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# Improving Reading Comprehension: For Children Living in Poverty in a Tier 3 Response to Intervention Group

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Improving Reading Comprehension: For Children Living in Poverty in a Tier 3 Response to  
Intervention Group

Caitlin E. Merrifield

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of The College at Brockport, State  
University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science in Education, Literacy Education

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## Abstract

This research explores the implementation of three different graphic organizers in my tier three, English Language Arts, Response to Intervention group. The purpose of this research is to improve reading comprehension for students raised in poverty. Data were collected for this study over a period of 6 weeks using the students' graphic organizers, transcribed audio recordings, and observation notes. Data were analyzed for how effective the graphic organizer was along with why or why not. The participants were involved in the analysis portion, making their connection to their learning that much deeper.

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## Introduction

As I look at progress report after progress report, I see the gap between reading fluency and comprehension grow wider and wider. For some reason, as children improve their fluency, their comprehension continues to plummet. As I go through what seems to be hundreds of progress reports, I finally realize the commonality among them all; poverty. As I think of every child's life my heart grows heavier and heavier. I wonder about what they encounter outside of school and the limited world they face each and every day. However, as these thoughts pass through my mind, I keep going back to one memory. This memory was from my week of professional development I participated in this past summer. The focus question of the week was, "How can we as educators counteract the negative factors we cannot change in our children's lives to ensure they are progressing their learning in school?" In order to understand the severity of this question, knowing the school and its children is critical.

First and foremost my school is filled with laughter. If you were to walk down the hallways you would see inspirational posters, bulletin boards filled with student work, and a bunch of children smiling and giggling. You would of course have your occasional group of children running down the hall and children chatting in line; our school is far from perfect. However, as you looked into classrooms you would see two teachers in every room. There is one special education teacher and one general education teacher; this dual teaching dynamic is to help meet the needs of all the learners. If you looked closely in the classrooms you would see

differentiated, scaffolded instruction in an attempt to again meet the needs of all the learners. If you looked even closer, specifically at how the children were working, you would see some children working in a group. The group could be with peers or with a teacher for differentiated instruction. There would be others working independently either at their seat or on the classroom rug, and a few working one-on-one for further support. From the mere appearance, one could say that my school looks just like any other school; however my school is not.

The children who make up this school are special; what my children face outside of school are things that are simply jaw dropping and heartbreaking. For instance, at the end of one of my groups I said, “I love you guys so much! Great group!!” One student replied, “You love us?” my quick response was, “Of course I do, I love all my friends!” The heartbreaking moment was when he said, “woah dat’s awesome, I dunno da last time someone said dat to me.” Since that situation occurred, I have told that particular student I love him every day. These children thrive off of love, respect, hugs, hand-holding, compassion, and empathy. For instance when a student falls asleep in group or class, we allow them to continue to sleep. These young individuals can take on a lot of baggage, if they fall asleep, we know it is because they must really need the sleep. What these children really thrive off of is positive praise, and compliments on their work or a change to their appearance. In the classroom that I share with two other intervention teachers, earning paper awards that I’ve made up is the ticket to an amazing day. We also praise them when they have done something correctly in terms of behavior with our

schoolwide *Ten Habits of Scholarship*; these include respect, responsibility, empathy, resilience, collaboration, critical thinking, curiosity, perseverance, self-control and initiative (A. Deacon, Personal Communication, February 15, 2017).

Unfortunately, 99% of my children live in severe poverty (J. Saia, Personal Communication, October 18, 2016). In my school, severe poverty means that each student attends school at no cost. Severe poverty also means that each student receives a free hot breakfast, morning snack, hot lunch, and an afternoon snack. In some cases, this is all the food a student will eat for the entire day. If needed, children are provided with snacks, macaroni and cheese, and cereal to take home over the weekend. In this school, we know they have no food or limited food at home; especially by the end of the month (S. Castner, Personal Communication, February 16, 2017). Severe poverty also means that some children are homeless and/or bounce from shelter to shelter. Sometimes families are even split up due to housing capacity in order to receive government assistance. This means children are relocated from their home and are sent to live with a close living relative or friend. When children bring the few belongings they own to school every day because they, “will be stolen if they are left at the shelter,” you understand just how emotionally traumatized these children are. In fact many of the children are diagnosed as being emotionally disturbed due to everything they have seen and experienced at such a young age.



## **Topic / Research Problem**

Looking specifically at poverty and everything it incorporates, I found that society has created a stigma for families of poverty. In fact, when I interviewed adults ages 22 – 40, the two most common words that came to mind when thinking about families of poverty were “sad” and “unfortunate”. I conducted this study because it became clear to me that society really has no concept of the drastic impact living below the poverty line has on children and their performance in school. Through no fault of the families, children living in poverty on average hear 13 million words, while children who live in the middle to upper socio-economic statuses hear 43 million words (White, 2012). In fact, studies have found that children who live in poverty enter school with less vocabulary knowledge than children in other socio-economic statuses (Farkas & Beron, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003). Unfortunately, these discrepancies do not disappear as children move onto new grades.

Vocabulary and word knowledge are critical components for student success in reading and comprehension. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) found that “73% of fourth grade children living in poverty scored in the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on the different vocabulary assessments” (para. 5). If children are exposed to fewer words, how can we expect them to recognize all words in a text? Or how can they understand all the vocabulary words we use in school each and every day; think back for a moment to the specific words used in our Ten Habits of Scholarship. To put it simply, children need to be read to. When children are read to, they are

exposed to words, concepts of print, sequential ordering, active thinking, questioning skills, retention and comprehension. The Children's Literacy Foundation (2016, p. 1) found that "children between grades kindergarten through fifth living in the middle or upper socio-economic statuses are generally exposed to 1,000 to 1,700 hours of one-on-one picture book reading; while a student living in poverty is exposed to 25 hours one one-on-one reading."

Looking solely at vocabulary, unfortunately we have children in school who are not capable of performing on grade-level (S. Castner, Personal Communication, November 22, 2016). For instance we have children in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade who are working at a 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level.

Although our Response to Intervention groups are supposed to be based on performance in their current grade-level, we have children with such severe needs that we have to move them down into a lower-grade-level intervention group. For instance I had a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade student in my 1<sup>st</sup> grade ELA Response to Intervention group. I also had a 5<sup>th</sup> grade student in my 4<sup>th</sup> grade ELA Response to Intervention group. To put the needs of my children into perspective, we often times have to provide intense 1:1 intervention. This is due to the fact that we cannot move a student down more than one academic grade-level; this is due to emotional and social reasons.

There are many different factors that explain why children living in poverty have increased difficulties in school. Contrary to what society thinks, it is not simply the families' fault; sadly, this is the stigma society places on families who live in poverty. Just to show how uneducated the public is on poverty and academic performance, of the 25 individuals surveyed

for this study, 15 of them, 60%, blamed the families for their student's lack of performance. The remaining 40% of my survey participants did think that parental involvement was not the only factor that can impact these challenges in school. I have children with the most engaging, supportive families who do whatever they can to assist in the learning of their children. For the children with supportive families, how does society explain the challenges they encounter in school?

Another factor that determines the children's success in school is the difference between conversations had among teachers with children; along with the conversations the children have with each other. Talking with a student or a group of children, teachers professionally use the standard dialect of English, also known as the language of power (Smith, 2013). This is one factor that many people in society overlook. Imagine that for 16 hours per day a child is immersed in a nonstandard dialect of English they hear at home, on the bus, among friends; essentially in their entire world outside of school. Then imagine that for only eight hours a day that same student is spoken to using only the standard dialect of English. These children are constantly and subconsciously code switching between the dialect they hear inside versus outside of school. To clarify, code switching is when an individual has the ability to alternate back and forth among different dialects or languages (Morrison, 2017). For the children in this study, the constant need for code switching is one possibility as to why they are struggling. If we as educators can identify one potential reason as to why children who live in poverty struggle academically, theoretically it would then be easier to identify different solutions to best meet the zone of proximal development of our children. This would in return allow teachers the ability to



face and said, “Boyyyy you best check yo self or ma mama guna get yo momma to give you a good whoopin.” One phrase in particular that the female student said caught me off guard, it was the phrase “check yo self”; I had never heard the phrase before and had no idea what it meant. Looking specifically at the word choice throughout the statement, this is an example of the usage of Ebonics in school. For instance, the words “your” and “going to” were pronounced as “yo” and “gunna.” Interestingly enough, when I did address the female student for speaking this way, she subconsciously code switched, she said, “Sorry Ms. Merrifield, it’s just so annoying.”

To paint a clearer image of who I am as an educator, I as an intervention teacher am responsible for benchmarking the student body in the fall, winter and spring. In order to benchmark the student body, intervention teachers need to use a Fountas and Pinnell Running Reading Record. Below are a few examples that show the code switching my children are exhibiting while they read. According to Morrison (2017, p. 1) code switching refers to the “process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another.”

**Actual Sentence:** I zipped your coat.

**Student Read:** I zip yo coat.

**Actual Sentence:** I pick the books up.

**Student Read:** I pick dem books up.

**Actual Sentence:** I don’t like that.

**Sentence Read:** I don’t like dat.

**Actual Sentence:** The man looks foolish in his coat.

**Student Read:** The man looks a foo in dat coat.

It is important to know that these miscues are considered to be higher-level miscues. They are higher-level because they reflect the student's use of what he/she knows about languages and shows that the student is reading the text well. These statements also definitely represent code switching; the words were written in the standard dialect of English, but the student code switched and read the words using Ebonics. One could argue that these high-level miscues and code switching can be seen as a strength for the children, i.e. their ability to code switch so quickly and efficiently. I have focused on code switching because my overall point is that code switching is simply an additional step that children living in poverty have to do in order to perform in school; while children in higher SES do not have to engage in this step in order to learn. The more steps a child has to take in the learning process, the greater the chance of error, confusion and challenges. To fully understand what this means, realize that this additional step is not needed by children who speak the local standard dialect.

The children in my study are dealing with code switching every day they are at school. In fact, "code-switching among African American children has been recognized since the 1970s and has informed different views of those children's home dialect and different approaches to the teaching of standard English" (Morrison, 2017, p. 1). To fully understand the code switching my children are doing, imagine that for 16 hours per day the children are hearing and using a nonstandard dialect of English; for only our eight hour school day, children are hearing and using the standard dialect of English. Can we really blame children for their difficulty/inability to comprehend a text that is not written in the dialect most familiar to them? Especially when they are only exposed to the standard dialect of English for such a small portion of their day?

I am in no way trying to eliminate Ebonics from my students' vocabulary, as I know it is a part of their culture. Ideally what should happen is that texts, instructional materials etc. should

be adjusted to be responsive to your student population. With that being said, a potential benefit to reading and writing in the standard dialect of English on a daily basis is that it will help children to be more comfortable reading and writing in the standard dialect of English. This comfortability increases their ability to perform well on state assessments. Thinking more long term, years from now if my children do not become comfortable with speaking in the standard dialect of English they will experience difficulty completing a job application and engaging in an interview. I want my children's language and culture to remain intact, however I also want to prepare my children to be successful in the real, adult world.

### **Rationale**

One of the most important aspects of my study is the student participants themselves. It is important to note that the children participating in this study are children who are living significantly below the poverty line; some are even homeless. The focus on children who live in poverty and/or are homeless is due to the fact that "socioeconomic status circumstances impacts the cognitive abilities of children" (Wright, 2014 p. 332). As mentioned above, the children in my school code switch daily. In fact, my children code switch on a minute to minute basis. A student could answer a question using the standard dialect of English, but then immediately turn to their friend and code switch and talk in Ebonics. It is actually quite fascinating how their minds can do this so quickly and effortlessly. In fact, researchers are interested in the ways in which code-switching, particularly by members of minority ethnic groups, is used to shape and maintain a sense of identity and a sense of belonging to a larger community (Morrison, 2017, para. 5).

If teachers can aid in the translation between Ebonics and the standard dialect of English, comprehension would inherently increase. I make this assumption based on the idea that if a student has a better understanding of the standard dialect of English, their accuracy and fluency would increase. If both accuracy and fluency increase, then there is a greater likelihood that understanding and comprehension would also increase (Cotter, 2012). As mentioned earlier, it was found that the typical student living in poverty is exposed to “25 hours of one-on-one reading”; while a student in a middle SES family is generally exposed to “1,000 to 1,700 hours of one-on-one picture book reading” (Children’s Literacy Foundation, 2016, para. 2). Children who miss this critical step prior to entering school are more likely to require interventions and supports to be successful in school. Another way teachers can assist with code switching and reading a text using the standard dialect of English, would be to simply provide more opportunities to read. By providing more opportunities to read, you are providing the children more time to practice their reading skills; subsequently this could help increase comprehension. These factors are the whole reason this study is important to the field. While respecting language and culture, we as educators need to help make children who live in poverty more successful in school. It is our job as educators to teach them the skills to be successful later in life; to be brutally honest, speech, comprehension and writing are essential for success in any job.

Another key factor in my research is the life experiences had by my participants. Although anyone can argue that all people encounter different cultural experiences, it was interesting to see that within the student population of the study, 95% of an entire grade level was unfamiliar with the cultural/life experience of a dirt road. My children simply are not exposed to certain life events or experiences compared to the majority white middle class. Their cultural/life experiences are different solely due to the fact that they live in a city and experience



a life of poverty. To support this notion, I have a scenario from when I was teaching a class of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade children on the difference between suburban, urban and rural communities, I was shocked at the lack of knowledge of rural and suburban neighborhoods. It can be equally said, that children from higher SES do not have the same cultural or life experiences as children who live in the city. For instance, I know that when I was the age of my participants, there is no way I would be able to take an RTS bus across town, or care for a little one at while I was still a child.

The children were asked to circle items they believed would be found in a rural community. The option 'dirt road' was listed in each column, yet not a single one of the 22 children had circled it. I began going student by student, asking them if they knew what a dirt road was. By checking in with a few children I was shocked to hear that they did not know what a dirt road was. One by one I pulled a student over to the window and asked, "Do you see the two parking lots behind the school? Do you see the road that connects the two parking lots?" Every time the student replied "yes, it's like the road the busses drive on." I then asked the student to look at the field behind the parking lot, I said, "picture that green field with no grass, it's just dirt, mud and rocks... now picture driving on that; that is what a dirt road is." All in all, the children were beside themselves, many gave responses such as, "what?! NO WAY! People actually drive on dirt?" or "Wait... how do the buses get through the mud?" After explaining dirt road in this manner for three different children, I then checked-in with the remaining children only to find that they too had no idea what a dirt road was. In response, I called everyone over to the window and did the same demonstration. All of the children were blown away at what a dirt road was. This just goes to show that their cultural experiences never had them encounter a dirt road before.

Earlier I had suggested that one way teachers could ease code switching was to increase student exposure to books. To best meet the needs of the learners, this would likely occur during the Response to Intervention group time. For the remaining portion of this paper, Response to Intervention will be written as RtI. RtI is a multi-tiered intervention support program; there are anywhere from two to four tiers for student placement (Fuchs, 2006). In my school where the study will be conducted there are a total of three tiers for student placement. According to Dickman (2006) RtI can be implemented in any content area; however it is mostly used for the development of reading and math skills.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of my study was to increase student reading comprehension during my tier three RtI ELA group time. Let it be known that all the student participants live in poverty or are homeless. I attempted to increase reading comprehension by implementing a different reading comprehension strategy on a bi-weekly basis. By implementing a different strategy every two weeks, I hoped to find out which comprehension strategies were the most successful for children living in poverty. I also hoped to identify this through the collection of student work. This would help me to identify some of the most successful reading comprehension strategies for my children. In order to select these three strategies, I first interviewed my colleagues to assess which reading comprehension strategies were used most frequently. I then narrowed down this information by determining which strategies had the highest success rate based off of teacher provided data. After identifying a handful of strategies found to be successful for my colleagues, I started implementing the strategies in my RtI groups. According to Carretti (2014) in order to have the ability to comprehend a text, “metacognition and the working memory are essential” (p. 194). With that being said, the goal was that some of the strategies or suggestions given during

interviews would include these two skills. In my current teaching practice, in this case my daily agenda, I already incorporated working memory into my RtI group time.

**Research Questions:**

After deeply analyzing the question from profession development I began to narrow it more and more. Due to the fact that the students at my school struggle severely with comprehension, I knew this was my target. With this narrowed focus I established the following research questions:

1. What Response to Intervention tier 3 ELA programs are provided for children in my school?
2. What instructional strategies focusing on comprehension are part of Response to Intervention tier 3 services for children in my school?
3. How might children' comprehension of text be impacted by the comprehension strategies taught in tier 3 Response to Intervention?

## **Review of Literature**

The following literature review provides an overview on children living in poverty. This includes background information on poverty from the community where the study is taking place, its definition for the purpose of this paper, what challenges children experience in school due to living in poverty, and the use of code-switching. It will then move into what RtI is, what it provides and how it is structured. This section will also review the essential components needed to improve reading comprehension during RtI groups that can assist children living in poverty. It will finally conclude with the relationship between background knowledge and comprehension.

### **Poverty**

Depending on which website you search to find the definition of poverty, you can always come across something different. For the purpose of this review of literature, the Federal Government's definition will be used. In order to define poverty, the United States Federal Government uses a tool known as the "Federal Poverty Level Indicator" which defines "who is poor... it measures a family's annual income" (Amadeo, 2016, para. 1). For 2016, "the Federal poverty guideline" was based on an annual income of "\$24,300 for a family of four; this guideline is the most commonly used statistics to determine poverty" (Amadeo, 2016, para. 2). If the family has more than four members then \$4,160 is added for each additional person. If the family has fewer than four members, then \$4,160 is deducted from the amount given to the family (Amadeo, 2016, para.2).

In order to determine who receives services, the United States continues to use the "Federal Poverty Level" to determine who can receive federal subsidies or aid throughout the United States (Amadeo, 2016). In order for a person or family to qualify and receive state and

governmental assistance there are certain factors that must first be taken into consideration, these include:

Earnings, pension or retirement income, interest, dividends, rents, royalties, income from estates, trusts, educational assistance, alimony, child support, assistance from outside the household, and other miscellaneous sources. It does not include capital gains or losses. It also includes cash benefits such as unemployment compensation, workers' compensation, Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, public assistance, veterans' payments, and survivor benefits. It does not include non-cash benefits, such as food stamps or housing subsidies. (Amadeo, 2016, para. 3)

Once all of these factors are taken into account, it will be determined if a person or family qualifies for assistance. The different forms of assistance/aid that families can receive include but are not limited to, "*food stamps, Medicaid, Affordable Care Act, Head Start, National School Lunch Program, Low-income Home Energy Assistance Program, Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)*" (Amadeo, 2016, para. 3). Looking specifically at the urban community where the study is taking place, the families of my school all qualify for at least some of these assistance programs.

The study location itself is a beautiful city filled with so much history. This Western New York city is filled with museums and different festivals that occur all year round. This urban community has a bus system that can take a student to any of the surrounding cities. This means that not having a car is not a huge issue in this community. What makes this city setting so unique is that the neighborhoods can change from safe and family friendly, too violent in a mere couple of miles. In reality, in just 19 miles, schools have opposite: dropout rates, graduation rates, violence rates, percentage of people living in poverty and access to an excellent education. (Researcher, Personal Communication, February 21, 2017).

Looking to the statistics of the area of the community where I am implementing my study, there are "26,171 children under the age of 18 who currently live in poverty; this is 52%

of the entire population of the community” (Center for Government Research, 2016, para. 2). Another factor of poverty is home structure. Unfortunately, single-parent households are more likely to experience poverty; this is not to say that dual parent households do not experience poverty as well. However, “children in single-parents families are at a greater risk of low academic performance and behavioral problems; they may experience parental conflict and residential instability” (Center for Government Research, 2016, para. 4). In this community there are a total of “17,087 single-parent families”; this means that 70% of the entire community are living in a single-parent household (Center for Government Research, 2016, para .5).

Looking specifically at the risk of low academic performance, it was found that only “5% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade children and 7% of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade children living in poverty achieved a passing score” on their state assessments. (Center for Government Research, 2016, para. 11). A passing score consists of obtaining either a three or a four. Based on the fact that early reading and comprehension skills are important to being successful in school and later in life, the scores received on these state assessments are quite concerning.

Poverty not only impacts children, it has a significant impact on parenting as well. If the parents of our children are not in a healthy mindset, then we cannot expect them to prepare their children to have an appropriate mindset. Vernon-Feagans (2012, p. 341) found that “parents who live in poverty were less sensitive, engaging and verbally stimulating in interactions with their children... which resulted in children having poorer language skills.” By having poor language skills, children will then have poor decoding skills. If a student has poor language and decoding skills, fully comprehending a text will be quite a challenge.

One of the main factors that hinders parenting in high poverty households, is stress. This includes the stress of instability, structure, money, bills, food, transportation, health insurance,

relationships, housing, etc., these all become very overwhelming. In single-parent households Blair (2011) found that parents are more likely to openly discuss their stressors and worries with their young children. This sharing of adult stressors negatively impacts the child. (Blair, 2011) When experiencing these adult stressors, both parent(s) and dependent(s) experience lower cognitive abilities. (Blair, 2011) Children are not equipped developmentally to handle such stressors effectively prior to an appropriate age and development.

To state this bluntly, based on the literature, living in poverty has a negative impact on children's overall development. In an effort to understand why poverty has such a strong impact on child development, Ferguson, Bovaird and Mueller (2007, p. 700) have found the, "Six factors of poverty" that impact development. Five of the six factors identified by Ferguson, et al. (2007, p. 701) directly impact child development; these five factors include:

**The depth of poverty:** some families cannot feed their families, others cannot find a place to sleep a night; the severity of poverty ranges. **The duration of poverty:** living in poverty for a month versus living in poverty your entire life. **The timing of poverty:** did the family enter poverty level when the children were 18? Or since birth? **Community characteristics:** concentration of poverty and crime in neighborhood, and school characteristics. **The impact of poverty had on the child's social network:** parents, relatives, and neighbors. (Ferguson et al., 2007, p. 701)

Ferguson et al. (2007) also found that children living in poverty often do not receive the stimulation needed for appropriate childhood development. Ferguson et al. (2007) theorized that the reasons why a child is not stimulated appropriately is due to parental inconsistencies, frequent changes of primary caregivers and many other factors. Let me make it clear that this is not seen in every family living in poverty. However according to studies done, these occurrences do appear the most in families who live in poverty (Ferguson et al., 2007).

Prior to entering school, Ferguson et al. (2007) believe that children need to have the necessary skills to obtain school readiness. According to Ferguson et al. (2007, p. 701) school readiness is:

A child's ability to succeed both academically and socially in a school environment. It requires physical well-being and appropriate motor development, emotional health and a positive approach to new experiences, age-appropriate social knowledge and competence, age appropriate language skills, and age-appropriate general knowledge and cognitive abilities.

To speak to that definition of school readiness, 90% of the children attending my school are not "ready." Children living in poverty are not "school ready" due to their potentially poor mental health and their language skills not being anywhere near age appropriate. To support this notion, Ferguson et al. (2007) found that "a child's home has a particularly strong impact on school readiness." Ferguson et al. (2007) continued on to say that it is "well documented that poverty decreases a child's readiness for school through aspects of health, development, home-life, schooling and neighborhoods" (p. 701). To further support this finding there have been studies that have found the association between low-income households and decreased school readiness (Ferguson et al., 2007). In fact, children living in poverty struggle with "vocabulary, communication skills, number knowledge, the ability to concentrate, and cooperative play with others" (Ferguson et al., 2007, p. 701). If our children are entering school with a predisposition to struggle with vocabulary, this can make comprehension an uphill battle, before teaching and learning has even started. It is important for educators to know that it is not the child's fault if they do not have school readiness. In fact, children lacking school readiness may come from families who never learned these appropriate skills. If this is the case, how can we expect parents to teach their child skills they themselves have never learned?



To paint a clearer picture, “children who live in poverty often begin school with weaker language and literacy skills than do children from higher-SES home” (Crowe, Connor, & Petscher, 2009, p. 190) This then leads into children who are not performing on grade-level. This could potentially be why we have to move children down to other grade level RtI groups. Unfortunately, if children are not performing on grade level upon the completion of 1<sup>st</sup> grade, “this dramatically decreases the chances of achieving grade-level expectations later in in school” (Crow et al., 2009, p. 190). Combining both of these factors together, it results in the high rate of failure and delayed reading skill acquisition among children living in poverty (Crowe et al., 2009). If our children are entering school with delayed reading skill acquisition, won’t their acquisition of comprehension also be delayed? Especially being that comprehension is a higher function of reading. Who would have thought that living in poverty could have such a drastic impact on a child’s development and success in school?

For the children participating in my study, living in poverty is all too real for them. According to my building principal, 99% of all children attending my school live severely below the poverty line (J. Saia, Personal Communication, October 6, 2016). For my school, “severe poverty” means more than simply being a part of the National School Lunch Program. As stated earlier, my children also receive a hot breakfast, morning snack and afternoon snack each and every day. If it is a Friday some children are even provided food to take home over the weekend. Also, if it is close to the end of the month we tend to send home food. We do this due to the fact that many families have run out of their government assisted grocery money.

Children who live in poverty may not only come from a struggling home life, but they may also experience severe difficulties in school. It is imperative to know that these difficulties are related to the fact that they come from a family who lives in poverty, not the actual family

upbringing itself. This notion that it has nothing to do with the actual family upbringing is very important to remember. It is easy to simply place blame on the families taking care of the children. For instance they might not have time to practice sight-words flashcards, go over spelling words, or read to their child before bed; however the issue of student difficulties in school goes much, much deeper than this.

### **Code-Switching**

Another factor that comes into play with student success is code-switching between the standard dialect of English and a nonstandard dialect, Ebonics. Although this paper has already briefly addressed code switching, this section dives much deeper into the topic. Regardless of parental involvement or home-life, many of the children and adults in the African American community where my study is taking place engage in code-switching:

Code-switching for African Americans shift between Standard English (a dialect of English that is recognized as the national norm in the United States and is spoken or written by the educated classes) and African American English (AAE), an Africanized dialect widely spoken by Americans of African descent. Other terms for African American English are African American Language, African American Vernacular English, Black English, Standard Black English, and Ebonics. (Morrison, 2017, para. 1)

Think back to the state scores shared previously; the ones with passing rates in the single digits. Now think of the language written on those assessments. Those state assessments are written using the standard dialect of English. Our children have to engage in a large amount of code-switching in order to engage with and take the test. The factor of the language used on the assessments could help explain the low scores achieved (Lee, Griggs, & Donnahue, 2007).

Teachers of children living in poverty need to be educated on the usage of Ebonics and code switching. They should be mentored on how to fill the gaps to reach their own student's zone of proximal development for reading comprehension. This review of literature is not taking

a deficit perspective on children living in poverty. However in order to progress children to grade-level expectations, the causations of some of the hurdles faced by children need to be identified and addressed. By doing so, teachers can then individualize and differentiate instruction for the children even better.

### **Response to Intervention**

Response to Intervention, most commonly known as RtI, is one of the many academic support services that can be provided to struggling children. Other districts have called this support service “AIS” which stands for Academic Intervention Services, or “core support.” In my school, where the study is taking place, we call this service RtI. This support service is a multi-tiered support program; there are anywhere from two to four tiers that children can be placed in (Fuchs, 2006). In my school there are a total of three tiers for student placement. As previously mentioned, RtI is typically implemented for math and reading. For the purpose of this study, the RtI that I provide focuses on the development of reading skills. These reading skills focused on include: decoding words, vocabulary, fluency, writing, phonics, high-frequency words, and self-monitoring skills. My focus of RtI is on reading comprehension; a simple definition for reading comprehension is, “to make sure what they [the children] read makes sense” (Dickman, 2006, para. 6). One intervention that my school uses is the LLI (leveled literacy intervention).

LLI is a reading support program; each lesson contains:

- A set of goals
- Rereading of previous texts
- Phonics/word work
- Book introductions
- Reading of a new book
- An entire section for *discussing and revisiting the text*, also known as comprehension.
- Teaching points
- Writing
- A connection to the previous books lesson
- Running reading records for odd leveled books to keep up to date records on children. (Fountas and Pinnell, 2017, para. 6)

Comparing the components of a good reader to what is offered in the Fountas and Pinnell LLI kits and to what it touched upon in ELA RtI group time, they all work hand in hand together.

For children who are placed in the tier three group, meaning they are one academic year behind, RtI is great. This service provides the neediest children who may not have an IEP or 504 with services similar to special education services (Griffin, 2008). Another great component of RtI is that it is data driven. This means that the data determines who goes into what tier and that teacher preference is not a factor. RtI focuses heavily on student progress, as it is “closely monitored at each tier of intervention to determine the need for progressively intense instruction” (Dexter & Hughes, 2011, p. 14). The goal is that most, if not all children will end up in the tier one group with only a few in tier two, and none in tier three.

Looking specifically at the tiers and how they work, according to Fuchs (2006), tier one indicates that children are responding appropriately to classroom instruction. This means that tier one children require no additional support to achieve grade-level expectations. During RtI time children in the tier one group stay in the classroom and receive instruction from their teacher. If children are unresponsive to instruction from the classroom, they are placed in the tier two group. In a tier two group, children receive minimal support to assist with achieving grade-level

expectations (Fuchs, 2006). For children who are placed in the second tier, this indicates that the student is very close to achieving grade-level expectations and requires minimal support to assist with instruction. Children who are placed in a tier two group are provided support in a smaller group setting either in the classroom or they can be pulled out and receive support in an alternate location.

If children are placed into the tier three group, this indicates that the student is at least one grade level behind in academic performance. Children in tier three are suggested to receive support instruction from an RtI teacher, in an alternate, less chaotic environment; group size is recommended to be between three and five children (S. Castner, Personal Communication, November 22, 2016). Some also associate children in a tier three group with receiving special education like services during group time (Dexter & Hughes, 2011).

The support service known as RtI has also been “proposed as an alternative to the IQ-discrepancy method for identification of learning disabilities” (Dexter & Hughes, 2011, p. 4). In fact if children are unresponsive to tier two intervention services, this is a huge indicator for an identification of a learning disability (Dexter & Hughes, 2011). Below there is a chart containing RtI components for each tier created by Dexter and Hughes (2011).

Please note that this chart is a summary of Dexter and Hughes' (2011) work.

<b>Tier</b>	<b>Core Instruction</b>	<b>Children</b>
1	Universal screening (3x per year)	All children
1	Monthly progress monitoring	All children; at-risk children (~25%)
2	Specialized interventions	~10 – 20% of children
2	Bi-weekly progress monitoring	~10 – 20% of children
3	More intensive interventions	~5 – 10% of children
3	Weekly progress monitoring	~5 – 10% of children
3	Potential for special education referral	~2 – 7% of children

*Figure 2.* Chart that summarizes Dexter and Hughes (2011) information on the different tiers involved in Response to Intervention. *This figure breaks down not only the tiers but it displays the core instruction along with what percentage of children should be in that tier.*

Based on the needs explained in the poverty section of this paper, it is easy to see how this multi-tiered support service could really assist children living in poverty. RtI is also great for children living in poverty due to its strict structure and heavy emphasis on progress monitoring. The heavy emphasis on progress monitoring is to always ensure each student is in the appropriate tier and are receiving the most appropriate, individualized instruction.

According to the research done by Maskill (2012) children who were in a tier three RtI group showed progress not only in their reading, but also in their oral reading skills, *comprehension* and performance on standardized assessments. In order to see success from RtI the amount of intervention provided to the different tiers is essential. Maskill (2012) found that children who were exposed to high-quality, individualized instruction in their tier three group made progress throughout the entire year.

In order for RtI to be successful in reading and comprehension, there are five key components, these include:

1. Teach the essential readings skills; don't deviate.
2. Provide differentiated instruction based on reading assessment results and adapt instruction to meet children' needs.
3. Provide explicit and systematic instruction with lots of practice—with and without teacher support and feedback, including cumulative practice over time.
4. Provide opportunities to apply skills and strategies in reading and writing meaningful text with teacher support. Children need to be taught what to do when they get to a "hard word."
5. Don't just "cover" critical content; be sure children learn it—monitor student progress regularly and reteach as necessary. (Denton, 2016, para. 12)

In order to make RtI effective for reading instruction, the teacher must know exactly what he or she is supposed to be teaching. For instance in reading, skills, strategies and concepts need to be taught (Denton, 2016). Below is a summary of what Denton (2016) classifies skills, strategies and concepts as:

Skills	What children learn to do. In reading, children must learn skills such as associating letters with their sounds (such as saying the sound of the letter b and blending these sounds to form words [as in sounding out words])
Strategies	Strategies are routines or plans of action that can be used to accomplish a goal or work through difficulty. Children can be taught strategies to use when they come to a word they don't know, strategies for spelling unknown words, strategies to help them write summaries of paragraphs, and other kinds of strategies.
Concepts	Children must learn concepts, or ideas. They need background knowledge related to reading and to the topics they are reading about.

*Figure 3. Summary chart of Denton's (2016) ideas. This figure displays how Denton (2017) classifies the difference between skills, strategies and concepts.*

## **Essentials of Improving Reading Comprehension**

Reading and comprehending what is read is the most important skill learned in school (Sungatullina, 2016). According to Sungatullina (2016) reading is, “a cognitive process in which readers interact with the text, forming hypothesis, predictions and using their background knowledge to construct the meaning” (p. 2). Without these abilities, children will not be able to understand a math word problem, answer a written response question on a state assessment, or write a persuasive essay after reading a social studies passage. It is for these reasons that reading is the foundation for progressing in other subjects.

However, looking specifically at reading comprehension, metacognitive awareness is a critical element as it is the cognitive process that could explain why children living in poverty have severe difficulties with reading comprehension. This could be due to the lack of school readiness they have, code-switching from the standard dialect of English to Ebonics, a lack of vocabulary knowledge or any of the other factors I mentioned earlier. To support the theory that children living in poverty have severe difficulties with reading comprehension, think back to those state assessment scores where only 5% of 8<sup>th</sup> grade children and 7% of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade achieved a passing score of either a three or a four (Center for Governmental Research, 2016). It is quite clear that children living in poverty struggle severely with reading and/or comprehension.

According to Sungatullina (2016), “metacognitive awareness is viewed as reader’s awareness, monitoring and regulating of reading strategies” (p. 2). This means that during RtI group time, strategies should include a focus on metacognitive skills. It has been found that improving metacognitive skills is essential for achieving the “formal operational stage” in Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development (Iwai, 2011, p. 151). To clarify, the “formal



operational stage” is when children “acquire their reasoning skills and develop abstract thought patterns; they are capable of making hypotheses and inferring possible consequences” (Ojose, 2008, p. 22). Children’s reasoning skills that come from this stage refer to the “mental process involved in the generalizing and evaluating of logical arguments and include clarification, inference, evaluation, and application” (Ojose, 2008, p.24). The acquisition of these skills is typically complete by the age of 12 (Dr. Walker, Personal Communication, November 22, 2016).

Sungatullina is not the only researcher to come this conclusion. In fact, Carretti (2014) found that in order to have the ability to comprehend a text, metacognition and the working memory are essential. The term “metacognition” was established in 1976 by a researcher named Flavell; his theories were very similar to and were influenced by the work of Piaget (Flavell, 1976). When touching on working memory it is important to note that to assist children, lessons should be planned with the mindset that it will take two days for lesson retention. Planning for two day retention means that lessons should be taught on two consecutive days due to the fact that typically there is little to no retention on day one (S. Castner, Personal Communication, November 1, 2016). For students living in poverty, working memory is a large obstacle to overcome; it is critical to find strategies that improve working memory for children.

Another important factor in reading comprehension is vocabulary. According to Sungatillina (2016, p. 3) if children don’t have the “background knowledge of specific vocabulary or the strategies to use context clues to identify unknown vocabulary words, reading comprehension is unlikely to occur.” Sungatullina (2016) also stated:

It is evident that limited vocabulary and word recognition will not give a student the opportunity to rely heavily upon the context and will consequently become a barrier to text content comprehension. To enlarge the vocabulary children need to be exposed to extensive reading. (p. 3)

Unfortunately some children living in poverty are exposed to a limited vocabulary. As mentioned earlier, children living in poverty on average hear 13 million words, while children who live in middle or upper socio-economic statuses hear 43 million words (White, 2012). Many studies have found that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds enter school with less vocabulary knowledge than children in the middle and/or upper socioeconomic status (Farkas & Beron, 2004; Hart & Risley, 1995; Hoff, 2003). In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) found that 73% of fourth grade student living in poverty scored in the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile on the vocabulary section of the state assessment (para. 6). This is why implementing RtI while children are young is critically important; it is much harder to try to play catch-up with older children than to implement RtI and provide children with the necessary skills while they are still very young. It is especially challenging for children entering kindergarten or their next grade level when they are already academically and cognitively behind (S. Castner, Personal Communication, November 17, 2016).

In order to promote reading comprehension for children living in poverty, the United States department of Education introduced “Project Athena” (Houser, 2009). Project Athena was a

Javits program funded through the Center for Gifted Education at the College of William and Mary. It sought to find ways to help impoverished children develop advanced skills in reading comprehension, literary analysis, and persuasive writing. (VanTassel-Baska, 2006, para. 1)

Project Athena found “many positive instructional strategies such as a systematic approach involving an intense curriculum and the use of powerful teaching and learning models linked to student assessment” (Houser, 2009, p. 13). Houser (2009) found that with “structured, powerful curriculum and high expectations, develop and strengthen children’s literacy skills despite the

background children may come from” (Houser, 2009, p. 13). Two years after its start, Project Athena came to the following conclusions.

1. Experimental students did significantly better than control students in both critical thinking and comprehension.
2. Gender differences were minimal.
3. All ability groups and ethnic groups registered significant growth gains from using the curriculum.
4. Experimental teachers scored significantly higher on both the frequency of use and effective use of differentiated strategies across both years
5. Experimental teachers who had used the curriculum for two years and received commensurate training demonstrated significantly enhanced use of differentiated strategies over first-year experimental teachers.
6. It is noted in conclusion that developing the literacy of impoverished children is possible through a systematic approach that involves high-powered curriculum wedded to the use of powerful teaching and learning models linked to multiple modes of student assessment to gauge the extent of accrued learning. (VanTassel-Baska, 2006, para. 1)

Similar to RtI, Project Athena was a data driven study. The study used a lot of progress monitoring.

Thus far it has been identified that metacognitive awareness, metacognition, working memory, structured and powerful curriculum, high expectations, progress monitoring/data and vocabulary are critical for improving children’s reading comprehension. The strategies implemented during this study included such components during RtI time. Knowing the needs of the participants and the ideals of RtI instruction, it was clear what needed to occur in order for the children to make progress in their reading comprehension. As stated above if nothing is done to assist children living in poverty then the cycle of failure, lack of employment and reliance on government assistance will continue; now is the time to counteract the challenges and break the cycle.

## **The link between background knowledge and comprehension**

There is more to comprehending a text than simply reading and understanding the material. In fact, what children already know, their background knowledge, is critical in assisting with reading comprehension. During the instructional time of the study, I used the term, “background knowledge.” However, my participants were not a fan of that term; my participants used the phrase, “Information I just know”. In the teaching world it is well known that if a student can make a connection to what they are doing, their understanding of what they are doing increases (Cross, 1999). To apply this to the reading and comprehension, if a child can make a connection to what they are reading, their understanding (comprehension) of what they are reading will increase. To think more broadly, “the more you know about a topic, the easier it is to read a text, understand it, and retain it” (Neuman, 2014, p. 145). Background knowledge is critical due to the fact that words have more than one meaning. If children do not have the appropriate background knowledge of certain words, their comprehension is surely going to be altered. According to Neuman (2014, p. 146),

Background knowledge enables readers to choose between multiple meanings of words. For example, think about the word operation. If you were to read the word in a sports article about the Yankees, you might think about Derek Jeter recovering from his latest baseball injury. If you read the word in a math text, on the other hand, you’d think about a mathematical process like multiplication or division. Words have multiple purposes and meanings, and their meanings in particular instances are cued by the reader’s domain knowledge.

In order for background knowledge to help comprehension, children need to try to fit what they are learning while they read and try to piece it with what they already know; like a puzzle (L. Rak, Personal Communication, July 21, 2016). It is important to note, that simply activating background knowledge is only the first step. In order for background knowledge to aid in reading comprehension, the knowledge being activated needs to be relevant (Elbro & Buch-

Iversen, 2013). To put it simply, “Failure to activate relevant, existing background knowledge may be a cause of poor reading comprehension” (Elbro & Buch-Iversen, 2013, p.435). This means that activating a random piece of background information will not only not assist with reading comprehension, but it could hinder it as well. When a child activates their prior knowledge, they can then make a connection to a text. If the child can make a connection to what they are learning aka, the text, their progress typically increases (Cross, 1999). To assist with reading comprehension there are three different types of connections that students can make while reading, “text to self, text to world and text to text” (Simons, 2017, para. 4).

### **Methodology**

The purpose of my study was to focus on children living severely below the poverty level. My goal was to increase their comprehension during my tier three RtI ELA group time. This study sought to identify the most effective reading comprehension strategies for children in a tier three RtI group. Data were collected using student work samples and interviews with colleagues over a 6 week time period.

### **Participants**

This study had two different groups of participants. In section one, the participants included my colleagues. For this section, teachers and the heads of the ELA / Response to Intervention departments were interviewed. They were asked about the reading comprehension strategies they had implemented, their success rate and any evidence they had to support their claim. The teachers interviewed were selected based on whether they were grade-level teachers of children I had in my Response to Intervention group; this included grades kindergarten through fourth. If the teacher did teach one of those grades they were further narrowed down

based on whether or not they taught reading. Their reading teaching could have been done in either a whole or small-group setting. If teachers fit these two criteria they were selected for an interview. Also, based on their education level, expertise in the field and experience of teaching reading, the head of the Response to Intervention department along with the head of the English Language Arts department were selected for an interview. The adult participants include eight women and one man. There were two African American participants, while the remaining six were Caucasian. All of the adult participants have acquired their Master's degree in education.

For part two of the study, the participants were the children in my tier three ELA RtI fourth grade reading group for the 2016 – 2017 academic year. They were selected based on the fact that they were already in my daily reading intervention group. Due to state requirements, tier three groups are limited to three to five children. It is typically recommended that tier three groups be limited to no more than five children (S. Castner, Personal Communication, November 22, 2016). However based on the demanding needs of my children, there had to be six children in my fourth grade ELA RtI group. This study looked at the six children in my fourth grade ELA RtI group. Every student participant lived significantly below the poverty line; there were two homeless children as well. This meant that every student received a free hot breakfast, mid-morning snack, lunch and mid-afternoon snack. In my school in order to be placed in a tier three group, the student must be at least one academic year behind in school (S. Castner, Personal Communication, November 22, 2016). In order to be determined as one year behind, children must be unable to complete on grade-level work without 1:1 assistance and must have required differentiated instruction and materials that designed from a lower grade-level's curriculum (S. Castner, Personal Communication, November 22, 2016). This meant that all the student participants were at least one academic grade-level behind. As far as the children in the study,

although they were in fourth grade, the materials I used were designed for children in second and third grade. Due to the often chaotic and unpredictable world my children came from, all six children had severe emotional needs; four children were diagnosed with being “emotionally disturbed.”

### **Setting**

As mentioned in the poverty section of the review of literature, the setting of my study was in an urban Western New York city. As for the specifics of my classroom, this was a large classroom that was shared with another intervention teacher. My classroom was a part of an urban charter school that includes grades k – 6. The school atmosphere was warm, welcoming and calm; this was essential due to the severe emotional needs of the children. Student work samples, inspiring posters, detailed bulletin boards, colorful walls, and a funky tile pattern on the floor made the school a friendly place to enter. The classroom itself was large. Inside my classroom there were room dividers that separated the space between myself and another intervention teacher. The half of the room included in the study contained a large, pink “U” shaped table that held six children and one adult. At this table was where the tier three ELA group lessons were taught. Within my classroom there was a “Student Learning Spotlight” display where beyond expectation work was showcased. The walls were covered with classroom norm contracts and inspiring posters. There was also a wall devoted to “Super Effort” awards and “I’m an Amazing Reader” awards that children could earn for exceptional work, effort etc. The student awards were photocopied so that one copy was placed on the wall while the original was sent home with the student; these are great student motivators. There was a classroom

library and a reading nook which provided children a comfortable, more relaxed reading experience with colorful pillows, cushions and yoga mats.

My classroom was in an incredible school. From its appearance it was obvious that the building was a positive place to be. For instance there were inspirational posters along the hallway walls, colorful tiles on the floor, student work all over the place, and a friendly face every which way you turn. As part of a professional development session we had in November, teachers were asked to make an inspirational poster with their favorite quote; these posters are all over the three floors of the building.

One of the best aspects of my building was not something that could be seen, it was something we provided. Due to the fact that we had many children who were diagnosed as emotionally disturbed and many other children who had severe social emotional problems, we had seven social emotional support specialists to assist with children during crisis. These specialists were in addition to the three social workers we had on staff all day. These support staff members worked during the after school program as well. Rather than simply reprimand and punish the student for their outburst/ behavior, my school digs deeper and tries to find the “root cause of what is going on in the child’s mind when the explosion occurred, what caused it, and how can we help assist with it?” (F. Dicks, Personal Communication, November 22, 2016). Often times the trigger from an explosion was something that happened outside of school. The amount of social emotional support we offered our children was incredible; this really boosted the relationships and trust built within the school and our family-like feeling as a whole school. Children often select one faculty member as their “safe person”; this means that in a time of crisis the student knows that he/she can go to that teacher at any time. I was a safe person for



three different children. These children knew that if I was in group that they could come in, grab a fidget, book, or coloring page and do what they needed to do in order to deescalate themselves.

Another great aspect of the school was that is provided way more than an education. My school promoted dignity, respect, collaboration and family; this was seen through something known as Community Circle. This whole-school gathering occurred every Friday morning for a 30 minute chunk of time when the entire building would come together. Staff and children loves when families would attend, in fact not only are they invited, but they are encouraged to attend. During this time we would sing songs, children perform, we have news anchors, play activities and have student of the week/month. During community circle children loved when the faculty would compete against one another. Following Community Circle we had Creative Crew. This was a 45 minute chunk of time when children went to the “crew” of their choice. In the beginning of the year all teachers in the building were required to come up with and run a “crew”. Crews could consist of anything, from hip hop crew, photography crew, sewing crew, wilderness crew, and cooking crew; the crew I started was called, mindfulness coloring crew. Once established, children were given a list of all the “crews”, they were told to pick their top three; then team leaders assigned children to a crew. Children were grouped with a variety of children from other grades; this allowed children to build relationships with other children in other grades. Being an Expeditionary Learning school, Community Circle and Creative Crew are really important to the community building and the school morale we have.

## **Positionality**

The life experiences, cultural background, education received and upbringing I have had all impact my role as an intervention teacher in the classroom. All of these factors and many more provide a framework for myself not only as a teacher, but as a researcher. As an educator I have been in classrooms from wealthy communities to average communities and urban communities with children who live in poverty. All throughout my experiences I have found that my desire to teach and help children learn remained constant throughout the different communities I was in. I firmly believe that all children have the ability to be successful however they just need the right tools. As an intervention specialist working with the neediest of needy children, it is my job to figure out how to make each individual child shine and lead them to the path of success. My experiences throughout a variety of communities along with my constant belief that all children can be successful will help me to have an unbiased view as I conducted my research and analyzed my data.

I am a divorced, white woman who is 26. I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and severe anxiety at the age of 16. I find this information to be critical in this section as many of the children I work with are diagnosed with a mental illness. This connection I share with children provide a deeper kind of relationship to foster; I can truly relate to their struggles. As an adult with a mental illness I remember countless situations in which therapists, doctors and teachers said to me, "I understand what you're going through." However they had absolutely no idea, and I could sense it. However, on rare occasions someone would say it and they would mean it; I gravitated towards those adults. I know that when I say it to my students, they truly know I "get" it. Sometimes the skills I have acquired over the years coping with my disorder were exactly what the children needed in a time of crisis.

I was raised in an upper-middle class household in a suburban neighborhood. My family also has a vacation home in the Adirondack Mountains. Both of my parents graduated with their Bachelor degrees; my father from Rochester Institute of Technology, and my mother from St. John Fisher College. My mother has also obtained her Master's degree from St. John Fisher to further her certifications as a teacher. Twenty-four years ago my father established his own restaurant; he continues to run his establishment. My mother was a stay-at-home mom for the first 13 years of my life. When I went to middle school, my mom decided to go back to school in order to obtain her degree in teaching. While my mother was in school, she worked as an elementary paraprofessional. My mother has been a special education teacher in the same district I grew up in for ten plus years. My brother is five years older than myself and he resides in the state of Massachusetts with his wife and newborn son. My brother graduated from Boston University with his Bachelor's and Master's degree.

I graduated from the College at Brockport with a Bachelor's Degree in History. I also received my certification in both general and special education for children in grades one through six. I am currently working as a first year intervention teacher for children in grades kindergarten through fifth in an urban charter school. English and American Sign Language are my two languages. The life that I have lived is very different than the life of my students; I have lived a very financially privileged life. It is due to this privileged life that I work with the population I do, as I find giving back to my community very important. Please always remember my philosophy, in which all children deserve to experience academic success.

## Methods of Data Collection

As the participant observer I wanted to first identify a handful of successful reading comprehension strategies taking place in my building. I then selected the three most successful to implement during my Response to Intervention group time. This was designed to improve the reading comprehension for children in my tier three ELA group.

In order to identify the most successful reading comprehension strategies implemented in my building, I interviewed my fellow colleagues. During interviews, teachers and department leaders were asked a range of six to eight questions (dependent on some of their answers). The interviews were recorded using my iPad. It is important to state that once a conversation had been transcribed, the audio recording was deleted. Due to the limited amount of free time my fellow colleagues had during their day, teachers were also provided the opportunity to fill out an interview form via e-mail. Teachers had one week to send back their interview responses. Within that same week teachers had the opportunity to interview in person.

Once a strategy had been implemented with children in my tier three RtI group, student comprehension was assessed using an array of methods. The audio recorded assessments included comprehension conversations of the story and whole-group retells. I then transcribed the conversations and immediately deleted the recording. These transcriptions were then used during the data analysis portion of my study.

For non-audio recorded assessments, data were collected through the use of graphic organizers; all worksheets were introduced through the *Gradual Release Model*, meaning that first I explained and modeled, we then did it together and then eventually the graphic organizer was completed individually. At the end of group time I collected the papers, covered all names and identifying marks, wrote a pseudonym for data analysis purposes, and photocopied them for

data analysis. All assessments including audio-recorded conversations were analyzed and evaluated using the same one to four scale rubric.

## **Procedures**

The first part of my study, the interview with my colleagues to identify the three most successful reading comprehension strategies, included a very simply procedure. See below for specifics:

1. Once an interview time had been set, the teacher met in my classroom, room 211.
2. I introduced myself and gave a brief explanation of why I was conducting the study.
3. I then started to ask the interview questions (all interviews were audio recorded on my iPad).
4. Once the interview was completed, I thanked each interviewee for their participation.

Discussing part two of my study, the work I had with my children, it is important to know that my study did not change the curriculum for my Response to Intervention tier three groups. The reading comprehension strategies implemented simply enhanced the group's normal, daily instruction. This meant that all of my fourth grade, tier three children participated in the study due to the fact that it was a part of their normal intervention group activities. I introduced my first reading comprehension strategy on Monday, February 6, 2017. Intervention groups met Monday through Thursday for 30 minutes. With the study being six weeks, I had a total of 24 group lessons to analyze. The tier three intervention schedule/agenda that was used each day was as follows:

- Children entered the room, found their folder for group and sat down.
- I went over the agenda for the day and explained any changes in the schedule that were out of the norm.

- I read the group target, children repeated it after me.
- I read the behavior group target, again student repeated it after me.
- *If* it was the first day of a new strategy and book I introduced the text and the reading comprehension strategy. This included clear concise explanations, easy to follow/ non-complicated steps, explicit modeling, and practice time.
  - *If* it was not the first day, I facilitated a discussion revolving around the retention of the strategy and the text introduced.
- I provided a book introduction each day prior to reading the story.
- A whole- group reading then occurred; I read the first page and then the children read independently. Throughout this time I was prompting the new reading comprehension strategy.
- Then a brief discussion of the story occurred.
- Children then worked on their graphic organizer.

This sequence of instruction is known as the Gradual Release Model which began with me, “the teacher explanation and modeling, then teacher scaffolding, while responsibility is gradually released to the student” (Foley, 2011, p. 196).

- Children began to independently read the book while filling out the graphic organizer.
- Once all children finished the chapter, the group re-engaged in a whole-group discussion of the comprehension of the book; this was a student led discussion that I simply facilitated.
- To conclude the lesson, a whole-group discussion revolved around what was learned, what was challenging and what went well occurred.

- We also discussed if we met our daily target and what to expect for the following day.

All children participated for the entire study, as this study was a part of their normal intervention curriculum. This meant that all children were expected to:

- Read the story and complete the graphic organizer that was selected for that 2 week period.
- Participate in whole-group and one-on-one discussions.

Children were expected to stay actively engaged and be accountable for their work, as these expectations are the same expectations during normal group time. Student behavior and academic expectations during group time will not change simply based on the fact that a new graphic organizer is introduced.

Trustworthiness of this study was established through multiple forms. Triangulation was one way I addressed trustworthiness. Triangulation was created through gathering different kinds of data from a number of participants over time (Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012). There were three main ways that I triangulated the data from my study. Based on the fact that I was analyzing four different types of data (audio-recorded conversations, written retells, written constructed response, and visual retells) I was able to identify the most valid findings on a particular student and/or the whole group in general. Another way I triangulated the data was through the different documentation of my data. I collected data through written answers and audio recorded answers. The final way I triangulated the data was through the use of a variety of participants. For instance, the children in my study were in the fourth grade, while the adult participants ranged in their ages in adulthood.

Additionally I established trustworthiness through the reassurance of participant confidentiality. Participants knew that all of the data collected was stored in one of the following places: my password protected iPad that came home with me each night, my password protected laptop that also came home with me each night, and /or a folder for copies of participant work that was stored with me at home. Student work samples were gathered during the day and then placed in this folder at home; this folder was stored in my personal desk. Along with confidentiality, my participants knew that I was the only person seeing the data with all the original information on it. When I worked with my research partner and/or my advisor to determine if my analyses could be confirmed or disconfirmed, pseudonyms were used and all identifiable markings were crossed out. When my participants trusted that all data was kept confidential, their trustworthiness also increased.

### **Analysis**

When I started analyzing my data, I could not believe how difficult it was. Using numbers from a rubric made coding my data very confusing and time consuming. I found my themes after I coded all my data; this included interviews from colleagues and student participants, conversations that had taken place, student work, and observations. The first goal of my study was to identify the three most successful reading comprehension strategies used in my Kindergarten through sixth grade building. I found that the Fountas & Pinnell LLI (leveled literacy intervention) program was the most successful and most commonly used program in my building. Rather than being told different strategies, I previously mentioned that the incorporation of supplemental instruction from Serravallo (2015) *The Reading Strategies Book* was recommended to me. It was further suggested that I pull two graphic organizers from the



book. The final graphic organizer was specifically suggested to me by the fourth grade team I interviewed; since my student participants were in fourth grade, I went with their recommendation. When it came time to include my fourth grade students in the study, the goal was to improve overall reading comprehension.

Once I started collecting my data, I immediately analyzed it. The first step I took was to have my audio recordings from my interviews transcribed. Since six of my nine interviews were submitted via e-mail, I only had to transcribe three interviews. Due to this small number, I was able to analyze my interviews much quicker. Please note, each transcription was dated and titled according to who, when and what the transcription was of. Once I started analyzing my interviews I realized that using a coding process was a great way to highlight commonalities and anomalies. When it was finally time to analyze the data collected from my fourth grade ELA RtI group, I found that using a numerical coding system was the best route. The numbers came from their rubrics; both their overall score and the score within each category on the rubric.

When it came to my findings, I personally identified the first one. After my first finding was identified, I then included my fourth grade participants as data analyzers. My first finding happened to answer my first and second research questions. These answers included information on the most commonly used and most successful reading comprehension programs and strategies implemented in my school.

When it came to including my participants in the analysis, I first showed my children all the data I collected. I then explained the numerical charts and the scores. Next we, my children and I, listened to our recordings. Combining the scores and the audio recordings, my student analyzers identified both finding two and three. I included my fourth grade participants in the analysis section because I wanted my children to take ownership of all they had done over the

past six weeks. My fourth grade participants had a lot to be proud of; their participation in this study was equally as important as my role in the study. I believed that they had earned the responsibility to assist with identifying the remaining two findings, conclusions, and the implications. This incorporation of the children being actively involved in their learning pairs nicely with the *Social Learning Theory* in which the children take charge of their own learning (McLeod, 2011). Below is a chart that clearly states the three different themes found after the analysis was completed. Please note this is for general reference; each finding will be elaborated on later in this section.

#### Overview of Findings

Finding Number	Finding
One	The most commonly used and most successful reading comprehension program implemented in my school is, Fountas & Pinnell <i>LLI</i> (leveled literacy intervention) with supplemental instruction from the book, <i>The Reading Strategies Book</i> (Serravallo, 2015)
Two	Based on the lack of differentiation and student control of how and when to fill out the graphic organizer, two strategies selected, <i>B-M-E</i> and <i>Interesting vs. Important</i> , were unsuccessful at having four of the six participants obtaining the target score of a four through a seven.
Three	Due to the participants' increased control of how to complete the graphic organizer, the most successful strategy was the second graphic organizer, <i>SWBST</i> (Somebody, Wanted, But, So, Then).

*Figure 4.* General overview of the findings of this research study.

The above chart further illustrates that finding number two is based on a commonality found between two of the three graphic organizers implemented. This chart also illustrates that student involvement / control of how and when to fill out the graphic organizer was the foundation of the third finding.

### **Background Information on the 3 Graphic Organizers**

It is important to remember throughout this section that all three graphic organizers were implemented using the level N chapter book titled, *Suitcase* (Walter-Pitts, 2006). The first graphic organizer implemented in my fourth grade, tier three ELA group was located in the *Summarizing What's Most Essential* section of Serravallo's (2015) book. Within this section the graphic organizer known as the B-M-E was used; this stands for “**B**eginning” and “**M**iddle” and “**E**nd”. This graphic organizer required the student participants to constantly update the setting and characters found while reading the chapter. It then required the participants to identify the one, most important fact from the beginning of the chapter, then the middle, and then at the end of the chapter. The goal of this graphic organizer was for students to only write one to two short detailed packed sentences. This requirement of one to two detailed packed sentences required the participants to show their ability to summarize. Due to the fact that authors typically throw in details to keep the book exciting and engaging, there was an option to write one interesting fact on the organizer. This graphic organizer was a part of our 2<sup>nd</sup> finding.

The other graphic organizer that was a part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> finding was the final graphic organizer implemented. This graphic organizer was titled, “Important versus Interesting.” The 2<sup>nd</sup> finding identified by my participants was that, based on the lack of differentiation and student control, these two graphic organizers were unsuccessful at having four of the six participants achieve the optimal score of a four through seven.

The *Important versus Interesting* graphic organizer was found in the *Supporting Comprehension in Nonfiction: Determining Key Details* section of Serravallo (2015) *Reading Strategies Book*. For this organizer, rather than simply pull out the most important information,

participants had to determine if what they found was in fact important or if it was merely interesting to them. While reading, the goal was for the participants to stop and think...

Does this fact support the main idea of this page (or section or book)? If it doesn't, it may be that the author included something interesting, but that isn't necessarily important to understanding the main points. (Serravallo, 2015, p. 262)

For finding three, the graphic organizer used for the basis of the finding was called "SWBST". This acronym stands for "Somebody, Wanted, But, So, Then." For this graphic organizer children had to answer the following questions:

Somebody: Who are the main characters of the chapter? Wanted: What did the main character want in the chapter? But: What was the problem of the chapter? So: What did the main character do to solve the problem? Then: Was the problem resolved? If not, how did the chapter end? (Serravallo, 2015, p. 262)

For this graphic organizer children could read the entire chapter and then answer the questions, or they could answer as they read the chapter. Once all the questions were answered, the participants took all of their information that they wrote above and had to turn it into a complete paragraph summary of the chapter. This was the one specific graphic organizer that was suggested to me during my interview of the fourth grade team. Through the analysis of the conversations and the growth in rubric scores from the *SWBST* organizer, my participants concluded that this was our most successful graphic organizer implemented; this was our third and final finding.

### **Finding One:**

Every grade level used the *Leveled Literacy Intervention* (K-4 interviewees, 2017) program for improving reading fluency for their tier three children. For the purpose of this paper *Leveled Literacy Intervention* will be addressed as LLI. In conjunction with the LLI kit, teachers also provided supplementary instruction for reading comprehension using *The Reading*

*Strategies Book* (Serravallo, 2015). As previously mentioned, this finding answered both my first and second research questions.

### Information on LLI

When Fountas and Pinnell created the LLI program, it was designed as an “intensive, small-group, intervention for children who find reading difficult” (Heinemann, 2016, para. 2). The goal of LLI is to, “lift the literacy achievement of children who are not achieving grade-level expectations in reading all while deepening and expanding comprehension with close reading” (Heinemann, 2016, para. 3). The LLI program is divided up into seven different leveled colored kits. Below is an image that outlines each kit and who it is intended for based on grade-level and current reading ability (Heinemann, 2016, below para. 3).

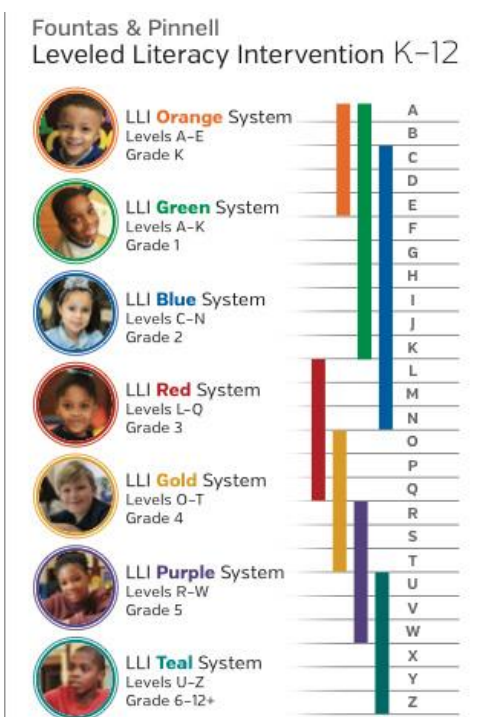


Figure 5. Leveled Literacy Intervention K – 12 Kit guide. The figure illustrates which colored kit is designed for which grade level and for each specific reading level.

Each LLI lesson includes five different parts. These five parts include a reread of a familiar text, phonics/word work, a scripted book introduction which includes modeling of one page, post-

reading comprehension questions for discussion, and a “connection to self” portion which requires children to write (Heinemann, 2016, para. 8).

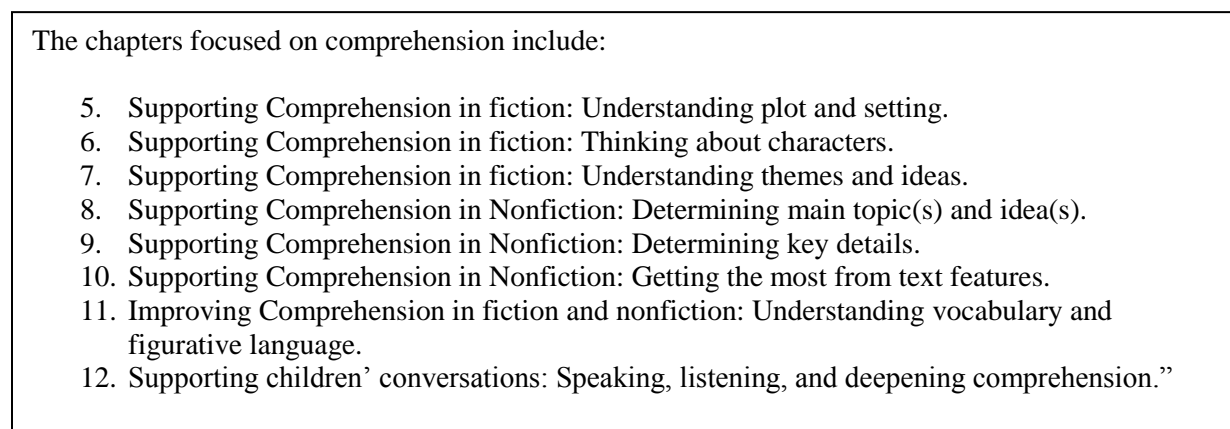
Rather than provide the current reading levels of the classrooms of the different colleagues interviewed, I focused on 4<sup>th</sup> grade. This emphasis on 4<sup>th</sup> grade is due to the fact that in this study, my 4<sup>th</sup> grade group was my study participants. In my building, 4<sup>th</sup> grade intervention teachers used the end of the blue kit and moved into the red LLI kit. The end of the blue kit is intended for children in the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and the beginning of 3<sup>rd</sup>; it is also intended for children who are reading between a level L and M (Heinemann, 2016). The red kit is designed for readers within the L through Q range (Heinemann, 2016). The 4<sup>th</sup> grade participants in my tier three group used the blue kit, level M/N in March of 2017.

### **Information on the Supplemental Instruction**

As far as the supplemental comprehension instruction, every grade-level used the book, *The Reading Strategies Book* (Serravallo, 2015). The first teacher recommendation for this book came from second grade. This female, Caucasian teacher enthusiastically said, “You have to have this book as an intervention teacher! It provides at least 20 strategies PER chapter!” Another recommendation came again from second grade. This second grade, female, African American teacher wrote, “It has 7 different comprehension sections to specifically assist tier three children!” Second grade was the only grade to include expressive punctuation in their recommendations of this book.

What finalized my decision to purchase the book included the comments made by the fourth grade team. The recommendations made by fourth grade were very clear, insightful and data driven. Not to mention, they were the teachers of my student participants. For instance one male, Caucasian teacher said, “There are eight chapters filled with comprehension strategies

based on what your focus is...maybe characters, or vocabulary, or the theme- this book is so thorough.” The most detailed recommendation came from fourth grade as well. This female, African American fourth grade teacher submitted her interview via e-mail. Below is an image of an excerpt from the emailed interview.



*Figure 6.* Emailed interview response focused on the recommendation of Serravallo (2015). This figure displays *the number and name of every chapter that focused on reading comprehension*. It also illustrates *that the comprehension strategies do not start until chapter five*.

Finally, there were two recommendation comments that struck me very hard. One was from a fourth grade, female, Caucasian teacher. Her recommendation resonated with me because not only did she tell me her opinions, but she backed up her thoughts by showing me specifics from the actual book. As we went over the book together she said:

This book is amazing! You wouldn’t believe all that it does for children. Look at how specific the strategies get based on the style of book...one chapter is, supporting comprehension in fiction- understanding plot/setting, then another chapter is supporting comprehension in fiction- thinking about characters.

The other recommendation comment that struck me came from a Caucasian, male, third grade teacher. This teacher submitted his interview via e-mail as well. What made his recommendation so strong was that he explained how the book was beneficial for improving reading

comprehension specifically. He wrote, “You should really look into this book, it’s a perfect place for finding differentiated instructional strategies for comprehension. Start at chapter 5 and just keep going.”

Once I had analyzed all the interviews from my colleague participants, I realized that I had found the answers to two of my three research questions! Question one asked, “What Response to Intervention tier three ELA programs are provided for children in my school?” As mentioned above, all grade-levels used the Fountas and Pinnell, LLI program. The second question asked, “What instructional strategies focusing on comprehension are part of Response to Intervention tier three services for children in my school?” It was made very clear that not only is *The Reading Strategies Book* (Serravallo, 2015) highly suggested from the head of the Response to Intervention department, but the grade-level teachers raved about it. The second graphic organizer implemented, the SWBST, was specifically suggested to me from my interview of the 4<sup>th</sup> grade team.

### **The Rubric**

Before I can explain the second and third finding, it is important to know and understand how the student participants were graded. In order to ensure that each graphic organizer was graded consistently, I used the same rubric for each graphic organizer. This rubric required me to rate four different categories. These categories included: interpretation, detail, use of information, and clarity. Each category was scored as a one, two, three or four. Overall comprehension scores were calculated by adding each number from each category all together. This meant that with the four categories, the best score a student participant could obtain was a four. This then meant that the highest, least desirable score a student participant could obtain was a 16. In order to demonstrate achievement in the study, the student participants had to achieve an



overall comprehension score of a four through seven on at least one of the three graphic organizers. In order for the graphic organizer to be determined as successful in the study, at least four of the six participants had to obtain a score in the goal range. Please note that discussions had also played a factor in determining success. Below is an image of the rubric I used to score the graphic organizers:

<b>Reading Comprehension Rubric</b>				
Week: _____		Student: _____		Grade: _____
Chapters: _____				
Graphic Organizer (circle one): 1: B-M-E / 2: SWBST / 3: Important vs. Interesting				
Category	1	2	3	4
<b>Interpretation</b>	Answers are mostly correct and demonstrate excellent comprehension. Opinions are always fully justified.	Answers are often correct and demonstrate good comprehension. Opinions are adequately justified.	Answers are occasionally correct and demonstrate competent comprehension of the topic. Opinions are sometimes justified.	Answers do not reflect accurate comprehension of the topic(s). Opinions are unjustified.
<b>Detail</b>	Answers are mostly complete, extensive, and include many details.	Answers are usually complete and include several details.	Answers contain some supporting details.	Answers lack the required detail or are incomplete.
<b>Use of Information</b>	Answers mostly include supporting evidence from the text/lesson when necessary. Paraphrases are often included in answers.	Answers usually include supporting evidence from the text/lesson when necessary. Paraphrases are sometimes included.	Answers include occasional supporting evidence from the text when necessary.	Answers do not include supporting evidence from the text when necessary.
<b>Clarity</b>	Answers are very easy to understand. They are clear and concise.	Answers are always easy to understand.	Answers are mostly understandable, but occasionally need prompts to clarify.	Answers are difficult to understand.
<b>Total:</b> _____				
<b>Overall Total:</b> _____				

Figure 7. The reading comprehension rubric. It is broken down into four categories and scores ranges from one to four. This figure illustrates the exact rubric used for grading all student graphic organizers. Adapted from Colonial Cities Rubric Activity 3-

[http://clacs.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/CLACS\\_ColonialCities\\_Activity3\\_Rubric.pdf](http://clacs.as.nyu.edu/docs/IO/CLACS_ColonialCities_Activity3_Rubric.pdf)

**Finding Two:** Remember, finding two was identified by the student participants. Our second finding stated, based on the lack of differentiation and student control, two strategies used were unsuccessful. They were determined to be unsuccessful based on that fact that both organizers did not result in having four of the six participants achieve the optimal score of a four through a seven. In-depth, thorough conversations revolved around varying opinions and lack of control of when and how the organizers were completed were also factors in determining that they were unsuccessful. The two unsuccessful organizers were the “B-M-E” and the “Interesting versus Important.” Below are images of these organizers:

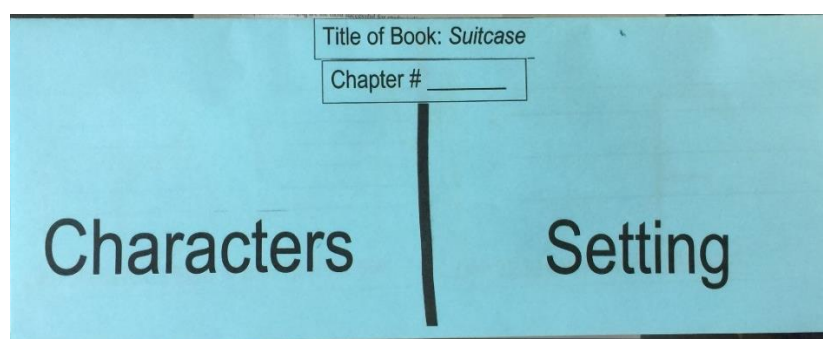


Figure 8. Model copy of the B-M-E graphic organizer. Participants had to write the specific chapter they were working on. The figure showcases *the front cover of the organizer*.

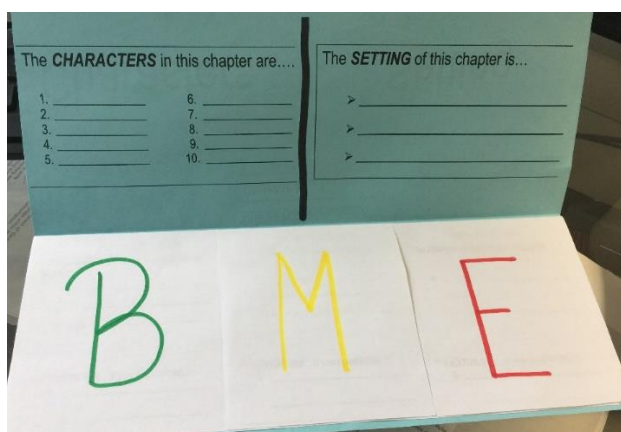


Figure 9. Model copy of the B-M-E graphic organizer. Participants had to write the characters and setting. The figure showcases *the inside sections of the B-M-E*.

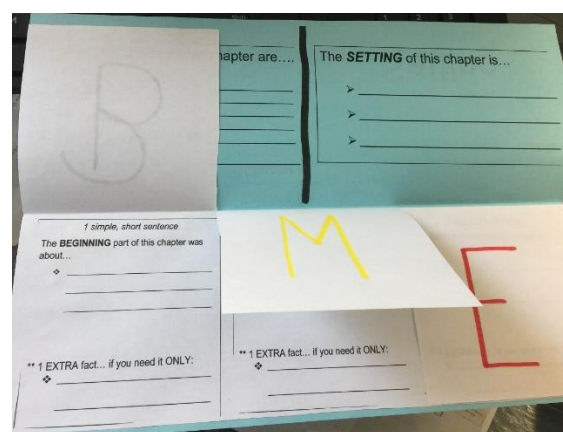


Figure 10. Model copy of the B-M-E graphic Organizer. Participants had to write their one important fact and could write one interesting fact. This figure illustrates *what is underneath the “B, M, E” flaps*.

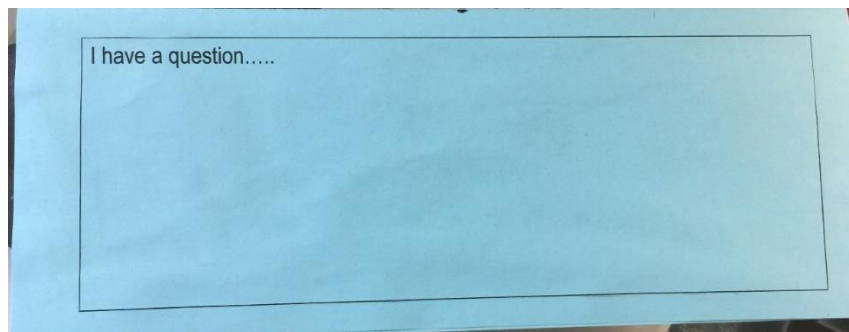


Figure 11. Model copy of the B-M-E graphic organizer. If the participants had a question regarding the chapter they could write it here. The figure shows the *back cover of the B-M-E graphic organizer*.

**Determining Importance**

Directions: As you read your text today, consider closely the information you learn from the reading. Would record the information as **important** or **interesting**? Important information is the must remember information versus cool or neat information. After we finish reading, we'll compare our lists.

Important	Interesting

Figure 12. The model copy of the “Determining Importance” graphic organizer. In Serravallo (2015) book, the organizer was titled “Important versus Interesting.” This figure showcases *the third graphic organizer implemented*. Student participants had to identify important information versus simply interesting information.

### **Evidence for the B-M-E**

This graphic organizer was classified as unsuccessful because only two children reached the target zone score. The two students who reached the target score were Z4 and J4. Overall as I mentioned earlier, this was one of the two least successful strategies, due to the fact that four of the six children did not reach the target score. In fact, even the overall class average was not even in the target zone. But another reason the participants identified supporting why it was not successful came from whole group discussions. Within a particular discussion it was agreed upon that the graphic organizer did not take into consideration the differing student opinions. During our discussion of the strategy and its overall lack of success one student participant brought up a great point. Below is the dialogue between myself, student J4, and a few interjections from Z4 and Y4:

**Teacher:** Alright, now that we have looked at all of our scores, rubrics and work samples does anyone have any idea as to why we struggled with this graphic organizer?

**J4:** Um yeah, I do. I mean how are we supposed to know what is the most important in the chapter if we have to stop in the beginning and middle and write?

**Teacher:** What do you mean?

**J4:** Like we had to write the most important part in the beginning then middle and then the end of chapter and then write a summary putting it all together. But what if the beginning and middle point have nothing to do with each other? Like we should be able to read the whole chapter and then write, because then we're given all the information before we have to write.

**Z4:** Yeah!

**Y4:** Yeah!! That makes a lot of sense, cause look at my chapter two graphic organizer the beginning section and the end section were about the main character, but the middle section revolved around the sister and in the end my middle section point just confused me because I couldn't find a way to put it into my summary. And what if I'm focusing on a different character, so what I thought was important might not be important to someone looking at a different character.

**Teacher:** Hmm... That's really interesting. What is it called when you think something that is different than someone else? What about you two is different?

**Z4:** Our thoughts! Our ideas! Our Opinions! Our Thinking!

**Teacher:** Hang on Z4, what did you say?

**Z4:** Thinking?

**Teacher:** Before that?

**Z4:** uh... opinions?

**Teacher:** YES! Opinions. You two have different opinions, so did this graphic organizer let you have different opinions? Yes or no?

**J4, Z4, K4, B4:** NO!

**Teacher:** So what did we just realize?

**Z4, K4, B4:** That B-M-E didn't let us think different opinions!

**Teacher:** It sounds like we just found our proof for our 2<sup>nd</sup> finding! Awesome job guys!

Although this organizer was identified as unsuccessful, there were a few positive findings in our analysis of the data. For instance, by chapter three all of the participants had a better score than what they achieved in week one and two. This means that all of the participants lowered their score from chapter one to chapter three during weeks one and two. Below is the data chart of growth:

<b>Student</b>	<b>Week 1: Chapter 1</b>	<b>Week 2: Chapter 2</b>	<b>Week 2: Chapter 3</b>
B4	14	13	8.5
Y4	16	14	10
Z4	15	15.5	6
E4	14	12	10
K4	16	16	15
J4	9	9	5

*Figure 13.* Weekly Progression of student scores using the B-M-E graphic organizer. This figure illustrates that only three students made significance progress and that only two students scored within the achievement range.

To represent detailed, positive growth I will be showcasing participants B4, Y4, and Z4.

In the figure above, those scores are highlighted. Student B4 started out with an overall

comprehension score of a 14 for her chapter one graphic organizer. Her interpretation score was a four, detail a four, use of information a four, and clarity was a two. Her strength was that her answers were always very clear to understand. When student B4 moved onto chapter two her interpretation remained at a four, as did her detail. However her use of information scored a three; for one third of her writing she used evidence from the text. This brought student B4's overall comprehension score to a 13; although not a large jump, she has made improvement. Her chapter three graphic organizer took a leap for success; interpretation was scored as a two, she now had correct answers that demonstrated comprehension. Detail also moved up to a three as did her use of information; clarity took a minor hit, there was some confusion, she scored a two and a half. These numbers brought her overall comprehension score to an eight and a half.

Student Y4 started out with an overall comprehension score of a 16 for chapter 1. A score of 16 shows that the student scored a four for each category. For this particular student, her interpretation of what was comprehended was very off target. However after 1:1 conferencing and prompting through edits, student Y4 appeared to have understood the next chapter's expectations. As for her chapter 2 overall comprehension score, she received a 14, two points better than her last; her detail and clarity had improved. By chapter 3 student Y4 had made steady growth. By the end of chapter 3, her overall score was a 10. She received three's for interpretation and detail, and two's for use of information and clarity! She began to consistently support her thoughts with evidence from the text without needing assistance.

Although this strategy was unsuccessful overall, student Z4 made the most growth using this graphic organizer. Initially Z4 started out with an overall comprehension score of a 15 for chapter 1. This score reflects that the student scored a four in the categories: interpretation, detail and use of information; and a score of a three for clarity. This was surprising as student Z4 is and

has been all year, excellent in his ability to orally express his comprehension. To improve his understanding, I did more conferencing and prompting with him. Surprisingly enough for chapter 2, Z4 scored a 15.5; his clarity worsened. Due to my concern of his worsening score, I provided direct 1:1 supplemental instruction during one, thirty minute lunch period. After this lunch instruction student Z4 went from a score of a 15.5 to a score of an eight! Student Z4 took his interpretation from a four, which is inaccurate, to a three which is correct with justified opinions. He scored another three for his use of information. Z4 grew from using zero evidence to support his answers to 50% of his answers including evidence. Student Z4 went from a four, to the best score of a one in his detail and clarity. When he was asked, “What made filling the B-M-E out for chapter three easier than chapter one and two?” He replied with, “I realized that all I had to do was write down the answers I was giving you when we talked.”

### **Evidence for “Interesting vs. Important”**

The other graphic organizer that was classified as not successful overall was the third and final organizer implemented, *Interesting vs. Important*. Based on the numerical data, this organizer was identified as unsuccessful due to the fact that it did not have at least four of the six children achieve the target score. In fact, with this organizer, not a single student was able to score between a four and seven. The lowest score achieved was done so by student J4; she received a nine. This score of a nine for student J4 was her highest score obtained throughout the entire study. Similar to the B-M-E organizer, the average score for this graphic organizer was a 10.6.

Below is a figure that shows scores obtained for this graphic organizer:

<b>Student</b>	<b>Week 5: Chapter 8</b>	<b>Week 6: Chapter 9</b>
B4	14	10
Y4	11	10
Z4	14	10
E4	11	11
K4	10	9
J4	9	9

*Figure 14.* Weekly progression of the six students from week five to week six using the “Interesting vs. Important” organizer. The figure illustrates *the high scores the participants obtained*. It also illustrates

Prior to starting this graphic organizer I hypothesized that this would be the most successful strategy due to the fact that the children all had been practicing the skill of summarizing and pulling out key details for four and five weeks now. However not only did the data make it clear that this strategy was not successful, my participants’ conversations that focused on this graphic organizer were particularly compelling. Below is an excerpt from a whole group conversation regarding this graphic organizer during analysis:

**Teacher:** Well it is clear to me that this strategy just did not work. Does anyone have any idea as to why this is?

**B4:** Sure do! Our numbers are so high! I mean seriously, I got a 14? What’s up with that? I liked what I said and I had evidence from the text to back it up.

**K4:** Yeah me too! I wrote about his sister Brandy, you even told me all my important facts were right!

**E4:** Yeah I wrote about Brandy too!

**Z4:** Wait a second! You guys wrote about Brandy? But I wrote about Xander, what gives?

**J4:** What I’m trying to say is, what is important or interesting to me, isn’t import or interesting to everyone else so how can there be a right or wrong answer?

**Teacher:** That’s a great question, but remember it’s not what’s important or interesting to you, it is what is most important or interesting from the author, the theme, the big picture.



**J4:** Well, what if we each think something different is important. Like I picked Brandy as being important, which she is because she's a girl and the main characters sister, but Z4 picked Xander, probably because he's a boy and was the main character, what makes his answer right and mine wrong?

**Teacher:** Hmm.... So let me get this right, you're saying that each of you could've selected a different theme, idea or character to base what you thought was important or interesting? I never thought of it like that, but I really enjoy the process you created to make your point. I wonder how the scores would've changed if I graded them now in this mindset. What we just discussed sounds really similar to something we talked about weeks ago, with our first graphic organizer, the B-M-E, does anyone have any idea as to what I'm remembering?

**Whole group:** [slowly and unmotivated] uh...

**Teacher:** Let me ask you this, if E4 wrote about Brandy and Z4 wrote about Xander, what about them is different?

**Z4:** OUR OPINIONS! Just like B-M-E

**Teacher:** So that means...

**Whole group sporadically:** WE JUST FOUND PROOF!

Similar to the B-M-E, this graphic organizer did not take into consideration the varied opinions of the participants. The conversation regarding the B-M-E and the "Interesting vs. Important" were the magical moments of our analysis. My children were officially excited about their learning and were able to make real connections between material that was weeks apart. As mentioned earlier, not only did we identify two unsuccessful graphic organizers from the numerical data, but we were able to find an underlying commonality as to why they were not successful.

**Finding three:** As stated in the reference chart of my findings, due to the participants' increased control of how to complete the graphic organizer, the most successful strategy was the second graphic organizer, *SWBST* (Somebody, Wanted, But, So, Then). This graphic organizer was the only organizer that had at least four of the six participants obtaining a score between a four and seven; this made it successful for the purpose of the study. Success was also identified through a

conversation I had with a specific student. Personal student success was identified based on the growth made in rubric scores between week three and week four. Looking at all three of the graphic organizers' overall average scores, the *SWBST* was the only organizer that had an average that was in the single digits; it just barely passed the target range by half of a point. Through observations it was clear that the children were working through these chapters nicely. The student analyzers found it interesting that the most successful organizer happened to be the organizer that had the most chapters to read and write about. Below is a chart that displays the growth in scores from the implementation of the *SWBST*.

<b>Student</b>	<b>Week 3 Chpt: 4</b>	<b>Week 3 Chpt:5</b>	<b>Week 4 Chpt: 6</b>	<b>Week 4 Chpt:7</b>	<b>Growth</b>
B4	8.5	7	6.5	5.5	+3
Y4	14	9	7	7	+7
Z4	8.5	7	6.5	5.5	+3
E4	11	9	10	8	+3
K4	10	7.5	7	6	+4
J4	7	6	6	4	+3

*Figure 15.* Weekly progression of all six participants' growth using the *SWBST* organizer. This figure illustrates that this was the most successful strategy due to the fact that at least four of the six participants obtained a score within the target range. In fact, five obtained the target score.

For overall success in the study, the numerical data showcased above displays that an additional participant obtained a score in the target range; meaning five, not four, children received a score between a four and seven. These five participants include: B4, Y4, Z4, K4, and J4.

As far as personal success, student Y4 made the greatest progress using the *SWBST* graphic organizer. Y4 again started off in chapter four with an overall comprehension of a 14; she ended on chapter seven with an overall score of a seven. In a span of two weeks student Y4 was able to cut her score in half; her detail and use of information went from a four down to a two.

The student who made the second most growth during weeks three and four was student K4. What interested us the most about student K4 was her last rubric score for week two. Her score was a 14. However her first score of week three was a 10. I bring this to light because this meant that on a Thursday she scored a 14 and then without any additional support she was still able to come into school four days later on a Monday, and better her score by four points. As analyzers we concluded that this meant that K4 had increased her ability to carry what she learned from one organizer into the next one. Through a whole group discussion I made my student analyzers aware that this meant her overall retention of the skills had increased.

We came to this finding not only based on the numerical data, but also due to the fact that all six of the fourth grade children stated that the SWBST was the most enjoyable to work through. It is also important to emphasize the power of engaging students in analysis of their work as a way to reflect about their thinking, learning, the text etc. On day three, student J4 elaborated as to why it was the most enjoyable. Student J4 started a powerful conversation that supported our finding, she said, "This makes a lot more sense den da last one." When questioned why she felt this way she stated, "Cause, we read da whole chapter and den wrote, I hated stoppin halfway through da paragraph and chapter." Her thoughts were backed up by her work, during chapters four and five she scored an overall comprehension score of a 7 and a 6. Student J4 was one of the five children who obtained a score within the target range of a four through seven.

Once J4 made this comment, all of the remaining participants chimed in. Student B4 stated, "Yeah! That was tough! What if nothin' was important in the beginning?" Student K4 interrupted and stated, "yeah, isn't that like starting a bad habit?" When I questioned her on this comment she supported her statement with, "if nothing in that section was important, but we had

to find something, then ain't we looking for things that ain't really there?" Student Z4 continued this thought and stated, "YEAH!! If the author didn't put anything important in that section then we were set up to fail, there could be nothin' to write about, I don't like that."

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to identify successful reading comprehension strategies to improve reading comprehension for students living in poverty. This study focused around the research questions listed below:

1. What Response to Intervention tier 3 ELA programs are provided for children in my school?
2. What instructional strategies focusing on comprehension are part of Response to Intervention tier 3 services for children in my school?
3. How might children's comprehension of text be impacted by the comprehension strategies taught in tier 3 Response to Intervention?

During this six week study I found that even though my student participants were more likely to face obstacles due to living in poverty, they there were able to improve their reading comprehension. Please note that this study was limited to a specific socio-economic status, grade and reading level. To further explain, the participants of this study all lived in poverty while two were homeless. As far as reading level, all students were reading the same Fountas and Pinnell level N chapter book.

Data analysis revealed that pedagogical strategies grounded in *Social Constructivism* promote achievement in reading comprehension. Including my student participants as analyzers in this study was incredibly beneficial for their growth and learning. According to Palmer (2013, para. 4) "Students benefit from opportunities to practice the problem solving, leadership and creative thinking required to participate in decision-making." The data also revealed that the *Gradual Release Model* can be successfully implemented when teaching reading comprehension.

Finally, the data, specifically the conversation data, revealed that student choice and opinions were important.

## **Conclusions**

### **Pedagogical practices rooted in *Social Constructivism* can promote achievement in reading comprehension**

The whole group conversations collected throughout this study bring to light how important it is that students be involved in their learning process. To put it simply, “What students have to say matters in how learning happens” (Palmer, 2013, para. 4). During the analysis portion of my study, my students were actively involved in their own process of learning. Students were coming up with different opinions as to why they did well as a group as well as individually. On the opposite side of that, they were also able to identify things that did not go well. As the days of analysis progressed, the ownership that the students were taking in their opinions and findings grew stronger and stronger. This led to more in depth analysis of all the data. This was seen during the whole-group discussions. Had I not included my participants in the data analysis process, I never would have been able to identify the same second and third findings. This would have been unachievable for me due to the fact that both finding two and three were supported 50% by whole group conversations, taking into account their opinions.

**When teaching reading comprehension, the *Gradual Release Model* is one successful teaching approach.**

Throughout the study it became abundantly clear that introducing and teaching the children how to complete each graphic organizer was successfully done through the *Gradual Release Model*. The quick and easy explanation of the *Gradual Release Model* is known in the education field is, I do, we do, you do. According to Levy (2007, para. 1) “this model proposes a plan of instruction that includes demonstration, prompt, and practice.” Fisher and Frey came up with a definition for *I do*, *we do*, and *you do* (Levy, 2007). *I do* occurs “in the beginning of a lesson or when new material is being introduced, the teacher has a prominent role in the delivery of the content” (para. 3). As the students take in the new information and skills, “the responsibility of learning shifts from teacher-directed instruction to student processing activities” this leads into the *We do* phase, at this time, “the teacher continues to model, question, prompt and cue students; but as student move into the “You do” phases, they rely more on themselves and less on the teacher to complete the learning task” (Levy, 2007, para. 4 & 5).

Within the gradual release model there is Bandura’s *Social Learning Theory*. I would provide explicit instruction with visuals while modeling. My students would first observe me completing the graphic organizer through modeling. After modeling, the participants then imitated the work. The major concept of Bandura and his *Social Learning Theory* is that, “People learn through observing others’ behavior, attitudes, and outcomes of those behaviors” (Bandura, 1977, para. 2). My students demonstrated their ability to learn through observing others while they participated in the analyzing of the data portion of the study. My students were not only seeing growth and progress in themselves, but they were able to look at one another’s scores, find commonalities and anomalies among them and learn from their findings.

For every new graphic organizer implemented, I would explain and model each and then provide an opportunity for questions. I did not move into the *We do* phase until all questions had been answered and each student was able to reiterate what the expectations of the graphic organizer were. Then using the chapter book *Suitcase*, I would initiate the first step of the graphic organizer and have the students finish the thought. It is important to know that students did not move into the *You do* phase all at the same time. In order to differentiate my instruction and meet all the needs of my learners, students remained in the *We do* phase and were provided prompting and assistance until they had a firm grasp of the graphic organizer and could fill out one portion on their own. In order to move into the *You do* portion, each participant had how have one section checked by myself and not need to make any corrections. Student confidence also played a role in determining when they started the *You do* phase; students were not moved forward until they felt they were capable of their abilities. When students doubt themselves and their ability to do the work, it reflects in the quality of what they produce.

I was also able to use the gradual release model in a non-traditional way. For instance, I would use the gradual release model when it was the first day of a new graphic organizer. On this day I would use a familiar chapter to model how the organizer was intended to be completed. The thought process behind this is, if I want my students to fully understand how to fill out this organizer, I should not model it using information they have never heard before. Had I used information they had never heard before, I personally do not think they would fully understand what information belonged where on the organizer. I was activating prior knowledge to increase the chance of understanding and success.

### **Student choice and opinions are important.**

Based on numerical data and whole group conversations looked at during our data analysis, we found that only one of the three graphic organizers implemented was successful for our 4<sup>th</sup> grade ELA RtI group. We also found that in order to fully express comprehension of a text, student participants should be given the option to read the entire chapter or read while they filled out their graphic organizers. When the student participants had to stop at random sections of the chapter, they did not perform well on their graphic organizer. Equally as important, we found that varying opinions pertaining to book reading must be taken into account when assessing for overall comprehension. According to Palmer (2013) when students have more leeway in the answers given and are positively reinforced, student achievement and engagement will increase.

### **Implication for students**

#### **Increased achievement leads to confidence & motivation**

The video taken, including both the audio and visual express the importance of motivation in achievement. Students not only saw personal growth within themselves, but during our analysis they were able to identify the growths in others. This realization of growth resulted in a more positive learning environment. According to Irvin, Meltzer and Dukes (2007, para. 10).

Engagement with learning is essential, because it is engagement that leads to sustained interaction and practice. Coaching, instruction, and feedback become critical to ensure that students develop good habits and increase their proficiency. Increased competence typically leads to motivation to engage further, generating a cycle of engagement and developing competence that supports improved student achievement.

To be more specific, Irvin et al. (2007, para. 4) stated that, “Instruction and practice are necessary to gain competence. Increased competence inspires continued motivation to engage, this cycle supports improved student achievement.” While listening to my audio recordings I



came to a conversation that I must have missed in action. In this conversation, our RtI group had just ended and student K4 was pushing in her chair, preparing to leave, talking to student Z4.

Below is the dialogue:

**K4-** Z4...Z4!, do you member doin' somedin like this last year?

**Z4-** Ya... finally, something I can do!

**K4-** Mhm, I finally gets it, it feels good, I'm guna go tell Mrs. Sherp (teacher from last year) dat we doin it!

**Z4-** Hey! I wanna go too, she'd be real proud'if us

This brief discussion showed me that my two students who have struggled the most are finally in a comfortable, confident state in their learning. This rapid progress became a boost of motivation. To further support this notion, as time went on, I observed that during group discussion Y4 participated more than she has all year; I no longer need to pull answer from her, rather than answering questions timidly and quiet, she is now proudly raising her hand and confidently speaking her answers. As mentioned earlier in this paper, it was also noticed that during the middle of the study, weeks three and four, the students were most successful with the "SWBST" graphic organizer also made comments such as, "this one was a lot more fun" and "I've done this before, I can do this!"

### **Implications for Teachers**

#### **Teachers need to take into account differing opinions between students when assessing reading comprehension**

The conversation data in this study is what really strengthens this conclusion. When implementing the "B-M-E" and the "Interesting versus Important" graphic organizers the students were able to identify the common reason why they were not successful. This reason was

the fact that each student could pick a different character, or theme or aspect of the book to consider important. For instance the chapter book we read for the graphic organizers the main character was a boy, however his sister was a girl. All of the girls in my group picked to write and focus on the sister, Brandy, the entire time, while the one boy in the group selected the boy, Xander. Also, in the story, Xander got better at basketball by working on his balance through practicing jump rope. All of the girls thought this was incredibly interesting and important, while my boy student only found it important; he stated, “Why would I think that’s interesting? Jumping rope is for girls.” When teachers make straight answer keys with their own answers and opinions, they are minimizing the creativity of the young readers they educate. In fact it is a little unrealistic to expect our students to have the same opinions about a book as an adult; our answers should be different. This was an invaluable lesson.

### **Teachers need to stick to the basics and avoid *Pinterest***

Previously in this paper I have included the images of the “B-M-E” graphic organizer. It had to be photocopied a special way, each individual organizer required coloring, cutting and gluing; it took a minimum of 15 minutes to create one graphic organizer. Each day I needed a total of six organizers; it took me over an hour and a half to make the graphic organizers every night! It would have been six hours a week, had I stuck with that model of the “B-M-E.” In all honesty, the flaps, and colors did not strengthen the graphic organizers’ effectiveness any further than the basic version of this graphic organizer. Below is a picture of the modified B-M-E graphic organizer; this version was much less extravagant and time consuming.

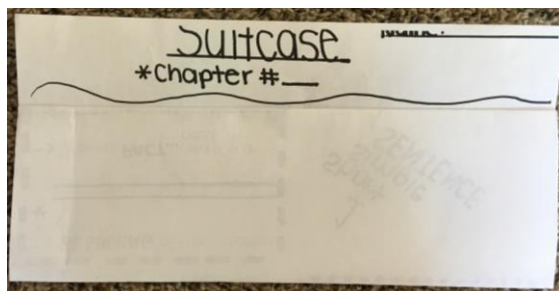


Figure 16. Simplified B-M-E. This figure displays what the B-M-E organizer looked like when they were passed out to the children. As you can see, it is folded up.

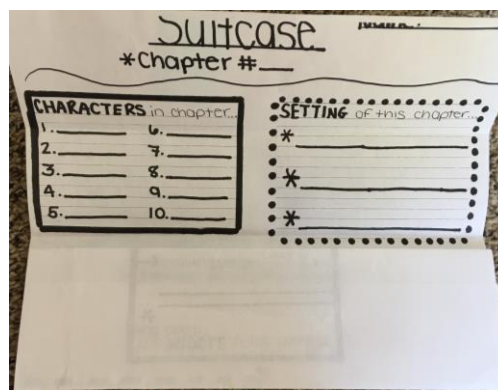


Figure 17. Simplified B-M-E (2). This figure displays what the B-M-E organizer looked like once it was unfolded one time.

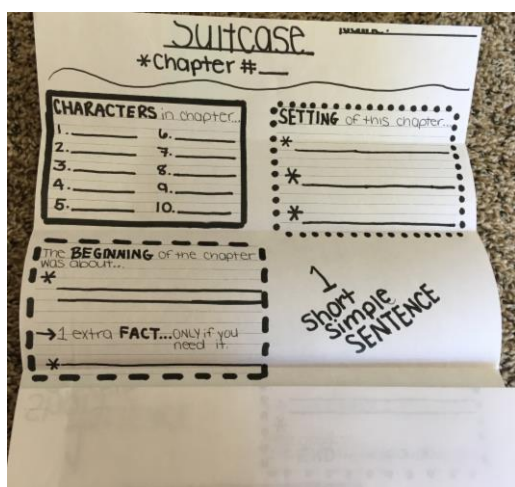


Figure 18. Simplified B-M-E (3). This figure displays what the B-M-E organizer looked like once they finished reading the beginning section; it was unfolded twice.

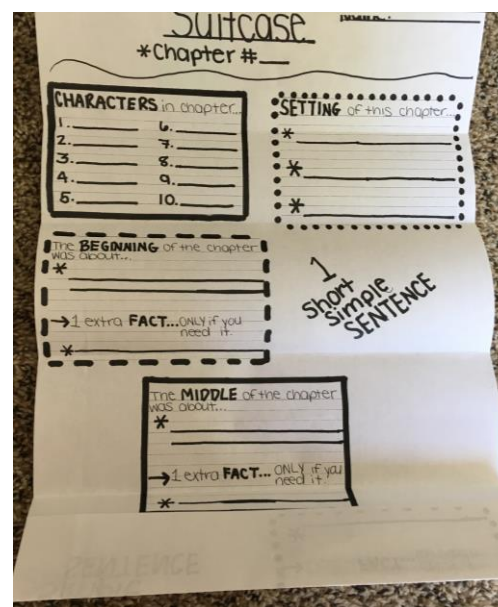


Figure 19. Simplified B-M-E (4). This figure displays what the B-M-E organizer looked like once they finished reading the middle section; it was unfolded three times.

SUITCASE  
\*Chapter # \_\_\_\_\_

<b>CHARACTERS</b> in chapter... 1. _____ 6. _____ 2. _____ 7. _____ 3. _____ 8. _____ 4. _____ 9. _____ 5. _____ 10. _____	<b>SETTING</b> of this chapter... * _____ * _____ * _____
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------

The **BEGINNING** of the chapter WAS about...  
\* \_\_\_\_\_

→ 1 extra **FACT**... ONLY if you need it.  
\* \_\_\_\_\_

1  
Short  
Simple  
SENTENCE

The **MIDDLE** of the chapter WAS about...  
\* \_\_\_\_\_

→ 1 extra **FACT**... ONLY if you need it.  
\* \_\_\_\_\_

1  
Short  
Simple  
SENTENCE

The **END** of the chapter WAS about...  
\* \_\_\_\_\_

→ 1 extra **FACT**... ONLY if you need it.  
\* \_\_\_\_\_

1  
Short  
Simple  
SENTENCE

Figure 20. Simplified B-M-E (5). This figure displays what the B-M-E organizer looked like once they finished reading the end section; it was unfolded for the final, fourth time.

### The importance of engaging students in *Accountable Talk*

Ensuring that children are thinking, discussing, questioning etc. with their peers while they learn is incredibly important. The conversations had during our data analysis days were some of the best conversations had all year. The children were not simply having conversations, they were engaged in accountable talk. Accountable talk is when, “Students respond to and further develop what others in the group have said...It requires active/attentive listening and the use of evidence” (Paterson Public Schools, PowerPoint, slide. 10). In classrooms where high levels of student engagement and accountable talk are prevalent,

All students take an active role in the discussion. They are able to explain the relationship between the discussion and the stated learning objectives. The teacher and students ask questions that require higher order thinking (synthesis, analysis, evaluation, problem solving, application of learning). Finally, students return to the text and other data sources to support their positions or challenge the positions taken by others in the discussion. (Paterson Public Schools, PowerPoint, slides. 10 & 12)

As I previously mentioned, my group of data analyzers were able to discuss constructively their own progress. However what made our conversations “accountable talk” was the fact that they were able to thoughtfully look at, analyze, comment, discuss, build off of, and respectively receive feedback from their peers. Not only was this major progress in their ability to engage in higher-level thinking, but this boosted the morale of the group; student to student interactions overall were much calmer, friendlier and less judgmental. Finally, through the conversations had, my children were able to further deepen their comprehension [the entire focus of this study] through accountable talk. Their comprehension improved because they no longer only had their own answer in their head; they heard and truly took in the thoughts of their peers.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study include, the sample size, the students that make up the group, time, and the fact that I was the only adult researcher in the study. The sample size is considered a limitation as it only included six students; this leads directly into my next limitation. My group of students in this study was made up of five girls and only one boy. There was not an equal or even a similar ratio of boys to girls in the group. This makes it is difficult to say if the opinions of student Z4 were unique to himself or to a boy’s 4<sup>th</sup> grade mind in general. Also time was a huge limitation; I only had six weeks to conduct interviews, implement three different reading comprehension strategies and expect to see growth. A study of this nature should begin

in the beginning of the year and should go until the end of the year. Finally, although my children took part in the data analysis, I still was the only adult researcher. Being the only adult researcher left only me to make the final decisions.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Based on my research and findings, I am very intrigued to continue my research. The one thing I would want to do differently as a teacher-researcher is to have a greater participant population size. To clarify, this includes having children from different grade levels as well as a more balanced girl to boy ratio in the study. By having a larger and more diverse group of participants, my results would have more validity. In the future, I would like to further this study and conduct it on a grander scale. I think that a study should occur where specific graphic organizers from *The Reading Strategies Book* (Serravallo, 2015) are differentiated to reach all grade-levels. This differentiation allows researchers to see if school-wide, one graphic organizer is truly superior to another in aiding reading comprehension.

### **Overall Significance**

This study is important as it looks at a specific population that the average person may not think about when they think of obstacles children face in school. This study provides all teachers an excellent resource for teaching reading comprehension. However, this study will be most helpful for teachers of students who live in poverty. It gives teachers different potential reasons as to why this specific population of children struggle. The results of the research show that even though children who experience poverty have obstacles that children of a higher SES demographic may not experience, they can still increase their reading comprehension. Much prior research has been worded in a deficit, negative way; almost as if children who live in

poverty are not capable of progressing their learning. This study can be used to negate all of that deficit perspective research.

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