

What Do Upper Elementary Striving Readers Say about Reading Informational Texts?

By:

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### Abstract

While much research has separately considered informational texts and students who struggle with reading, few studies have looked at how these two interact together and what the possible benefits might be. This study provides descriptive information about the perceptions of informational texts from three striving readers. Each student was interviewed and additional data were collected about the students' literacy environments from their parents, teachers, and classrooms. Results showed that the three students spoke positively about informational texts and that two of the most attractive qualities are interesting material and making meaning from pictures. Within their classrooms, the three students were exposed to a considerable number of informational texts. While the professional literature advocates the use of informational texts for the benefit of boys, it is interesting to note that the two girls in this study chose to read a considerable number of informational texts. It is concluded that informational texts appealed to the three striving reader study participants. Ideas for helping parents and teachers use informational texts with striving readers are presented.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Students who still experience reading difficulties in the upper elementary grades present a dilemma to teachers every day. The past several decades of research have produced many important insights into students who have reading difficulties. Disengagement from reading (Guthrie & Davis, 2003), insufficient reading practice (Dreher, 2003), and low motivation to read (Gambrell, 1996) are among a few of the examples of why students struggle with reading. Using informational texts with struggling readers is a tool that has potential for success but may be an undiscovered resource in many classrooms. For ease of understanding, what today are often called informational texts are those texts that, in the past, were exclusively labelled as nonfiction (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008). This potentially valuable resource is underutilized (Duke, 2000). There has been limited research into the use of informational texts with struggling readers (e.g., Caswell & Duke, 1998; Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003; Dreher, 2003). This study is intended to investigate what students see as the potential benefits of informational texts.

The term *struggling readers* has been well-established and is commonly used in research today (e.g., Compton-Lilly, 2009; Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008; Wilfong, 2008). The term *striving readers* originated in Fink's (1995/1996, 2006) work as she was studying how and why a group of struggling readers overcame their difficulties and subsequently gained high-level reading abilities that helped them to become successful professionals. *Struggling readers* is a term that connotes deficiencies and weaknesses. The idea of *striving readers* represents a shift in thinking about readers with reading problems from "a deficit model to an **interest-driven model based on students' strengths and abilities**. . . . The positive qualities of motivation and effort" for students who struggle to read are conceptualized under this definition (Fink, 2006, p. x,

emphasis in original). For the purposes of this study, as with Fink (2006), the term *struggling readers* is used interchangeably with *striving readers*. People are likely to be more familiar with the notion of “struggling readers,” however, “striving readers” is perhaps a more palatable and, arguably, accurate term. *Reluctant readers* is a third term used to describe readers with difficulties. Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) describe readers who cannot read because of a lack of skills *and* those who are disinterested in reading as *reluctant readers*. This study will use an alternative definition that places *reluctant readers* under the umbrella of *striving readers*. Therefore, for this study, *reluctant* and *struggling readers* will both fall under the parent category of *striving readers*.

### *Background to the Problem*

There is extensive interest on the topic of students who struggle with reading and, as such, research has been conducted in the areas of striving, struggling, and reluctant readers (e.g., Bryan, 2009; Caswell & Duke, 1998; Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003; Dreher, 2003; Duffy-Hester, 1999; Fink, 1995/1996, 2006; Guthrie & Davis, 2003; Pressley, 1998; Robb, 2008; Wasson, Beare, & Wasson, 1990). Fink’s (1995/1996, 2006) work on striving readers offers a new look at students with reading problems and potentially changes the way some educators view action plans for such students. While investigating reluctant readers and their reading preferences, Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) found that reluctant readers often preferred nonfiction. Most of the research in this field centres on struggling readers and possible ways to enable their reading success. Caswell and Duke (1998) studied the difference in reading achievement when struggling readers changed text genres; while Duffy-Hester (1999) reviewed classroom reading programs for struggling readers and what impact these may have for reading instruction.

Finding a way to help striving readers is difficult because their struggles and reading reluctance can be widespread and complex (Bryan, 2009). The research offers potential solutions to use in the classroom and at home and different techniques teachers can employ. For the purposes of this study, striving readers (including both struggling and reluctant readers) are defined as students who have any or all of the following indicators: “lack of sufficient internal vocabulary (insufficient number of words stored in memory); inability to read with fluency—that is, accurately, quickly, smoothly, and with appropriate expression, intonation, and comprehension; [and] difficulty understanding and remembering text content” (Fink, 2006, pp. 129-130). These indicators, according to Fink, suggest that a student is learning to read but having some difficulty.

Over the past two decades, the use of informational texts has become a growing area of research (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003; Doiron, 2003; Dreher, 2003; Duke, 2000, 2003, 2004; Larkin-Lieffers, 2007; Peterson, 2008). In particular, Duke (2000, 2003, 2004) presents the benefits of informational texts for elementary school readers and illuminates the problem of access to such materials. Larkin-Lieffers (2007), Doiron (2003), and Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) also list benefits of informational texts. In this study, informational texts are defined as texts:

written with the primary purpose of conveying information about the natural and social world (typically from someone presumed to be more knowledgeable on the subject to someone presumed to be less so) and having particular text features to accomplish this purpose. Features commonly found in informational texts include graphic elements, such as diagrams and photographs; text structures, such as compare/contrast and cause

and effect; access formats, such as headings and an index; language forms, such as use of timeless verbs and generic nouns (e.g., “Birds eat insects” versus “That bird is eating an insect”); and others. (Duke, 2003, p. 14)

Further adding to this definition, Duke and Billman (2009) describe informational text as “text whose primary purpose is to convey information about the natural and social world, and that has particular linguistic features to accomplish that purpose” (p. 110). Examples of informational texts include encyclopedias, almanacs, single topic books, biographies, diaries, CD-ROM’s, newspapers, magazines, manuals, books on tape, internet, and brochures (Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003). Larkin-Lieffers (2007) explains a dramatic improvement over the last decades in the selection and quality of children’s nonfiction available and describes two distinct types: either factual information books or informational storybooks. Duke (2000) separates them into three categories: informational, narrative-informational, and informational-poetic.

Based on existing research literature, it is not unreasonable to think that informational texts may be a benefit to striving readers. Self-esteem can be fragile when a student is having problems reading at the upper elementary school age (Pressley, 1998), and so perhaps finding a book to read may cause great anxiety (Reutzel & Gali, 1998). Based on Duke’s (2000) suggestion that informational texts are attractive to students, such texts may offer a way for striving readers to have positive reading experiences. There has been little research done (e.g., Caswell & Duke, 1998; Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003; Dreher, 2003), however, connecting the use of informational texts as a way to benefit striving readers and their reading progress. Dreher (2003) looked at the predominance of stories versus informational texts in literacy instruction. As a result, she advocates more of a balanced approach in order to increase motivation and

achievement; and, she makes suggestions for utilizing the opportunities informational texts offer to struggling readers. After observing that many reluctant readers prefer nonfiction, Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) discuss why informational texts might appeal to such readers. Caswell and Duke (1998) studied two beginning struggling readers who improved dramatically in skill and attitude after switching from narrative to informational texts. The exploration of what striving readers say about reading informational texts is the aim of this study.

Regardless of the grade level, in many Canadian classrooms, there may be students who are struggling to read. Upper elementary school teachers are especially challenged to find ways to help striving readers in an atmosphere where basic reading skills are expected to be already mastered. Students who may or, indeed, may not be eligible for resource help are expected to find a way to progress in this system and become readers. After all, “problems in reading during childhood also are predictive of poor reading during adulthood” (Pressley, 1998). Duffy-Hester (1999) reports that there has been a shift in responsibility from special educators to classroom teachers of students who need extra help, and those teachers are unsure about what methods to use. Educators want to do everything they can to ensure successful reading environments within classrooms. Given that one goal of education is to create lifelong readers (Doiron, 2003), it is even more important to find ways to work on this problem.

### *The Researcher*

In this study, I was involved in all aspects of data analysis. This being the case, my perspective has an impact on the interpretation of this data. Therefore, it is important to situate

myself as the principal researcher. That is, the reader should be aware of my background and perspective in this study.

I am a mother of two girls. I am an avid reader. I enjoy children's literature immensely and spend many hours selecting and reading books myself and to my children. I read many different genres of texts and especially enjoy fictional novels about the ocean and the people who live by the coast. I always read and was read to as a child and had a variety of books available in my home. I grew up in a home where both of my parents enjoyed reading. My mother reads mostly fiction in bed at night and my father enjoys informational texts such as newspapers and biographies.

I am a certified teacher who has taught in the private school system for six years. The majority of my teaching time has been spent in the upper elementary grades. The school where I was employed practiced theme studies with an emphasis on student research work. Students studied a subject in depth using a variety of visual, oral, and kinesthetic methods. A cumulative project would be required to demonstrate the students' knowledge of the subject. These information literacy projects could take several different forms such as speeches, posters, models, plays, songs, or books. It is there that I became familiar with informational texts and observed potential benefits to striving readers in my classroom. In order to stay at home with my children and attend to my studies for my Master of Education degree, I have not been employed in the classroom for the past three years.

After teaching for six years at the upper elementary school level, I came to know several students who struggled to read. As their classroom teacher, the responsibility fell to me to help

striving readers learn to read at grade level. I observed that striving readers had unique challenges such as finding age-appropriate materials at their reading level, being motivated to keep trying something that had been difficult for several years, and maintaining a healthy level of self-esteem in an environment where most of their peers read at grade level with ease.

From personal experience, the striving readers in my classroom often had difficulty finding an easy-reader or other fictional texts to read during self-selected reading time. It was often when they picked up an informational text that they could finally settle down and read for a session. Information literacy projects conducted by upper elementary school students in my classroom were completed primarily using informational texts. Frequently, the striving readers could manage their way through an assignment without significant help from their teacher. Informational texts also seemed to be popular choices during library time and during early morning or free choice times. Boys, in particular, seemed to enjoy this genre, and often did so as an enthusiastic, animated group. This is not to denigrate fictional texts, as I believe a balance should be created in the classroom.

Therefore, it appeared to me that informational texts seemed to be accessible and motivating for many students and especially the striving upper elementary readers. Striving readers seemed to have feelings of familiarity and comfort with informational texts as demonstrated by the ease at which they interacted with these texts. Striving readers would often browse through informational texts in their spare time and could choose a text on their topic of research without difficulty. The navigation of informational texts seemed to be understood by striving readers. I wondered if these texts could or should be used in reading instruction, given the positive attitude the students had towards informational texts. As such, I am interested to

investigate if this familiarity and comfort with informational texts is apparent in other striving readers. Do striving readers find informational texts appealing?

Given the nature of this study, and my involvement in data collection and analysis, the reader should bear in mind the information that I have here provided about myself. A different person may have collected different data or interpreted the results a different way and, therefore, may have different findings.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The primary purpose of this study was to explore upper elementary striving readers' perceptions of reading informational texts. Is this genre attractive to striving readers and if so, why? This study documents the comments of students, providing a deeper understanding of why informational texts may appeal to striving readers.

Given our current understandings of the situated nature of literacy (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2004; Street, 1995), it is important to provide a rich description of the contextual setting within which the study participants function. Literacy skills are learned in a context, say Cope and Kalantzis (2000), and it is important to think about factors such as local diversity and global connectedness when attempting to teach students through appropriate literacy programs. Gee (2004) agrees that learning and thinking happens in a context, and that this presents teachers with the new challenge of ensuring the success of all students *and* teaching those students to learn and think in the high-tech global world. Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič (2000) also agree that literacy is situated in a context and explore literacy as parts of broader social practices such as history, culture, media, and family. This being the

case, data will be gathered for the purpose of painting a word portrait, as it were, of the study participants.

As such, it was the additional purpose of this study to gather information from parents and teachers about each students' literacy environment. This was done using three methods. In order to create a context for each students' literacy experience, responses from teachers about each student were collected as the first method of defining this environment. Secondly, teachers and parents shared lists of print materials the participants read on a given day. Lastly, a detailed count of the print materials in each participants' classroom was conducted. All of these methods combined together further situate the nature of each students' literacy.

### *Research Questions*

Given the purpose and background to this study, and the need to contextualize study participants' comments, the intention was to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What do striving readers have to say about reading informational texts?
  - a) Do striving readers see informational texts as beneficial?
  - b) If informational texts are seen as beneficial, what are the reasons?
- 2) How much informational text are striving readers reading?
- 3) How much informational text are striving readers exposed to in their school classrooms?

*Significance of the Study*

Duke (2000) claims that the use of informational texts offer a wealth of benefits and is an underutilized resource. If engagement, motivation, and personal interest are all paths to reading success, then striving readers, their teachers, and parents may find informational texts to be beneficial. This study may illuminate those things striving readers see to be the benefits of informational texts. As Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) advocate, “by incorporating information/nonfiction into reading instruction, reluctant readers are allowed into a community of readers” (p. 27). Informational texts may represent a resource of significant benefit to parents, teachers and, above all, students. Teachers will have a better understanding of what draws striving readers to informational texts and, perhaps, then make them more available for their students. The use of informational texts, themselves, may continue to become a more significant genre within the classroom creating more of a balance of texts. Students may have more success finding books they can read. Parents with children who have reading difficulties may also decide to purchase texts (i.e., informational texts) for their homes that are better-suited to their child’s needs. Overall, this study presents a discussion of informational texts from the perspective of striving readers.

The findings of this study are significant in that they reveal to us what striving readers have to say about informational texts. Finding out what striving readers think about informational texts can help teachers to carefully consider the ways that they use such texts within a classroom setting. The findings of this study also help us to consider how students use informational texts in their everyday lives.

*Scope of the Study*

The limitations of this study are discussed in greater detail in chapter five of this thesis. For now, suffice it to point out, this investigation explores the perspectives of only three striving readers, in grades four through six, from a Maritime province. Furthermore, the three students who participated in the study were each interviewed on only one occasion. Given the limitations of this study, the findings are not generalizable, however, this study does present the real-life situated literacy environments and the perceptions of three striving readers in relation to informational texts.

*Definitions*

In this next section, I provide definitions of important and, perhaps, confusing terminology that I employ throughout this study. The definitions were constructed after consultation of the professional and research literature.

**Comprehension:** Understanding and remembering the content of text (Fink, 2006).

**Displayed print:** Any print that is on classroom walls or other surfaces (Duke, 2000). Examples may include poetry, informational posters, class rules, and student research projects.

**Emergent reader:** A reader, no matter the age, who is beginning to learn to read (Durkin, 1961).

**Engagement in reading:** To participate in one's own reading, become involved, or establish some kind of connection with reading (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

**Expository texts:** Another name for nonfiction or informational text (Dymock, 2005).

**Fluency:** The skill of reading text accurately, quickly, smoothly, and with expression, intonation and comprehension (Fink, 2006).

**Genre:** A category of text type. For example, realistic fiction, fantasy, informational texts, and biographies are all different genres of texts (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008).

**Informational texts:** A text whose primary function is to convey information (Duke, 2003).

Otherwise known as nonfiction. Examples might include books, magazines, maps, recipes, the internet, and biographies.

**Interest-Based Model of Reading:** Fink's (2006) notion of reading with passionate interest and focusing on the positive qualities of readers (e.g., motivation, effort, strengths, and abilities).

**Internal vocabulary:** A term meaning the number of words stored in one's memory (Fink, 2006).

**List of print materials:** A list made up of types of print (e.g., books, magazines, recipes, maps, and computer games), fiction or nonfiction, that are read on any given day.

**Narrative texts:** A type of text that tells stories. Another name for fictional texts (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008).

**Nonfiction:** A type of text written using verifiable facts. Also known as informational texts (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008).

**Reluctant readers:** A reader who is disinterested in reading (Stringer & Mollineaux, 2003).

Reluctant readers are one type of striving reader.

**Self-esteem:** To have confidence in your own abilities and worthiness (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991).

**Situated nature of literacy:** The contextual setting in which a student learns and uses literacy (Barton et al, 2000). This is mainly focused in school and at home and is used to further our understanding of each student's reading experience.

**Striving reader:** The parent category for readers who are learning to read but who are having some difficulty (Fink, 2006). Striving readers may struggle with vocabulary, fluency, and/or comprehension. Struggling readers and reluctant readers are two types of striving readers.

**Struggling reader:** A reader who is not reading at grade level and who may be having problems with motivation, engagement, and self-esteem (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Struggling readers are one type of striving reader.

**Upper elementary:** Grades three to six inclusive.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to familiarize the reader with the professional literature relevant to the above stated research questions, the literature is reviewed focusing upon two main areas. One important area is understanding striving readers. The other main focus of this literature review is the educational use of informational texts.

*Striving Readers*

Why do upper elementary students have reading difficulties? Avoidance is one answer, state Juel (1988) and Dreher (2003), and because struggling readers avoid reading, they do not get the practice they need to progress. It has been long argued (e.g., Allington, 1977; Stanovich, 1986) that one way to get better *at* reading is *by* reading; however, this can be hard to do if one avoids reading. Guthrie and Davis (2003) suggest that many middle school struggling readers are disengaged from reading and, therefore, have a low motivation to read. Wasson, Beare, and Wasson (1990) describe poor readers as uninvolved students who are off-task and less engaged. Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) divide reluctant readers into two types: those who can read competently but have no interest, and those who lack reading skills and see themselves as nonreaders. There is a wide range of reasons why students struggle to read. Avoidance, disengagement, low motivation, lack of skill, and lack of interest are among a few of the factors.

Guthrie and Davis (2003) examine disengagement in readers and possible ways to re-engage students who have reading difficulties. In their study, Guthrie and Davis administered questionnaires to all Grades 3, 5, and 8 students in the state of Maryland in order to investigate declining reading motivation from elementary to middle school. They found that middle school

students were much more disengaged from reading than elementary school students. Struggling readers are defined by Guthrie and Davis as “those disengaged from reading activities that are related to schooling” (p. 61). They suggest that one reason students have difficulties with reading is because they are disinterested or disconnected from reading. As students advance, the texts become harder, and there is often less support offered in the classroom. The students, therefore, lose interest and become disengaged from reading. Guthrie and Davis suggest that possible solutions are to offer an abundance of interesting books and meaningful materials to striving readers, which would directly help with motivation and reading achievement. To re-engage striving readers, Guthrie and Davis recommend using a wide variety of texts with content linked to real-life issues.

Bryan, Fawson, and Reutzel (2003) state that engagement in reading should be one of the most important goals in education. In their study, they observed three non-engaged readers in fourth grade to find a baseline of reading behaviors for those three students. After implementing the intervention of literature discussions, Bryan, Fawson, and Reutzel further observed the students for on and off-task behaviors. Their study found that non-engaged readers benefited from short discussions with an interested adult about what they were reading during silent reading time. These discussions enabled the researchers to find out what the students enjoyed reading and helped the researchers ensure children were reading material of interest to them. Some students, like the ones in Bryan, Fawson, and Reutzel’s study, often need encouragement and direction from the teacher to find a book.

Personal interest or individual preference is another potentially significant factor in the literacy lives of striving readers. Fink (1995/1996, 2006) describes the idea of ‘passionate

interest' as a way to overcome the challenges of reading. Fink (1995/1996) interviewed 12 successful dyslexics and explored reasons how and why they were eventually able to overcome severe struggles with reading. Fink suggests that "teachers should consider the powerful role of enjoyment and tap each student's interests" (p. 278). Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) agree that the best way to overcome reading difficulties is to find out about personal interests. Finding a text that children fall in love with, referred to by some as the *home run* text (Kim & Krashen, 2000; Trelease, 2006; Ujiie & Krashen, 2002; Von Sprecken, Kim, & Krashen, 2000), may spark an interest in reading. Dayton-Sakari and Jobe suggest that, from their experience, it is important to promote personal interest topics and to actively show approval of informational books by modeling nonfiction in the classroom and reading them aloud. Worthy, Turner, and Moorman (1998) have similar beliefs after their study on self-selected reading where they interviewed language arts teachers. They promote self-selected materials for readers and state that personal engagement with interesting texts is "an essential component of avid reading" (p. 296).

Reading motivation is another important factor in finding ways to help striving readers. In her review of six research-based factors related to increased motivation to read, Gambrell (1996) suggests that a book-rich environment and opportunities for choice are key components to fostering reading motivation in classrooms. Dreher (2003) and Duke (2000, 2004) propose using informational texts to motivate struggling readers. Looking closely at student interest and reading motivation and how this connects with informational texts is an important piece of the puzzle when trying to help striving readers.

In 2006, Fink published a book about her Interest-Based Model of Reading. The model is intended to help us understand how to support striving readers to improve their reading ability. This model is a student-centred method emphasizing ways to increase the skills of struggling readers at any age or ability by highlighting their strengths. Transactions among reader, text, and teacher are emphasized, following Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional model of teaching. This dynamic process views texts, not as static entities, but as representing a variety of possible meanings. The teacher is seen as more of a participant in the classroom who transfers responsibility to the student for learning; there is a great amount of student input, decision-making, and control over the students' own learning, and students' personal contexts and purposes are allowed in to this transactional view of reading (Straw, 1990). Informational texts and striving readers seem to fit this model because of its student-centred approach that focuses on student strengths, and the view that each learner can take responsibility for his/her own learning using personal context and purpose as starting points. Also, informational texts are used for different purposes and they offer different ways for individual students to derive meaning, making them dynamic materials. Teachers might use informational texts in the classroom to benefit striving readers by allowing them to choose material that interests them thereby allowing student input, decision-making, and more control over what they are learning. The striving readers' personal contexts and purpose for reading are recognized and valued in this model. All of these examples show how using Fink's Interest-Based Model of Reading can help us understand why informational texts might be beneficial to striving readers.

Clay's (1985) notion of reading levels, and the use of a running record to record and assess a child's reading, created new ways of thinking about reading instruction with struggling

readers. In her book, she describes easy, instructional and hard levels of reading. Generally, a student can read independently at the easy level, participate in guided reading at the instructional level, and be read to at the hard level. There may be several benefits to reading instruction for striving readers at the hard level such as teaching for fluency, modelling, vocabulary, and extension activities. However, for striving readers who may need instruction in decoding, phonics, or comprehension, instruction for these reading elements may be most effective when taught at the instructional level. The reality for many struggling readers is that they are continually being instructed at the hard level which “can diminish self-confidence, self-esteem, and reading skill” (Robb, 2008). Striving readers need to experience positive reading environments to have the best chance of success. In turn, success is likely to help students to become engaged, capable readers (Bardura, 1986).

Bryan, Smith and Burrows (2007) believe that “the most important thing is not *what* children read, but *that* they read” (p. 1, emphasis in original). Their study found that, when given a variety of texts from which to choose, two-thirds of six- to nine- year olds chose an easier text to read, including informational text-light books. They suggest that this shows a strong preference for easier reading material among children still developing reading independence. Teachers should be aware of this preference and should also keep in mind that informational books were one preferred option for these developing readers. It is important that readers practice the act of reading because it is through such practice that a reader develops and improves his/her abilities (Allington, 1977; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). As people read more, their skills improve and so harder texts become easier for the improved reader. They may continue to choose easier texts, but what was once harder, has become easier. Simply

put, the more children read, the more they will generally improve. Otherwise, a widening gap seems to form between those who do not read and their reading peers, whereby the capable and motivated readers experience continued progress in reading ability compared to their struggling and unmotivated peers (Stanovich, 1986). Personal interest and motivation, again, play a potentially important role in the eventual success of striving readers and, for some, this personal interest and motivation might be sparked by, and satisfied by, informational texts.

One aspect of focus with striving readers has been the connection to gender. Boys often perform more poorly than do girls on standardized tests and in school, generally (Peterson, 2008). In their study of 40 grade one students, Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish, and Shapiro (2007) examined preferences for narrative and/or informational books. They offer the recommendation to improve the imbalance of test scores between genders by offering boys more opportunities with nonfiction. The idea here is that an increase in motivation is likely to result in more reading and, thus, improved reading skills (Stanovich, 1986). Peterson (2008) examined the library borrowing habits of elementary school children and the link between reading ability and preference. She examined the circulation records of one elementary school library in North Carolina. The fiction and nonfiction titles that were borrowed by second, third and fourth grade students were examined in relation to age, gender and reading ability. She found that the lowest performing boys checked out more nonfiction than the highest performing boys. Informational texts may offer several benefits to weak students, and particularly so with boys.

*Informational Texts*

In some respects, the ways that students read today have changed considerably from how their parents read (Barton & Hall, 1999; Brandt, 2001; Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003; Tusting, 2000). Today, students often sample or skim texts compared to reading in-depth chunks at a time. Children's information books have changed to reflect this fast-search approach, one example being DK Eyewitness Books which has revolutionized the world of informational books (Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003). This series of books contain full-colour photographic illustrations, an abundance of white space, and short but detailed text boxes filled with information. In her review of the availability of information books for emergent readers, Larkin-Lieffers (2007) talks about the entertainment value of books increasing, especially for children eight and older, in order to compete with television and the internet. She refers to interactive books as one innovation that has responded to this change as it mimics certain aspects of the internet. Zygouris-Coe (2006) states that 90% of all internet sites are in expository form, making reading informational texts important in today's world.

The benefits of informational texts have been widely discussed among researchers. Duke (2000, 2003) says that it is the building of inherent curiosity, supporting vocabulary, development of expertise, world knowledge development, links to home literacy experiences, and developing a concept of literacy that make informational texts special. After years of experience in the classroom with reluctant readers, Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) list the following attributes as benefits of some informational texts. Their list includes attributes such as: highly visual; accurate; up-to-date; clear and direct; and, they contain attractive photographs; clear structure; detailed illustrations; varying typefaces and sizes; an index; captions; a glossary;

a bibliography; headings; internet links; realistic drawings; and the qualifications of the author.

In his review article that explores the rationale for balancing the use of information books in literacy programs, Doiron (2003) agrees and lists these benefits of quality informational texts: appearance; format; up-to-date information; diagrams; illustrations; accessibility; and style.

Larkin-Lieffers (2007) compares informational texts to fiction. In her review, she describes the former as more appealing and useful, having age appropriate illustrations and content, and she states that some children enjoy fact over fiction. Informational texts are considered by some to have unique characteristics that could make them a good choice for many readers.

Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) discuss why informational texts are appealing to reluctant readers. They claim that, from their experience with reluctant readers, the action in these types of books is attractive, particularly to boys. The minutiae of any number of subjects will likely engage students obsessed with a topic. Also, Dayton-Sakari and Jobe have observed that reluctant readers tend to enjoy facts, which match the reader well with informational texts. All of these points make a good case for why informational texts might appeal to reluctant readers.

In Duke's (2000) study, she reported evidence of the underutilization of informational texts. She found that, after observing 20 grade one classrooms, minimal, if any, time was given to instruction related to informational texts. She found a mean of only 3.6 minutes a day was spent with informational texts during written language activity time. Duke also found that information books were in short supply in early elementary classroom libraries and that minimal informational text was displayed on classroom walls. She further examined the differences between very low and very high socio-economic status school districts and found that there were significantly lower numbers of informational text experiences in the low socio-economic status

classrooms. Duke sees this as a missed opportunity to prepare students for informational text reading later in school and life and to “turn on as many students as possible to literacy” (p. 205). Duke also identifies experience with informational texts early in education as a way to get over the ‘fourth grade slump,’ a common term for reading disinterest in and around the fourth grade. She says that it is traditionally explained by the increase in demand for expository reading and writing, but that students might develop a stronger interest in reading if the earlier years offered more varieties of texts, namely informational texts. There is the potential for informational texts to be “a vehicle to inspire and attract students to literacy” (p. 221).

The balance of text genres—fiction or nonfiction—is an area to examine when looking at trying to help striving readers. In her review article about using information books for young children, Duke (2003) talks about the dominance of narrative texts in classrooms and the fact that this may be inconsistent with many children’s preferences. When Dreher (2003) makes the case for tapping the potential of information books, she reviews the literature and discusses the predominance of fictional over informational texts and the need to create more of a balance in order to increase motivation and achievement. Dreher argues that through such things as read-alouds, reader’s theatre, access to an information-rich library, and time, struggling readers can be motivated to read, which will perhaps present a starting place to improve reading performance. Duke (2000) also advocates a balance of texts genres. Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) have observed that many reluctant readers prefer nonfiction or informational books over story-narratives. They suggest that the need for informational books is considerable as many reluctant readers avoid fiction. Caswell and Duke (1998) found that some students “found a ‘way in’ to the world of literacy through non-narrative texts that they had not found through narrative forms

of discourse” (p. 108). Caswell and Duke showed an example of this in their case studies of two struggling reader/writers who attended a literacy lab offered through Harvard University which functioned as a literacy centre for students having difficulty learning to read and write. These two beginning, struggling readers were observed to have improved considerably in skill and attitude after switching from narrative to informational texts in their literacy lab time. Caswell and Duke call for greater attention to non-narrative texts in the early grades. They explain that the early exposure to non-narrative texts will help prepare students for future schooling and it will also offer an expansive repertoire of materials to the diverse needs and interests of students. Caswell and Duke conclude that using more non-narrative texts in the early grades increases the likelihood of sparking an interest in literacy.

From her review of the literature on the value of informational texts for young readers and availability of these types of books, Larkin-Lieffers (2007) demonstrates that opportunities to find informational books are limited. She says that greater classroom access to informational texts is needed, as there seems to have been a trend of little use of nonfiction. School libraries that should be at the centre of plans to improve literacy often have budgetary restrictions which can limit the access to informational texts. From her visit to seven Canadian bookstores, Larkin-Lieffers found these retail stores had a predominance of fiction. She further discusses limited access of information books by reporting that there are fewer book awards for informational books, and that public libraries seem to favour fiction in terms of availability for younger children, location in the library, and eye-level access of materials. All of these points support her case about the limited availability and access of informational texts.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This study was designed to investigate what three striving readers have to say about reading informational texts. In order to contextualize the students and their comments, this study also aimed to answer research questions related to the situational nature of the students' literacy by obtaining data from the students' classrooms and from their parents and teachers.

In this chapter, I provide details of the methods employed in conducting this study. In the first section, I restate the research questions and study purpose. In the second section, I describe the researchers involved in this study. In the third section, I discuss the study participants and the participant selection. In the fourth section, I provide details of the methodology adopted for data collection. I then conclude with an explanation of how the data was analyzed.

*Research Questions and Purpose*

As previously described, three research questions directed this study. The first question investigated the perceptions of striving readers with regard to informational texts, and whether they saw these as beneficial. The second and third questions, situating the students in their literacy environments, explored how much striving readers read informational texts and how much they are exposed to in their classrooms.

The purpose of this study is to explore upper elementary striving readers' perceptions of reading informational texts. What is it about this genre that might be attractive to striving readers? Additionally, it was the intent of this study to gather information from parents, teachers

and classrooms about the context of each students' literacy experiences in order to further situate the nature of their literacy.

### *Researchers*

I was responsible for organizing and facilitating the data collection for this study. As principal researcher, I was also involved in all aspects of data analysis. The student interviews, teacher responses, print materials lists from parents and teachers, and the classroom inventories comprised the data to be collected and analyzed.

In addition to myself, the principal researcher, a number of research assistants collected and analyzed data. One research assistant was responsible for conducting interviews with the three striving readers. This ensured consistency across the interviews with student participants. This assistant is a new teacher with two years of experience as a public school substitute teacher. She is currently working towards her Master of Education degree in literacy.

Other research assistants collected data in classrooms and assisted with data analysis. Inter-rater reliability was ensured by using more than one researcher for each data set. One research assistant was involved with analyzing results. He was responsible for coding data from the interviews and the print materials lists, and assessing if the teacher responses were accurately reflected in the case studies. This assistant is currently a graduate student, working towards his Master's degree, and has 13 years of experience in post-secondary education. Four research assistants were involved with collecting data in classrooms. These assistants are certified teachers at the school where the study took place. The first research assistant has taught primary (Maritime equivalent of kindergarten) for six years and has her Early Childhood Education

certificate. The second assistant has two years teaching experience in grade 1/2. The third assistant has taught grade 3/4 for two years and, additionally, has her Master's degree in Science. The fourth research assistant is in his 21st year of teaching, holds a Master of Education degree, and is in the process of completing his Ph.D in Education.

### *Participants*

Upper elementary school striving readers, their parents, and classroom teachers were selected as participants in this study. All student participants were chosen from an independent private school where theme-based studies are taught and multi-age classes are used. Three students from two different classes agreed to participate. One student was enrolled in a grade 3/4 class and two students were enrolled in a grade 5/6 class. The student participants were: one grade four boy; one grade five girl; and one grade six girl.

The site chosen for this study is an independent private school. The school's students come from predominantly upper middle class homes in an urban centre in one of Eastern Canada's capital cities or from nearby communities. This site was selected because of my own teaching experience within the school. I am familiar with the situational context of the school and the professional relationships I have already established also facilitated ease of accessibility. This school is rooted in the beliefs of theme-based, experiential learning which is defined by students learning best through discovery and enjoyment. Multi-age classes are offered at this school and the three study participants came from two such classrooms. There is a focus at the school on student research work by using a variety of materials and methods such as field trips, guest speakers, videos, hands-on materials, visual aids, applicable fiction, and an abundance of

informational texts. The small class sizes at this school allow teachers to challenge and support students in ways that recognize the uniqueness of individuals and support the belief that a happy child learns best. This study, then, includes three particular students from this particular school. I recognize that the school and classroom setting is not a typical setting.

Defining striving readers to the school and to the participants in this study was an important task. Fink (2006) describes striving readers as those who are learning to read but who are having some difficulty in the areas of vocabulary, fluency, and/or comprehension. Upper elementary teachers were invited to select candidates from their classes who fit Fink's definition of striving reader. The students identified by their teachers for potential study participation were those currently receiving resource help for reading or comprehension, students whose parents expressed a concern about their reading, or students who fit the definition but did not receive resource help for some reason (e.g., not wanting to be pulled away from class). Students were chosen as potential candidates by their teachers if they did not meet the school's required benchmarks, that are attached to the provincial curriculum, for their grade level.

After obtaining university ethics approval for the study (see Appendix A), I contacted the relevant school for consent of participation. Once a list of eligible candidates was compiled from the school, parental/guardian consent was obtained for the student participants. Initially, the intention was to work with as many as six students. The final list of participants was to reflect the gender ratio of the teachers' candidate nominations. For example, if there is a list of 12 names and eight of them were boys, the final selection of study participants would have been four boys and two girls. Given that the parents of only three student participants gave signed consent in the present study, the gender ratio concept was not used. Eleven candidates were sent

information letters; six boys and five girls. There were three yes responses, three no responses, and five families that did not respond.

The classroom teacher for each participant selected also took part in this study. Consent was obtained from teachers and then candidates were chosen. As two of the study participants came from one classroom, only two teachers were involved with this study. In order to help situate the students' literacy environments, the role of the teacher in this study was to provide more information about the student participants than was provided by the students themselves. Each teacher was asked to respond in written form to a series of questions. They were also asked to make a list of print materials the student participant read in school. This list could have incorporated a variety of subject areas and included what the student might have read on a typical day. Such a list may have contained the following: silent reading materials; research work materials; maps; internet; library books; posters; signs; textbook instructions; and note-taking.

The parents of each striving reader were involved in this study as well. After consent was obtained for their child and for themselves, parents were asked to record a list of print materials their child reads at home. This list included what the student might read on a typical day of the week. These materials could have been anything parents saw the child reading, or that was read aloud to them. The list may have contained material brought home from school, and could have incorporate different text genres.

### *Methodology*

Of key significance to this study is the investigation of student perceptions. While many studies have offered important contributions to our understanding of striving readers and informational texts, there is a dearth of research that explores what students have to say about it. Student perceptions of school and reading are important and informative and, as such, this is recognized as an important current approach to literacy research (Bryan, 2009; Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Moje, 2000; Pachtman & Wilson, 2006). In their study involving student perceptions about computers and drama, O'Toole and Dunn (2008) found "the participants' comments...significant and suggest[ed]...that students should be given opportunities to have input into learning design on a more regular basis" (p. 102). In their study on academic dishonesty, Stephens and Nicholson (2008) found that by exploring the *lived experiences* of their student participants, they could gather "a more complete accounting of the diverse thoughts and emotions that students experience" (p. 362). Asking readers to reflect upon their personal experiences with informational texts as striving readers, may offer a deeper understanding of the issue as opposed to observations of behavior, analysis of achievement levels, or surveys about personal interest. Therefore, the investigation of student perceptions was an appropriate research methodology to use for this study.

Each of the three student participants were individually interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol prompting students to share their perceptions about informational texts (Appendix B). Prior to the interviews with the three study participants, a pilot interview was conducted with a grade four student from another school. This pilot interview was used in order to test the structure of the proposed interview, including the value of each of the intended

questions. While there were no changes made to the questions after the pilot interview, valuable information was learned about the interview process. For example, it became clear during the pilot interview that in order for the interviewer to receive the fullest answers, he/she needed to ask all questions, including the corresponding probes. It was also noted in the pilot interview that the interviewer needed to allow the students as much of a chance to speak as possible, not resorting to small talk, or the like, in order to fill space.

The semi-structured interviews of the three study participants consisted of a list of questions aimed at engaging the student in a discussion about informational texts. For reference during the interviews, there was a sample of informational texts available to the students and the interviewer. Some of the students referred directly to a specific text from this sample. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed and analyzed. All of the interviews took place during one morning at the school.

There was a large variation in the length of the interviews; Jonah's (as with all of the names used in this thesis, this is a pseudonym) interview was 16 minutes, Katie's was 29 minutes, and Hannah's interview was 38 minutes. The dynamics of the interviews varied from interview to interview. The interviewer reported that the two girls were very talkative and she often brought them back on topic by restating the question. As the interviews proceeded, the interviewer also noted that she began to think of better ways to prompt the students into providing fuller responses to the questions. Jonah was interviewed first, Katie was next, and the last student to be interviewed was Hannah.

The interview schedule was developed using Fink's (2006) Interest-Based Model of Reading which is one of the foundations for this study. The model is directed at helping readers of all ages and abilities. "The model emphasizes transactions among reader, text, and teacher and features the following components: 1. a passionate, personal interest that spurs sustained reading; 2. avid, topic-specific reading; 3. deep schema knowledge; 4. contextual reading strategies; [and] 5. mentoring support" (p. x). As mentioned before, this model emphasizes students' strengths and abilities. It is with this model in mind that the interview questions were created. There is more of an emphasis on students' positive qualities; for example, what striving readers *can* do. Students were able to give candid answers to the researcher by sharing stories of personal interest. Questions in the interviews were asked once, and depending on the response, reworded and asked again. Prompting students to further explain their answers facilitated more depth to each response.

In addition to the student interviews, information was gathered from students' classrooms, their teachers and parents. Information about the students' literacy environment was gathered from teachers. Lists of print materials the students were currently reading and reading on a typical day was documented by parents and teachers. Finally, displayed print and classroom library content was recorded. All of these data together gives a more complete picture of each student participant and the situated nature of their literacy (Barton et al, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2004; Street, 1995).

Classroom teachers were asked to respond to a series of questions about the student participants (see Appendix C) in a written format. These written responses were used to create a case study of each student, describing the participant and his/her literacy environment. These

narrative descriptions are intended to give the readers a sense of the student; his or her perceptions and beliefs (Stephens & Nicholson, 2008) as they relate to informational texts and reading in general. It was requested that teachers respond to these questions via electronic mail to the principal researcher. Teachers were also asked to provide a list of print materials (see Appendix D) the participants were reading in school. This list may have included materials from silent reading time, before and after school times, school library books, and required reading. Types of materials may have included such things as books, magazines, poems, recipes, computer games, newspapers, letters, signs, or the internet.

Parents of the participants were contacted in advance of the interviews with the students. They were sent a letter containing guidelines and information about the study. Parents were asked to provide, via electronic mail to the principal researcher, a list of print materials their child was reading at home. It was explained to the parents that this list was meant to be a snapshot of what the child was reading on a typical day. The material could have been anything they observed the child reading or that had been read aloud to them. The list may have included materials from school, and could have consisted of different text types. The list may have included materials such as books, magazines, poems, recipes, computer games, newspapers, letters, signs, or the internet.

Finally, information was gathered from the participants' classrooms. Duke (2000) carried out observations in her study of displayed print and classroom library contents. Along with her research assistants, Duke counted displayed print and classroom library contents, including library materials with their front covers visible. Duke's procedure was conducted for four classrooms after which the items were coded for text genre and the data was checked for inter-

rater reliability. My study followed similar guidelines. Displayed print was categorized as any print text on classroom walls or on other surfaces. Examples of such print included classroom rules, labels, lists of jobs, maps, posters, and students' work. Each print material was coded for text genre using the categories of *fiction*, *informational*, and *other*. The assistants conducting the count grouped any print material that was not informational text or fictional text into the *other* category. The number of texts and text genres was tallied. Texts in the classroom library were also recorded. This included any print texts available to the students such as books, magazines, textbooks, or basal readers on classroom shelves, and library books. How the book was displayed was recorded; for example, whether or not all or most of the front cover was showing. This determined the number of informational texts displayed versus other types of books displayed in the classroom library. The classroom library materials were also coded for genre. This data collection took place one week after the student interviews were conducted.

The student interviews and collection of classroom data took place at a location and time convenient to the school and students. The parents of the students involved were made aware of the interview day and asked to have their print materials lists ready one week after the interviews. Teachers were also made aware of this day in order to be prepared to have the student participants leave class for the allotted interview time, and to have their students' literacy environment responses and print material lists ready one week after the interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

After data were collected from students, teachers, and parents, data analysis began. In order to ensure accuracy and minimize bias, the following efforts were undertaken: inter-rater

comparisons were used to limit personal bias; explicit instructions were given to teachers, parents, and research assistants; and careful, precise transcription of the interviews was conducted. Data analysis included four main sections: student interview transcripts; teacher-response letters; lists of print materials from parents and teachers; and a detailed count of displayed print and classroom library content. These four main areas allowed for analysis of results from two perspectives. First, using the results from the teacher-response letters, the lists of print materials, and the classroom counts, a strong understanding of the literacy environment in which the reader existed was gained. From the alternate perspectives of the readers themselves, the analysis of the interviews allowed for a rich understanding of their opinions on the subject of informational texts. This dual perspective approach provides a thorough analysis of the perspectives of striving readers with respect to informational texts.

As described in detail below in their respective sections, research assistants were needed to help analyze the data. The coding and analysis of student transcripts, the teacher-response letters, and the print materials lists required one assistant. The detailed count of classroom displayed print and library content required two assistants for each classroom counted.

The necessary training for the data analysis was given to the assistants. I conducted all of the training for the assistants. The training for coding the student interviews involved describing theme categories and using relevant examples. With regard to ensuring the accuracy of the interpretation of the teachers' responses, I trained the assistant by giving explicit instructions for comparison techniques. Defining genres and giving examples of those genres comprised the training for the print materials lists. In order to train the four assistants for the

classroom inventories, I demonstrated an example of a tally and gave clear instructions about how to organize the counting.

*Student Interviews.* Analysis of data began with the transcription of the three student interviews. The data from these semi-structured interviews were coded and organized into themes. In this study, idea units (Bryan, 2009), or any part of an utterance containing one main idea, were marked and assigned a category or theme. Table 1 below shows a description of these themes with relevant examples. As each idea unit was evaluated, it was compared to other ideas in its theme category. Idea units were examined for possible integration with other idea units, and analyzed for commonalities. Themes were then discussed in terms of significance to the classroom and how they relate to existing theoretical knowledge. Lastly, from all of the information learned from the coded data, the major themes, the integration of themes, and the practical and theoretical implications, conclusions were drawn.

Theme categories were largely determined *a priori*, with the themes having been identified as a product of those things identified as key points in the professional and research literature. The interview questions were then crafted specifically to explore these key points. Transcripts were examined whereby each topic or recurring idea in the data was reviewed. In coding the student transcripts, student utterances were analyzed for their ideas. In cases where there were several ideas in one utterance, the ideas were separated and grouped accordingly. The ideas were placed into various theme categories according to the notion of ‘best fit’ (Bryan, 2009). The context of each utterance was taken into consideration rather than looking at the utterance in isolation. A brief explanation of each classification category is described below.

Table 1

*Description of Themes with Examples*

Theme	Description	Example
Personal Interest/ Enjoyment	This theme contains the idea of enjoying reading and/or having personal interest in a topic. There are comments about reading in general and then, more specifically, about the enjoyment of informational texts and topics students found to be of interest when looking at such texts.	<p>Interviewer: Do you enjoy reading these types of books [informational texts]?</p> <p>Madison: If they're about horses, dolphins, or bunnies, then yes. Or zebras.</p> <p>Interviewer: So, basically, if they're about things that you like, then you would read them?</p> <p>Madison: Like if it's related to a horse, like a zebra, or pony, or something, then I would read it.</p>
Setting	The setting theme refers to where and when reading is taking place. This theme encompasses reading in general and then examines where and when the students read informational texts.	<p>Interviewer: When you're at home and you are reading, where are you, in your house, reading?</p> <p>Erin: It's funny. I actually read in the bathroom...I have three sisters and I have the whole downstairs and I'm right beside the playroom. So, it's all loud, and then I have to go into one place, and just find one place that wasn't noisy. It was either my brother's room or the bathroom, and my brother's room you couldn't even step into!</p>
Social Atmosphere	This theme focuses on the students' literacy environment. There are general comments about friends' and family's reading habits, and comments were made about informational texts relating to the students' literacy environment or atmosphere.	<p>Interviewer: Does your family read?</p> <p>Madison: My mom reads every night.</p> <p>Interviewer: Every night.</p> <p>Madison: She'll spend two hours reading a book and she'll be done it. Like a 500-page book, she'll read it in two hours. She'll be pretty much done it.</p>

Theme	Description	Example
Familiarity	For this theme category, familiarity refers to the amount of experience or knowledge the student has with reading in general and with different genres of texts, specifically informational texts.	Interviewer: Would that be an information book or a story book, what do you think? Erin: Probably an information book because it says tornadoes on the front and it's probably saying stuff about tornadoes.
Function	The function category refers to how reading skills are used in general, and then specifically about how informational texts are used and how they might be helpful.	Interviewer: Do you think that these books, informational books, help you in school? Jonah: Well, they really help me with my research to, like, find out things and then I get to write it down in my own way.
Difficulty Level	This theme focuses on how easy or hard informational texts might be to read in general, and then a specific focus on the difficulty level of informational versus fictional material.	Interviewer: Do you find informational books easy or hard to read? Jonah: Pretty easy, but sometimes there are, like, scientific words that I can't really describe.
Comparison to Fiction	This theme category compares informational texts to fictional ones.	Interviewer: Do you find informational reading, all this stuff or anything else you read for information, is more or less useful to you than fictional reading? Madison: I'm going to say both, because picture books may be easier for some people than chapter books. And picture books might have, like I just said, you can study the picture and make your own story. With chapter books, you can't do that.

Theme	Description	Example
Attributes	The attribute theme contains ideas about the characteristics and qualities of informational texts.	Interviewer: And why would you pick that [a caption] out to read first [from an informational text]? Jonah: Because it kind of looks like there is some fact that's not described in the other things.

As I reflected on each utterance, I recognized that the *a priori* categories adequately represented the data. The themes were examined to decide which ones best represented similarities and differences in the data (Bryan, Smith, & Burrows, 2007) and were categorized accordingly. As depicted in Table 1, I determined eight distinct themes and continued the analysis by placing each idea unit into one theme category. The data in each of these theme categories pertained to reading in general and also specifically to informational texts. All three students expressed several ideas for all eight themes.

Having developed a level of comfort with these theme classifications through my own analysis (that is to say, I was satisfied that the eight themes sufficiently accommodated the various data), I then employed a research assistant to conduct an analysis of his own, coding the data according to the themes I had established. To establish inter-rater reliability, I trained this research assistant by explaining the eight themes and including specific examples of how the assistant might go about determining into which theme each idea best fit. After the training, the first student transcript was independently coded by the research assistant and by myself. Once the transcript had been independently coded, I met with the research assistant in order for the two of us to compare and contrast our analyses. Of the 124 ideas units in the first transcript, the research assistant and I independently agreed upon on 88 theme assignments, while there were

36 discrepancies, for a percentage of agreement of 71%. After the independent coding of the first transcript, a discussion took place where agreement was reached about placing each idea into appropriate themes. The remaining two transcripts were then also coded independently. The research assistant and I came together a second time to compare and contrast our analyses. Any discrepancies were discussed and explanations were given along with the rationales behind the decisions. Through this process for coding student transcripts, the research assistant and I came to a consensus for any inconsistencies.

Once the data was separated into themes and ideas were placed into these theme categories, the data were examined for integration amongst themes. As shown in chapter four, the number of ideas was then tallied and the ideas specific to informational texts were counted. The positive, neutral, and negative comments specific to informational texts were then examined. A description with relevant examples of these comments are shown in Table 2. This enabled me to draw conclusions about how these three striving readers viewed informational texts and if such texts were attractive to them.

Table 2

*Description and Examples of Positive, Neutral, and Negative Ideas in Relation to Informational Texts*

Type of Idea	Description	Example
Positive	A positive idea was considered to be any comment a student made about informational texts that was favourable.	Interviewer: Do you find that informational reading is more or less useful to you than fictional reading? Jonah: I'd say, yeah, the fact ones are more useful because they tell me about what the past was and what is going to happen.
Neutral	Neutral ideas were counted as those that were neither positive nor negative in nature; those that were non-specific and simply stated information <i>about</i> informational texts.	Interviewer: Have you ever heard or used informational books like these before today? Madison: Yes. Interviewer: Okay, tell me where and when if you can think of it. Madison: School, theme, last year, like last term.
Negative	If a student made a negative comment about informational texts, this was counted as a negative idea unit.	Interviewer: So how does your enjoyment of stories and fictional books compare to your enjoyment of these books [informational texts]? Erin: ....[reading informational texts] you just get really bored and you don't like it.

After each idea was placed into a theme category, the data were compiled for each striving reader. A case study was then created, as shown in chapter four, for each of the three students using specific examples and direct quotations from the interview transcripts. The account of each striving reader offers a rich description of his/her perspective on reading in

general and, more specifically, on informational texts, and offers a description of each students' literacy environment.

*Teacher Responses.* The information provided by teachers regarding the literacy environment of each student participant was compiled. Gathering the information from these written responses offered a clearer picture of the students from an academic point of view, with an emphasis on literacy. Each set of teacher-responses was examined individually for each student participant. The research assistant and I independently read over these responses and met to discuss common themes. As shown in chapter four, this data and the data from the student interviews was compiled into a case study. The case studies for each student were shared with the research assistant on a subsequent meeting. An agreement was reached that the accounts are accurate reflections of the data from the teacher-response letters. These case studies describe the students' perceptions and literacy environments and give a clearer picture of the student as a striving reader.

*Print Materials Lists.* The lists of print materials from parents and teachers were compiled and tallied for each student. Using the aforementioned categories of *fiction*, *informational*, and *other*, a list of print materials was independently tallied by myself and a research assistant. The necessary training was conducted for this assistant which included a discussion of genre categories and examples of how to tally the data. There was complete agreement in the initial designation of items into the *fiction*, *informational*, and *other* categories between researchers. After this initial designation, we revisited those items that had been identified as *other*. After further discussion, we eventually assigned each of the *other* items to the *informational* category. These data were then examined for similarities and differences at

home, at school, and by gender. In chapter four, a series of tables and graphs are used to show the results of the tabulations of the print materials.

*Classroom Inventory.* The detailed count within each classroom of displayed print materials and classroom library content was tabulated and graphed. Research assistants were given a definition of *fiction*, *informational*, and *other* categories, and an outline of how to count classroom library and displayed print materials. Two assistants independently conducted a count of one classroom, while a different two assistants conducted a count of the other classroom. When each pair met to discuss results, there was minimal or no variation in the data collected by the research assistants. Any discrepancies were discussed and rationales explained and an agreement or level of understanding was reached. Following Duke's (2000) guidelines, the total number of displayed print was recorded, and then the total number of fictional, informational, and other print was recorded. Percentages were calculated for individual classrooms and then for both classrooms combined. The research assistants met following their independent count of displayed print to identify common examples of such print. For classroom library content, the total number of texts were coded for genre (fiction, informational, or other) and tallied. Percentages were, again, calculated for individual classrooms and then for both classrooms. The total number of classroom library books that were fully displayed were counted and a percentage was tabulated of fully displayed texts that were coded as informational. The assistants met after their individual count of library content to review topics of special interest, such as displayed books being related to theme studies. Of primary concern here is the number of informational texts available to student participants in their classrooms and then a calculation of the average

number for the upper elementary classrooms involved. In chapter four, a series of tables and graphs are used to show results of the detailed count of print materials.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The results of this study explored the perceptions of three striving readers and their literacy environments in relation to informational texts. In this chapter, a case study compiled from the four main areas where data were collected, is presented for each student. These four main data sources were: student interviews; teacher responses; print materials lists; and classroom inventories. All the data were analyzed and the results are explained by using ideas from the three students, presenting the classroom environment of the students, and displaying graphs and charts from the print materials lists and classroom inventories. All of these areas together represent the complete data set for this study.

*School Setting*

The school where the study took place is unique. It is important to remind readers, before they read the results of this study, that there are many aspects of this school that are not typical and, therefore, not necessarily representative of the general population. The school currently has a population of 155 students between preschool and grade nine. The students represent a wide variety of educational, socio-economic and religious backgrounds. According to one of the teacher participants, the school attracts many families that sacrifice extras such as vacations and second cars in order to give their children private school education. The two classes involved in this study are comprised of students that are heterogeneously mixed, with some students performing above average academically, some students performing at average levels, and some students who struggle to do well. Two teachers from two different classrooms participated in this study. Both of these classrooms were multi-age and, within the school, there

were other classrooms containing the same grade levels. According to one of the teacher participants, the religious denominations of the students from one class were similar to the denominations of the students in the other class. They were mostly Christian or agnostic, with Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish denominations comprising the remainder.

An important component of the participating classrooms is theme studies. Each class in the school studies one or two major themes each term under the umbrella of the main theme for the year. For example, under the main theme of *Discovery*, a class might study *Space*, *Family*, and *Metamorphosis* as sub-themes throughout the year. One sub-theme is dedicated to each term in the school year. During the time of the interviews, each class was transitioning into a new theme study. The main theme for the year was *Living Things*. Jonah's class was studying the *Human Body* and then *Insects*. Erin and Madison's class was studying *Adaptations*, or living things in winter time, and transitioned to *Civilizations*, or living things that share a communal space and culture. Students in this school conduct informational literacy projects, or research projects as they refer to them, at all levels from preschool to grade nine. They present what they have learned, usually in the form of a presentation for parents, through poetry, stories, research fairs, oral presentations, models, and music.

The daily schedule at this school involves a number of different subject areas, including theme studies. For example, the morning routine for upper elementary students might begin with a whole class read-aloud session, followed by work in theme studies. The subject areas of science, social studies, and health are all included in theme class and are focused on in depth at different times of the year, depending on the theme. The study of language arts occurs in

conjunction with theme studies and also by itself. As an example, a theme about the human body, would involve a greater focus on science and health work, compared to a theme about pioneers, which would involve mostly social studies work. Language arts instruction would take place in all themes. The daily routine might continue after recess with math as a separate subject area. The afternoon schedule would usually consist of certain specialties such as french, art, physical education, swimming, and music, and would also include further work in theme studies and/or separate language arts instruction.

The school setting, as seen from the information provided above, is unique. These atypical aspects of the school are, therefore, to be considered along with the results as they are read. The findings of this study are representative, then, only of these particular students and this particular school.

### *Case Studies*

As previously described, a case study was developed for each striving reader. The responses to a series of questions the teachers answered was used to help discuss the students' literacy environments at school. Five categories comprise the teacher responses: how the student is struggling, resource help, attitude towards reading, special strategies used in the classroom, and independent reading behavior.

*Jonah.* Jonah is ten years old and in grade four. He attends a multi-age, grade 3/4 classroom with a total of 15 students; eleven girls and four boys. The class varies in terms of educational, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Jonah has trouble with reading fluency and spelling. He receives resource help outside the classroom twice a week for reading and once a week for spelling work. During resource time, Jonah works on basic sounds, decoding, high

frequency words, comprehension, making words lessons, and fluency. Jonah has a positive attitude towards literature and learning. He commented that he enjoys comic books and action and said, “I like reading . . . it’s a good thing.” He added, “It’s more of a way to spend time if it’s, like, pouring outside and you don’t really want to go outside or you’re sick or something, then you get to read.” Jonah has excellent comprehension and does not seem to mind that the reading process is slow for him. He commented that he uses his reading skills in everyday life for things like reading signs on a street, doing homework, navigating a menu in a restaurant, and using the computer.

One of the special strategies used to help Jonah in the classroom is the opportunity he has to read informational texts that are interesting to him. Jonah appeared to be interested in living things such as dinosaurs and mammals. He commented that he likes to fish, swim in the ocean, and climb trees. Referring to the informational text samples that were available during his interview, Jonah said that he would not enjoy a book about making things float and sink because he is “not much into that type of science.” Jonah works in a group setting when conducting his research projects where students are supportive and help each other. Another strategy used to help Jonah is that the classroom teacher is close at hand to help him with any research questions.

Jonah recognized the difference between fictional and informational texts. He defined fictional texts as those with “more of a story about things.” Jonah described informational texts as “more or less fact” and research materials. He shared the title of one book he read recently called *The Stomach and the Digestive System* (Ballard, 1997). Jonah seemed to be familiar with

some of the types of informational texts; “This one is more about how to make stuff. . . .

*Mammals* (Parker, 2001) is more about what mammals are and how closely related we are.”

Several aspects of Jonah’s reading habits were noted. Jonah mentioned that he has informational books at home about topics such as math and birds. When asked if he had a lot of informational texts at home, he responded that he had “not so many, but pretty many.” Jonah mentioned that he reads mostly on his bed in his room and reads more on the weekends because he has more time. According to Jonah, because he lives in the country and spends much of his time outside, he reports that he reads “more or less every third day.” Interestingly, on a typical school day, Jonah listens to an audiobook in the car to and from school. According to his teacher, during silent reading time, Jonah willingly chooses books to read. He chooses books that are not too difficult for his reading level such as the *Geronimo Stilton* books (Edizioni Piemme). The classroom teacher said that Jonah does not usually get distracted and often settles to read independently.

Jonah’s reading on a typical day at home and at school was recorded by his mother and his teacher (see Tables 3 and 4). Table 5 shows how much Jonah read on an average day in terms of fiction, informational texts, and other materials. Given the data presented in Tables 3, 4, and 5, on the typical day represented by those tables, Jonah read mostly fictional texts and, at 130 minutes of his home time, read them for a considerable amount of time. The only incident of Jonah reading informational text was recorded at school, while his mother reported that he did not read informational texts at home at all.

Table 3

*Jonah's Typical Day Reading At Home*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Purpose (where indicated)</b>	<b>Classification</b>
<i>Artemis Fowl</i>	90 minutes	Audiobooks while commuting	Fiction - Audio
<i>Amulet</i>	20 minutes	---	Fiction
<i>Frindle</i>	20 minutes	Home reading	Fiction

Table 4

*Jonah's Typical Day Reading At School*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Purpose (where indicated)</b>	<b>Classification</b>
<i>Artemis Fowl</i>	15 minutes	---	Fiction - Graphic novel
'Saltmarsh'	15 minutes	Internet research	Informational
<i>The Secret Garden</i>	15 minutes	Read aloud by teacher	Fiction

Table 5

*Tally for Jonah's Typical Day Reading*

	<b>Fiction</b>	<b>Informational</b>	<b>Other</b>
At Home	3 (130 min.)	0	0
At School	2 (30 min.)	1 (15 min.)	0

On a daily basis, Jonah is exposed to many forms of texts in his classroom from within the classroom library and the print displayed on walls and other surfaces. Informational texts made up approximately one quarter of Jonah's classroom library, and fiction encompassed the remaining three-quarters of the material (see Table 6). There were more informational texts than fictional texts that had their front covers displayed in the classroom. The ratio of fictional materials with their covers showing out of total fictional materials, to informational materials with their covers showing out of total informational materials, was approximately six times higher for informational materials displayed in the classroom library with their covers showing. As shown in Table 7, Jonah's classroom had mostly informational materials displayed on the walls and other surfaces. It seems that Jonah is exposed to a considerable number of informational texts in his classroom.

Table 6

*Jonah's Classroom Library Count*

	<b>Total Fiction</b>	<b>Fiction with Cover Displayed</b>	<b>Total Informational</b>	<b>Informational with Cover Displayed</b>
Researcher #1	306	19	96	32
Researcher #2	303	19	90	32
Mean Total	304.5	19	93	32

Table 7

*Jonah's Classroom Displayed Print Count*

	<b>Fiction</b>	<b>Informational</b>	<b>Other</b>
Researcher #1	0	78	28
Researcher #2	0	78	28

Jonah uses informational texts at school and at home. He said that he uses informational texts for his research projects; “Last year I was studying tornadoes and I had to use those books.” He added that they are helpful because “they really help me with my research to, like, find out things and then I get to write it down in my own way.” He commented that “the fact ones are more useful because they tell me about what the past was and what is going to happen.” Jonah said that he uses informational texts at home to help with his homework; “They show me things that I wouldn’t really know before.” He added, “Sometimes, if I need a bit of help with my math homework, then I look in some of the books that are more about math.”

Jonah commented on the difficulty level of informational texts and then compared this to fictional texts. He said that he finds informational texts fairly easy to read with the exception of some scientific words that are hard to describe. He reported that he finds texts about what something did to be easy; like what the dinosaurs did, for example. Jonah added, “I think the ones that aren’t that much fact are easier because they don’t use that many words like . . . the scientific words.” Jonah compared informational texts to comic books; “Well, it’s just like I have to do it, I *have* to do it. But like in my comic books, I read it whenever I want. I don’t have to read it, but I just choose to.” He added that his comic books have “more pictures that are

unreal” compared to informational texts. Jonah described how his novel is different from one of the dinosaur informational texts because it “has different sections and it’s more fictional.”

Jonah reported a number of positive qualities of informational texts. He commented that one helpful characteristic of informational texts is that they show you different things. For example, he said that the book *Making Things Float* (Gibson, 1998) showed readers how to do things, and one book on dinosaurs had different facts about what dinosaurs were like. He added that he gets excited when there is a lot of text on a page because he can flip the page and see new and different information. Jonah explained how pictures are another helpful characteristic of informational texts. He said that a picture of dinosaurs “kind of helps because you can kind of see what they did.” Jonah also commented on the usefulness of captions in informational texts. He said that when he picks up an informational text, he often looks at the caption “because it kind of looks like there is some fact that’s not described in the other things.”

Jonah seemed to have mixed feelings about the social atmosphere that reading may offer. He commented that he does not talk with his friends about reading. He explained that “it’s kind of something that I do alone.” He said that most of his friends read and are interested in “chapter books, like Jack and Annie [from Mary Pope-Osbourne’s *Magic Treehouse* series].” He added that he does not recommend books to his friends “because they follow a different line on their reading.” Jonah mentioned working with a partner in French class to use a French/English dictionary.

Jonah appears to enjoy reading in general. He is familiar with different genres of text and enjoys a considerable number of fictional materials. Jonah reads mostly at home, in his

room, and on weekends. He is exposed to a considerable number of informational texts in his classroom. He is able to choose topics and materials of interest to him for his school research projects. Jonah finds informational texts to be helpful tools which he uses at school and at home. He pointed out that scientific words can sometimes be difficult to understand in informational texts. He felt that pictures and captions were two useful characteristics of informational texts, helping to explain what was happening on the page. Jonah is often supported at school by classmates and teachers when using informational texts, although he seems to have mixed feelings about the social opportunities that reading might offer.

*Erin.* Erin is ten years old and in grade five. She attends a multi-age, grade 5/6 classroom with a total of 14 students; five girls and nine boys. The class has varying educational, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Erin has trouble decoding, using proper reading strategies, and is anxious about and lacks confidence in her reading ability. She receives resource help twice a week outside of the classroom to work on reading fluency, comprehension, decoding, researching skills, and confidence-building. Erin has a positive attitude towards stories, poetry, and choosing research project books. It appeared that Erin enjoys reading biographies and books that are imaginative. She seemed to like choose-your-own-mystery books “because you get to choose your own way of telling the story.” Erin said that she does not enjoy scary books such as *Harry Potter* (J.K. Rowling), or books that are not of interest to her. When asked if she likes to read, Erin said, “Sometimes I do and sometimes I don’t.” Erin enjoys being read to in class and is attentive to this reading material. Her positivity with reading continues as she takes part in reading clubs outside of school with her friends.

Some of the strategies used to help Erin in the classroom focused on the variety of texts available to her. She has access to a wide variety of research books in her classroom that include texts with different reading levels, several photographs, and simple wording. She is able to study topics of interest to her such as ‘European Society during the Renaissance’ for her theme class. Erin appeared to enjoy playing a lot of sports and said she is a “big computer user.” She seemed interested in tornadoes and said she would read informational texts for fun if she enjoyed the topic. “It would depend if I liked what I was researching. If I didn’t like what I was researching, I would probably not like the book.” She added that, “If I liked the animal . . . [if] I really liked the book I was reading but I didn’t get to finish it at school, I would probably ask my teacher if I could take it home and read it.” Erin further commented that she reads some books about information and sometimes writes things down. Erin has a wide variety of fictional material also available to her in her classroom.

Another strategy used to help Erin is having regular discussions with her classroom and resource teachers. Erin is also expected to read aloud to the class once every few weeks. She prepares for this by reading aloud at home in order to practice her pronunciation and fluency skills. Erin chooses texts that are meaningful to her such as books she has enjoyed in the past or that have childhood memories.

Erin appeared to have experience with both fiction and informational texts. She described fictional texts as “books that aren’t true,” using mystery books, especially the choose-your-own adventure books, as one example. Erin seemed to be familiar with historical novels from read-alouds in class:

There was sort of a part inside of it that was informational, from way, way far away.

And it was how to bone set, bone setting . . . it was really cool, and then it just goes back to the story we were reading.

Erin commented that if she finds a book she likes, she will try to find more books by the same author. She described her system for choosing a book:

I would pick up a book from one of my favourite authors, or I would try to find a book that has an interesting cover. And then I read the first few sentences on the first page.

And if I like that first sentence, if I like it, I'll read the last sentence on the first page.

And if I don't like that then I'll choose another book. And if I don't like the first sentence and I like the ending sentence, it could be good in between.

Erin said that she also reads the back of a book to find out what the book is about. Erin talked about her interest in biographies; one kind of informational text. She said, "I like how they're different from other books. They don't just say . . . things that are not true and I like learning about the things from people, like, different people. It's fun." When asked to share what she thought one of the books in the sample of informational texts might be about, Erin described *Canadian Biography for Young Readers* (Hancock, 2001) as a chapter book that:

looks like a normal book, except it has quite a bit of pages. . . . It's probably about people that were, like, from a long time ago and they're just telling their stories. And it sounds like . . . they're saying it's sort of like a quilt.

She indicated that the book would be categorized as real versus not real and that "it sounds like it's a story but also information at the same time." Erin labelled another book as informational

because “it says *Tornadoes* (Orme & Orme, 2005) on the front and it’s probably saying stuff about tornadoes.”

Erin reported several uses for her reading skills such as looking for aisles in the grocery store, finding someone in the phonebook, finding a house on a street, figuring out what to do for homework, reading stop signs and knowing when to stop, or using the computer. When asked where she uses reading on the computer, Erin said:

Everywhere. To find the sites that you want, and like, if you had to read instructions to play a game on the computer then you would definitely read that. And just plain if you’re looking for something. Or . . . if you couldn’t tell what the signs were, like, on the computer . . . you’d be lost.

Another comment Erin made about using her reading skills pertained to the reading that she does at school. She said that she reads more at school because, for example, “if you’re writing, you have to read it over. . . . So, it’s more that you read more because you *have* to read more.” Erin reported that her teacher reads aloud to her class in the morning in order “to wake everybody up,” and that these books bring about a lot of conversation. Erin also commented that she enjoys reading license plates off the back of cars:

It’s cool to know where people are from. When I was in Florida a couple of weeks ago, there was this license plate that said Alaska, and one next to it from, I think it was, Indiana. And, I was like, that is really far! It’s neat to know where people are from.

Erin reported that she uses informational texts at school and at home. She commented that informational texts are useful when she is trying to learn about something; “I wanted to

learn about something, so I read the book about it, then I'd probably write down things I liked." Working on research projects in class is one area that Erin said she uses informational texts; "We were studying a place, and we had to try to find the place that we were looking for." She added that informational texts are helpful in school because "if you're studying something . . . if you need to find information, like about tornadoes, you probably . . . would find more information." Erin mentioned that informational texts are also useful for doing homework. She said, "If I was trying to figure out what a polar bear eats, I don't think I would really know if I didn't have a book that said, 'A polar bear eats this thing.'" She also gave some examples of where informational texts are useful at home such as information about trying to build something properly, using a map, and finding a place in the world.

Erin commented that she does most of her reading on the computer and in school. She said that "you do more reading at school than you do at home because you have to read instructions and you have to read the teacher's comments and all that." Erin noted that she takes a lot of books home from school to read and that her area of choice to read in the house is the bathroom because it is less noisy. According to her teacher, Erin willingly chooses a book to read during independent reading time. She does not avoid getting a book or waste time, unlike some of the other struggling readers in her class. Erin is eager to share books that she finds enjoyable with her friends and with her teacher.

Tables 8 and 9 show Erin's typical day of reading at home and at school recorded by her mother and her teacher. Erin's reading on one average day, in terms of fictional, informational, and other texts, is shown in Table 10. Erin appears to read a considerable number of informational texts of different kinds in school and reads them for a considerable amount of

time. She seems to read both fiction and informational texts at home and at school and does most of her reading at school. Erin is exposed to many different kinds of fiction and informational texts at school. According to these results, Erin interacts with informational texts more than fictional texts.

Table 8

*Erin's Typical Day Reading At Home*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Purpose (where indicated)</b>	<b>Classification</b>
Research on the Renaissance / e-mailing friends	25 minutes	Computer time	Informational
<i>The View from Saturday</i>	25 minutes	Novel Study book	Fiction

Table 9

*Erin's Typical Day Reading At School*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Purpose (where indicated)</b>	<b>Classification</b>
Homework Board, Daily Schedule, Agenda	10 minutes	---	Informational
<i>One Peace</i>	15 minutes	Hackmatack Non-Fiction book	Informational
Poems, various styles	5 minutes	Read aloud by teacher	Fiction
<i>Matilda Bone</i>	15 minutes	Read aloud by teacher	Fiction (historical novel)
<i>The Renaissance in Europe, A Street Through Time (ex.)</i>	35 minutes	Research books	Informational

Table 10

*Tally for Erin's Typical Day Reading*

	<b>Fiction</b>	<b>Informational</b>	<b>Other</b>
At Home	1 (25min.)	1 (25 min.)	0
At School	2 (20 min.)	3 (60 min.)	0

Erin is exposed to many forms of texts in her classroom every day. The areas of the classroom focused on were the library and displayed print on the walls and other surfaces. Informational texts were found to make up approximately one quarter of Erin's classroom library, and fiction was found to comprise the remaining three-quarters of the material (see Table 11). Compared to fictional texts, informational texts were displayed in the classroom more often

with their front covers showing. When examining the ratio of fictional materials with their covers showing out of total fictional materials, to informational materials with their covers showing out of total informational materials, there were three times as many informational materials displayed in the classroom library with their covers showing. Table 12 shows that Erin's classroom had almost three times as many informational materials displayed on the walls and other surfaces as compared to fictional or other materials. Erin appears to be exposed to a considerable number of informational texts in her classroom.

Table 11

*Erin and Madison's Classroom Library Count*

	<b>Total Fiction</b>	<b>Fiction with Cover Displayed</b>	<b>Total Informational</b>	<b>Informational with Cover Displayed</b>
Researcher #1	134	10	54	11
Researcher #2	136	10	52	11
Mean Total	135	10	53	11

Table 12

*Erin and Madison's Classroom Displayed Print Count*

	<b>Fiction</b>	<b>Informational</b>	<b>Other</b>
Researcher #1	13	35	1
Researcher #2	13	32	1

Erin described the difficulty level of informational texts. She said that “sometimes they're easy to read because they have easier words to read in them and then sometimes they're

really hard because they have really long words.” The informational text called *Making Things Float and Sink* (Gibson, 1998), for example, was determined by Erin to be easy to read. She described her method for testing this and other books’ difficulty levels:

From reading the first word, from reading the title of the chapter, the first word of the page, then you know what the book is sometimes going to be . . . if it’s going to be easy or hard. If you can read the title then usually it’s going to be easier to read it.

Erin commented, however, that “easier does not usually mean more enjoyable” because you might become disinterested in the text. Erin said that she finds informational texts, such as ones about how to make things, easier for her to read compared to a big novel because it is easier for her to remember her spot on the page.

Erin compared informational texts to fiction. She commented on the lack of pictures in novels. She said, “In novels, there’s not that many pictures so you can’t really tell by looking at the pictures what’s going to happen.” Erin discussed her enjoyment of fiction versus nonfiction:

Fiction books . . . sometimes they’re more interesting, and sometimes they’re not actually that interesting. And usually they are more interesting than nonfiction books because they have a story behind it. Sometimes it’s interesting when it’s nonfiction but sometimes it’s not and you get really bored and you don’t like it.

Erin mentioned that she finds informational texts to be more useful than fictional texts because fictional texts tell a story that is untrue. She felt this could become confusing if you are trying to find out accurate information.

Erin described some of the characteristics of informational texts. She shared her reasons why she chose the *Tornadoes* (Orme & Orme, 2005) book from a sample of informational texts; “Because of the cover, and how there was a tornado in the background and the people running and how their faces were.” She also commented that informational texts are more up to date, are often organized by one topic at a time, and that research has most likely gone into the writing of the book. Erin mentioned proper layout as an important characteristic of informational texts, saying that dividing the information by topic is helpful. Erin commented that pictures are important in the layout of an informational text. She said that pictures show you how to do things, and if there were no pictures, it would be confusing. She also commented that pictures are helpful when trying to remember your place in a book; “Because if you were in the middle, and just ended a sentence, and then had to finish reading, then you would know automatically what you had to do because of the pictures.” According to Erin, one negative characteristic of informational texts was that these texts can be “very, very long.” She added that a child’s version of informational texts can be less enjoyable than an adult version:

There could be an adult book that has more detail in it, and then there’s a kid’s version that is smaller, has bigger print, and doesn’t have that much detail, and isn’t more enjoyable because there’s not that much detail.

Erin seems to enjoy the social component of reading. She appeared to have a lot of friends who read. She said that they read bigger books; “my friends like to read *Harry Potter* (J.K. Rowling) and stuff like that.” Erin mentioned that she talks about books with her friends and has been to the library with friends outside of school; “Sometimes if I found a really, really good book and then they found a really good book too, and it ends up we have the same book.”

Erin commented that she enjoys reading informational texts with friends; “Because if you didn’t understand something . . . they would just give the answer to you and then you would know what it was.”

Erin sometimes enjoys reading. She has a positive attitude about reading and participates in reading clubs outside of school. Erin particularly enjoys being read to in class. She is able to choose her own study topics and is offered a wide variety of texts in her classroom. Erin is familiar with fictional and informational genres of text and especially enjoys biographies. She reads mostly at school, reporting that she spends a considerable amount of time reading from the computer. She uses informational texts both at home and at school. Erin reads, and is exposed to, a considerable number of informational texts. She finds that informational texts can be both easy and hard to read, and they can be both interesting and not interesting when compared to fiction. She reported that pictures, a striking cover, and a proper layout were all positive qualities of informational texts. Erin enjoys sharing reading experiences with others.

*Madison.* Madison is eleven years old and in grade six. Madison is in the same grade 5/6 classroom as Erin, with a total of 14 students; five girls and nine boys. As previously mentioned, the class has a variety of educational, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. Madison has trouble with reading comprehension and fluency. She struggles to read for meaning when using informational texts for research and often does not have a sense that she lacks understanding in some areas. Madison receives resource help twice a week outside of the classroom to work on reading comprehension and writing strategies such as paraphrasing. Her classroom and resource teachers also help Madison inside the classroom to gather information from informational texts. Madison has a positive attitude about stories and poetry and enjoys

when the teacher reads aloud in class. She commented that she enjoys picture books, sometimes mysteries, and likes to read about animals. Given what she said, Madison seemed to like to read a book with “a lot of detail in it, that’s not too confusing, but it’s not too easy.” After working with two literacy tutors, Madison said, “I used to hate, hate reading. But now I love it, I can’t stop reading.” When she finds a book she enjoys and is comfortable with, Madison tends to read and reread that book.

One of the special strategies used in class to help Madison is the variety of reading levels of research books that are accessible to her including those with photographs, simple words, and higher level texts. She is able to choose her own topic of interest for her research such as the most recent topic, ‘Egyptian Civilization.’ Madison said that she enjoys dance, horseback riding, playing outside with friends, going to the park, and bicycle rides. She mentioned that she finds some informational texts interesting and enjoys reading those texts. Madison said that she did not enjoy scary topics such as skulls but, rather, prefers books about animals such as horses or ponies. “If they’re about horses, dolphins, or bunnies, then yes. Or zebras. . . . Like if it’s related to a horse, like a zebra, or pony, or something, then I would read it.” Madison indicated that she has used informational texts previously in her theme class and currently uses one in French class.

Madison has regular discussions with her classroom and resource teachers about her schoolwork for clarification, assistance, or guidance. She is also expected to read aloud to the class once every few weeks. She chooses books that are meaningful to her and prepares at home in order to build confidence and practice pronunciation and fluency. Madison seemed to enjoy having books read to her in class.

Madison seemed familiar with both fictional and informational texts. She defined one story read aloud to her in class as a fictional story that contains factual information. She added that the novel study book she just completed was fictional. Madison classified books that her parents read as “adult books” which she says are different than the ones she reads because sometimes “there’s bad words . . . and inappropriate stuff.” She described the books her parents read as more like novels as opposed to fact books, and some of these books contain pictures. Madison described the main similarity among the books in the sample of informational texts available during the interviews as being all picture books. She commented that some of the informational texts in the sample are normally read by “younger kids, little kids,” that they contain a lot of facts and information, and that she sees them both at home and at school. She mentioned that the reason she does not use informational texts for doing her homework at home is because, “I don’t have any.” Madison compared some informational texts to textbooks, saying that:

you have textbooks in some schools, like my old school. . . . These ones, they’re kind of like textbooks. . . . Some of them aren’t, this one’s not, the dinosaur one. The mammal one is like a textbook.

Madison shared an account of her experience with a reading tutor: “I couldn’t read that well before, and then I went to [a reading tutoring company] . . . and that was awesome with reading.” She said that she does most of her reading at school and tries to find a comfortable position to read, either “on the carpet or in the chair.” According to her teacher, Madison willingly chooses a book for independent reading but sometimes gets distracted and takes time to settle down to read. When Madison finds a book she enjoys, she likes to share it with others.

A typical day of reading for Madison, at home and at school, was recorded by her mother and her teacher (see Tables 13 and 14). Madison's reading of fiction, informational texts, and other print materials on an average day is shown in Table 15. Madison appears to read the same number of informational texts at home and at school. In these results, she read more fiction in school than at home. She also seems to read informational and fictional texts for about the same number of minutes in school and at home.

Table 13

*Madison's Typical Day Reading At Home*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Purpose (where indicated)</b>	<b>Classification</b>
<i>The View from Saturday</i>	30 minutes	Novel Study book	Fiction
<i>ER Vets</i>	10 minutes	---	Informational
<i>American Girl</i> magazine	15 minutes	---	Informational

Table 14

*Madison's Typical Day Reading At School*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Length</b>	<b>Purpose (where indicated)</b>	<b>Classification</b>
Homework Board, Daily Schedule, Agenda	8 minutes	---	Informational
<i>The View from Saturday</i>	10 minutes	Novel Study book	Fiction
Poems, various styles	5 minutes	Read aloud by teacher	Fiction
<i>Matilda Bone</i>	15 minutes	Read aloud by teacher	Fiction (historical novel)
<i>Adventures in Ancient Egypt, Life in Ancient Egypt</i>	25 minutes	Research books	Informational

Table 15

*Tally for Madison's Typical Day Reading*

	<b>Fiction</b>	<b>Informational</b>	<b>Other</b>
At Home	1 (30 min.)	2 (25 min.)	0
At School	3 (30 min.)	2 (33 min.)	0

Every day in her classroom, Madison is exposed to several different types of texts. She and Erin shared the same classroom, so had similar exposures to texts in the classroom library and displayed print. As previously discussed for Erin's classroom, informational texts make up approximately one quarter of the classroom library with the remainder comprised of fiction (see Table 11). Informational texts were displayed more often with their front covers visible

compared to fictional texts. As shown in Table 12, Madison's classroom had almost three times as many informational materials displayed on the walls versus fictional or other materials. Madison appears to be exposed to a considerable number of informational texts in her classroom.

Madison indicated that she thinks reading is useful overall and offered numerous uses for her reading skills. For example, she said that she reads text on walls, posters, titles, and computers, and uses reading to read books, to cross the street safely, and to do her homework. Madison added that she e-mails and goes on MSN when she uses the computer at home. When commenting about the usefulness of reading, Madison said, "It's recommended for you to read. You should read." She added that "it's actually good for your brain. . . . New words that you don't know, you can figure them out and you can use them in your comprehension and your brain." When asked why she should read, Madison answered, "It's really important in your life to read because just think when you get to high school or junior high or college, you have textbooks . . . and you're sort of required to read all those books."

Madison offered several uses for informational texts at school and at home. She commented that informational texts are useful when you are trying to find information for research projects; "We had to look at books similar to *Mammals* (Parker, 2001) and get information on it. . . . And now I have the poster up in my room." She continued by saying that if she did not enjoy the topic of the informational book, she would get the information she needed and put the book back. Madison added that informational texts are helpful "if you're doing a project just for fun."

Madison finds informational texts both easy and hard to read; “They could be easy because there might be words that are sort of easy for me to understand, and it could be hard because some words could be difficult for me.” She categorized some of the informational texts in the sample to be for younger students because they had easy words in them. Madison pointed out that the informational text called *Mammals* (Parker, 2001), with a lot of words on one page and containing words such as ‘structure,’ ‘million,’ and ‘species,’ would be easy for her to read. Informational texts are sometimes confusing, explained Madison. She described having difficulty finding a place to begin reading on a page in one of the dinosaur books; “That’s really confusing for me. I might start over here, I might start over here.” Madison described an experience with texts that are difficult for her to read. Referring to comic books, Madison said:

I find comic books sort of confusing because there’s too much, like, it’s all across the page. So, it’s really hard for me to read comic books. I don’t really enjoy them that much. And I like novels because they’re easier for me to read.

Madison said that she sometimes finds informational texts harder to read than fiction because there are some words that are not familiar to her.

Madison commented on the similarities and differences between informational texts and fiction. She said that chapter books require more thinking when you are reading and that novels are less confusing to read because of the full page of text. When asked if she thought she would have preferred informational texts or fiction a few years ago when reading was more of a challenge and she had a negative attitude towards reading, she thought she might prefer informational texts because if she couldn’t read the text then she could study the pictures.

Madison explained that she feels both informational texts and fiction are useful. She described the benefits of informational books versus chapter books:

[Informational] books may be easier for some people than chapter books. . . . You can study the picture and make your own story. With chapter books, you can't do that. You can change the words around to make it fit, but you couldn't, like, look at the picture and see.

Madison described several qualities of informational texts. She commented that using a layout that divides topics is one positive characteristic of informational texts. She described a page in one of the sample books; "It's about all different kinds of animals, like on every page. There is water animals, there is climbing animals, there is camouflage animals." Madison also mentioned that informational texts contain research and have answers in them. She added that pictures, text all over the page, colour, and a title are all positive qualities of informational texts. She also commented that where chapter books are normally paperback "and plain old greyish paper," informational texts are often published on "white writing paper." Madison explained that pictures are helpful when reading books because they "give you a sense of what's happening." Because even in some chapter books for adults, there's pictures." She commented that:

If I couldn't read the text, I would probably just study the picture and think in my mind what the text might be. Like, if there was a bunny in the grass, and there was no text, I would think the bunny was hopping in the grass.

She went on to say that you can make your own story from the pictures. Madison described the pictures in her *Amazing Animals* (Khan & Clarke, 2003) book as “really interesting, like, they’re really elaborate.” She seemed to enjoy the fact that there are often photographs in informational texts and that they are often “pretty and elaborate.” Madison commented that she also enjoys reading photograph captions in the book about ponies. She said that she would read the caption first because it was different than the rest of the text. In response to a question about the amount of thinking time it takes for informational compared to fictional texts, Madison commented that chapter books take more thinking time because “normally, there’s no captions, like, there’s no icons.” Madison noted one negative aspect of informational texts. She pointed out a three-dimensional informational text on dinosaurs and said that she felt it might not be very helpful because there may not be “a lot of research,” or accuracy supporting this kind of text.

Madison seems to enjoy the social atmosphere that reading offers. She commented that she has slightly different interests in books compared to her friends. Madison’s mom and dad both seemed to have a keen interest in books, especially lengthy books: “My mom reads every night. . . . She’ll spend two hours reading a book and she’ll be done it. Like a 500-page book, she’ll read it in two hours.” Madison said that she has visited the library with her mom. She described that on one such occasion, after receiving help from a librarian to find a book on animals, she asked her mom if they could purchase the book for their house; “So now I have it.” Madison commented that she does not use informational texts to do her homework, rather she uses her mom. Madison talked about enjoying informational texts and that her grandmother’s friend told her that “even if there’s pictures in them, doesn’t mean that they’re for little kids.”

Madison now seems to have a more positive attitude about reading compared to the past. She is able to choose topics of interest to her when working on student research projects in class. Madison seems to be familiar with both informational and fictional texts. She reads mostly at school and enjoys sharing favourite books with others. Madison is exposed to a considerable number of informational texts in her classroom. She finds informational texts to be useful and to be both easy and hard to read. She felt that pictures were an important quality of informational texts because they give the reader a sense of what is happening. Madison seems to enjoy the social aspect of reading.

#### *Comparing and Contrasting the Three Study Participants*

The results offer many ways to compare and contrast the three striving readers in this study. The similarities and differences among the data are discussed for student ideas, for print materials lists, and for classroom inventories.

*Student Idea Units.* In order to determine if informational texts were appealing to the three students in this study, student idea units were tallied focusing on the positive, neutral, and negative ideas specific to informational texts (see Table 16). Overall, the majority of the student comments were positive; 72% were positive, 23% were neutral, and only 5% were negative. The positive comments were largely found in the function, attributes, and personal interest and/or enjoyment categories. The highest number of neutral ideas was found in the familiarity of genres category. Of the ten negative ideas, the majority were about difficulty level of informational texts, and two comments were found in the comparison to fiction category. It is,

therefore, evident that the three striving readers in this study had a considerable number of positive comments to say about informational texts.

Table 16

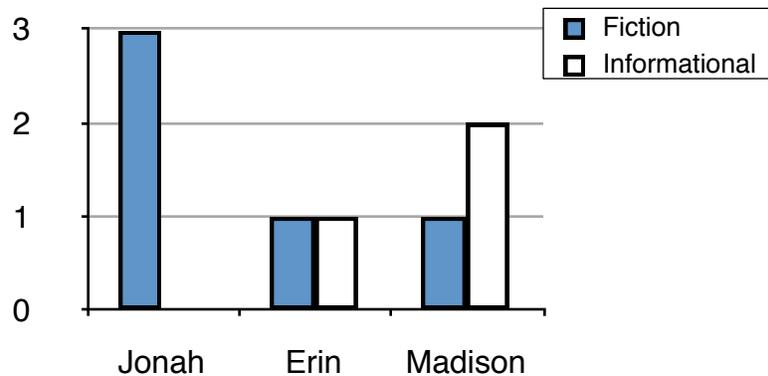
*Number of Positive, Neutral, and Negative Ideas Specific to Informational Texts*

Theme	Number of Ideas	Ideas Specific to Informational Texts	Positive, Neutral, and Negative Ideas Specific to Informational Texts		
			Positive	Neutral	Negative
Personal Interest/ Enjoyment	68	25	24	1	0
Function	56	48	39	9	0
Attributes	48	40	38	2	0
Familiarity	40	30	9	20	1
Setting	26	7	1	6	0
Social Atmosphere	25	10	8	2	0
Difficulty Level	20	18	9	2	7
Comparison to Fiction	13	10	7	1	2
<b>Total Ideas</b>	296	188	135	43	10
<b>Percentage Value</b>	-	-	72%	23%	5%

*Print Materials Lists.* In order to further situate the nature of the students' literacy, print materials lists were collected. These lists were recorded by parents and teachers, supposedly representing what the student read on a typical day at home and at school. A typical day was described as an average kind of day without extraordinary events. Despite the intention for these lists to detail all of the reading the students completed in a day, they are not a record of every

piece of text students read in one day. Rather, because of the way they were compiled from parents and teachers, they represent a sample of what the students read or had read to them. This information was previously provided in Tables 5, 10 and 15. Comparing the three students, a series of graphs below represent the results for reading at home and reading at school.

Figures 1 and 2 show the number of materials typically read at home and at school by the three students. Figures 3 and 4 show the number of minutes typically spent on reading at home and at school. The number of materials gives information about the kinds of reading done by each student. The number of minutes spent with each genre shows the combined length of time reading one genre versus the another.



*Figure 1:* Number of Materials Read at Home on a Typical Day

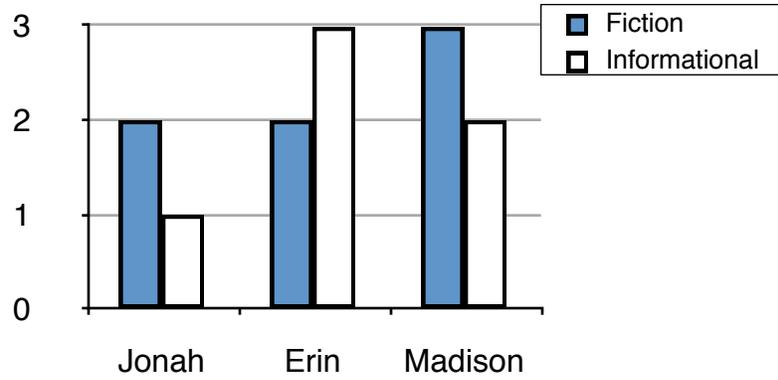


Figure 2: Number of Materials Read at School on a Typical Day

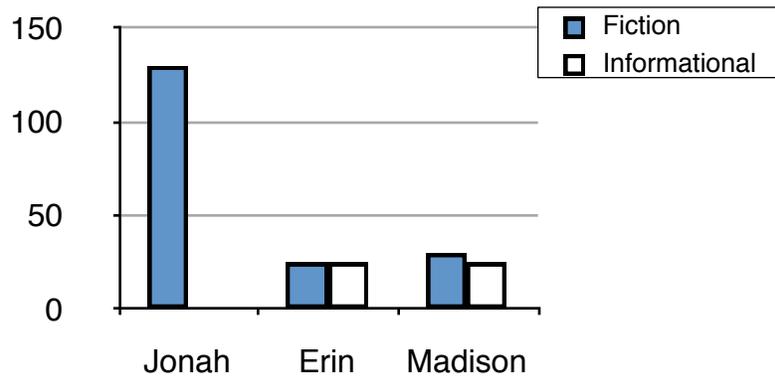


Figure 3: Number of Minutes Read at Home on a Typical Day

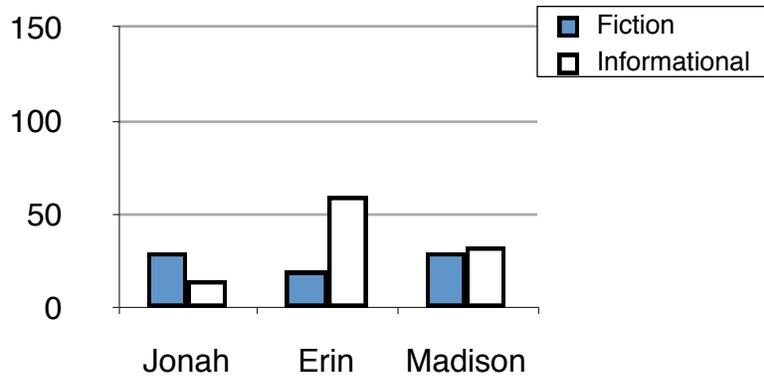


Figure 4: Number of Minutes Read at School on a Typical Day

There are some similarities and differences in the data when comparing the students to each other. Jonah, for example, reads the most fiction of all of the students. Erin and Madison read a similar number of informational texts and almost the same number of fictional texts in a typical day. Based on the information provided by the parents and teachers for the typical day, the girls both seem to read more at school than at home whereas Jonah reads much more at home. Jonah appears to read the most at home by a wide margin, and Erin reads the most at school by a smaller margin.

The definition of fictional and informational texts in this study include read aloud books. Jonah's amount of time reading is much higher than the other students' because of books read aloud to him, audiobooks in this case. Although the girls also had books read aloud to them in class, these books were at school and read for a short amount of time. The results may look different if they showed only books that were read by the students.

Personal interest and choice when reading is an important component within the research literature. When examining the print materials lists from home and at school, it appears that each student has time in a typical day to read something of his/her choosing. For example, all of the students choose their own research topics in school and use books or the computer, at school and at home, to complete their school assignments. Independent reading material was also shown to be an area, at home and at school, where the students could read a text of personal choice. The findings showed, after examining the typical day reading for each striving reader at home and at school, that all of the students had some time in their day to read texts that were interesting to them, as independent reading material and/or for research.

From the research literature, gender was one factor of significance when looking at striving readers. The main focus in the professional literature seems to be on boys who struggle to read (e.g., Chapman, Filipenko, McTavish, & Shapiro, 2007; Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003). However, in this study, two of my study participants were girls and so, therefore, it is important to remember that it is not just boys who struggle with reading. This study also shows that it is not just boys who might benefit from informational texts. Erin and Madison spent slightly more than half of their overall reading time with informational texts. The number of fictional texts read by both genders was also substantial. The results show that the girls seem to interact considerably with informational texts overall.

*Classroom Inventory.* The detailed classroom counts of the classroom library and displayed print represent the third set of data demonstrating the striving readers' literacy environments. All numbers reported in this section have been rounded to the nearest whole number. The results shown here are representative only of two particular classrooms in this particular school.

Informational texts made up approximately one quarter of the two classroom libraries studied. Twenty-three percent of the texts in Jonah's classroom were informational, while the figure for Erin and Madison's classroom was 28%, for an overall average of 26% (see Figures 5 and 6). Fiction encompassed the remainder of the material in the two classroom libraries, accounting for approximately three-quarters of the texts in each classroom.

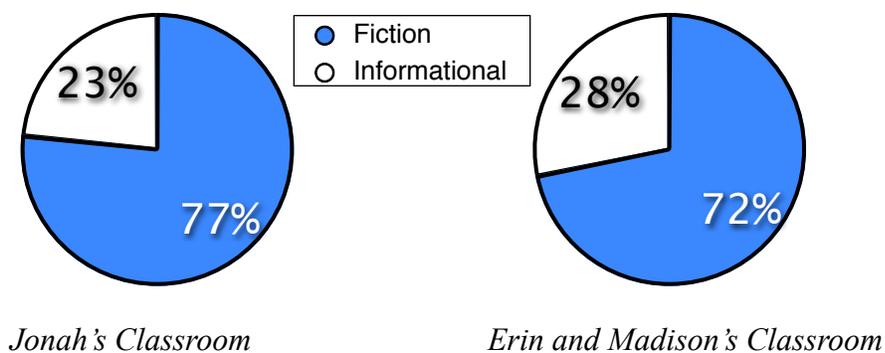


Figure 5: Classroom Library Counts

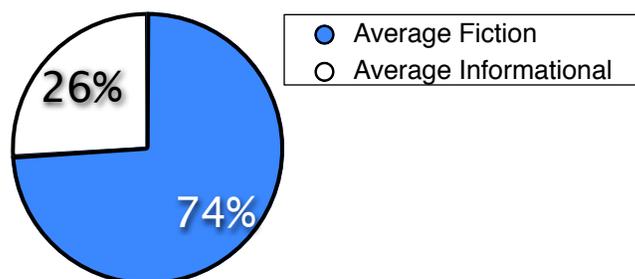


Figure 6: Average Classroom Library Count

Interestingly, as shown in Table 17, when comparing the ratio of fictional materials with their covers showing out of total fictional materials, to informational materials with their covers showing out of total informational materials, an average of 28% of the informational texts in the classroom libraries had their covers displayed. In contrast, there was only 7% of fiction books displayed with their covers showing. To give an example, of the 305 fiction books in Jonah's classroom library, 19 had their covers showing; compared to 93 informational texts of which 32 had their covers displayed.

There is a significant amount of variation between the classrooms in terms of number of texts in the classroom libraries. Jonah's classroom had more than double the number of fictional

texts and almost double the number of informational texts compared to Erin and Madison's classroom. There was a smaller difference, however, by which these texts were displayed across the classrooms. The fictional texts were displayed in almost identical percentages in both classrooms (see Table 17). The informational texts were somewhat different, representing a 13% difference between the two classrooms. Overall, the classrooms were similar in terms of the percentage of informational versus fictional texts in their libraries, and the number of fictional texts displayed. There were differences between the classrooms in the number of books in their libraries, and the percentage of informational texts displayed.

Table 17

*Average Percentage of Classroom Library Count*

	<b>Jonah's Classroom</b>	<b>Erin and Madison's Classroom</b>	<b>Average Percentage</b>
Average Informational	23	28	26
Average Fiction	77	72	74
Average Informational Covers Displayed	34	21	28
Average Fiction Covers Displayed	6	7	7

It is important to note here that the large difference in the number of books between classrooms may be symptomatic of the difference in age between the classes. Jonah is younger than both Erin and Madison and in a different class. According to one teacher participant, students from the older class bring a lot of their own reading material to school and consistently use the school library. The two classrooms, a grade 5/6 class and a grade 3/4 class, may have

different kinds of books in the room because of the students' ages. For example, there may have been more larger novels in the older room versus more simple chapter books, easy-readers, or picture books in the younger room. The difference in age of the students is a consideration when examining the difference in number of texts. That being said, many factors may affect the number of texts in any given classroom such as personal preference, financial constraints, experience, and opportunities to procure a sizable library collection.

The classroom library count had several items to consider when recording data. For example, some of the fictional texts included novels, picture books, and comics such as the *Calvin and Hobbes* books (Watterson). The informational texts included chapter books, such as the *True Dog Stories* series (Davidson), theme-related research books about plants, picture books, and biographies. Some of the materials counted included books belonging to a local reading club, of which there were both fiction and informational texts.

The second half of the classroom inventories involved displayed print. This included materials on the walls or other surfaces in the classroom (see Figure 7). As seen in Table 18 and Figure 8, there was an average of 73% of informational displayed print calculated for the two upper elementary classrooms. There is an appreciable number of informational texts displayed across the classrooms.

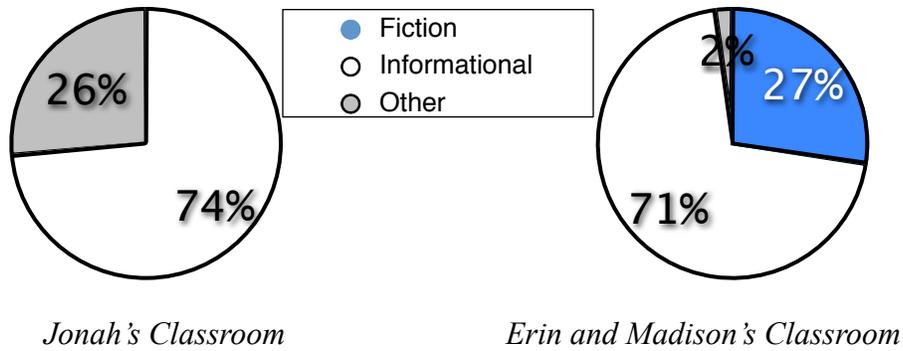


Figure 7: Displayed Print Counts

Table 18

Average Percentage of Displayed Print Count

	Informational	Fiction	Other
Jonah's Classroom	74	0	26
Erin & Madison's Classroom	71	27	2
Average	73	13	14

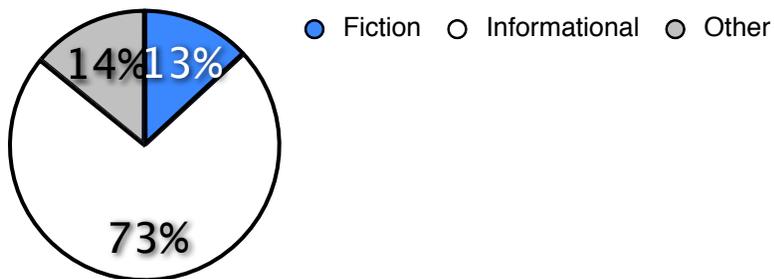


Figure 8: Average Displayed Print Count

There was notable variation between classrooms for the displayed print count. Both classes had similar percentages of informational displays. However, the actual number of

displays was twice as high in Jonah's classroom. Another difference in displayed print was that no fictional displays were recorded for Jonah's classroom compared to 13 for the other classroom. Also, only one item was recorded in the *other* category for Erin and Madison's classroom compared to 28 in the other room. That being said, the percentages for displayed informational print remain considerable and similar across classrooms.

There were many different items to consider when recording displayed print in these classrooms. The *informational* category included items such as brainstorm charts, maps, student-made posters about body systems, math word wall, schedules, fire drill instructions, student health information, cursive writing chart, labels, homework board, French displays, and notes on the chalkboard and chart paper. The examples in the *fiction* category for displayed print included poetry. The *other* category contained items such as the clock, the letters of the alphabet on the math word wall, and the thermostat. The small difference in the results between research assistants for the displayed print count is attributed to slight counting errors and did not represent a discrepancy in their decisions about texts.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

All of the data collected were examined in relation to the three research questions. I explored striving readers' perceptions about reading informational texts and if they saw such texts as beneficial; the number of informational texts the striving readers were reading; and the amount of exposure to informational texts the three striving readers experienced in their classrooms. The ideas expressed during the interviews provided some important information about the perceptions of informational texts the selected students held when specifically responding to questions about their reading. Given what the three striving readers said about informational texts, it is evident that personal interest, proper environment, social interaction, defining genres, and recognizing attributes are all important ideas for the three students. They spoke positively about informational texts in general, and so it seems that informational texts held some appeal for the three striving readers.

The teacher responses, print materials lists, and classroom inventories also provided important information about the literacy environments of the three students. To answer the second research question regarding the number of informational texts the three striving readers were reading, many patterns were found. The most significant of these shows that the female striving readers in this study read a considerable number of informational texts. In response to the third research question, it was found that striving readers were exposed to a considerable number of informational texts in their classrooms both in displays and in the library.

This remainder of this discussion chapter is divided into five main sections. First, the implications for practice or significance to the classroom is discussed. Second, the implications of the results from this study are discussed in relation to existing theory and knowledge. Third,

ideas about future research that might be needed is discussed. Fourth, limitations of the research are discussed. Finally, concluding remarks are presented.

### *Classroom Significance*

Many ideas emerged from the results that would be of significance in the classroom. Some of these ideas may be useful for teachers and parents of striving readers, and for striving readers themselves. When exploring personal interest and enjoyment, for example, all of the students mentioned that they enjoy reading material when they are interested in that genre or topic. This finding is consistent with previous research. Fink's (1995/1996, 2006) notion that "passionate interest" can help striving readers overcome reading challenges lead to her suggestions for teachers to use the role of enjoyment and tap into students' interests. In their study on reading disengagement, Guthrie and Davis (2003) felt that using an abundance of texts that are interesting and meaningful could be one way to help students who are struggling to read. Duke (2000) advocates using informational texts as a way to attract students to reading in order to promote positive literacy experiences.

After examining comments from this theme category, all of the students seemed to know what they like. The students appeared to enjoy certain reading topics such as text on hobbies they have, animals they enjoy, and activities outside of school in which they participate. The students seemed to strongly dislike some other topics, including those they found to be scary or uninteresting. All three students were able to recognize different styles of text such as mysteries, comic books, and biographies and commented on how much they liked or disliked such texts. The lists gathered from parents and teachers demonstrated that these striving readers had times in their day, either at home or at school, where they could choose reading material of personal

interest. Two examples were recreational reading and research projects. The teachers also recounted that these striving readers have the opportunity to read informational texts that are interesting to them and to choose a topic when working on their research projects. The findings demonstrated that informational texts, specifically, are enjoyable if the topic is an interesting one.

The importance of choice was stressed by one student, emphasizing the ease at which he reads the genre of his choice, compared to when he is assigned reading. This is consistent with Gambrell's (1996) research on reading motivation and Bryan, Smith, and Burrows' (2007) work on reading preferences, that student choice is an important factor in the enjoyment of books. The value of helping these three striving readers to find enjoyable, interesting reading material, including informational texts, is one finding of this study that may benefit striving readers at home and in the classroom.

For the three student participants, in this particular school, this study found a considerable number of informational texts in these striving readers' classrooms. Approximately one quarter of the classroom libraries and approximately three-quarters of displayed print on the walls contained informational texts. Duke (2000) conducted a similar classroom inventory. The results for this study show a notable difference of 16% from Duke's study, where she found informational texts to comprise a mean of only 9.8% in the grade one classrooms she studied. A considerable number of informational texts, then, were found in these striving readers' classrooms. In terms of Duke's results for displayed covers showing informational texts, she found a range of between 4% in low socio-economic classrooms to 25% in high socio-economic classrooms, compared to the 28% in this study. Informational texts with their covers showing

were four times as prevalent, on average, as fictional texts with their covers showing, which might have an effect on the number of times this book is viewed by students. Looking at Duke's results of a mean of only 2.6% for informational print displayed on the walls and other surfaces, and the 73% recorded for this study, the difference between the two numbers show an appreciable number of informational texts displayed in this study. The findings show that there was a considerable number of informational texts found in the three classrooms, therefore offering the opportunity for a considerable amount of exposure to informational texts.

The considerable number of informational texts found in these classrooms is inconsistent with Larkin-Lieffers (2007) research which demonstrated the limited availability in classrooms, libraries, and bookstores, and the trend of little use of nonfiction. Duke (2000) and Dreher (2003) both highlight the dominance of fictional texts in the classroom which is consistent with the findings here.

Given the amount of increase in informational texts in this study compared to Duke's (2000) study, it may be reasonable to expect that there is an increasing balance between genres. Fiction and informational texts may never be found in equal numbers in classroom libraries, rather there may be a different ratio that can be defined as a balance. With several researchers advocating the use of informational texts in classrooms, and with these findings, perhaps there is a shift in focus to a more genre-balanced classroom.

Creating the best environment for reading was an idea that emerged when looking at where and when students read. The students all seemed to attempt to find a space to read that was comfortable for them. These striving readers talked about finding a physical space that was comfortable, such as in a chair or on the carpet and then finding a spot that had fewer

distractions, such as the bathroom or a bedroom. For students who have trouble with reading, it may be important to find a comfortable and calm space so that they can focus on reading. The teachers responded that, during independent reading time, some struggling readers do not avoid choosing a book and settle down to read, while others, often boys, can find it difficult to create the best reading environment. Creating a proper environment for reading is important for all students, and especially for striving readers.

Another significant finding was that reading is often a social event. Positive examples from the interviews and the teachers included groups of friends encouraging each other in a reading club, a family visiting the library together, working with a partner on a research project, sharing books with teachers and friends, discussing work with the teacher, and enjoying read aloud material in class. This study also found that the three students read more informational texts at school than at home. Friends and family sometimes, however, read bigger texts or those of a different genre. Striving readers may find it difficult to connect with books that they do not enjoy or have difficulty reading, and so the social opportunity may be weakened. All of the students commented positively on the social aspect of using informational texts. By working with a friend in class, helping a partner find an answer, or asking a parent to purchase an interesting book, informational texts, perhaps not unlike fictional texts, seem to be a vehicle for social interaction. In the classroom, these may be important ideas for teachers when they approach how to conduct their daily schedules and possibly how to form groupings of students in terms of striving readers. The findings suggest that, for these three striving readers, when a positive social atmosphere is created while using informational texts, it has the opportunity to be both enjoyable and motivating for them and, therefore, beneficial.

Among the participants of this study, the two girls read a considerable number of informational texts, both in the number of texts they read and for how long they read them. The comments from the girls and the information gathered from their teacher and parents showed that they read informational texts at home and at school for a variety of reasons. These reasons included: research projects; independent reading; reading clubs; and leisure time on the computer. The data from the female striving readers is somewhat consistent with the research literature which demonstrated that students who are weak upper elementary readers prefer nonfiction compared to stronger readers in upper elementary (Peterson, 2008). It might be valuable for teachers and parents involved in this study to note that the two girls in this study spent a considerable amount of time reading informational texts, sometimes more than they read fiction. There may be a tendency for teachers and parents alike to presume that female readers prefer stories to informational texts. It may be of great benefit for the parents and teachers of these two girls to be aware that they appear to have a preference for reading informational texts. Using informational texts offers the opportunity to provide these striving readers with a variety of texts at different reading levels and on topics that are interesting to them. The research literature focuses on the use of informational texts to help boys who struggle to read. The findings of this study remind us to also focus on girls who struggle to read.

All of the students found informational texts useful and had similar examples for how they use their reading skills. The main functions mentioned by the students were to learn something, to conduct research, and to help with homework. Informational texts were viewed by one student as more useful than fiction when trying to find out accurate information. Reading in general was mentioned to be useful by these striving readers because they felt that they use

reading everywhere. Being aware that these three striving readers acknowledge informational texts as useful might benefit teachers when planning programs for readers who struggle.

Despite being familiar with the basic definition, the three students seemed unaware of the range of styles within the genre of informational texts. The students appeared to be familiar with their own personal topics of interest, and they seemed to enjoy reading informational texts when it is written about one of these subjects. All of the students indicated that they had heard of or used informational texts before. The students seemed to be quite familiar with the basic definitions of fictional and informational texts, describing them as stories and either nonfiction or fact books. Their thinking, however, suggested that they define informational texts differently than they use them. For example, describing a sample of various informational texts as those read by younger students, or dismissing ones that are too difficult because of the scientific vocabulary. Also, when asked why she did not use informational texts for homework, one student answered that she did not have any. These two examples show some of the misconceptions that can arise with informational texts. Leveling a text for use with only a younger student and labeling a text as too difficult may sometimes prevent its usage altogether, no matter its actual value.

The narrow conception of informational texts held by some people is potentially problematic. Conceptions that precludes materials such as recipes, magazines, computer games, informational chapter books, and the like, may limit the use of these potentially beneficial text types. That is to say, if those who enjoy informational texts do not consider these to be informational texts, they might not access them or be provided with access to them.

Students commented that they use informational texts mainly for learning something new, to conduct research, and to help with homework. The results from parents and teachers found that there was a considerable amount of exposure to informational texts in the classroom and that some of the striving readers read such texts with high frequency. Explicitly defining texts, and using a variety of examples, then, seems to be significant for striving readers and for the classroom. This way, striving readers might be able to better recognize how much they actually interact with informational texts, and adjust their reading patterns accordingly.

The three students commented that the difficulty of informational texts often depends on the difficulty of the words. They described difficulties with words that were unfamiliar, scientific, and long. Other difficulties mentioned by the students had to do with the number of words on a page, uninteresting subject area, confusing layout and length of text. These negative comments about informational texts, while only a small percentage of the total comments made, may help teachers and parents to aid students in understanding how to read informational texts. Duke (2000) advocates a similar act by parents and teachers, to help students understand informational texts better in order to help them in school and in the future.

All of the students mentioned positive qualities of informational texts. In addition to its usefulness, the students listed a number of other benefits of informational texts. For example, informational texts were seen to be helpful overall and contained qualities such as bold covers, attractive layouts, an abundance of pictures, colour pages, good paper quality, short captions, and useful research. Teachers mentioned that there was a wide variety of informational texts offered in their classrooms which offer various topics, different reading levels, pictures and simple wording. This is consistent with previous research (Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003; Doiron, 2003;

Larkin-Lieffers, 2007). Captions are another useful characteristics of informational texts mentioned by the students. Pictures were seen to be one of the most important benefits by students because they help to describe ideas and clarify information. For the three striving readers in this study, the pictures seemed to offer a way to make meaning out of information. This is consistent with Caswell and Duke's (1998) notion of using informational texts to find a way in to reading. Taking advantage of the benefits of informational texts, especially pictures, is another significant factor for the classroom.

One of the main purposes of this study was to find out if striving readers think informational texts are beneficial, and if so, why. Since this is a complex question that may not be easily understood or answered by young children, it was not asked explicitly. However, from the ideas that emerged in the interviews, and the positive attitude the three striving readers had about informational texts, it seems reasonable to say that such texts are appealing. As evidence, these striving readers enjoyed informational texts because they offer a wide variety of personal interest opportunities. Interactions in a social setting, such as visiting the library and working on research projects, are another reason why striving readers enjoy informational texts. These three striving readers also find informational texts appealing because they offer a number of characteristics that are helpful. One of the most popular characteristics was that informational texts are useful in school and at home for such reasons as learning new things and helping with homework. Other helpful qualities of informational texts that appealed to the striving readers are the abundance of pictures, short captions, bold covers, attractive layouts, and colour pages. Pictures, which were one of the most popular qualities of informational texts, are attractive to these striving readers because they offer a way to begin the comprehension of an idea, without

reading the text. All of these reasons represent evidence for why the three striving readers in this study find informational texts appealing and of some benefit.

*Discussion of Results Relating to Fink's Interest-Based Model of Reading*

In studying the three transcripts and the information gathered about the students' literacy environments, it became clear that using informational texts to benefit striving readers closely follows Fink's (2006) Interest-Based Model of Reading. These following five components make up Fink's model: high-interest reading; topic-specific reading; deep schema knowledge; reading in context; and support. Given that the results of this study showed that three striving readers enjoyed informational texts when they were interested in the topic area, the findings are consistent with the first component of Fink's model. Reading material, including informational texts, that striving readers are passionately interested about will help to motivate and engage them in reading.

One of the characteristics of informational texts is that there is a wide variety of topic areas at varying levels. This is consistent with the second component of Fink's model, topic-specific reading. If striving readers are interested in a specific topic, they can likely find informational texts on that subject.

The third component of the model, deep schema knowledge, refers to the integration of new knowledge with prior knowledge when reading (Carter, 2000). Fink's (1995/1996) theory demonstrates that with deep schema knowledge and passionate interest, even those who struggle to read have the opportunity to manage difficult texts. The majority of participants in Fink's study, all dyslexics, read informational texts in the forms of professional textbooks and research

literature. Informational texts offer the opportunity for reading an abundance of texts in one area, therefore focusing on one schema or set of knowledge. Using informational texts that are interesting to each individual striving reader, and incorporating their own schema knowledge, is another consistency to Fink's model.

Reading in context is the fourth component of Fink's model. Reading for a certain purpose, such as a research project about a specific topic, offers the opportunity for readers to read in context. Informational texts, offering a wide variety of topic areas, allow striving readers the chance to find a text that they are interested in within a certain context.

The final component of Fink's model is support. All of the students in this study reported to have received support from their teachers, their parents, and their classmates. As in Bryan, Fawson, and Reutzel's (2003) work, non-engaged students benefit from short discussions with an interested adult. For striving readers in particular, assistance with reading is significant. With help from their support system, striving readers can use informational texts to make steps towards improving their reading skills. Applying Fink's model helps us to understand why using informational texts may benefit striving readers.

### *Future Research*

The findings of this study suggest the need for further research into the benefits of informational texts and striving readers. Given that the striving readers in this study found informational texts appealing, the next step is to explore if, indeed, informational texts are beneficial to striving readers. One way of doing this would be to examine the impact an intervention would have that focused on using informational texts as part of the striving readers'

reading programs. Investigating the merits of this kind of intervention may demonstrate the possibility of using informational texts for the purpose of extending and improving the reading capabilities of striving readers. Based on the finding that these three students have a positive attitude about reading informational texts, it may be of use for students who are striving to read to have opportunities with informational texts in the classroom. Additional work could also be done to examine at what point in schooling to intensely focus on informational texts in order to best serve striving readers. Is it best to work with informational texts in the primary grades, or is it better to wait until the upper elementary grades? If striving readers can benefit from informational texts and promote reading in general, then further research is important.

Reading is a complex skill. There are many reasons why students might struggle to read, and there are just as many, if not more, complex solutions that could help them attain this skill. That is, even though the students' comments in this study suggest the school and the parents are proceeding appropriately in terms of providing suitable numbers of informational texts, the students are still struggling to read. It would appear, then, that there are other things that might need to be done to help these students. With young readers, the attitude toward reading is such an important factor. Bryan (2009) points out that deriving pleasure from reading leads to continued practice, which in turn creates more proficient readers, which will lead to increased pleasure in reading, and so on. This cycle may well keep going so long as students are enjoying what they read. More research can be done, then, on different ways to help readers overcome their difficulties. Despite their struggles, the students in this study retain positive attitudes about reading, at least for informational texts, and so it is likely that their abilities will improve, particularly as the school continues to provide resources, encouragement and support.

Another area in need of investigation is to repeat Duke's (2000) study to find out if the trend she found of minimal use of informational texts is currently widespread, or if there has been a shift. Given the size and purpose of this study, a much larger sample is needed to explore such a trend. The results of this study showed that three striving readers had considerable exposure to informational texts in their classrooms and that some of the striving readers read such texts with high frequency. It would be interesting to see if this result is the same for a larger population.

Another area of exploration for the future includes exploring gender patterns relating to striving readers and informational texts. There has been a focus up until now on how to help boys who struggle with reading and using informational texts as one possible strategy (Chapman, et al, 2007; Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003). The research of this study suggests that girls who struggle with reading also enjoy informational texts, and interact with them more than fiction in some cases. Further research might focus on the types of informational texts that girls enjoy the most and strategies to use them at home and in the classroom.

The results of this study are derived from one particular group of research participants. In light of the New Literacy studies (Barton, et al, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2004; Street, 1995), we currently understand literacy as situational. As such, one area of future research needs to be replication of this study in other settings. Further research could be conducted for other participants, grade levels, schools, and geographic regions.

*Limitations of the Study*

There are several limitations to this study. Given the number of student participants in this study, three students participants precludes the generalizability of the findings. In terms of numerical data collected, because the numbers are small, any slight increase or decrease can mean a considerable change in results. The print materials lists gathered from teachers and parents are subjective, contain small numbers of texts, and list only books for examples of materials read. It was my intention that the data collectors would include texts reflective of a much broader conception of informational texts. However, the lists from the parents and teachers were not a complete list. Also, the school lists for Erin and Madison come from the same teacher and, therefore, may be more similar than if they had come from different teachers. Jonah's results from home show a high number of books read aloud to him, which may not be the case of most other students. The findings in this study may, therefore, be very different for three different students. It would be interesting to see the similarities and differences of results from a larger sample size.

An important limitation is the group of student participants. All students were chosen from an independent private school which generally represents middle-upper income families. The views of the students participating in this study, then, may not represent the view of the 'average' student. This school also uses theme-based learning relying heavily on informational texts. Students learning in these classrooms have an abundance of exposure to the texts they were interviewed about, therefore making the students familiar with the subject. This might have made their responses more plentiful, and possibly not equivalent to other students.

This study is also limited by the characteristics of the school where the study took place. The location of the school represents a small geographic area. Also, only one school and two classrooms are represented here. The views of the students in this study, then, represent only a small group in terms of socio-economic, geographic, and educational perspectives.

Another limitation of this study is the process of collecting comments from students through semi-structured interviews. Each conversation was different, with some students answering more for some questions than others, and may have been affected by extraneous factors such as mood, anxiety level, or health. As an example, Jonah's interview took the shortest amount of time. This could possibly have related to his age, personality, anxiety level, gender, connection with the interviewer, or other reasons. Therefore, the data from the students is not necessarily representative of a larger population.

The reliance on children to explain themselves is another limiting factor to this study. When working with students in grades four, five, and six, it is recognized that the responses may not be as accurate or complete as they might otherwise have answered. Expressing one's opinion about a certain type of text may be difficult for children to do in a specific and detailed manner.

### *Conclusions*

While much research has considered students who struggle with reading, and also informational texts, few studies have looked at how these two interact together and what the possible benefits might be to striving readers. It is important to remember that the ideas in this and other studies like it come from individual students who have unique perspectives. That

being said, the results found in this study can help to examine patterns in reading that might be useful to parents, teachers, and to the students themselves.

When examining what students had to say about informational texts, it was found that the three striving readers had mostly positive comments. This positive attitude leads to the conclusion that informational texts, indeed, appeal to the three striving readers. Comments about personal interest, in particular, were the most popular. Reading material that is interesting, informational texts for example, may be of some benefit to striving readers. Creating proper reading environments, generating opportunities for social interaction, defining different genres, and recognizing the various attributes of informational texts could also benefit these three striving readers. After investigating the students' literacy environments, it was found that females read a considerable number of informational texts and that striving readers were exposed to a considerable number of informational texts in their classrooms. Striving readers in this study seemed to have the opportunity and the tools available to make progress in their reading.

From the findings of this study, informational texts represent a resource of significant benefit to parents, teachers, and students. Teachers can focus on personal interest and choice in their reading programs, creating proper reading environments, and generating social opportunities with texts. Students may have more success finding books they can read if they are able to choose topics of interest to them. Parents with children who have reading difficulties may also decide to create special spaces at home for reading, to encourage social interaction with texts, and to increase their home libraries by purchasing or borrowing texts that are better-suited to their child's interests and needs.

Overall, it is concluded that informational texts were appealing to the three striving readers. Two of the most attractive qualities of informational texts, from the perspective of students in this study, is that they offer a chance for readers who struggle to find a text that interests them and to make meaning from that text by using qualities such as pictures. As with Fink's (1995/1996) successful dyslexics, informational texts can be used to help striving readers progress in their reading. Given the considerable number of informational texts the striving readers in this study were exposed to, this may be indicative of a pattern forming towards greater use of informational texts. By creating the proper environment and using high-interest materials, striving readers may benefit from informational texts.

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Appendices

Appendix A  
University Ethics Approval Certificate



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**APPROVAL CERTIFICATE**

March 3, 2010

**TO:** Cindy Cameron  
Principal Investigator  
Advisor - G. Bryan

**FROM:** Lorna Guse, Chair  
Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB)

**Re:** Protocol #E2009:140  
"What do Striving Readers say about Reading Informational Texts?"

Please be advised that your above-referenced protocol has received human ethics approval by the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board, which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement. This approval is valid for one year only.

Any significant changes of the protocol and/or informed consent form should be reported to the Human Ethics Secretariat in advance of implementation of such changes.

**Please note:**

- if you have funds pending human ethics approval, the auditor requires that you submit a copy of this Approval Certificate to Eveline Saurette in the Office of Research Services, (e-mail [eveline\\_saurette@umanitoba.ca](mailto:eveline_saurette@umanitoba.ca), or fax 261-0325), including the Sponsor name, before your account can be opened.
- if you have received multi-year funding for this research, responsibility lies with you to apply for and obtain Renewal Approval at the expiry of the initial one-year approval; otherwise the account will be locked.

The Research Ethics Board requests a final report for your study (available at [http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/ethics/ors\\_ethics\\_human\\_REB\\_forms\\_guidelines.html](http://umanitoba.ca/research/ors/ethics/ors_ethics_human_REB_forms_guidelines.html)) in order to be in compliance with Tri-Council Guidelines.

Appendix B  
Interview Protocol for Students

Introduction

*“Hello. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am a teacher doing research about what students your age have to say about reading. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions.”*

Introduction / Reading in general

1. Please begin by telling me about your reading.
2. Tell me about the things you like to read.
3. In what ways do you use your reading skills?

Probes: Do you use reading in order to get things done? When you go to a restaurant, catch a bus, play a computer game?

4. Where do you do most of your reading?

Probes: Do you read more at home than at school? At home, do you read in bed, or in front of the television, etc? Do you read more on the weekends?

5. Do you talk about reading with your friends?

Probes: Do you ever recommend books to friends? Read the same books as friends?

Informational Texts

*I now want to talk specifically about a certain type of reading material called informational texts. I have some examples here of different types of informational texts. [Show about a dozen different types of informational texts and point out how these types of texts are different from storybook, fictional texts in that the focus is on conveying information, rather than relating a story.]*

6. Have you heard about informational texts before today? When/where? What else do you know about them?
7. Can you give me examples of informational texts that you have read this week? For

- what purposes did you read them?
8. Tell me about a reading of informational texts that you have shared with a group of friends.  
Probes: Can you describe the experience? Did you enjoy it?
  9. Do informational texts help you in school? Do they help at home?  
Probes: Do they help you to learn about things? Do you use them to do your homework? If yes, can you tell me about that?
  10. Do you enjoy reading informational texts?  
Probes: Why? Can you give me an example? What is it about them that you find enjoyable?
  11. Do you find informational texts easy or hard to read?  
Probe: Why do you think that is so?
  12. Do you generally find informational texts easier or harder to read than material that is not informational text?  
Probe: Why do you think that is so?
  13. How does your enjoyment of fiction compare to your enjoyment of informational texts?  
Do you like to read fiction?
  14. Do you find informational reading is more or less useful to you than fictional reading? If so, in what ways is that so?
  15. Do you like to read?
  16. Just before we finish up, is there anything else you would like to add about your reading?

“Thank you very much for your time. You were a big help.”

## Appendix C

### Questions for Teachers

#### Introduction

Readers who still experience reading difficulties in the upper elementary grades present a dilemma to teachers every day. The past several decades of research has produced many important insights into students who have reading difficulties. Using informational texts with struggling readers is a tool that has potential for success but may be an undiscovered resource in many classrooms. This potentially valuable resource is underutilized (Duke, 2000). There has been limited research into the use of informational texts with struggling readers (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Dayton-Sakari & Jobe, 2003; Dreher, 2003). This study hopes to investigate the potential benefits of informational texts with struggling readers, particularly focusing upon what students see as the benefits of such texts.

#### Academic Environment

1. What is the student's full name, age, and grade level?
2. Can you give an example of how this student is struggling with reading?
3. Does this student receive resource help? If so, how much? If not, why not, and how are they being helped otherwise?
4. How would you describe this student's attitude towards reading?
5. Can you describe any special strategies used in the classroom to help this reader?
6. Can you describe this student's behavior during independent reading time?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for your time.

## Appendix D

## Instructions for Print Materials Lists

Dear parent and teacher participants,

Please provide a list of print materials you observe your child/student reading or being read aloud to on **one** ‘typical’ day of the week. This list is meant to be a snapshot of what the child reads on an average day (ie: a day without extraordinary events). For parents, the list may include materials from school, and can consist of different text types. For teachers, this may include materials from silent reading time, before and after school times, school library books, and required reading. Types of materials may include books, magazines, poems, letters, signs, the internet, recipes, computer games, and newspapers. Please be as specific as you can, including exact titles and the approximate time spent reading each material. Please see the example below:

**--EXAMPLE--**

Parent’s Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Mrs. Wendy Brown \_\_\_\_\_

Student’s Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Cindy Brown \_\_\_\_\_

List of Print Materials: A “typical” day

Books – *Captain Underpants* (20 min.)

*Amelia Bedelia* (15 min.)

Magazines - *Owl* (10 min.)

Computer - Internet: *How Volcanoes Work* (20 min.)

Math game (10 min.)

Please forward this list to the principal researcher within one week of your child’s/student’s interview.