A review of the literature indicates that very few researchers mention the school library or librarian when talking about how to help struggling readers. This research shows that in order to make the transition from struggling to successful readers, students need interesting and culturally relevant texts, individual solutions, and adult support. The school librarian can aid struggling readers by developing the school library collection, collaborating with all teachers to tailor the instruction of these students, and creating library programs that foster literacy and an environment of support.

Headings:

- Academic success
- Media specialists
- Reading
- Reluctant readers
- School librarians
- School libraries
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Introduction

The significance and role of a school librarian in reading development is obvious to the general public, yet few understand exactly what this role entails. The association of reading with libraries is common, particularly in schools. The librarian’s job is to teach research and information skills to students, but what, exactly, is the librarian’s role in fostering literacy in the school community? According to the American Association of School Librarians’ position statement the school librarian’s role in reading is as follows, “School librarians are in a critical and unique position to partner with other educators to elevate the reading development of our nation’s youth” because teaching research skills require the honing of reading skills such as the abilities to “comprehend, analyze, and evaluate text in both print and digital formats” (2011h). The AASL position statement clearly states that “Reading is a foundational skill for 21st-century learners” (2011h). Without the ability to read proficiently, students will not be able to easily take in, comprehend, and understand information either in school-based assignments or in their daily lives. Students who struggle to read will also naturally struggle to access and comprehend information in other areas of life, and if reading problems are not addressed they will leave school unprepared to excel in an information-saturated world.

How then does the librarian’s role in improving literacy apply to the students who struggle with reading? The academic success of all students in the school should be the prime focus of the librarian. Therefore, the abilities of all students to read and
comprehend texts should be the primary concerns of the school librarian. How then can the librarian help those students who need help the most?
**Background research**

In order to learn what librarians should do to help struggling readers, answers to the following background questions were located in library science and teaching literature. The specific questions are as follows:

1) What does it mean to struggle with reading?
2) What are the implications for a student struggling with reading?
3) Why is it important to help this population?
4) Who are struggling readers, and why do they struggle with reading?
5) What actually helps a student who is struggling with reading?

**What does it mean to struggle with reading?**

Gay Ivey, scholar in the field of Reading Education, defines struggling readers as "students who have not learned to read strategically and purposefully by the sixth grade" (1999, p. 373), but her definition obviously limits this population to secondary students. For the research scope in this paper “struggling readers” are defined as any and all students who are consistently reading below grade level expectations. Struggling readers are often also referred to as “reluctant readers.” A reluctant reader is someone “who, for whatever reason, does not like to read,” (YALSA, 2011). Reluctant readers may have a myriad of reasons why they do not like to read including, but not limited to, a low self-esteem about their ability to read. Therefore, a student could be a reluctant reader
without being a struggling reader, though struggling readers are always also reluctant readers. The term “struggling reader” in this paper will refer to those students, whose literacies are below grade level expectations which leads to a dislike of reading or have resulted from a distaste for reading in the first place. It is understood that reluctant readers are at risk of becoming struggling readers.

In his book *Reading for Their Life: (Re)Building the textual lineages of African American Adolescent Males*, Alfred W. Tatum gave many examples of how struggling readers are unhappy in school settings. According to Tatum, “these young [African American] men experience unquantifiable pain when they struggle with reading,” and he went on to mention a high school student participant in a focus group who said, “‘If I didn’t have a mentor outside of North East High School I would probably drop out. It’s scary not knowing how to read. I don’t want to be in school anymore. I am tired of being made fun of,’” (Tatum, 2009). Tatum mentioned another student appearing in a documentary about Douglass High School in Baltimore who experienced this pain, but with quite a different attitude. This student said, “‘F*** academics, that’s for them nerdy mother******. I am going to keep it gutter,’” (Tatum, 2009). This student was obviously angry, and it could be that he rejected his own academic success when he did not see it as a real possibility.

In a discussion about struggling readers, the students behind the statistics must be explored in depth and viewed as more than a population which simply has lower overall test scores. Struggling with reading is a personal dilemma in the United States and is felt
by students in schools on a daily basis—students who are frustrated, angry, sad, disappointed, and maybe even ready to give up on reading all together.

**What are the implications for struggling readers?**

The implications for these students who literally struggle to read materials on their grade level are serious. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, "Poor reading skills correlate heavily with lack of employment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for advancement" (Office of Research and Analysis, 2007). Researchers have long known that while there is no real correlation between the ability to read proficiently and intelligence, there is a definite correlation between the ability to read and academic success (Wheeler, 1949). Based on this research it is logical to infer that if a student struggles to read, it naturally follows that they struggle in school and subsequently struggle in their daily lives. Tatum also states in *Reading for Their Life* that some young people in public schools are experiencing “personal and academic dormancy that interrupts their ability to invest in our fast-moving, ever-changing, increasingly demanding world,” (2009). Also in *Reading for Their Life*, Tatum speaks of the low literacy rates, high dropout rates, and high poverty and crime rates among African American adolescent boys (2009). Another educational researcher, psychologist Keith Stanovich, coined the term ‘Matthew Effect’ when talking about struggling readers and the impact their difficulty in learning to read has on the rest of their lives (1986). The Matthew Effect refers to the snowballing of a student’s reading difficulties if they are not resolved at a young age. As Stanovich succinctly puts it,
“Slow reading acquisition has cognitive, behavioral, and motivational consequences that slow the development of other cognitive skills and inhibit performance on many academic tasks. In short, as reading develops, other cognitive processes linked to it track the level of reading skill. Knowledge bases that are reciprocal relationships with reading are also inhibited from further development. The longer this developmental sequence is allowed to continue, the more generalized the deficits will become, seeping into more and more areas of cognition and behavior. Or, to put it more simply—and more sadly—in the words of a tearful nine-year-old, already falling frustratingly behind his peers in reading progress, ‘Reading affects everything you do’ (Morris, 1984, p. 19).” (2000)

Proving that a definite relationship exists between reading skills and overall success and happiness in life would require a massive longitudinal study however substantial data does exist that shows a clear correlation between literacy and other areas of achievement in life.

For example, research from the U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics indicates that are that those who do not read well also tend to spend more time in prison, make less money, and hold fewer steady jobs. According to this NCES data, proficient readers made up the majority of those employed in management and professional occupations in 2003.

### Percentage Employed in Management and Professional Occupations, by Reading Level in 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Level</th>
<th>Management, business</th>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Total in either job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics
Logically if people who are not reading at a high level are not holding higher level jobs, then they are not being paid higher salaries. The NCES also found this to be true in 2003.

### Percentage of Full-Time Workers by Weekly Earnings and Reading Level in 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Level</th>
<th>$850-1149</th>
<th>$1150-1449</th>
<th>$1450-1949</th>
<th>$1950 or more</th>
<th>Total earning $850 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

Also found in 2003 by the NCES was that adults with lower reading levels had an increased perception that their abilities to read prevented them from having better job opportunities.

### Percentage of Adults Who Said Their Reading Skills Limited Their Job Opportunities, by Reading Level in 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Level</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>A lot</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

And according to a study done in 2006 by The Conference Board, employers are also very aware when their employees are less than proficient at reading and in other areas of expertise such as foreign languages, mathematics, science, and other major school subject areas listed in the following table.
Percentage of Employers Who Rate High School Graduates as Deficient in Basic Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Percentage of Employers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing in English</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign languages</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History/geography</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government/economics</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading comprehension</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities/arts</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English language</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


A survey conducted by Statistics Canada and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2005 showed that about 20% of American workers read at a level below what their jobs required. According to data found by the National Endowment for the Arts’ 2008 research report *To Read or Not to Read: A question of national consequence*, “more than half of Below-Basic readers are not in the workforce,” and “44% of Basic readers lack a full-time or part-time job—twice the percentage of Proficient readers in that category.”

Data was also found showing that struggling readers tend not to participate as much in societal events such as concerts, plays, sporting events, outdoor activities, and attending museums. The NEA’s 2006 report *Involved in Arts, Involved in Life* found that “Literary readers are more than 3 times as likely as non-readers to visit museums, attend plays or concerts, and create artworks of their own. They are also more likely to play sports, attend sporting events, or do outdoor activities,” and that “18- to 34-year-olds, whose reading rates are the lowest for any adult age group under 65, show declines in cultural and civic participation.” Also found by the NEA, struggling readers are less
likely to be involved in civic activities such as voting (2008). The NEA’s 2008 report To Read or Not to Read showed that “84% of Proficient readers voted in the 2000 presidential election, compared with 53% of Below-Basic readers.”

There is a correlation between struggling readers and high school dropout rates. The NEA found that “half of America’s Below-Basic readers failed to complete high school—a percentage gain of 5 points since 1992,” and “one-third of readers at the Basic level dropped out of high school,” (2008). There is also a correlation between struggling with reading and the odds of going to prison in the United States. The data contained in the 2008 NEA Report showed that only 3% of prison inmates were proficient readers, and the reading scores of adult prisoners were on average 18 points lower than non-prisoners.

As mentioned previously, no longitudinal study was found to indicate a definite relationship between proficiency in reading and lifelong success and happiness. It should be noted that the statistics found during this research do not account or control for factors such as socio-economic status, racial discrimination, and quality of education received. The data indicates broad trends in the lives of struggling readers and collectively indicates that the ability to read well makes a strong, positive impact on a person’s life.

**Who are struggling readers, and why do they struggle?**

Many struggling readers begin as reluctant readers. The 2008 NEA report To Read or Not to Read indicated that not reading on a regular basis has been shown to stagnate or even reduce overall reading comprehension skills. Logic dictates that students who are not reading are not gaining as much vocabulary, fluency, or
comprehension skills as students who do read for pleasure on a regular basis. Also in *To Read or Not to Read* the NEA stated using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that students who read less for pleasure tend to score lower on reading and writing tests, as shown in the following tables (2008).

**Average Reading Scores by Frequency of Reading for Fun:** Grade 12 in 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Reading for Fun</th>
<th>Average Reading Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Almost every day</td>
<td>302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or twice a week</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or twice a month</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never or hardly ever</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading scores range from 0 to 500.
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

**Average Writing Scores by Frequency of Reading for Fun:** Grade 12 in 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Reading for Fun</th>
<th>Average Writing Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Almost every day</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or twice a week</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once or twice a month</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never or hardly ever</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Writing scores range from 0 to 300.
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

Most research on the topic of struggling readers focuses on males, particularly those considered ‘disadvantaged.’ As early as 1949 Wheeler found that minorities, or “coloreds,” presumably mostly African Americans, scored significantly lower in most subject areas than their “white” peers, despite there being little to no difference in their average IQs (Wheeler, 1949). (Wheeler based his findings on standardized tests, but thought that reading skill was what ultimately trumped all other skills when it came to taking achievement tests. If the test was written at a level above the taker’s comprehension, it naturally followed that the taker would do poorly [1949].) Wheeler attributed this disparity in achievement between “coloreds” and “whites” to the quality of reading instruction that the students were receiving, saying that teachers in white schools
employed more lesson differentiations and reading interventions for struggling students (1949). In the past sixty years since Wheeler’s research segregated schools have been abolished to give all students the same opportunities in education. However, minority students still often struggle as a result of racial discrimination and pro-quó segregation. As Tatum puts it, “For many African American adolescent males today, the seeds of intergenerational poverty and social dysfunction continue to be watered,” (2009). Tatum maintains that African American adolescent boys are reluctant readers, and eventually become struggling readers as a result, because they cannot engage with the reading materials offered to them in school (2009). Education is a female dominated sphere with little racial diversity. It makes sense that African American adolescent males (as well as those from other racial and ethnic minority groups) would be among those who are reluctant and subsequently struggling readers if their reading materials are being selected from a “white” female’s perspective on a regular basis. Tatum states that reading materials for this specific population of students must include content which the students can relate to effectively (2009). Specifically, Tatum proposes that

Educational practices for African American adolescent males living in high-poverty communities or economically disadvantaged homes in middle-income communities must have the interdisciplinary depth, theoretical grounding, and attention to responsive pedagogy necessary to address their needs within and among the many contexts in which their lives are being shaped: poverty, violence, premature sexual activity, fatherless households, negative gang influences, limited religious influences, and community destabilization. (2009)

These suggestions were made for the benefit of African American adolescent males struggling with reading, but the same ideas and strategies can be applied to other populations of struggling readers with the assumption that others will also benefit from
reading materials which enable them to make a personal connection with some aspects of the text.

English Language Learners (ELLs) also struggle with literacy and have some of the lowest reading test scores nationwide (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). As Wheeler pointed out, students who cannot read a standardized test will obviously not have high achievement scores (1949). Peregoy and Boyle state the same hypothesis,

“Even second language readers who are proficient in English have been found to read more slowly than native English speakers, attesting to the comprehension difficulties related to English language proficiency during reading (Fitzgerald, 1995). This fact calls into question the validity of standardized reading achievement test results for many English learners,” (2000).

In addition to the varying levels of English proficiency that are present in any ELL classroom, this student population is hugely diverse with students coming from different backgrounds and issues these students come from and experience (2006). Relatedly, these students are often forced to settle for ELL programs that are under-funded and underdeveloped, often in crowded rooms and less-than-the-best facility conditions (Rubenstein-Avila, 2003). An additional factor includes a first language
which is also lacking in literacy development because their families moved frequently — resulting in much missed education in either language (Rubenstein-Avila, 2003; Vardell et al, 2006; Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). Therefore, students in an ELL classroom are usually reading English with many different levels of proficiency (Rubenstein-Avila, 2003; Vardell et al, 2006; Peregoy & Boyle, 2000).

Struggling readers tend to be minorities for a plethora of reasons, but why do they tend to also be males? There are gender inequities in reading instruction and males tend to struggle more with reading. Some have suggested that three out of four struggling readers are male (Rog and Kropp, 2001). Other researchers and educational professionals state that this inequity is a result of reading instruction that caters to the female perspective in schools. As educational researcher and author Marlene Asselin puts it in a 2003 article for *Teacher Librarian*,

> “Gender differences in reading have become a major focus of research and are explained by at least five schools of thought (Gambell & Hunter, 2000). Unfortunately, the deficit perspective is dominant and boys are faulted for not being willing to engage in fiction, choosing to participate in sports instead of choosing to read, and basically not following school rules about what and how to read.”

Asselin argues in this article that boys in general simply do not like the kinds of literature they are made to read in school, namely fiction. According to Guzzetti, Young, Fyfe, & Hardenbrook (2002) boys “tend to focus on action rather than character development and relationships. They prefer ‘visual’ media—the Internet, nonfiction, newspapers, and magazines—that focus on sports, electronics, and games”(Guzzetti et al., 2002). Asselin says that “boys…don’t socialize as easily around texts as girls do” and this is because those who are avid readers read such a wide variety of materials (2003). As another
researcher and author put it, “many boys have views of reading we never hear about because most of what they read is passed over as insignificant,” (Meek, 1983).

The fact that fiction is heavily emphasized in both classrooms and school libraries is clear. The gender differences in book choices are common knowledge among practicing educators and librarians, with boys choosing non-fiction and informational texts and girls leaning more toward works of fiction. A former elementary school principal who is now a professor of education at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina wrote an article for The Reading Teacher (2005) about struggling readers. In the article she recounts a particular experience while teaching a fourth grade class.

“I had five reluctant readers (all boys), and I tried all kinds of things to motivate them to read. I can clearly remember them telling me that they didn’t want to read because ‘reading is dumb and silly.’ At the time, I thought this was just their way of rationalizing the fact that they weren’t good readers. I read to this fourth-grade class every day, but I am embarrassed to admit that I can’t think of a single nonfiction title I read aloud. I read Charlotte’s Web (White, 1952/1974) but never a book about real spiders. What if their “reading-is-dumb-and-silly” attitude was engendered by the fanciful text I so enjoyed reading to them?” (Cunningham, 2005)

When boys are reluctant to read, it may be because they do not enjoy the materials they have to choose from. Girls may have similar experiences and become reluctant and subsequent struggling readers in the middle grades. For example, according to many researchers (Ley, Schaer, & Dismukes, 1994; McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995) adolescents across the board begin to find reading school material uninteresting in the middle grades. Other researchers such as Ivey (1999) and Bintz (1993) suggest that adolescents do not lose interest in reading in general, but rather the materials they have to
read once they get older. As a researcher and teacher of reading education courses at Rutgers University, Gay Ivey shared numerous firsthand experiences with struggling middle grade readers in her article “Reflections on teaching struggling middle school readers” for the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. Casey, a sixth-grade student and self-declared former avid reader who wanted to explain her sudden disinterest in reading “wrote this note to her teacher:

> I used to love to read. But this year it's not as enjoyable. I don't know why but I plainly don't like it anymore. I guess it is because I have better things to do. Another reason may be that I can't find a book in the library that interests me. I mean the school library would be the only place I could get books right now. I have already read my books at home.

> I can relate to those people who say reading is boring now. I guess after you read so much you just get tired of it.

> Reading is kind of like a boy. You like (him) or reading for a long while. Then after so long you just don't like (him) or reading any longer.

> I thought you were suppose to enjoy reading as you got older. But it's just the opposite for me. As I get older reading is starting to interest me the least little bit.” (Ivey, 1999)

Ivey reported that a short time later Casey said she liked reading again after finding a new series of books that captured her interest. Ivey’s example of Casey showed that “regardless of ability or general inclination to read, interesting materials are needed to develop and sustain engaged middle school readers,” (1999).

In summary, this literature review has shown that reluctant and struggling readers are of both genders and come from all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, though they are heavily concentrated in males and underprivileged minorities. The general reason given as to why these students struggle with reading is that they lose
interest in their reading materials, particularly around adolescence. One theory for this sudden shift in adolescents from loving (or at least, liking) reading to hating it is partially because these students are at a time in their human developments when they feel a need to focus on who they are and who they are becoming. Texts that do not offer these readers some mirror image of whom they are and/or whom they want to be simply do not interest them.

**What helps these readers?**

**Interesting Materials**

A literature survey shows that struggling readers are mostly males who lose interest in reading, often because they cannot personally relate to the materials pre-selected for them in schools. Struggling readers may also be girls and boys who are simply not interested in the materials for a plethora of personal reasons, or who are reluctant to read because they experience difficulty comprehending on-grade level texts. Effective strategies from librarians and educators include giving students free choice of materials, as well as calling their attention to materials which they may find interesting while not so difficult as to become frustrating.

**Adult Support**

The issue is not entirely a matter of interest. Current and previous research suggest that environment factors also play a large role in determining a student’s ability to read, such as parental involvement (Shaver & Walls, 1998) and socioeconomic status.
(Wheeler, 1949; Tatum, 2009). The authors of *Is Literacy Enough? Pathways to Academic Success for Adolescents* cite the presence of caring adults to be a main factor in whether a student will drop out of high school, saying “It is unlikely that adolescents who feel that they have no supportive, caring adults in their lives will persist through the challenges of high school,” (Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007). Tatum labels the phenomenon “learned helplessness” (2009) or as Snow et al state, “the throwing-up-the-hands response” (2007) to adolescents struggling with reading. The case studies done by Snow et al showed many children, “…growing up in homes in which adults did not have the personal or financial means to provide support, and even more examples of students who could find nothing to connect them to their teachers or their classmates in school,” (2007). The analysis of the reasons behind this lack of adult support or presence in adolescents’ lives is another research study and is beyond the scope of this paper.

Additionally, Rubinstein-Avila’s case study of an adolescent ELL student showed his positive experience with teachers who believed in him, making his current school year completely different from all years prior. She says,

“But this year had been different; it had been his best. According to Miguel, the caring and support from both his core teachers was what made him come around. ‘Ms. Domingo and Ms. Molina, they, like, really care about me and they believe in me. I’m not just a student to them; they like me. They, like, always try to help me out; they, like, want me to do my best, and they always helping me.’” (2003)

In order to feel confident about their success as readers, these students need to know that their educators care about them as individuals.

*Helping English language learners: Strategies specific to those learning English*
English language learners are individuals with unique experiences in both life and languages. Keeping this diversity in mind is key when helping these students acquire English literacy skills. As Peregoy and Boyle said,

“Learning as much as possible about individual English learners is essential to planning effective literacy instruction, especially in the broad areas we have discussed in this article: English language proficiency, prior knowledge and life experiences, and literacy in the primary language. This kind of information makes it possible to validate students for what they do know and build from there.” (2000)

A starting point is the student’s level of cultural background knowledge that would help them comprehend subject matters more easily as they read. Peregoy and Boyle suggest more hands-on experiences for students with little background knowledge of American culture or history, saying that “building background knowledge on a text topic through first-hand experiences such as science experiments, museum visits, and manipulatives can facilitate success in reading,” (2000). Another suggestion from these researchers is specific instruction on the structure of English texts, such as poems, story plots, expository essays, etc., because “For example, knowing how a story plot or a cause/effect argument is structured can facilitate reading comprehension in those genres,” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000). Combining acquisition of cultural background knowledge along with knowledge of text compositions can help ELL students increase both word recognition and comprehension of the materials they read (Peregoy & Boyle, 2000).

Also aiding in comprehension are texts of which the reader already has ample background knowledge. Research has shown that students are more likely to engage in texts if they see authentic, accurate representations of themselves and/or their culture within. Some educators may find the task of identifying culturally rich texts for ELL
students challenging because they have different backgrounds from the students, but many researchers have found that culturally sensitive instruction does not require that educators be a member of the same race, nationality, culture, language, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status as their students (Au & Raphael, 2000; Rubinstein-Avila, 2003). Choosing culturally representative texts may be difficult and daunting, but is pivotal for these students nonetheless. Vardell et al warn about bilingual books, saying “Just because a book may be translated into Spanish or contain a few Spanish words, it may not be a culturally authentic work of literature,” (2006). For example, the Arthur books by Marc Brown are often translated into Spanish but we would not call these books culturally representative of the Hispanic populations. If ELL students desire to read non-culturally authentic books they may certainly do so, but it is imperative to also make culturally representative texts available to these students.

When selecting texts, consideration of “survival” content has also been found to be helpful (Vardell et al, 2006). This content gives beginning ELL students vocabulary they need immediately, on topics such as “time and money, school, colors, days of the week, months of the year, signs and symbols, foods, weather, clothing, family, homes, occupations, and animals,” (Vardell et al, 2006).

Educators should also be aware that humor does not translate well. Books that non-ELL struggling readers may enjoy and find funny could be lost on ELL students. Vardell et al attest to this, warning that “puns, parodies, irony, and sarcasm are communicated differently in different languages…. Beginning English learners are not going to understand the humor even with an explanation,” (2006).
Learning from solutions for ELL students: Strategies applicable to other struggling readers

There are effective strategies for ELL students based on their individual needs that impact their success as readers and can easily be applied to other populations of struggling readers. As the literature indicates, ELL students come from many different languages, cultures, countries, and literacy levels. Other populations of struggling readers also include students of diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Educators of ELL students, as well as all other struggling readers, must acknowledge the diversity in their classrooms to teach reading effectively.

In addition to this instruction, careful attention should be paid to the texts that are selected for ELL students as well as any struggling reader. Peregoy and Boyle advocate for the use of “short, simple pieces such as poems, pattern books, songs, simple directions, or recipes” for beginning English language learners, but caution that care should be taken when selecting these types of texts for older students to “assure that text content is age-appropriate,” (2000). However, an ELL student’s or other struggling reader’s lower reading level may not reduce the pool of age-appropriate texts as much as one would assume. Many picture books are still very appropriate for these students, as Vardell et al point out:

“Given these considerations, picture books in English may often be the most appropriate literature choice, even with older students. Many picture books have broad accessibility across grade levels and age ranges. Indeed, the sophisticated illustrations and controversial content and themes of some recently published picture books make them more suitable for older students…Highly visual books help provide scaffolding as students begin by ‘reading the pictures.’ This method can build confidence and independence…” (2006).
Therefore, in many cases, selecting picture books and graphic novels may be the best route for struggling readers and ELL students.

Also, reading aloud may be a solution for all struggling readers, whether they are English language learners or not. Having a text read aloud to students, particularly one that is culturally relevant and/or engaging, can motivate them to read the text on their own which would in turn boost their comprehension and fluency skills. Vardell et al also point out that reading aloud gives ELL students “…extensive practice with their new language—opportunities to hear and use English in a variety of purposeful, authentic contexts,” (2006). Peregoy and Boyle stress the importance of modeling “sticking with a text” that is challenging when reading it aloud and walking the students through the comprehension “…by reading and discussing one paragraph at a time. Other strategies include pairing students to read to each other, with the teacher on hand to assist through rough spots,” (2000). Vardell et al also recommend that reading be a shared activity between students and their educators, suggesting other activities besides read-alouds and book buddies such as story retellings, book talks, literature circles and other assignments that require students to read, reflect, and respond (2006).

Vardell et al point out several elements to consider when selecting texts for English language learners. For picture books, content accessibility is very important for this population of students. The content must provide enough background knowledge of the subject (or build on background knowledge the student already has) so that English comprehension is aided instead of impeded by the subject matter (Vardell et al, 2006).

Language accessibility of picture books is important to consider when selecting texts for any population of struggling readers—the student must be able to read and
comprehend without getting too frustrated at the difficulty of the text (Vardell et al, 2006). Visual accessibility is also important, so the pictures complement the subject matter and aid in comprehension rather than distract from it, and genre accessibility should also be considered because “Just as the classroom reflects diversity, the school and classroom library should, too—through a rich array of genres and topics,” (Vardell et al, 2006).

When selecting fiction books for ELL students and other struggling readers, again background knowledge of the culture can be especially helpful. As Vardell et al advise, “Fiction titles that spring from the students’ cultures are ideal in providing familiarity for ease of comprehension as well as for identifying with story characters. Thus, there is an impetus for seeking quality multicultural literature reflecting many cultures.” (2006)

While some may argue that introducing ELL students to cultures unfamiliar to their own through works of fiction could serve as important cultural lessons, this approach may not be best when the goal is to increase proficiency in reading English. Works of fiction that are “…full of flashbacks or colloquial expressions can be challenging for beginning English learners to understand,” (Vardell et al 2006). However, “…themes in contemporary picture books and novels such as fitting in, being different, moving and adjusting, separating from family, or seeking one’s place in the world are appealing to English learners,” (Vardell et al, 2006) and arguably will also be appealing to all readers, struggling or not, who may experience these same issues.

The professional literature indicates that many struggling readers, especially boys, tend to prefer non-fiction over fiction. Non-fiction is also a tool useful to ELL students
and other struggling readers to supplement curriculum and hard-to-understand textbooks (Vardell et al, 2006).

Poetry should be highlighted for its benefits to ELL students and other struggling readers, as well (Hadaway, Vardell, and Young, 2001). Fluency in written and oral English may be enhanced. According to Vardell et al,

“Rhyming poetry, for example, provides the sound qualities helpful for predicting words and phrases. Concrete or shape poems use the visual layout of the poem along with words to describe an object or experience. Even free verse poetry helps students focus on the arrangement of words on the page and on the description and emotion that those words can provide. Listening to the spoken word is an important first step in learning any language. Poetry is an ideal entry into language learning for English learners because of its rhythm, repetition, and rhyme…” (2006).

In addition to these benefits for ELL students, many struggling readers may appreciate the manageability and brevity of poems (Vardell et al, 2006). Poetry also offers opportunities for student read-alouds and performances. Having ELL students read poetry aloud promotes oral fluency in an engaging activity (Vardell et al, 2006). Other struggling readers may also benefit greatly from read-aloud activities centered on poetry. Ivey (1999) stresses the positive outcomes of student performance, noting a sense of pride in their own work (especially when given time to practice and perfect the delivery of their poems) while simultaneously increasing vocabulary and fluency.
The librarian’s role in helping struggling readers—Ideas and inferences from research

The success of all students in the school is the main concern of all educators, including the school librarian. Having discovered the strategies shown to work with struggling readers, what is the school librarian’s role in implementing these with students who struggle to read?

The American Association of School Libraries offers that “by explicitly teaching and co-teaching reading comprehension strategies, [Library Media Specialists] can make a positive impact on students’ reading development. These strategies are easily integrated into classroom-library lesson plans and story time learning objectives,” (Moreillon, 2006). What are these reading comprehension strategies? According to school librarian, researcher, and author Judi Moreillon in Collaborative Strategies for Teaching Reading Comprehension: Maximizing Your Impact (2006), there are seven strategies for reading comprehension: background knowledge, sensory images, questioning, predictions and inferences, main ideas, fix-up options, and synthesis.

AASL defines ‘background knowledge’ as “your personal history based on: what you read, what you’ve seen, your adventures, experiences of day to day life, your relationships, your passion,” (American Association of School Librarians, 2011a). ‘Sensory images’ as a reading comprehension strategy refers to visualizing, or creating
“sensory mental images from written or oral text,” (AASL, 2011b). Developing questions related to the text is key to thinking critically about the text. According to AASL, “authentic/strategic questions prompt thinking, don’t always have one right answer, cause [the] reader to wonder or ponder, dispel or clarify confusion, challenge the reader to rethink one’s opinion, lead the reader to seek out further information, and may require further research,” (2011c). Making inferences means “…merge[ing] background knowledge with clues in the text to come up with an idea that is not explicitly stated by the author,” and inferences are used to make predictions about the text that “can be confirmed or contradicted by the end of the story or text,” (AASL, 2011d). Determining the main ideas of a text is also a key strategy in reading comprehension, as successful readers need to be able to identify the most important information in a text (AASL, 2011e). The term ‘fix-up options’ refers to when a reader has lost comprehension, realizes this, and makes decisions about how to regain it (AASL, 2011f). Finally, ‘synthesis’ as a reading comprehension strategy happens when readers “…construct meaning from what they read by gaining a new perspective or thought,” (AASL, 2011g).

The AASL’s Standards for the 21st Century Learner is an American Library Association publication that offers “…vision for teaching and learning to both guide and beckon our profession as education leaders.” The standards are communicated in terms of benchmarks, and Moreillon (2009) has matched some of these 21st Century Learner benchmarks to the seven reading comprehension strategies. The table relating the benchmarks with the comprehension strategies is below. Moreillon’s work shows that, not only is the reading comprehension of all students a concern of the school librarian,
reading comprehension is a key part of the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Skills that school librarians are charged with imparting to every student in their respective schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Comprehension Strategies (Zimmermann and Hutchins)</th>
<th>Indicators from Standards for the 21st-century Learner (AASL)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Background Knowledge</td>
<td>Use prior and background knowledge as context for new learning. (1.1.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read widely and fluently to make connections with own self, the world, and previous reading. (4.1.2)</td>
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<td>Recognize when, why, and how to focus efforts in personal learning. (4.4.3)</td>
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<td>Connect ideas to own interests and previous knowledge and experience. (4.1.5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sensory Images</td>
<td>Read, view, and listen for pleasure and for personal growth. (4.1.1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Use visualization and imagination to strengthen understanding (comprehension) and enjoyment. (Judi's inference)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>Develop and refine a range of questions to frame search for new understanding. (1.1.3)</td>
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<td>Find, evaluate, and select appropriate sources to answer questions. (1.1.4)</td>
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<td>Display initiative and engagement by posing questions and investigating the answers beyond the collection of superficial facts. (1.2.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predictions and Inferences</td>
<td>Use prior and background knowledge as a context for new learning. (1.2.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read, view, and listen for information presented in any format (e.g., textual, visual, media, digital) in order to make inferences and gather meaning. (1.1.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Ideas</td>
<td>Organize knowledge so it is useful. (2.1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fix-up Options</td>
<td>Monitor own information-seeking processes for effectiveness and progress, and adapt as necessary. (1.4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesizing</td>
<td>Make sense of information gathered from diverse sources by identifying misconceptions, main and supporting ideas, conflicting information, and point of view or bias. (1.1.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                                                           | Continue an inquiry-based research process by applying critical-thinking skills (analysis, synthesis,
Concrete ideas for the librarian

Very few research or professional articles mentioned the school library or librarian when talking about how to help struggling readers. The literature has shown that in order to go from struggling to successful readers, students need interesting and culturally relevant texts, individual solutions, and adult support. The librarian can aid struggling readers by developing the school library collection, collaborating with all teachers to tailor the instruction of information skills to these students, and creating library programs that foster literacy and an environment of support.

Developing the library collection so that it includes culturally relevant and enabling texts for reluctant and struggling readers should be a main concern of the school librarian. Librarians can then highlight these books in the library and talk to teachers about using them in their classes, particularly with the struggling readers. Additionally, librarians can consult with teachers about purchasing manageable non-fiction texts to best supplement their curriculum. These texts may be offered to struggling readers who have difficulty reading their text books.
Reading comprehension skills can easily be built into any library, research, or technology lesson. When collaborating with teachers, librarians can tailor all or parts of their lessons to students who have trouble with reading comprehension. For example, Vardell et al found it helpful for ELL students when teachers and librarians were able to model “…how non-fiction authors use reference aids (for example, maps, tables of contents, indexes, and glossaries) as well as how the text is organized with headings and subheadings, boxes and sidebars, and illustrations and graphic aids (including charts, graphs, and timelines),” (2006). Information literacy is easily combined with both English language learning and building reading comprehension.

When thinking of school library programming, the librarian should make struggling readers some of the targets. Family read aloud nights, poetry slams, read aloud book clubs, and storytelling clubs can all engage struggling readers in performance arts that simultaneously absorb students into texts and give them a sense of pride and accomplishment in their performances. Having school administrators, other teachers, and parents come to the library to spectate shows adult support for these students.

To assist librarians seeking to target their libraries for improvements that would aid struggling readers I have gathered four helpful resources. The first may be found at [http://www.readingrockets.org/audience/professionals/librarians] and is a list of resources created specifically for librarians dealing with struggling readers and includes a toolkit developed in collaboration with Reading Rockets (a WETA organization developed to help struggling readers), AASL, and the Association for Library Services to Children.
The second helpful resource is called the ‘School Librarian’s Role in Reading Toolkit’ and was developed by AASL. This toolkit contains useful handouts in .pdf formats as well as PowerPoint presentations on how the librarian can have an active role in fostering literacy skills in the school through collaboration with teachers and understanding reading comprehension strategies. Additionally, the toolkit contains resources on using Web 2.0 tools to aid in fostering reading in the school. The toolkit may be found at this URL:

[http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/aaslissues/toolkits/slroleinreading.cfm]

Next is a poetry selection aid for ELL students that will also be helpful for other struggling readers. The article is called “Choosing and sharing poetry with ESL students” and was published in the April/May 2002 issue of Book Links. Written by prominent ELL researchers and authors Hadaway, Vardell, and Young, this article is an excellent starting point for a librarian wishing to beef up his or her poetry collection with the intent of providing more reading options for struggling readers. The article contains an annotated bibliography of poetry collections divided into ten categories: poetry basics, multicultural and bilingual poetry, poetry for social studies, poetry for science, poetry for mathematics, poetry about school, poetry about seasons and weather, poetry about animals, models for writing poetry, and poetry picture books.

The fourth and final resource for librarians seeking aid in collection development for struggling readers is HIP—High Interest Publishing. This publisher exclusively produces books that are considered “hi-lo,” or “high-interest, low reading level.” Librarians can select based on Lexile levels as well as offer companion teaching guides as a resource to teachers. HIP offers titles suitable in content for grades 4-12, including
the “HIP Edge” series with gritty, urban stories and the new “HIP Fantasy” series. The HIP website is [http://www.hip-books.com].
Summary and Conclusions

In summary, a survey of the research and professional literature on struggling readers shows that they are mostly male and particularly concentrated in underprivileged, minority populations. Students learning the English language are also very likely to struggle with reading in English.

Research shows that struggling with reading has serious life-long implications. Students who struggle with reading and mature into adults who still read with difficulty often hold less steady jobs, make less money, and are statistically more likely to go to prison. Adults who do not read proficiently also tend to participate less in society by not going to as many concerts, museums, sporting events, and other societal events than those who are proficient readers. These adults also are less likely to participate in other civic activities such as voting. All of this information is evidence of a correlation between reading skills (or lack thereof) and quality of life as an adult. To prove a relationship between reading ability and quality of life, a longitudinal study needs to be done.

Professional literature overwhelmingly suggests that offering students struggling with reading interesting reading materials in diverse formats is the key to their reading and subsequent academic and life-long successes. Though some struggling readers will have gender and socioeconomic status in common, struggling readers make up a very diverse population in the school and this needs to be reflected in library purchasing decisions made to benefit them. The librarian may consult with the school reading specialists to select reading materials that will be interesting while still on a reading level
that students will not find too frustrating. These resources are often referred to as ‘Hi-Lo’, meaning, ‘high-interest, low reading level.’ Some publishers, including Capstone, offer materials specifically classified as ‘hi-lo’. Other publishers, such as HIP, or High Interest Publishing, offer these types of materials exclusively. However, the librarian should not focus solely on collecting engaging works of fiction for these students. Many struggling readers will prefer non-fiction subject matter and many will also desire to read poetry because its brevity makes reading a less frustrating task.

In addition to collection development, the librarian may work with ELL teachers and reading specialists to create programs meant to engage these students in reading. Reading aloud to others may be a very positive experience for those struggling to read. The chance to practice reading a poem or excerpt of a story builds vocabulary and oral fluency, as well as giving students motivation to read in preparation of their performance in front of their peers, parents, and/or educators and school administrators. The librarian could assist in creating poetry slam clubs, family read aloud nights in the library, or other activities that would accomplish these same goals.

In conclusion, the school librarian not only has the power to help struggling readers in a way that positively impacts them for the rest of their lives, but he or she has the responsibility to do so. Struggling readers are individuals—not a cluster of low test scores. Helping them achieve in reading will help them achieve in life, and it is our duty as educators to make this happen.
References


