 years old with to a child this could not have been fun and a good experience.

### **James Hemmings**

The central idea from this story is that starting a new school is challenging. I think this because he really talks about how he is nervous about the school year and not knowing a lot of English. *He says in the text that* "She, too, sat down and the questions and answers began my way of our interpreter." He also said he had good teachers that made it fun and more easily done for him. *Here is some text for this reasoning* "Miss Ryan overcame my fear of tall, energetic teachers." *another piece of evidence is* "Her voice patiently maneuvering me over the awful idiocies of the English language." The teacher needed to be patient with him because of him not knowing the language and so he could feel secure and not timid to ask questions. That is why I think that he was very courageous for stepping into a new school.

## Appendix C - District Permission

March 14, 2019

To Whom It May Concern:

Kendra Preston has permission to conduct research related to her doctoral program at [REDACTED] Middle School. If you have any questions, or if I can assist Kendra in any way, please do not hesitate to contact me.

[REDACTED]

Principal

[REDACTED] Middle School

[REDACTED] 1100

[REDACTED]

## Appendix D - Parent Permission Letter

Spring 2019

Dear Parents and/or Guardians,

When determining who should be considered for interviews, my focus is on students' whose writing scores differentiate from their reading scores. Therefore, students who receive low marks in their writing need to score high in their reading, or students who receive high marks in their writing need to score low in their reading in order to be a viable candidate for the interview process.

My name is Kendra Preston, a sixth grade ELA teacher here at [REDACTED]. I am currently enrolled in the Curriculum and Instruction Ed.D. program at Kansas State University in Manhattan, KS, and in the process of gathering research for my thesis: *developing proficient writers at the middle school level*.

I am seeking your written consent to allow some of the work your son or daughter produces in their ELA classes to be part of my research. The research will utilize writing samples and survey responses from [REDACTED] students they produce in their ELA classes from Spring 2019 through Fall 2021. All information that will be gathered for the study will be produced for school, used within their ELA course, and/or produced in their ELA class. The purpose is to gauge how students grow as writers throughout their middle school career (writing samples/excerpts) and what instruction impacts their learning process (survey).

Since this study will examine growth, the goal is to preserve the authenticity of the learning environment; **therefore, this will not be anything different from our established classroom instruction.**

I am requesting your written consent to allow what your son or daughter produces in their ELA classes for the duration of their middle school career to be included in this study. The pooled data results will be utilized for this thesis project only (individual students will not be identified). Your approval to allow your son or daughter's writing and survey data to be taken into consideration for the study will be greatly appreciated. Please sign and return the required minor consent form. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require additional information.

Sincerely,  
Ms. Kendra Preston  
Phone: [REDACTED]  
E-mail: kpreston[REDACTED]org

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\_\_\_\_\_ (student's name) is a current student at [REDACTED]. We know the participation in this is voluntary, and we

\_\_\_\_\_ GIVE permission for his/her work to be used in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_ DO NOT GIVE permission for his/her work to be used in the study.

## Appendix E - IRB Approval Letter



University Research Compliance Office

TO: Dr. J. Spencer Clark  
Curriculum and Instruction  
202 Bluemont Hall

Proposal Number: 9740

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair  
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 04/17/2019

RE: Proposal Entitled, "Writing Instruction at the Middle School Level /Ed.D Program"

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written - and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §46.101, paragraph b, category: 1, subsection:**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.