INDEPENDENT READING: PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES
OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Education

MAY 2011

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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Acknowledgements

This work is grounded in the significant support and expertise I received from the faculty and staff of Washington State University. Specifically, I am grateful to the members of my committee: Dr. Mary Roe, whose broad knowledge of literacy issues continues to push me to consider perspectives beyond my own; Dr. Joy Egbert, whose outspoken common sense keeps me focused on what really matters; and Dr. Dawn Shinew, whose calm wisdom is an ongoing source of inspiration. A special thanks to Dr. Janine Darragh, who opened up her home and her own doctoral journey; I continue to benefit from her advice and her example.

This study would not have been possible without the generosity of the eight teachers showcased in this inquiry. They welcomed me into their classrooms and their teaching, providing unfettered access to their thoughts, their practices, and their students. Their clear dedication to integrating reading into their students’ lives helps to maintain my hope in the possibilities for books to contribute to the growth of all children.

Certainly not least of all, I owe a debt of gratitude to my family and friends, who never wavered in their faith in my ability to accomplish this goal. Many times throughout this journey it was their support and sacrifices that kept my feet on the path. It is to Jeremy, Brittany, and Zachary, with whom I first shared my love of books and reading, that I dedicate this work. They have always been and always will be my inspiration to succeed. And finally to Dale, whose day to day and year to year efforts enable me to reach higher than I ever could have alone. He took my dream and made it his own; my accomplishment is his accomplishment.
INDEPENDENT READING: PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES
OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

Abstract

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May 2011

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In this qualitative study, teachers’ understandings, perspectives, and practices related to independent reading are examined through classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, a teacher survey, and classroom artifacts. Utilizing a theoretical framework based on the work of Ruddell and Unrau (2004), this study acknowledges the significant role teacher understandings about instruction and teacher practices during instruction play on the literacy learning process and specifically on teachers’ classroom use of independent reading. The commonalities in beliefs and practices regarding independent reading of eight highly effective elementary teachers lead to better insight regarding the use of independent reading as a component of literacy instruction. Implications for practical application of these findings include structuring of independent reading events that incorporate ongoing teacher guidance, a focus on student learning, and a foundation in student needs. This increased understanding provides the impetus to follow up with investigations into the efficacy of independent reading that includes these components to positively affect students’ reading achievement.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The value of reading to positively impact students’ reading development is a widely held and commonly accepted belief in the education community. Allington (2006) states that if he could change one aspect of the school curriculum, he would drastically increase the amount of actual reading done by students during the school day. His unequivocal support for increased reading practice in the instruction of reading follows decades of examination of his own studies and those of others that demonstrate a link between increased reading and reading achievement. Guthrie (2004) explains that part of his support for greater amounts of reading practice is based on the examination of a number of specialized occupations, including wrestling, skating, piano playing, and others, in which the quantity of practice significantly impacts proficiency; experts typically spend 500% more time engaged in the performance of a skill than do novices. Guthrie states his doubt that reading is the first activity in the human condition in which practice would not lead to improved performance. Belief in the power of reading has frequently been spurred by studies (e.g. Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990; Leinhardt, Zigmond, & Cooley, 1981; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000) as well as popular opinion that point to the conclusion that practice in reading does indeed generate improved reading abilities in students.

One classroom opportunity for reading practice, independent reading, is highly regarded and often recommended for inclusion in reading programs (National Reading Panel, 2000). However, the ways that independent reading is utilized in real practice vary so much as to defy clear guidelines for effective implementation. As an educator for 19 years, I developed my own form of independent reading for elementary classrooms that included setting reading purposes, encouraging student choices, acting as a problem-solving resource, and conducting culminating activities. I have seen colleagues utilize independent reading in a variety of other ways in their
classrooms, based on their own individual understanding of its methods of implementation as well as their views of its value in advancing literacy learning. Alternately, there are teachers who question the value of classroom independent reading or who fail to put it into practice; in some elementary classrooms, independent reading time holds little significance in the instructional process. In each of these varied cases, the use of independent reading is conducted in almost as many different ways as there are teachers using it. No consistent understanding seems to exist among classroom teachers regarding either the value of independent reading or the most promising methods of its use in the elementary classroom.

This lack of uniformity among practitioners mirrors the field of literacy research, which has failed to establish agreed-upon standards for the practice of independent reading, especially in pursuit of effecting student reading growth. For example, the National Reading Panel report (2000) failed to provide a clear explanation of independent reading in its synthesis of studies exploring the impact of increased student reading on reading achievement. The Panel relied on a list of 30 search terms from various reference sources to perform an electronic search for research literature related to the topic of increased reading. Their list of terms included

*independent reading, free reading, voluntary reading, recreational reading, sustained silent reading*, and others in common use in scholarship and in instructional settings. A single term or set of principles that characterize the act of providing students with increased time to read on their own appears to defy consensus, though the National Reading Panel report states that most of the studies that fit their selection criteria examined sustained silent reading (SSR) and other similarly labeled programs.

Classroom implementation of independent reading methods varies widely with predictably uneven results, perhaps as a result of a lack of scholarship identifying its most
beneficial methods of application. In spite of a call by the National Reading Panel (2000) for clarification of the types of independent reading programs in use, little research consideration has been given to this topic. Especially lacking is information regarding teachers’ viewpoints and resulting practices regarding independent reading. Of significance, there has been a perplexing lack of attention to the ways that highly effective literacy teachers understand and implement independent reading in their classrooms.

There has been an influx of studies (e.g. Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998; Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004; Pressley et al., 2001; Taylor et al., 2000; Knapp and Associates, 1995; Designs for Change, 1998; Puma et al., 1997) focused on defining the teaching practices of highly effective literacy teachers, demonstrating a belief in the significance of such knowledge to increase our understanding of the principles of effective literacy instruction. However, there has been little attempt to examine the classroom independent reading practices of highly effective literacy teachers in order to allow that knowledge to enrich our understanding of potentially beneficial uses of independent reading. The problem to be addressed in this study is a lack of understanding in the literacy field regarding the perspectives that highly effective teachers hold about independent reading and the ways these views are manifest in classroom literacy practices. More clarity regarding the ways that highly effective teachers of literacy apply independent reading practices in their classrooms may be instructive in shining a light on the most promising ways to utilize independent reading in the pursuit of student reading achievement.

**Theoretical Perspective**

The present study reflects a practitioner-based epistemology that honors and utilizes teacher knowledge, drawing on it to form conclusions regarding independent reading practices
for classroom use. Snow (2001) emphasizes the possibilities for expanding our educational research base with the wealth of practical knowledge possessed by teacher practitioners. Ruddell (2004) further explains that examining the practices of effective teachers will enrich our knowledge base of high-quality teaching. He states that such enhanced understanding will lead to increased opportunities for more effective teacher preparation and teacher in-service programs.

Seemingly, teachers in actual practice hold pedagogical and content information that is not sufficiently acknowledged nor accessed in drawing conclusions about effective literacy instruction. Collins Block, Oakar, and Hurt (2002) emphasize the possibilities for increased professional knowledge to be gained by examining "the processes of expertise in action" (p. 179), in the form of the practices of highly effective classroom teachers. These authors echo calls from The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1998), The National Reading Research Panel (1999), and the International Reading Association (2000) to explore how theories of literacy instruction are embedded in exemplary practice. In the current study, forming a clearer understanding of independent reading based on the views and practices of highly effective literacy teachers honors and makes use of the expertise that highly skilled classroom practitioners possess to create a better knowledge of the most promising components of the classroom use of independent reading.

Additionally, this examination draws on the sociocognitive perspective of Ruddell and Unrau (2004) who developed a model to explain the meaning-negotiation and meaning-construction process that occurs in reading in a classroom context. This theory acknowledges the significant role teacher understandings about instruction and teacher practices during instruction play on the literacy learning process. Within Ruddell and Unrau’s model, the outcomes of instructional decision-making stem from a combination of (a) teachers’ affective conditions such
as instructional beliefs and philosophy, and (b) teachers’ cognitive conditions of conceptual and instructional knowledge. Subsequent opportunities for literacy learning occur as teachers conduct instruction based on these co-existing conditions. The current study will rely on these model components to examine highly effective teachers’ understandings and perspectives related to independent reading and the ways these conditions prompt independent reading to be enacted in their classrooms.

In joining perspectives that honor and employ practitioner knowledge and acknowledge the significance of teachers’ views and actions in reading classrooms, I act on Snow’s (2002) concern about the lack of a systemization that would allow researchers to draw upon teachers’ practical knowledge to enrich the field. I hope to uncover highly regarded teachers’ views of independent reading in order to develop a clearer understanding of its attributes. Once the components within this definition are clearly understood, the potential exists to explore how this version of independent reading might promote students’ reading achievement. While scholarship exists that attempts to explain some of the ways that independent reading practice may prompt student reading achievement, little is known about the perspectives of highly effective teachers who utilize independent reading with students. In summary, knowing more about what accomplished teachers think and do in actual practice can provide valuable insight regarding those characteristics that might allow independent reading to positively influence the reading achievement of students.

**Research Questions**

As the previous discussion indicates, the driving question that guides this investigation is: What attributes of independent reading are unique and what attributes are commonly held by
teachers regarded as highly effective teachers of literacy? The following guiding questions may
aid in responding to this inquiry:

1. What are highly effective teachers’ understandings and perspectives regarding independent
reading?

2. How do highly effective teachers and their students utilize independent reading in their
classrooms?

3. For these highly effective teachers and their students, what role does independent reading
serve?

Additional sub-questions may evolve during the course of this exploration and will be addressed
as their importance becomes evident.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Student reading in elementary classrooms has a long, varied, and uneven history (Pearson & Goodin, 2010). While such an examination is beyond the scope of this review, a better understanding of the ways that independent reading is currently viewed in the literacy field provides necessary background for an investigation of its use by elementary classroom teachers. An exploration of the literature surrounding independent reading for elementary students reveals that while reading is most often regarded favorably among educators, scholarship is mixed concerning the ways it shapes reading growth. A variety of theoretical and research-based work is cited to provide an overview of the varied stances with which independent reading is perceived and to prompt better understanding of the foundation on which practitioners might make their decisions regarding its use in their classrooms.

Value of Increased Reading

Numerous studies have led researchers to draw the conclusion that more reading leads to better reading, whether on individual components such as vocabulary or comprehension, or on overall reading ability. Much of the scholarship consists of correlational studies examining the potential for classroom reading, occurring in various forms, to impact students’ reading achievement. In other studies, connections are drawn between increased reading and other educational factors, leading researchers to tout student reading as a desirable component of classroom practice.

As one example, Taylor et al. (2000) conducted a study to pinpoint the school and classroom features that characterized effective reading programs, observing fourteen schools in different geographic locations around the country, including 22 kindergarten, 23 first-grade, 25 second-grade, and 22 third-grade teachers. In the study the researchers compared pre- and post-
testing and amounts of reading observed in classroom activities. One statistically significant factor they uncovered was that students in the most effective and moderately effective schools spent more time independently reading than did students in the least effective schools.

Fourth-grade students completing the 2009 NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) assessment were asked to report on the amount of time they spend reading (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). According to the NAEP report, students who read five or fewer pages per day scored lower than those who read more pages in school and for homework, and students who read for fun almost every day scored higher on the assessment than those who read for fun less frequently. Students who were provided with school time almost every day to read books they had chosen themselves scored higher than those who were given time less frequently to do so.

In an oft-cited work in which Stanovich (1986) synthesizes a body of research literature around individual differences in reading ability, he uses the term “Matthew effect” (p. 380) to define the cyclical nature of reading and reading growth. Findings suggest that students with the advantage of well-developed reading skills will read more and learn more from their ongoing reading, resulting in increased reading. Students with inadequate reading skills read less, resulting in less reading development. This rich-get-richer and poor-get-poorer hypothesis emphasizes Stanovich’s belief in the act of reading to enhance reading ability.

Some studies have examined the impact of reading practice specifically on vocabulary development. Cunningham and Stanovich (1991) conducted a study with upper level elementary students to examine whether print exposure resulted in gains in vocabulary development. The students were administered a Title Recognition Test in which they were asked to identify reading materials that were familiar to them, and those results were compared with their scores on a
variety of word-level assessments. When variables such as decoding were controlled, print exposure was found to be a significant predictor of vocabulary knowledge.

Nagy, Anderson, and Herman (1987) conducted a study with third-, fifth-, and seventh-grade students that was designed to replicate the way that students encounter unknown vocabulary in normal reading. Those who read text containing targeted vocabulary knew approximately three percent more of the difficult words than those who had not, demonstrating that students learn vocabulary during normal reading activities. The authors explain that although this seems like a small probability of learning a word through normal reading, the impact on long-term vocabulary growth widens when you consider the average amount of reading that is done. They acknowledge that single exposure to words probably doesn't provide enough in the way of conceptual relationships to make words fully known. However, the authors speculate that repeated exposure may promote internalization of the system of ideas in which a word exists, furthering a significant level of incidental vocabulary learning through normal reading.

A number of studies have demonstrated the influence of increased reading on students’ comprehension skills. Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, and Cox (1999) conducted a study with 271 third-grade and fifth-grade students examining reading amount as a predictor of text comprehension within a larger investigation of the effects of instructional intervention on reading achievement. When controlling for the contribution of past achievement and prior knowledge, reading amount was significantly predictive of conceptual learning from multiple texts. The researchers hypothesized from these results that reading increases fluency of the use of cognitive comprehension strategies through their practice during the act of reading.
Reutzel and Hollingsworth (1991) conducted a study exploring the impact of regular sustained self-selected reading, measured by a criterion-referenced reading skills test measuring four specific reading comprehension skills. Results showed significant gain from pretest to posttest on comprehension skills for all groups but no significant differences between the treatment groups. While this study did not demonstrate a positive impact on reading achievement, Reutzel and Hollingsworth conclude that this provided evidence, though limited, to support more time spent on independent reading without an adverse effect on tested reading skills, and they advocate further study on the issue.

Taylor et al. (1990) reported a study of 195 intermediate-level students who recorded the amount of their daily reading both in and out of school, focusing on the relationship between the students’ time spent reading and reading growth while accounting for the students’ pre-study reading proficiency. Results show that the minutes of time spent in silent reading per day in reading class significantly contributed to higher reading comprehension scores, supporting the belief that independent silent reading at school improved reading proficiency.

Krashen (2004a) conducted a meta-analysis examining 54 comparisons of programs that emphasized free reading versus more traditional reading instruction. The traditional programs emphasized assigned reading and direct instruction in grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and spelling. In 51 out of 54 (94%) of the studies, students in free reading programs did as well as or better than students in traditional programs on tests of reading comprehension. The longer each study was conducted, the more consistently the results showed the benefits of the free reading program over the traditional program. Krashen concluded that it is essential for educators to reconsider classroom practices in order to accommodate an increase in opportunities for students to engage in free reading.
Stanovich, West, Cunningham, Cipielewski, and Siddiqui (1996) emphasize their belief that reading contributes to cognitive and comprehension processes, based on a longitudinal study (Cipielewski & Stanovich, 1992) in which elementary students’ scores on measures of reading comprehension were compared to evidence of their exposure to print. The researchers state that reading is a very complicated process that requires unique processing skills and that these cognitive processes get an unusual amount of practice in the act of reading. Therefore, Stanovich et al. hypothesize that additional reading might have positive effects on component skills of reading including automatic word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, and content knowledge structures linked to reading comprehension.

In contrast to programs advocating student reading conducted without adult support, some studies have demonstrated the significance of direct teacher guidance and monitoring of students’ silent reading on students’ reading achievement. Taylor et al. (2000), in their study identifying school and classroom characteristics that typify effective reading programs, demonstrated the positive impact on achievement of increased independent reading but reiterated that teacher follow-up activities such as writing about reading might also enhance reading achievement. Leinhardt et al. (1981) emphasized the importance of teachers increasing reading time by decreasing students’ off-task behaviors. They reported on the observed quantity of reading done in classrooms of 105 learning disabled students and compared it to pre- and post-tests of the students’ reading ability. Their results indicate that additional teacher-directed silent reading increased test performance. Based on the outcomes of their study, Leinhardt et al. attempted to quantify the impact of this sort of guided reading practice on reading ability, stating that "these results suggest that an average of one minute per day of additional silent reading time increased posttest performance by one point. An increase of five minutes per day would be
equivalent to about one month (on a grade-equivalent scale) of additional reading achievement" (p. 355).

Other researchers agree that the way in which students participate in literacy activities has a demonstrated effect on their potential for impacting reading achievement. Wilkinson, Wardrop, and Anderson (1988), in reconsidering the results of the Leinhardt et al. (1981) study of silent reading impact, found that alternative models of the data suggest time spent on oral reading may have more of an effect on student achievement than time spent on silent reading. One conclusion they reached is that the low level reading abilities of learning disabled students may have made oral reading more effective: silent reading was beyond many students' range of abilities. In addition, oral reading demanded greater student participation and elicited greater teacher feedback, resulting in increased opportunities for impact. Other studies (e.g. Allington, 1984; Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2001; McCallum, Sharp, Bell, & George, 2004) have yielded mixed results regarding the benefits of oral versus silent reading for a variety of learners.

**Questioning the Link between Increased Reading and Reading Achievement**

Much scholarship appears to point toward a beneficial connection between reading practice and reading ability, often exemplified in the studies as proficiency on reading assessments. In spite of a general belief in reading as a positive activity, some reading scholars are hesitant to endorse an absolute link between reading practice and reading achievement without more definitive evidence. One such body who failed to find a confirmed link between additional time spent reading and an increase in reading achievement was the National Reading Panel (2000), which was assigned by the United States Congress in 1997 the task of examining and reporting back on the accumulated scholarship on reading practices. Their assessment of the research literature on encouraging students to read more, limited to experimental and quasi-
experimental research, found only 14 studies that met their selection criteria. Most of those studies were investigations of sustained silent reading (SSR) and similarly labeled programs. The panel failed to find conclusive evidence among these studies confirming that increasing the amount of reading a student does significantly impacts his or her reading ability. While they acknowledged that there are hundreds of correlational studies that demonstrate that the best readers read the most and the weakest readers read the least, they found in their examination no causational evidence confirming that increased reading led to increased reading achievement.

The National Reading Panel (2000) called for further research on the impact of reading practice on overall reading achievement and especially on fluency. Pearson and Goodin (2010) explain that the panel did not propose that independent reading in school was unimportant or ineffective, but merely that there wasn’t conclusive evidence allowing decisions to be made regarding its use as a classroom practice. However, Pearson and Goodin point out that that is exactly the conclusion reached by many policymakers, with resultant effects on the reduced use of reading in schools. Some in the field (e.g., Coles, 2000; Krashen, 2001, 2005) have disputed the conclusions of the National Reading Panel's report. Krashen (2004b) claims that many studies demonstrating the positive impact of greater reading were left out of the Panel’s examination because of the rigid criteria for inclusion. He joins others in expressing his concern over the impact of the conclusions in the report and especially of the ways that many of those conclusions are being used to determine district and state reading programs.

Carver and Leibert (1995) take issue with the "reading bootstrap" concept (p. 29) on which much reading theory and practice is based, which says that readers can raise their own abilities by mere practice alone. They explain that cognitive theorists consider problematic the premise that one can achieve a higher cognitive structure simply by practice without help or
direct instruction. Their contention is that improvement is impossible for students while reading below-level material because the reader is being exposed to nothing new; improvement is questionable with at-level material; and improvement is impossible with above-level material because the readers don't possess the skills to scaffold the new learning. In a six-week study with 43 students in a summer reading program, they failed to see reading practice lead to an increase in reading achievement. Though the study was conducted for only a limited amount of time, the researchers contend that the amount of reading that was done was closely equivalent to the amount of reading that would be done in a classroom if during a school year a teacher allocated 30 minutes of free reading time three times per week and the students read for half of that time. Results of their comparison of time spent reading and progress in reading skills questions the assumption that students can achieve a higher level of reading ability simply by reading, since neither group made substantial gains on posttest scores, with both groups remaining almost exactly the same. The researchers claim that their results provide fairly strong evidence that time spent on free reading alone provides no gain in reading level, vocabulary, reading rate, or reading efficiency. They argue that the practice of spending time on free reading during reading instructional periods should be questioned.

In a follow-up letter to the editor in *Reading Research Quarterly*, Rasinski and Linek (1995) question the study conducted by Carver and Leibert (1995) and the subsequent conclusions they draw regarding the lack of an impact by free reading on reading skills. Their claims focus on the failure of the study to include a control group that did no reading at all, the fact that the researchers pooled reading behaviors and variables instead of examining individual reading behaviors, and that the overall environment of the study was not conducive to growth in reading. They explain that these factors call into question the results reached in the study.
Other researchers, while not dismissing the reading practice-to-achievement link, propose a need for a further investigation into the types of reading practice that may impact different types of reading skills for students with different types of reading abilities. Perhaps not all types of increased reading activity lead to improvement in reading achievement in all students. For example, in an examination of the aspects of home background, home activities, and classroom activities that support reading development (Meyer & Wardrop, 1994), researchers discovered that the impact of literacy activities varied depending on the grade levels of students. Among second-grade students, school factors were more impactful on reading achievement than were home factors, which was not the case with the kindergarten and first-grade students in the study.

A student’s current reading proficiency may also have an impact on the ability of the student to acquire more advanced reading skills from reading practice. Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) acknowledge that exposure to print is an important source of advancing vocabulary knowledge, based on a study demonstrating that books introduce children to more varied vocabulary than either oral interactions or TV (Hayes & Ahrens, 1988). Snow et al. contend, however, that a study by Robbins and Ehri (1994) demonstrates that those children who are not progressing well already in the area of vocabulary may be less able to profit from this method. Stanovich et al. (1996) state that reading contributes to cognitive and comprehension processes in all children regardless of ability level but they acknowledge that some may benefit from print exposure more than others.

While there appears to be a general consensus regarding the positive nature of reading practice, disagreement exists around the specific factors that might allow it to benefit the reading growth of diverse groups of learners. Additionally, there is a lack of information regarding how increased reading might affect overall reading achievement, since most of the studies have
examined the connection between student reading and performance on assessed reading skills such as vocabulary and comprehension. Renewed efforts to study the implementation and outcomes of the classroom uses of independent reading, as called for by The National Reading Panel (2000), might provide better insight into its potential as a tool to positively affect student reading achievement.

**Defining Independent Reading**

One potential source of difficulty in establishing the impact of reading on reading achievement may lie in a lack of agreed-upon standards for what *reading* or *independent reading*, used for the purposes of effecting reading achievement, might include. For example, the National Reading Panel report (2000) failed to provide a clear explanation of independent reading in its synthesis, relying on terms found in the research literature that are used to define the act of providing students with increased time to read. Most of the studies that fit their selection criteria examined the impact of sustained silent reading (SSR) and similar programs such as uninterrupted sustained silent reading (USSR), drop everything and read (DEAR), and super quiet uninterrupted reading time (SQUIRT). The National Reading Panel explains that typical requirements for these programs are that students be provided with a regularly scheduled amount of time each day during which they are free to read material of their own choosing with no follow-up discussion or assignment requirements. Frequently adults model reading behaviors by participating in reading along with students.

Other literacy scholars provide similar definitions of SSR as it is used in classrooms. Pilgreen (2000) emphasizes that true SSR does not require any accountability measures, stating that such efforts are avoided in an attempt to simply immerse students in enjoyable reading. She explains that SSR is different from self-selected reading, during which students are still reading
books of their choice but which may include some measures of accountability such as student-teacher conferences or other follow-up activities. Pilgreen explains that both SSR and self-selected reading fall under the umbrella term free voluntary reading, which Krashen (1993) explains is any school program in which students are provided a time set aside for reading.

The term independent reading is most often found in explanations of reading workshops, of which independent reading is a significant component. Reutzel (1999) explains that in a reading workshop, individual students are engaged in reading opportunities while the teacher conducts small group lessons or conferences with other students and is also available to provide assistance that might be required by students reading independently. Calkins (2001) adds that independent reading occurring during reading workshop is usually silent, except in emergent and beginning readers. Calkins emphasizes that independent readers benefit from book discussions with peers or teachers.

**Current Status of Independent Reading in Elementary Classrooms**

In spite of a general belief and some research studies pointing to the value of independent reading to enhance reading achievement for students, its use as an integral part of reading programs in American elementary classrooms has diminished. Edmundson and Shannon (2002) explain that the National Reading Panel Report, which is used to define scientifically based reading instruction for Reading First and other literacy programs throughout American schools, declined to recommend sustained silent reading and similar independent reading activities as a classroom practice with scientific backing. Edmundson and Shannon speculate that this omission has resulted in independent reading being largely removed from literacy instruction plans in many schools, in favor of more direct instruction in the pursuit of higher test scores.
As evidenced in this review of literature, and while acknowledging concerns about the strength of this support and the lack of causal warrant, empirical evidence exists that supports the influence of reading practice on aspects of reading achievement as well as on overall reading achievement. This research leaves a number of issues unaddressed. First, the ways that independent reading occurs in these studies is inconsistent. This failure to operationalize independent reading has resulted in scholarship that provides no clear direction for literacy practitioners or researchers.

Second, a noticeable lack of attention has been paid to the ways that teachers perceive independent reading and utilize it in actual classroom practice. A number of studies (Collins Block et al. 2002; Mohan, Lundeberg, & Reffitt, 2008; Taylor et al. 2000; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003; Wharton-McDonald et al. 1998; Pressley et al, 2001; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996) focused on identifying characteristics held in common by effective literacy teachers. However, while independent reading was part of the mix, its unique properties remain underdefined. Startlingly little notice has been paid to the specific ways that effective teachers utilize independent reading in their literacy classrooms or the views they hold regarding its use. The need remains for better awareness of the ways that highly effective teachers understand and use independent reading. A qualitative examination of their words and actions can fill this void. Such insight may provide a window into the possibilities for independent reading as a classroom practice by defining those attributes that accompany and define it. This tight definition of independent reading could then set the stage for future studies that investigate the causal links between independent reading and students’ reading progress. Based on these findings, it might also further enable professional learning opportunities to wisely position independent reading in teachers’ elementary classrooms.
Chapter 3: Methods

The purpose of this study is to better understand the ways that highly effective teachers utilize independent reading in their classrooms as well as the perspectives they hold regarding its use. I accomplished these objectives by observing teachers’ actions and by hearing from the teachers themselves about the reasoning that grounds their independent reading practices. In order to accomplish these goals, a qualitative design was employed that allowed multiple forms of simultaneously collected data to address these research questions.

Researcher Role

Researcher participation and interpretation is acknowledged in the data collection and analysis phases of this study, as well as in the conclusions drawn. This more active role finds support in the work of Hill Collins (1990). For Hill Collins, the practice of embedding herself in her research instead of attempting to distance herself and her experiences from her participants provides unique points of view that might differ from a more objective stance. This is the attitude I held as I watched teachers conduct the business of their classrooms and listened to their perspectives regarding their practices. My teacher background allowed me to place the activities I viewed in a context that promoted understanding of the teacher experience. In addition, when the teacher participants realized that I had years of background as an elementary teacher and was familiar with what they encountered on a daily basis, they seemed to relax and treat me as a colleague with whom they could share perspectives that I would understand.

On the other hand, it was important to recognize that I was interacting with teachers as a university representative and researcher. This could place me in an outsider position by the teacher participants. Tilley (1998) emphasizes the significance of acknowledging the outsider position that a researcher may occupy, especially when that position may be tied to perceived
power inequalities. She recommends that academic researchers working in education settings become familiar enough with the research setting to maintain respectful interactions and to avoid perceptions of exploitation. I was careful in all phases of this study to demonstrate my respect for teachers’ classroom authority and expertise and to acknowledge that it was their perspectives on which I was basing my investigations. My goal was to utilize my former-teacher and current-researcher perspectives to gain greater clarity of teacher viewpoints and classroom situations and to privilege teacher knowledge in creating reasonable and useful implications from the results.

**Independent Reading for this Study**

In addition to defining my role in this study, it was also imperative to clearly establish how the term *independent reading* would be used for the purposes of this work. There are a multitude of terms in use by literacy educators and scholars to talk about providing students with reading practice. Along with *independent reading* (e.g. Topping, Samuels, & Paul, 2007) terms such as *silent reading* (Pearson & Goodin, 2010), *free voluntary reading* (Krashen, 1993), *scaffolded silent reading* (Reutzel, Jones, & Newman, 2010), *book flood* (Elley, 2000) and numerous others dot the reading literature. While certain characteristics are sometimes attributed to specific types of reading practice, in other cases the terms appear to be used interchangeably. I chose to use the term *independent reading* since it is in wide use by literacy scholars and practitioners and it seems to be free of some of the attributes that signify other terms.

In the data collection stage of the study I purposely did not define for teacher participants the term independent reading. I hoped this would allow the teachers in my study wide latitude to explain their own understandings of the ways they provided reading practice in their classrooms. I also did not initially limit my observations of reading events to those that fit preconceived notions I held about what independent reading in classrooms might look like. This provided me
with the opportunity to allow a definition of independent reading to develop over the course of my data collection, according to events I witnessed and from teachers’ explanations of their independent reading use. During initial observations and interviews I recorded all episodes of student reading. Later, I focused more specifically on recording data about reading events that were aligned with teachers’ prescribed ideas of independent reading times as well as other times that students were reading that did not appear to be teacher-led reading opportunities.

In the analysis stage of the study it became necessary to make decisions about what reading events I would include as I organized the data. At that point, based on teacher observations and interviews as well as on literacy scholarship, I applied the following criteria to reading events that I would include under the umbrella term *independent reading*: A reading event is included as an episode of independent reading when one or more students were engaged at any time during the school day in reading text or related text features such as illustrations, either aloud or silently, in materials other than those assigned to be read by the teacher. Related activities include those specifically related to independent reading, occurring either before, during, or after independent reading episodes.

**Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of eight in-service elementary classroom teachers in school districts in a state in the northwestern United States. In order to identify potential teacher participants, elementary school principals representing a variety of demographic areas and student populations were asked to nominate elementary teachers whom they considered highly effective teachers of literacy. Recent studies (Wharton-McDonald et al., 1998; Bohn et al., 2004) have relied on school administrators to make initial identifications of highly effective teachers, from whom researchers subsequently select participants based on follow-up criteria. Wharton-
McDonald et al. asked language arts coordinators to nominate teachers whom they considered to be exceptional at helping their students achieve literacy success. The coordinators were permitted to use their own criteria for nominations but were asked to provide evidence that justified their choices. Bohn et al. provided principals with a list of teaching practices that promote student engagement and asked them to nominate highly effective teachers based on those criteria.

In the current study, 99 principals in school districts within a 90-minute drive of my primary residence were sent emails containing information about the study. A follow-up email was made two weeks later to those principals who had not yet responded to the initial request, and a phone call was made a week after that to principals who had failed to reply. Principals were asked to complete a form on which they could identify the nominated teacher and provide reasons for their nomination. The form contained a checklist with a number of attributes that might cause them to consider a teacher highly effective, including but not limited to selected criteria cited by language arts coordinators in the Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998) study. These attributes included: (a) observed teacher behaviors, (b) teacher enthusiasm for reading, (c) students' reading achievement at the end of the year, (d) teacher involvement in improving his or her own practice, (e) students' enthusiasm for reading, (f) the desire to have their own child (i.e., the supervisor's child) placed in these classrooms, (g) the teacher's ability to reach students with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds, and (h) positive feedback from parents. Twelve principals returned the emailed forms, nominating one or more teachers whom they consider to be highly effective literacy teachers.

Nominated teachers were contacted and asked to participate in the study. Initially twelve teachers agreed to participate in the study. Introductory visits were made after school to each of
the teachers, during which I explained the components of the study and scheduled a follow-up visit to conduct the first full-day classroom observation. The survey and student consent forms were left with them to complete and submit at our next meeting. Following the initial visit, one teacher chose to end her participation, citing an overloaded schedule. At one of the schools three teachers who team-teach the primary students were asked to choose one of them to represent the study. At another school in which two teachers team-teach their first-grade students, the same process was followed. Following the introductory visits, eight teachers remained with whom I would conduct an evaluation visit.

Similar to the Wharton-McDonald et al. (1998) study, the administrator nominations were considered a starting point for determining teacher effectiveness. In the initial phase, the eight teachers were observed in their classrooms in order to establish that their practices are consistent with research findings identifying characteristics of highly effective literacy teachers. To accomplish this, I created an evaluation guide containing a list of common principles to which the practices of the nominated teachers could be compared. Taylor, Pressley, and Pearson (2000) collapsed several recent studies (Pressley et al., 2001; Taylor et al., 1999; & Knapp and Associates, 1995; Designs for Change, 1998; Puma et al., 1997) to compile a list of characteristics of highly effective teachers of literacy. Wharton-McDonald et al. identified behaviors that characterized teachers who had students who were achieving at the highest levels on measures of reading and writing. Mohan et al. (2008) consolidated a number of studies on effective teachers conducted by Michael Pressley and his colleagues to form a set of characteristics most consistently found among teachers in effective literacy classrooms. I compiled the characteristics recognized by these researchers, identified commonalities, and then consolidated them to form a list of practices demonstrated by highly effective teachers of literacy.
(see Appendix A). The list included the following traits: (1) excellent classroom management, (2) balanced literacy instruction, (3) implementation of instructional density and higher order thinking activities, (4) extensive use of scaffolding, (5) encouragement of student self-regulation of literacy skills and strategies, and (6) high expectations for all students. In order to ensure that my assessment of these characteristics was consistent with the meaning intended in the previous studies, specific language from the previous studies that defined each attribute was noted on the evaluation guide that was used in my initial classroom observation of teacher behaviors. I spent a full day in each classroom and during these observations I noted on the evaluation guides evidence of the teachers exhibiting the listed characteristics. Each of the initial eight teacher participants displayed behaviors in their classrooms that corresponded to this list of practices. Therefore, they continued on as participants in the data collection portion of the study.

**Data Collection**

Data typical of a qualitative design were collected: surveys, interviews, observations, and artifacts that provided information about teachers’ understandings and uses of independent reading. These data allowed an integration of the teachers’ observed practices and their own words regarding their perspectives around independent reading. Ascribing meaning to these representations of teachers’ lived experiences is consistent with the use of qualitative methods, which Denzin and Lincoln (2005) explain position the researcher to “make the world visible” (p. 3) through interpretation of phenomenon that occur in natural settings. Consistent with my theoretical perspective of acknowledging the significance of teachers’ views and actions in reading classrooms, it was the purpose of this study to bring to light highly effective teachers’ viewpoints regarding their use of independent reading and to uncover the ways they apply it in practice. I utilized the theoretical framework I created around Ruddell and Unrau’s (2004) model
of teachers’ affective and cognitive conditions to gather information regarding teachers’ perspectives and the ways these seemed to affect their classroom use of independent reading.

Interviews

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with each teacher on two occasions throughout the course of the study. Freebody (2003) explains that semi-structured interviews permit core issues relevant to the researcher to be covered, with follow-up questions that allow topics of importance to the interviewees to be pursued. Seidman (2006) maintains that an interview guide, when used cautiously, can aid the interviewer in establishing the focus of the encounter while still allowing participants to explore the meanings they make of experiences.

Initial interviews with each teacher, conducted following two full-day classroom observations, began with some general questions regarding teachers’ professional background, school and student characteristics, and techniques used to provide literacy instruction. Then, a series of open-ended questions asked teachers to share their understandings and perspectives regarding the classroom use of independent reading. Initial pre-determined questions were followed with additional conversation on topics raised by participants or stemming from observed classroom episodes that were pertinent to my initial understanding of teachers’ viewpoints surrounding the topic of independent reading. Audio recordings as well as hand recorded field notes were compiled during each interview and were later transcribed verbatim. (See Appendix B for the questions that guided these interviews.)

The second semi-structured interview was conducted with teachers following two additional classroom observations. This concluding interview served two purposes. First, it provided an opportunity to discuss with teachers issues related to independent reading that became apparent in subsequent observations and following the data analysis that had occurred thus far. Second,
the concluding interviews acted as member checks, allowing teachers to reflect on preliminary conclusions I reached regarding their views and practices related to independent reading and to provide additional feedback that more fully articulates their perspectives.

Semi-structured interviews with students were also conducted during the second half of the study. Teacher participants were asked to select a student at a higher, middle, and lower reading achievement level to participate in an interview at a time when I would be in the classroom for an observation. Students were first asked some general questions about their perspectives regarding books and reading. Then students were asked to share their views of the independent reading activities occurring in their classrooms, their understandings of their teachers’ attitudes toward independent reading, and their perceptions of the role independent reading plays in their reading development. Hearing from students permitted the voices of more of the actors in the learning-to-read process to contribute to a better understanding of the role that independent reading plays in their classrooms. (See Appendix C for the questions that guided the student interviews.)

Observations

Classroom observations were performed on four occasions throughout the data collection cycle in order to examine the ways that teachers utilize practices related to independent reading as well as ways that their students appear to engage in independent reading activities. As with the interviews, observations began with an initial list of points related to independent reading to be monitored during classroom visits. For example, during the first two full-day observations, I watched for and recorded incidents such as teacher and student behaviors before, during, and after reading events, classroom conversations regarding reading topics, and incidental activities throughout the day that seemed connected to reading. Examination of this information led me on
subsequent classroom visits to gather observational data more specifically related to independent reading as its importance became apparent. On the third and fourth visits, which occurred during either mornings or afternoons when independent reading would typically be expected to occur, I focused attention specifically on student and teacher behaviors during independent reading events. I looked at the balance between actual reading and reading-related activities, the connection between reading behaviors and the classroom context, and the decision-making around student book choices. For each of the eight teachers, I spent approximately 21 hours conducting observations, for a total observation time of 168 classroom hours.

Hatch (2002) recommends a method of qualitative observation in which researchers enter an observation situation with a series of “sensitizing concepts” (p. 81) that provide a focus for the observation, but then allow participants’ views and actions to guide the ongoing investigation. This ensures that observations remain grounded in the actors’ experiences and perspectives. In this study, I conducted each observation with a preliminary focus in mind but remained open to include concepts that rose up as focal points during the visit. While I was in each classroom I hand recorded descriptions of classroom events as well as my own reflections and questions that were triggered by what was occurring. I transcribed the field notes following each classroom observation.

**Surveys**

A survey was administered to teacher participants at the beginning of the data collection cycle. Questions in the survey asked about teachers’ opinions and understandings of a number of factors related to the classroom use of independent reading, along with demographic information regarding their classroom and their professional background. Survey questions were adapted from those used in related studies (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000; Ford &
Opitz, 2008) to examine teachers’ literacy instruction practices. Information collected from the survey serves as one approach to triangulation in supporting other data collection efforts; Fontana and Frey (2005) assert that a multi-method approach to data collection betters the chances of gaining understanding into the complex practices employed in peoples’ lives. In this study survey answers supplied student, teacher, and school demographic information that provided background for understanding teaching contexts. Survey questions about teachers’ beliefs also served as starting points for deeper exploration of their perspectives on a variety of reading issues. (See Appendix D for questions asked on the teacher survey.)

**Artifacts**

Selected artifacts that further understanding of teachers’ views and practices related to independent reading were collected during the study. For example, when I observed documents related to independent reading I requested copies. When teachers or students referred to documents in their conversations with me I also requested copies.

**Data Analysis**

Hatch (2002) explains that qualitative data analysis “means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories” (p. 148). In the present study, data collected from teacher and student interviews, classroom observations, surveys, and artifacts were examined for patterns in an attempt to create understandings that aid in responding to the research questions.

**Applying the Theoretical Framework**

I used the theoretical framework developed for this study regarding Ruddell and Unrau’s (2004) model of teachers’ affective and cognitive conditions to investigate initial lines of inquiry
regarding teachers’ perspectives and the ways these seemed to affect their classroom use of independent reading. Ruddell and Unrau’s model acknowledges the ways that teachers’ affective conditions such as instructional beliefs and philosophy and teachers’ cognitive conditions of conceptual and instructional knowledge are exemplified in teacher understandings about instruction and teacher practices during instruction. I kept this framework in mind as I began to examine the collected data and form a system to categorize the perspectives teachers shared about instruction and behaviors I witnessed during instruction.

**Theoretical Sampling**

In this study I employed a process that Glaser and Strauss (1967) refer to as “theoretical sampling” (p. 45) in which data collection, coding and analysis occur simultaneously with each process informing the others. Initially, a great deal of data might be gathered until preliminary categories related to the research questions emerge. In the current study I began the data collection phase by conducting with each teacher two full-day classroom observations and an hour-long interview over an eight-week period. I began the analysis by rereading the transcripts of each observation and interview, noting each instance that was connected in some way to the topic of independent reading.

**Coding.** I examined each event to determine the way in which it was associated with independent reading and I created a list of categories with which I could label the incidents. From this opening set of data, 82 codes emerged that could be applied to the reading events and perspectives evident in the observations and interviews (See Appendix E). A transcript of each observation and interview was then re-read and marked with the codes that applied to each chunk of data that related to independent reading.
After the initial coding took place, I examined this large set of codes for the ways that they could be collapsed and organized into more inclusive categories. Glaser and Strauss (1967) explain that as these core theoretical categories form, data collection becomes more focused, providing the researcher the impetus to delve more deeply into some relevant categories with a goal of saturation while allowing some others to fall by the wayside, and eventually prompting the hypotheses that begin to form in response to the research questions. Upon examination I discovered some patterns and commonalities in the codes and collapsed them into eight categories that lined up with the research questions on which the study is based. I organized these eight categories into three major themes that became the organizational structure under which I could continue to collect data and begin to form some understandings about independent reading in these teachers’ classrooms (See Appendix F).

Corbin and Strauss (2008) note that with theoretical sampling, “the research process feeds on itself” (p. 144), since concepts that develop through data collection drive further inquiry about those concepts, which prompts the next round of data collection in hopes of finding further indicators of those concepts. In this study, categories that developed from the integration of the initial codes provided guidance as I conducted an additional classroom observation, this time especially focused on reading events that lined up with the data analysis that had already occurred. However, I continued to remain alert to ways that the identified categories could be expanded to include new findings that might present themselves. Following the third classroom observation, I reread the transcripts of that visit and coded them based on the initial list. I needed to add three additional codes to label concepts that had not previously seemed significant but whose importance was now apparent. I once again reread the initial observations and interviews and applied the new codes as necessary. I also integrated the new codes into the eight categories
I originally devised; the new codes did not necessitate the creation of any new categories.

**Further inquiry.** Following the coding of data from the third classroom observation, it became clear that almost every reading event I recorded was a duplicate of an episode observed during a previous classroom visit. Only a few questions remained in my mind, primarily around the ways that the students perceived and utilized classroom independent reading events. Therefore, I decided to conduct one more classroom observation focused on ways that students selected books for independent reading and to use that opportunity to interview selected students to ask about the ways they view their teachers’ classroom utilization of independent reading.

In addition, I had a few more questions for the teacher participants regarding specific elements of their beliefs and practices. For example, patterns in the data revealed the amount of reading time that was spent not on reading itself but on related activities. I wanted more information about the reasoning behind teachers’ decisions to use reading time for that purpose. Therefore, I used this information to structure a final teacher interview to address the questions that remained for me regarding the issues that came to light in the ongoing analysis.

**Saturation.** The categories that I developed allowed me to compare new events and perspectives to those I had already recorded, providing me with a standard by which I could assess the saturation of each category. Glaser and Strauss (1967) state that “the criterion for judging when to stop sampling the different groups pertinent to a category is the category’s theoretical saturation. Saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category” (p. 61). In the current study, I used the categories I developed to judge whether or not I was observing new information. After my third observation in each classroom, the field notes I was recording became repetitive and predictable. For these teachers independent reading had consistent components that I was able to understand.
after several classroom visits. To ensure that I could end my data collection with the confidence that I was no longer adding previously unseen features to the categories, I conducted a fourth visit. As expected, independent reading events were similar to those I had observed on the three previous occasions. While additional observations might provide more anecdotes, they wouldn’t increase my understanding of the ways that independent reading was utilized in these classrooms. On this basis I determined that saturation had been reached and I stopped conducting observations.

Following the final classroom observations and teacher and student interviews, I once again reread transcripts and used the list of codes, consolidated into categories, to mark chunks of data that applied to independent reading. At this point I utilized my theoretical framework to group categories of data and make decisions regarding its dissemination in written form. The theoretical framework acknowledges the implications of teachers’ cognitive knowledge and affective beliefs on their understandings about instruction and their activities during instruction. Based on this framework, I integrated information about teachers’ cognitive and affective conditions with incidents of related classroom practices in order to describe the ways that these concepts merge in teachers’ classroom use of independent reading.

Establishing Study Quality

A study can be considered valid if the results can be interpreted accurately and with confidence, while reliability can be established if the methods, conditions, and results are replicable and consistent (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Understanding of validity and reliability for qualitative research is somewhat nebulous because of attempts by some qualitative researchers (e.g., Wolcott, 2005; Lather, 1992) to break free of the positivist ideologies carried over from scientific research. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) note that it is unwise to attempt to directly
apply the narrow standards of scientific research to qualitative studies because the forms arise from different philosophies and carry different expectations. However, I agree with LeCompte and Preissle that using the general principles of validity and reliability to assess qualitative efforts may be especially useful to the novice researcher who is attempting to utilize legitimate and accepted research designs. Therefore, I use LeCompte and Preissle’s translations of validity and reliability to qualitative research to address these issues in this study.

Validity

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) note that internal validity of a qualitative study relies on the researcher observing and measuring what they really claim to be observing and measuring, and that some aspects of qualitative design strengthen a researcher’s ability to achieve a valid study. They state that one way this can be accomplished is to include participants as interactants rather than as merely subjects. Utilizing “member checks” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 236) throughout the process helped to ensure that my accounts are consistent with participants’ experiences and perspectives. Throughout the course of this study I discussed with teacher participants classroom events I had seen and questions I had regarding their purposes or beliefs behind those activities, and I invited their comments. This allowed me to confirm that my understanding of teachers’ perspectives and practices was consistent with that of the teachers.

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) explain that the ability to avoid spurious conclusions is the key to maintaining validity in a qualitative study. In order to avoid this threat to validity, I was vigilant in keeping my conclusions strictly linked to collected data. First, all of my understandings regarding teachers’ perspectives and practices are backed by recorded classroom events or teachers’ own words. In addition, I added interview questions as well as focused classroom observations as necessary to pursue alternative explanations for conclusions I made in
order to be sure that other plausible explanations for relationships were explored. In another attempt to ensure that I had sufficient data to justify my conclusions, I continued data collection until saturation occurred (Morse, 1995), or when it appeared that no new insights regarding teachers’ understandings and uses of independent reading would be forthcoming. Finally, I triangulated multiple data sources such as interviews, classroom observations, surveys and artifacts, allowing me to draw conclusions based on these sources with full confidence that they reflected as much as possible my participants’ understandings and practices. In these varied ways I ensure that the conclusions reached at the termination of this study are fully warranted.

One of the biggest potential threats to the internal validity of this study may lie in the way that my multiple roles as a researcher and former teacher might have clouded my observation and interpretation of classroom events and teachers’ perspectives. I believe that I alleviated some of these observer effects by spending sufficient time in classrooms to get a true picture of teachers’ actual practices. I remained vigilant about recording classroom events as objectively as possible and about transcribing teachers’ verbal interactions with me verbatim, in order to ensure that data remained founded in actual events and in teachers’ own words.

In addition, although I entered this study in the position of university researcher, I successfully utilized my standing as a former classroom teacher to avoid teachers’ perceptions of my outsider status that might have complicated our interactions. All of the teacher participants appeared very comfortable and open in sharing with me any information I asked for or that they felt was relevant to my understanding.

**Reliability**

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) suggest that ensuring reliability in a qualitative study differs from the stringent requirements for statistical generalization in quantitative research.
However, since a study that is comparable and translatable increases its usefulness in the field, I attempted to address potential threats in order to ensure the reliability of this study. For example, LeCompte and Preissle explain that a multisite design helps to increase generalizability by enlarging the dimensions to which it might be compared. This study was conducted in eight classrooms on seven different school district sites, making external validity and reliability inherently stronger.

However, reliability also necessitates consistency, and with a multisite design comes the potential for irregularity in procedures. To maintain the consistency of data collection and analysis in this study, I began observations and interviews with a set of “sensitizing concepts” (Hatch, 2002, p. 81) that provided a similar focus across all school sites and with all teacher participants. Then, data from each was consolidated in establishing categories and reaching conclusions. In these ways I ensured that the conditions were consistent and able to be replicated in other research endeavors.

In addition, LeCompte and Preissle (1993) point out that the use of constructs that are idiosyncratic or peculiar to a specific group might limit the comparability of a study. In this study, most of the constructs found within the classroom settings, such as instructional practices or routines, are typical of those found in many American classrooms. Though each research site was naturally unique, I was vigilant in outlining settings and participant characteristics, in order to provide as clear a window as possible into study components. This information is included in the Findings section of this work.

Shulman (1997) explains that qualitative researchers aim for some level of generalizability, in the tradition laid by quantitative inquiry methods, in order to draw connections between the populations, settings, or tasks they study and wider conditions. Failing
this purpose, findings uncovered in a particular context will be confined to a better understanding of that very limited milieu and may call into question the relevancy of the investigation. Shulman acknowledges that establishing generalizability in qualitative work does not differ that much from efforts by quantitative colleagues to establish generalizability between random samples and a larger population. He draws on the quantitative work of Cornfield and Tukey (1956) in explaining the need to build “an inferential bridge” (p. 14) between the groups under investigation in specific qualitative studies and the groups to whom the researchers aim to generalize their discoveries. In the present study, the basis for establishing such a bridge is based on the variation in types of teaching settings observed. There are some particularities that exist in the classrooms in which this investigation occurred. For example, every classroom in this study was housed in a public elementary school in the same state and all of the teachers observed were white females. However, other demographics may allow connections to be made to teaching situations outside the eight on which this investigation was based. For example, the schools in this study were in varied urban, suburban, and rural settings typical of many elementary school environments. The socioeconomic status of the students involved varied from middle-income to lower economic family backgrounds, reflective of student populations in countless American elementary schools. While four of the classrooms contained 95% or greater number of European American students, the others were populated by at least some non-white students and several had students for whom English was not their native language, a situation faced by many elementary teachers. The amount of teaching experience held by the teachers in this study varied from a low of five years to a high of 30 years, which mirrors the amount of teaching experience that might be found in numerous school teaching staffs. The demographic variability in the classrooms investigated in this study might well prompt comparisons with educators in a wide
range of teaching situations.

Summary

In this study, the perspective and practices of eight highly effective teachers provide information on which to base a better understanding of the use of independent reading in their elementary classrooms. Data from observations, interviews, a survey, and classroom artifacts was integrated to provide a multi-faceted view of teachers’ understandings and beliefs about independent reading and how those perspectives are exhibited in their practice. Under the process of theoretical sampling, this data was examined for patterns and categories were formed in order to determine the attributes of independent reading that are unique and the attributes that are commonly held among the teacher participants. Attention was paid to characteristics such as validity and reliability as well the researcher role in order to ensure confidence in the quality of this study. As a result, the findings can be understood to reflect the perspectives and practices of the eight teacher participants regarding independent reading use in their classrooms.
Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to gather information regarding highly effective teachers’ understandings and perspectives related to independent reading and how those are manifest in the practices of their elementary classrooms. The study was conducted with eight teachers who were identified by their school principals as highly effective and who demonstrated characteristics of highly effective teachers as recognized in education scholarship. The teachers allowed me to observe in their classrooms, ask them questions about their practices and perspectives, talk to their students, and gather artifacts related to their instruction. This grounding in practitioner knowledge and belief is consistent with the theoretical framework of this study, which calls for tapping into teachers’ understandings about instruction and teachers’ practices during instruction (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004) to provide better understanding of the use of independent reading in real elementary classrooms. This theoretical framework provides a structure on which to respond to the overarching research question: What attributes of independent reading are unique and what attributes are commonly held by teachers regarded as highly effective teachers of literacy?

I integrated information collected from the eight teacher participants about and during their use of independent reading in order to look for patterns that would provide better understanding of unique and commonly held features regarding their overall perspectives and practices. Upon analysis of the compiled data, several themes emerged that provide insight into these highly effective teachers’ knowledge and beliefs regarding the use of independent reading and the ways those perspectives intersect with actual classroom practice. First, I provide contextual summaries of each teacher, including a snapshot of the independent reading events typical in each classroom, aggregated across multiple observations. Then, I outline some of the
factors to which these teachers attribute their literacy knowledge and beliefs. Next, I integrate observations of teachers’ practices and viewpoints to outline a better understanding of independent reading and the ways that it is accomplished in their classrooms. Finally, I bring to light themes evident in the data that allow me to respond to the research question with answers grounded in the beliefs and understandings held by the eight teacher participants.

Teacher Participants

The eight teachers in the study hold characteristics and head classrooms that may be considered representative of many teacher and student populations in American schools. Two teachers are in schools located within urban districts, three are in schools that are located in suburban areas surrounding a city, and three are in rural schools at least an hour’s drive from a major city. The majority of the schools service only elementary students in pre-kindergarten through fifth or sixth grades. However, two of the rural schools house pre-kindergarten through twelfth grades and one of the other schools includes third through fifth grades only. The schools range in size from having 78 students at the elementary level to enrolling over 500. Students’ socioeconomic status is also diverse. Some schools have populations where 21 percent of students qualify for free or reduced price meals while in others nearly 67 percent of the students qualify for these meals. Some student populations are primarily European American and some contain varied numbers of minority or second-language learners. Following is a synopsis of each of the eight teacher participants and their teaching contexts, along with a brief description of the ways that independent reading occurs in their classrooms. To maintain confidentiality, all teacher, student, and school names have been changed in this work.
Francis

Francis is a fifth-grade teacher at Fourth Avenue Elementary School, located about 17 miles from a major city. State statistics indicate that 57% of the total school student population, which includes third through fifth graders, qualifies for the free or reduced lunch program. Francis estimates that approximately 86% of her students’ families are at a lower-income level and the other 14% are middle income. She states that 100% of her 23 students are white or European American and that all speak English as their first language. One of her students receives special education services. Francis has been a teacher for 16 years, in first through fifth grades and also in a position titled Early Childhood and Literacy Specialist; she holds a Master’s degree in curriculum and instruction. On a survey completed at the beginning of the study, teachers were asked to rate their knowledge base regarding classroom use of independent reading as: very well-informed, fairly well-informed, not very well-informed, or not at all informed (See Appendix D). According to her answer on the survey, Francis considers herself fairly well-informed about literacy instruction.

In Francis’ classroom, independent reading usually takes place as one of several activities occurring simultaneously. Though Francis indicated on the survey that she conducts whole-class independent reading one to two times per week, on my visits I did not witness any episodes in which the entire class was expected to read at the same time. Instead, there were typically two time periods during the day, each lasting for about 30 minutes, in which some students read independently and responded to their books while others engaged in group reading instruction with the teacher or teaching assistant and other students carried on independently with written or other tasks. During the time periods that I observed, most students remained at their seats and appeared engaged in their work, requiring little teacher intervention to maintain their focus. The
classroom appeared productively calm, though not silent, as the teacher conducted a lesson with a small group and some students talked as they worked together. Students chose their own independent reading materials as needed from the classroom or school libraries or they brought books from home. The teacher exhibited little direct involvement in the students’ independent reading, focusing instead on instruction with groups of students seated on the carpet on one side of the room.

In addition to these organized opportunities for independent reading, students in Francis’ room are expected to use transition times, such as when they finish early with an assignment, to read while they wait for other students to finish. I observed this occur on a few occasions, though Francis typically kept the students busy with assigned tasks most of the day. Students are also expected to perform independent reading at home for a minimum of 100 minutes per week, which is a school requirement for all fifth graders. Parents are required to note the number of pages students read and to sign their children’s Daily Planners verifying that the reading was done.

**Penni**

Penni teaches third grade at Jefferson Elementary, which is located within one of four adjoined urban districts in a large metropolitan area. According to the state education website, 58% of the student population of kindergarten through fifth-graders qualifies for free or reduced-price meals. Similarly, she estimates that about 60% of her students come from low-income families while the others are at a middle-income level. Of the 24 students in Penni’s classroom, 95% are European American and the other 5% are bi-racial; all are native English speakers. Two of her students qualify at least part time for special education services. Penni has worked as a teacher for eight years in kindergarten through third grades. She holds a bachelor’s degree in
education and is currently enrolled in an online program in pursuit of her Master’s degree in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in reading. Penni is the only teacher in the study with a state reading endorsement. According to her response on the survey, Penni considers herself fairly well-informed about independent reading use.

Independent reading in Penni’s classroom occurs at two main times during the day. When students first come into the classroom in the morning, they immediately get their book bags that hang on hooks in the front of the room and take them to their seats. The students read for approximately 15 to 20 minutes while Penni conducts “business” (field notes, November 8, 2010), during which students come to her one by one, she greets them, and they carry on a brief conversation. She also verbally conducts lunch count and other clerical tasks. The students look up when their names are called or questions are asked aloud but then return their attention to their books.

In the early afternoon Penni reads aloud to her student and then conducts whole class reading instruction before the students read. At the beginning of independent reading time students choose between “Read to Self,” “Buddy Read,” or “Word Work,” components of the Daily 5 system (Boushey & Moser, 2006), while two students are chosen to work on the computers. Penni provides reading instruction to small groups at a table at the front of the room while the students scatter around the room to do their reading. Each day some of the students are expected to replace the books in their bags with new “just-right” books. When students are not working in small groups with Penni, some appear to read their books and work on reading-related activities for almost the entire period, which lasts for about 50 minutes, while others seem to stay engaged with their books only part of the time. Penni provides occasional behavioral reminders to individual students or to the entire class. The atmosphere is calm though not silent
as Penni conducts instruction at the table and some students read together. I occasionally overheard Penni discussing her students’ independent reading books with them in the small group. Besides these formal reading times, students are expected to read when they finish literacy assignments early, while they wait for peers to finish. Penni also requires her students to read for homework each night.

**Naomi**

Naomi is a second-grade teacher at Rockland Elementary, a kindergarten through sixth-grade school in a suburban district just outside the city limits. About 21% of students in her school qualify for free or reduced price meals, while she estimates that about 10% of the students in her classroom come from low-income families. Naomi has 21 students in her class, 2 of whom qualify for some sort of special education services. All of the students are European American and speak English as their first language. Naomi holds a Master’s degree in multi-disciplinary education and has been teaching for 22 years in the primary grades; for the past 14 years she has been teaching second grade. When asked to respond on the survey, Naomi labels her knowledge base regarding the classroom use of independent reading as very well-informed.

Each day, Naomi’s whiteboard contains a morning list of tasks for students to complete, which typically includes a short written assignment following by silent reading. After students unpack their homework and belongings and complete the assigned written task, they take books from their desks or choose one from the bookshelf in the front of the room and begin to read. Some remain at their seats while others sit in a few folding chairs placed near the book shelves. While students read Naomi conducts clerical tasks such as lunch count and she checks students’ homework, discussing it with them individually. Part of her conversation involves the reading they did at home; the school requirement is a minimum of 15 minutes of reading five nights per
week. They are expected to record the number of minutes they read each night in their Nightly Reading Book and parents are expected to sign. The morning independent reading time averaged about 30 minutes in length each day that I observed in the room.

Independent reading also takes place during a daily reading lesson that typically occurs in the afternoon. Naomi conducts a brief discussion about some reading or writing element and then assigns students to complete a written assignment. Students who complete the assignment then take part in independent reading. Students appear very focused on their books at the beginning of these reading times when there is little movement or distraction but their attention begins to wane when more students or Naomi are moving around the room or talking. The afternoon independent reading times that I observed occurred for about 35 minutes. I also observed occasional independent reading at other times of the day when students had completed math or other work and were waiting for fellow student to finish.

Elizabeth teaches fourth grade, also at Rockland Elementary School. She estimates that 20% of her 24 students live in low-income households, nearly consistent with the state statistics for her school. Three of her students receive special education services at least part time, and all but one are European American and speak English as their first language. Elizabeth holds a Master’s degree with an emphasis in gifted and talented education and has worked as a teacher of students in first through fourth grades for 23 years. Based on her survey response, she judges her knowledge base regarding independent reading in her classroom to be fairly well-informed.

Independent reading in Elizabeth’s room occurs primarily in the afternoon following a teacher read-aloud. Students are given a reading-related written assignment to complete and are expected to read silently when it is done. Sometimes the assignment is designed to be completed
in conjunction with the reading. During the independent literacy times that I observed, which averaged about 40 minutes, some students took so long to complete the assignment that they did little or no reading. Most of the students who got to read appear focused on their books, though a couple of students appeared distracted and seemed to do very little productive work. The classroom atmosphere was fairly calm; the only noise was from Elizabeth, who quietly conducted reading group instruction with students at a table at the front of the room. She had no involvement in the independent reading carried on by her students, other than to provide occasional reminders about behavior or the written task to be completed. In addition to the in-class reading that students do during this time, Elizabeth requires her students to read at least 20 minutes four nights per week and to respond to their reading each night in their composition books.

Jennifer

Jennifer works in a team-teaching situation at Collingwood School in a tiny rural district more than an hour outside a city. The building houses pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade students. She and two teaching partners share the responsibility for teaching the primary block of students in kindergarten through third grade. They group the students according to achievement levels for language arts and math instruction, rather than sorting them by grade level. Jennifer teaches a first-grade reading curriculum and has between 8 and 15 students who rotate in and out of her room depending on the part of the day and subject being taught. She estimates that approximately 50% of her students come from middle-income families and 25% are low income, while the school averages a rate of 39% free and reduced price meals. In Jennifer’s class, all students speak English as their first language; 91% are European American while the remaining 9% are of Hispanic heritage. Jennifer holds a bachelor’s degree, majoring in child development.
with a minor in elementary math, after switching from a major in radio and television. She has been teaching for 30 years in situations from early elementary through high school and in a variety of subject areas. When asked on the survey, Jennifer stated that her understanding of independent reading is fairly well-informed.

Independent reading in Jennifer’s class occurs as the first morning activity and revolves around students selecting books marked with an Accelerated Reader (AR) level, reading the books, and taking AR quizzes. Students then go to retrieve their quiz results from a printer located out of the room, color on charts marked with book levels, and then get other books and repeat the process. Students appear focused on books for small increments of time while they read but there is a lot of movement and noise as students relocate to computers to take the quizzes, as they color the charts in their desks, as they report their results to their teacher, and as they choose new books to read. Jennifer spends her time moving around the room talking to students about their book choices, about their quiz results, and about computer-related issues. This activity lasts for about 45 minutes each morning.

On two occasions I witnessed students who completed a math assignment early reading independently for an average of about 10 minutes while waiting for others to finish. In addition to these in-class opportunities for independent reading, students in Jennifer’s room are required to read for 15 minutes on five nights out of seven each week and parents are expected to sign a sheet nightly verifying their children’s reading.

Sara

Sara is the second-grade teacher at Seafare Elementary, a tiny pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade school located in a rural area a little more than an hour from a city. Sara has 15 students in her class, 1 of whom receives special education services. The cultural makeup of her
student population is 86% European American, with the remaining 14% divided between Hispanic and Asian American students. All of the students in Sara’s class speak English as their first language. State statistics show that 53% of students in her school receive free or reduced price meals, while she estimates that 20% of the students in her class live in low-income families. Sara has been a teacher for 18 years in kindergarten through fifth grades and holds a Master’s degree in early childhood education. Based on her survey response, she deems her knowledge base regarding independent reading in the classroom as fairly well-informed.

Independent reading in Sara’s room usually occurs on two different occasions during the school day. During the first reading opportunity, the teacher and teaching assistant work with small groups of students while the others carry on independently with a list of assigned reading tasks, one of which is independent reading. There is a lot of movement and often noise as students move about the room participating in these reading tasks. Some students read intermittently while others frequently appear distracted and focus on books for only brief periods of time. On several of these occasions, which averaged about 55 minutes across the morning, I observed the teacher holding short discussions with students about their independent reading books after she completed her reading group instruction.

After lunch recess and a daily read-aloud, students are all expected to read independently in an activity Sara calls DIRT (Daily Independent Reading Time), which typically lasts for 15 to 20 minutes. Each day three students are permitted to read “Any book, Anywhere,” (field notes, November 9, 2010) while the others are expected to read their “just-right books” at their seats. Some students stay fairly well focused on their reading materials while others appear distracted and seem to do little reading. There is noise and movement as some students whisper-read or talk to each other, students talk to Sara about taking Accelerated Reader (AR) quizzes, and students
move to computers or book shelves. Sara spends this time helping students with AR quizzes and also meets individually with students to discuss their books. Students are expected to read 15 minutes per night four nights each week for homework.

Tammy

Tammy teaches in a first-grade classroom in Renway Elementary, which houses kindergarten through sixth grades and is located in the main urban school district in this area. She has 21 students in her classroom, one of whom receives special education services. She estimates that 67% of her students come from low-income families, which is the school average for students receiving free and reduced price meals. Tammy has a diverse student population, with 57% European American students, 10% Hispanic students, 5% Asian or Pacific Islander students, and the remaining 28% multiracial or from other ethnic groups, including students from Sudan and Ethiopia. 72% of her students speak English as their first language. Tammy has a Master’s degree in supervision and curriculum and has been teaching for 30 years, mostly in kindergarten and first grade. When asked on the survey, Tammy responded that she is very well-informed about using independent reading in her elementary classroom.

In Tammy’s room independent reading occurs across the morning at two specific parts of literacy time. Students enter the room in the morning at staggered times due to bussing, breakfast, and other scheduling issues. During this time period students unpack and then choose books to read from unleveled nonfiction tubs, which Tammy labels “content reading” (field notes, October 22, 2010). Students are not expected to read silently, though some do; they frequently discuss with others at their tables what they are reading. There is a lot of movement at this time as students continue to come into the room. Tammy spends her time conferring with students and discussing the books they are reading.
Later in the morning, the students participate in another whole-class independent reading time call BOB (Bag of Books) reading. Books for their bags are chosen by students on Fridays during “book shopping” and are selected with a strong adherence to reading levels. During BOB reading students take their bags anywhere in the room and read independently. Occasionally these first-graders appear distracted from their reading, whispering to neighbors or looking around the room. However, the majority of students remain in their spots and focus on their books, reading silently or quietly a great deal of the time, which averaged about 25 minutes during my visits. During this activity Tammy calls several students to the table at a time and conferences with them individually, listening to them read, discussing their books, and noting their reading behaviors. She sometimes conducts small group instruction during this time. Students are expected to read for homework and parents are asked to sign their reading log book each night.

Amanda

Amanda teaches third grade at Parkside Elementary, located in a small farming district about an hour and an half from a city. The school houses pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. She team teaches with the other third grade teacher in her school; she teaches all of the language arts curriculum and the other teacher provides math, social studies, and science instruction. She teaches language arts to half of the 31 third-graders in the morning and the other half in the afternoon. One of the students is identified as a special education student. Amanda estimates that 20% of her students live in low-income households, while the school rate for free or reduced priced meals is 46%, according to the state statistics. Ninety percent of the third-graders that Amanda teaches are European American, while the other 10% are from a Hispanic background; 5% speak English as a second language. Amanda has been teaching for five years in preschool
through third grade classrooms. She holds a Master’s degree in elementary education and considers herself fairly well-informed about using independent reading in the elementary classroom, based on her survey response.

Independent reading in Amanda’s classroom occurs during literacy time structured by the Daily 5 program (Boushey & Moser, 2006), which provides choices for students to participate in “Read to Self, Read to Partner, Work on Word, Work on Writing, and Listening” (field notes, October 25, 2010). Each morning students choose literacy activities based on reading goals that they determine individually and then participate in their selected activities while Amanda conferences individually with students about their work. She mandates the “Read to Self” component each day, in which students take their self-selected books anywhere in the room to read and then reflect on in their Literacy Binders. During my visits the independent reading sessions lasted about 25 to 35 minutes. Most of the students seemed focused on their reading activities, though they seemed to spend a lot of time on reading-related activities rather than on the text itself. This cycle is repeated in the afternoon when the other third-grade class comes into the room for their literacy instruction, while the morning’s class goes to the other room for instruction in the other content areas. Students are also expected to complete reading for homework each night.

Factors Influencing Teachers’ Use of Independent Reading

The eight highly effective teacher participants in this study hold knowledge and views regarding independent reading that are exhibited in their classroom practices. In interviews and informal conversations they discuss a variety of factors that influence the ways that they implement independent reading events with their students. Some of these factors include the
knowledge and beliefs they have acquired, influences from outside as well as inside the classroom, and affective components.

**Acquisition of Literacy Knowledge and Beliefs.**

Six of the highly effective teacher participants hold a Master’s degree and one who does not was enrolled in a Master’s program at the time of the study. However, few of them list their formal educational programs as being instrumental in their acquisition of knowledge about literacy instruction, including independent reading. Only Naomi credits her Master’s program for directly influencing her reading instruction, while Amanda and Francis mention that topics they studied in undergraduate or graduate programs motivated an ongoing exploration of literacy topics. However, it is clear that the teachers in this study consider themselves lifelong learners. Naomi’s statement, “I’m doing ongoing education all the time” (interview, November 10, 2010) seems to be a common theme among these teacher participants.

**Outside experts.** The teachers attribute most of their literacy teaching expertise to the ongoing learning they have acquired in arenas beyond their university experiences. One source mentioned for information about literacy instruction is district-provided professional learning opportunities. Teachers employed in larger districts freely discuss opportunities to learn about a variety of reading topics through workshops and speakers brought directly into their district venues. In smaller districts teachers note that it is usually not financially feasible for their schools to bring in in-service training but that their districts have provided them with opportunities to travel to workshops and conferences. A common thread across most of the teachers’ discussions about their professional learning options is that district-provided trainings are becoming scarcer as professional development budgets dry up. Amanda also mentions her district’s lack of
attention to literacy as a reason that district-provided professional learning opportunities are not as abundant as in the past. She states,

You know, right now we’re not really focusing on literacy. A couple years back we focused on writing and at that point we were really focusing on that area. Right now we’re focusing on effective questioning skills so it really depends on where our focus is, where we tend to do our workshopping. (interview, November 16, 2010)

The district’s focus appears to have a direct impact on the sort of professional learning experiences in which teachers take part.

The teacher participants in this study rely heavily on outside experts to provide information about literacy instruction. One commonly discussed source is professional reading materials, either pursued independently or often as a member of a book study group. Teachers were eager to talk about books they have accessed to boost their literacy teaching knowledge. They mention authors such as Regie Routman, Nelly Edge, Rebecca Sitton, Marie Clay, and Adrienne Gear; and mention numerous book titles on which they rely. Only one teacher, Amanda, mentioned relying on online sources for a large part of her teaching information, while others pursue information electronically but do not rely on it for the bulk of their learning.

Another supply of expertise for the teachers is speakers they have heard at conferences, district in-service events, and workshops. They mentioned name such as Richard Allington, Ellin Keene, Debbie Miller, Stephanie Harvey, and Regie Routman in discussing reading experts who influenced their literacy understanding. Tammy especially peppered her comments about her belief in independent reading with mention of a number of reading scholars on whom she bases her understanding. She states,
And so when we studied the work of Ellin Keene, when all the thinking strategies and all the fix-up strategies were separated, and making meaning became the most important aspect of literacy, my teaching really changed. So everything kind of revolves around that. (interview, November 2, 2010)

Later in the same conversation Tammy explains,

We’ve seen Richard Allington a couple of times. He came to our school district and we saw him in Portland. And his message is read, read, read, read, you know. Kids won’t learn to read unless they actually have a chance to read, you know, and they have to read things that are meaningful and things that are appropriately leveled. (interview, November 2, 2010)

It is clear that for Tammy, as well as most of the other teachers, outside experts comprise a large part of their ongoing professional learning about literacy instruction.

**Peer collaboration.** Another major source of these teachers’ continuing expansion of literacy beliefs and knowledge appears to be exchanges and collaboration with their peers. Each teacher referred in some way to the benefits to their own professional development that stem from interactions with their colleagues, learning both from and with them. Some referred directly to learning they have taken from other teachers, either those they know personally or teachers who disseminate their expertise more widely. For example, Amanda relies not only on teachers in her own building but also on online sites in which educators from around the country share teaching ideas. Jennifer and Tammy have both attended workshops presented by teachers and rely on them as a valuable source of literacy advice.

Working and learning with their colleagues also appears to support these teachers’ learning process. Some of the teachers mention the value found in collaborative professional
learning efforts, including attending workshops and book studies together, as well as providing needed support when trying out new ideas in the classroom. Jennifer explains that the value she places on independent reading is enhanced by a supportive environment in her building:

I would say that within the school I am encouraged because everyone is on the same page. I’ve taught in schools where myself and maybe one other teacher, in larger schools, were on the page and nobody else wanted to partake, nobody else saw the value in it. You know, you’re supposed to sit at a table, use your basal, that’s reading. You’re done, that’s it. In some districts you’re just an island unto itself, doing it. And so your kids are doing well but you’re just doing it on your own, and you don’t feel that encouragement.

(interview, November 3, 2010)

Tammy values the opportunities she has in joining with her teaching partner in most learning endeavors:

Whenever we do any kind of professional development, it gives us the benefit of observing each other and keeping us going, because it’s easy to forget things if you just go and come back, but if you have somebody who says, “Okay, are we going to be trying this?” It just keeps you motivated and on track. (interview, November 2, 2010)

**Learning from experience.** A pattern that became evident in talking with teachers about their literacy knowledge was their belief in a variety of experiences, both in and out of the classroom, as opportunities for professional growth. Francis explains that growing up in a family of teachers and being the youngest of seven children provided her with an immersion in literacy that she privileges in providing literacy experiences to her students. Elizabeth mentions her background teaching primary grades that prompts her high-quality literacy instruction for her fourth-graders. Both Penni and Naomi refer to experiences in which their students lead them to a
better understanding of ways to teach reading. Jennifer discusses the ways that her path to
learning about independent reading has been an ongoing process of experimentation, stating that
she learned by “trying it. A combination of, you know, you learn as you grow. You learn as you
do. And trying out different things, reading different things” (interview, November 3, 2010).
Clearly these teachers view the integration of outside learning events with classroom interactions
to be a significant factor in their growth as professional learners.

**Teacher reflection.** In discussing ways that they have developed their instructional
understandings, each teacher indicated a propensity to spend significant amounts of time
reflecting on approaches for translating their growing knowledge into classroom practice. Francis
mentioned that her teaching career actually began with a need to understand how the reading
process worked for others:

> When I was in college and I realized that it just didn’t happen for everybody the way it
> happened for me, it really became a passion for me to figure out how this happens for
> other people so other people could have what I have. So I spend a lot of time trying to
> figure out, how do you go about teaching other people that it doesn’t come naturally to?
> (interview, December 14, 2010)

Other teachers explain that such ongoing reflection accompanies many of the decisions they
make regarding their literacy instruction. Amanda says her “mind is constantly on the classroom”
(interview, November 16, 2010) and Tammy explains how valuable it is for her to follow many
classroom events with time to “reflect back and think, wow, why?” (interview, November 2,
2010). Amanda complains that she never has enough time during the school year to fully reflect
on reading research and ways she could put it into practice in her classroom:
Honestly, I feel like I need to do better at being more involved in the research portion of my teaching. You know, looking at the International Reading Association, the journals that are put out by the International Reading Association…and I think part of the reason I haven’t, at this point, is that it’s more of a triage from year to year, trying to do the best I can with where I’m at, maybe establish myself in different areas. And within my teaching, that I’ll be able to do that more. I’d like to do that more. I think for me a lot of that goes on over the summertime, where I’m planning ahead and doing a lot of my research. And then I try to implement it and I go from there. (interview, November 16, 2010)

It is clear from these teachers’ responses that they spend significant amounts of time reflecting on the professional learning they do and attempting to create classroom literacy events, including independent reading activities, that exhibit their burgeoning knowledge and beliefs.

**Perceived External Influences**

Beyond the knowledge and beliefs that teachers hold about literacy instruction, there are other influences on the ways that they utilize independent reading activities. The teachers in this study acknowledge a number of factors beyond the classroom level that affect their ability or motivation to implement independent reading with their students. Some of these outside influences act as barriers to independent reading while others appear to encourage and aid teachers’ efforts.

**Accountability.** In discussing factors impacting their reading programs, half of the teachers mention the national and state efforts toward standards-based accountability but they are mixed on their perceptions of how this movement has affected their use of independent reading.
Several teachers feel that state and national standards keep them more focused on their goals for students, including the goal of increased time spent reading, as Tammy notes:

I think that all the things that are coming out with the I Can statements and the standards have been helpful. They might make us roll our eyes because it’s another piece but it does keep you focused and the children focused on just what the outcome is you want everybody to do. (interview, November 2, 2010)

Francis explains that as a result of concerns for improving state test scores, independent reading became something of a “cultural norm” (interview, December 14, 2010) in her school.

In spite of a general awareness of national and state accountability requirements, however, most of the teachers deny that their reading programs have been noticeably affected. Only one teacher mentions that the onus of external accountability has significantly altered the way she structures independent reading time. Elizabeth says that because of state testing measures, she’s not able to provide the kind of reading experiences she would like for her students:

As the state has come in and said, “You have to do this and you have to do this and you have to do it by fourth grade,” that just changed things. And so, where I would, in a perfect world, like to give them 25 minutes of just whatever they like to do for reading for enjoyment, for pleasure…and I try to work that in. It doesn’t always work that way because of what we have to cover. I think the state has taken that away from us. The reality is that we’re running out of time. We’re out of time. (interview, February 15, 2011)

Elizabeth explains that because of state expectations, she rarely provides time to read that isn’t connected with a purpose, “something in the back of their heads,” (interview, November 30,
She explains that because of testing requirements she feels always forced to “expect something constructive to come out of” every independent reading occurrence.

Many of the participating teachers appeared stymied when I asked if education accountability trends had impacted their independent reading programs. Most of them did not mention those as influencing factors until I asked about the subject, and even then few of them thought that those outside influences were significant in the ways they use independent reading. At a local level, only Penni mentioned experiencing pressure to justify her class-time use of independent reading. She says she is generally supported by her building principal regarding her reading program but

the one thing is that I think he wants to see more of is “how do you know? How do you know they’re doing that? How do you know they’re reading what they’re supposed to be reading, if you don’t have any pencil to paper proof?” (interview, December 13, 2010)

Encouragement. In contrast to the limited reference to external education policies, teachers provided numerous examples of outside encouragement of their independent reading activities. All but one teacher mentioned enthusiastic district administrators and peers, many of whom had participated in book studies or other collaborative efforts, and also of district policies that facilitated their literacy endeavors. Several teachers talked about national figures such as Laura Bush and programs such as Read Across America as examples of support for their providing their students with numerous classroom opportunities to read. In fact, Tammy went so far as to say that she has had no experience with those outside her classroom who question the value of providing independent reading time for her students, if they are informed:

I’ve never heard anybody who could say anything negative about independent reading.

Never. I think that anybody who understands the reasons for it, understands the research
that’s done, has read that research as well… There’s nothing that discourages us from
doing that. (interview, November 3, 2010)

It appears that the teachers are much more vocal about those external factors that serve to
encourage and support their literacy instruction efforts than those that might contradict them. In
discussions with some of the teachers about forms of encouragement or discouragement for their
independent reading use, I mentioned the National Reading Panel (2000) report, which failed to
find conclusive evidence confirming that increasing the amount of reading a student does
significantly impacts his or her reading ability. None of them remarked on having prior
knowledge of these findings, and they were all quick to brush off its conclusions for independent
reading with their own students.

**Classroom Components**

Teachers cite various factors within the classroom itself that affect their use of
independent reading time and activities. They explain that some of these components, such as
various reading resources and programs, can support their efforts to expand reading opportunities
for their students. Other factors, including student characteristics and time pressures, alter their
ability to provide worthwhile independent reading events.

**Resources.** For students to participate in independent reading activities, an inherent
requirement is the availability of reading materials. The materials deemed necessary by the
teachers in this study are a result of the beliefs they hold regarding the type of books most
advantageous for student reading success, including requirements for sufficiency and
appropriateness. Teachers also have available a variety of other materials such as their basal
reading series and other reading programs unrelated to the district-supplied basal series. They
rely on them to various degrees for support of their students’ independent reading.
**Classroom library.** Every teacher participant in this study agrees that an ample classroom library is essential to the success of their students’ independent reading, and this is exemplified in the abundant libraries found in each of their classrooms. The eight teachers average over 1400 books in each of their rooms, with a low of about 500 and a high of over 3000. The lower grade levels classroom libraries, with a preponderance of picture books have, not surprisingly, more books that the upper grade level libraries with their emphasis on chapter books. Penni points out some important aspects of students having direct access to books in the classroom:

> You have to have a classroom library because they need to be able to choose, they need to be able to change out their books frequently. There’s just something about them shopping for their books in the classroom, it’s just different than the [school] library, these belong to all of us, these are our books. These are for all of us to use and share and love and recommend to each other and talk about and get excited about. (interview, February 8, 2011)

Jennifer states that having enough books for students to practice reading has always been a challenge. It was such a priority for her, however, that at the beginning of her teaching career she used her own funds to create a classroom library:

> I think I began in the very beginning, I realized that practice reading was important, and the more that they read the more they learned, and this was a long time ago, before we had programs like Accelerated Reader, and I would just buy tons and tons of those easy readers and, that was back in the days of Troll. And I would just…Troll, and 700 dollars a month of salary. So you would get whatever you could and I just collected and collected and collected bonus points, and every bonus point I got would go for these little
books. And I tried to build a library so kids could practice read. (interview, November 3, 2010)

She adds that she and her teaching partners have now combined their personal collections to create greater choices for their students, and she talks excitedly about the options this opens up for student reading. This reflects the views of the other teachers, all of whom use their own resources in purchasing books to supplement district provisions.

Tammy explains that their school benefitted from a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which provided many books that were gathered in a school book room that she relies on to stock the library in her classroom. She states that as a result of the expansion of her school’s reading materials “we’re getting some really good resources; the book shopping and the book choice has gone so much more smoothly because kids really have so much deeper choice, number of choices to make” (interview, November 2, 2010). She adds that she relies on online resources to aid in leveling books to provide guidance for students’ reading choices.

Specific reading programs are named by a number of the teachers in this study as a resource in their independent reading programs. While all of the eight teacher participants use a basal reading series to provide at least some of their instruction, each of them stated their basal series does not include explicit independent reading components. Some of them mentioned using components of the basal such as stories from the student anthologies to support independent reading. However, a number of them rely on other programs, including Accelerated Reader, Reading Counts, and The Daily 5 to support their students’ independent reading.

**Accelerated Reading and Reading Counts.** The Accelerated Reading (AR) program by Renaissance Learning and the Reading Counts program by Scholastic are structures that provide a number of reading supports including information for leveling trade books, book quizzes that
assess student comprehension, and an online system for tracking student reading progress. Of the eight teachers in this study, six of them utilize to varying extents one of these programs to aid their students’ independent reading. Accelerated Reading is most fully utilized in Jennifer’s first-grade classroom, where it forms the basis of her independent reading program. Each morning Jennifer’s students spend their entire independent reading time choosing, reading, and taking quizzes on picture books that fall within the Accelerated Reading system. In fact, when asked to describe what independent reading looks like in her classroom, she replies, “It looks like AR” (interview, November 3, 2010). She explains that AR and the STAR testing that accompanies it provide her with information about her students’ proximal reading range and with the ability to monitor her students’ comprehension of the books they read. She describes the reasons that she chose to participate with the AR program:

I didn’t have the ability to monitor like I do. It’s crucial, I think, in independent reading that the comprehension component is that ability for me to monitor. Cause I can go on there and see what they’ve done. But the kids can monitor too, are they understanding what they are reading? All this is just huge in reading growth. And I learned that over the years, so I began searching for things that made life easier, that allowed me to monitor, that allowed me to give them more opportunity, and to make that meaningful opportunity. You can give 28 kids little books to read but how much is going on with first graders? This, it’s a huge tool in the ability to allow them the opportunity to practice and monitor the quality of that practice. And their reading range. Because staying in that proximal range, too, is key.

Interestingly, the other first grade teacher, Tammy, doesn’t think that Accelerated Reader provides the kind of reading experience she wants for her students. She says, “I like to hear them
and I don’t think it’s a deep enough conversation for little guys to just be going through” (interview, February 11, 2011). Sara, on the other hand, appreciates aspects of AR that drive her students to want to read more, saying, “I think it’s a great motivator to them; they get feedback, something they can take home and show their parents. They love working on the computers” (interview, February 16, 2011).

Regarding Reading Counts, Elizabeth says that it is available in her room but she doesn’t make it a top priority. Her students can participate to win school-sponsored incentives but she doesn’t monitor their performance with the program. Amy sees benefits with using Reading Counts with her students but also mentions some drawbacks to this sort of structure:

I think that it can be valuable as a motivator to earn the points. I think it can also be valuable in terms of helping the kids, when it’s working properly, to keep track or to hold themselves accountable, to be able to monitor their progress as far as how many books they read, how many point they earned that kind of thing. But the reality is, I have yet to figure out how to enable it, so my kids are not able to access how many points they’ve earned. I have to report that back to them and so the delay in me getting that information back to them…The idea is that immediate feedback and they’re not getting the immediate feedback right now. And real honestly, I don’t want the kids to be…I want them to be motivated by the love of reading and passion for good literature, not by the carrot of the number of points I can get because then that takes the focus off of where it’s supposed to be. And one of the things that I really hated about that to begin with was, I don’t want kids not choosing a particular book because, “oh, that’s not in my lexile.” Well, so that’s not in your lexile, so maybe that’s a book that you can read together with mom. Or maybe for right now it’s a not-yet book, an I’m-not-there-yet book but I really want to
read that book. I just don’t want them to be limited by an imposed structure. (interview, February 22, 2011)

*The Daily 5*. *The Daily 5* names a system and a book of the same title developed by Washington state teachers Gail Boushey and Joan Moser (2006), also referred to as The Sisters. The program described in their book provides a literacy framework in which students participate in independent reading and writing tasks while teachers provide literacy coaching with small groups or individual students. The book and system seem to be common knowledge among most of these teachers; six of them refer to it at least once during our conversations. The most common use made of the Daily 5 in these teachers’ curriculums is to employ selected aspects of the system to supplement their programs. Penni and Francis use at least some components of the Daily 5 in their independent reading program and Amanda uses it as the foundation of her daily literacy instruction, integrating it with a basal program. She states that the Daily 5 adds components such as independent differentiated instruction and student goal setting that is not found within her basal series:

I love that I’m basing structure off the basal but that’s not the whole component of my program. I’m able to teach comprehension and grammar and phonetic pieces through the basal, but then taking that basal and adding in, like the Daily 5 and the independent differentiated instruction piece. I think the portion I would not be able to live without is the Daily 5 and the Reading Cafe, that whole independent portion of the reading, being able to read at your level and set goals and really evaluate yourself as a learner, two really important things to teach kids how to do. (interview, November 16, 2010)

**Management.** Teachers in the study note some day-to-day issues that influence their use of independent reading for classroom use. One factor over which they feel they hold little control
is a lack of time to accomplish everything they think they must. Teachers mention a number of draws on their time with students, including holiday events, conferences, other curricular components, and community expectations, all of which reduce the number of minutes they are able to provide student reading time. As Francis states, “I try to build in time for my kids to do that but time is at a premium” (interview, December 14, 2010). Elizabeth explains that she is frustrated with competing demands on time she must spend on student activities:

And I feel it’s important they get a chance to read their own choice. And that’s the one thing that falls by the wayside when you run out of time or the state gives you so much to do, you think, “that’s the one thing I can let go,” but I think it’s important. (interview, November 30, 2010)

A second classroom issue that teachers cite as a challenge to providing adequate and effective independent reading activities is the management of student behavior. Penni states that it is simply hard to keep track of the simultaneous independent reading activities of that many students while at the same time providing support and instruction. Francis mentions the added burden of fewer adults in the room than in the past, a result of shrinking school budgets. These highly effective teachers use a variety of management techniques to successfully control their classroom situations during independent reading time but they agree that these are ongoing issues with which they struggle in attempts to create optimal literacy environments for their students.

Student characteristics. The students who populate these teachers’ classrooms span a range of demographic characteristics. Two of the teachers indicate that their students’ particular needs have a notable influence on the way they plan and structure independent reading experiences in their classrooms. Tammy discusses the special situation created by the needs of
her students for whom English is not their native language, noting that it is difficult for these students to sustain independence with reading when they don’t hold the language of the texts:

Children that are second-language English, that is the other thing; when we’re looking at reading and we’re looking at the three cueing systems, they don’t have the syntax. They may be getting the phonics part of it but they don’t have the comprehension part and they don’t have the part with the syntax of the language, so they can’t predict what’s going to be coming next. You’re at a real disadvantage when you don’t have the vocabulary.

(interview, November 2, 2010)

She explains that she takes extra steps such as pre-reading, exposure to vocabulary, and book discussions with her English language learners, to better enable them to achieve some measure of independence when they later approach texts on their own.

An additional student characteristic that two teachers indicated was influential on their classroom use of independent reading is age. Not surprisingly, the two first-grade teachers, Jennifer and Tammy, share this common concern. Both of these teachers engage their students every day in activities that they label independent reading; however, each explained that the support their students require might cause some to question whether it can truly be characterized as independent. While expressing her firm belief in practice reading for her first-grade students, Jennifer explained that the elements that allow them to benefit from independent reading activities might differ from those applied to older students:

They need to read out loud in the beginnings. You need to be able to talk to them about what they’re doing, help them learn to apply their decoding skills, and use that in their reading so that’s a downfall cause that’s not really independent reading. So you need this
read-with to enable them to develop the ability to read independently, you need the read-with aspect of it. (interview, November 3, 2010)

Tammy agrees:

The little guys, first of all don’t really have a lot of stamina. They can’t, many of them can’t read, so to ask them to read for a half an hour…We build it up, of course, we start with about six minutes, but even now there are a lot of children in the classroom that the books that they’re reading may only take a minute or two. So to be able to sustain reading for a period of time and not be an accomplished reader is pretty tough…Little kids can’t really be quiet readers, so if you’re expecting a very very quiet classroom with children that are emergent readers, they can’t, so you have to have a little bit of flexibility with your expectations with quiet. (interview, November 2, 2010)

These two teachers are committed to providing independent reading practice for their students but acknowledge that the supports sometimes required by these emergent readers might call into question its inclusion as independent reading in the strictest sense of the word. However, Tammy explains her reasoning behind labeling as independent the activities in which her students participate on a daily basis, since her goal is to gradually wean them from teacher support:

You’re asking children without guidance to be reading a text and to be using what they know about reading to solve reading problems without needing to ask anybody else to help them. So yeah, I’d say that’s independent; I think that’s a fair label. (interview, February 11, 2011)
Affective Factors

There are affective considerations that influence these teachers’ use of independent reading in their classrooms. Few of the teachers openly discussed their own feelings about reading. More frequently they talked about a desire to open up the world of reading to their students because of their belief in its importance and their conviction that independent reading is a way to achieve that goal.

Benefits of independent reading. Not surprisingly, the teacher participants in this study are all strong advocates of independent reading and utilize it in their classrooms on a daily basis. When asked to justify this use of classroom time, the most common response from teachers was the inherent ability of independent reading to provide their students with the opportunity for practice of their burgeoning reading skills in an authentic context. Jennifer summed up the explanations given by the other teachers:

That practice piece is key, it’s critical. Their reading development is so much slower if independent reading is not a piece of their reading experience, a part of their reading program. It’s a part of the balance. If it’s not there it’s almost like the engine of the train is gone and the caboose is having to push it. (interview, November 3, 2010)

Tammy cited Richard Allington in her explanation:

He just flat out says, you can’t read if you don’t read. You can’t play soccer if you don’t practice soccer. You can’t learn to swim unless you start in the shallow part and wear floaties. You can’t do that until you’ve had chances to get better and better and then get to the deep end and take off the floaties. You have to have support and you have to be able to practice, and you have to be practicing in the right depth of water. He’s clear on that. (interview, November 2, 2010)
The teachers mentioned other benefits of independent reading, such as boosting skills of comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency; prompting students to explore new topics; and motivating a love for reading.

**Teacher confidence.** These feelings of the importance of reading seemingly boosted their tendency to disregard outside pressures when they contradicted teachers’ feelings about independent reading use. Several of the teachers indicated that they carried on with independent reading even when it had been questioned by others. For example, Naomi stated that while she was typically encouraged in her efforts to provide independent reading opportunities to her students, she would disregard advice that went contrary to her belief system:

> I’m the type of person that I’ll hear what is said and I’ll take a little piece of that and I’ll go, “Oh, that’s not right.” I’m strong-willed enough that I say, “Come to my room and you can see.” So I’m very confident about it. Really in my school…and I’m proud of my students and how they love reading, so I don’t pay attention to what’s out there.

(interview, November 10, 2010)

Most of the teachers expressed feelings of confidence in the ways they conducted independent reading in their classrooms; two of them cited their students’ superior reading test scores as proof. Penni attributed her students’ reading success to her use of independent reading compared to that of the other teachers in the building:

> So I know what I do and I know what other teachers do and I know what my scores were and I know what their scores were; and one of the biggest differences between our teaching isn’t our mini lessons, I don’t really think it’s our reading groups. I mean, I don’t really know for sure cause I’m not in there all day. I think it’s the amount of time that kids are reading. (interview, December 13, 2010)
Other teachers discussed ways that professional reading and seeing others’ reading programs had validated work they were doing with their own students. While the teachers expressed occasional doubts or questions about specific aspects of their literacy instruction, overall they appeared to believe in the value of the independent reading components of their programs.

**Understanding Independent Reading**

Lacking a definition of independent reading that is consistent and accepted across the literacy field, I paid special attention to the ways the teacher participants spoke about and enacted independent reading events for their students. When I asked them what the term *independent reading* means to them and what it looks like in their classrooms, their responses were often similar, sharing some common ideas regarding students interacting with text on their own. Tammy stated that “it means kids reading and making meaning from what they’re reading, without other people solving their problems for them” (interview, November 2, 2010). Naomi answered that

> an independent reader is someone who is able to go and they’ll be able to choose a just right book on their own and be able to sit there and read it, and then when I go to them and ask them questions, or “tell me about what you’ve read,” they can do it. (interview, November 10, 2010)

Jennifer and Sara were more specific, mentioning the use of the Accelerated Reader program as an integral part of their independent reading. Amanda referred to a segment of the Daily 5 program, saying that in her room it was “the whole Read to Self part, independent reading. Away from the basal. A book that’s a good fit book for that student. That’s independent reading to me” (interview, October 25, 2010).
The teachers went on to describe some components that demonstrated their shared beliefs about what independent reading contains in elementary classrooms. These included opportunities for students to be given choices in a variety of areas, to work at their own levels, and to interact with text without depending on adults to solve reading problems. However, the teachers were united in their belief about the necessity of adult support for their students’ efforts at every stage of the independent reading experience. All agreed that while independent reading was an opportunity for young readers to test their reading wings, they felt responsible for providing the ongoing assistance necessary to ensure their students’ independent reading success. These dual objectives were reflected in the ways teachers conducted independent reading activities with an eye toward enabling students’ independence under the careful guidance of expert adults.

**Student Autonomy**

Unlike many of the activities in which students participate throughout the school day, teachers appeared to view independent reading times as occasions for students to participate more fully in decision-making. However, they made it clear that allowing students expanded decision-making power did not preclude teachers from overriding students’ choices when teachers felt that they were not conducive to learning.

**Seating options.** One student choice during independent reading consisted of the simple opportunity to choose where their reading would take place. Almost every teacher stated that they allowed students to sit anywhere they wanted while they read, a seemingly unheard of option for most classroom activities. In fact, several of them have created environments that allow their students to view reading as a pleasurable activity, adding special seating and other elements that highlight the enjoyment of the reading experience. Elizabeth explains that she wants her students to view reading as something beyond a learning event, saying “I’ve got the
pillows; when they do independent reading they go back and sit on the bench. They get a pillow, they plop it down. I want them to see reading not just as functional but as enjoyment” (interview, February 15, 2011).

This choice was most often exercised by students being scattered around the classroom and often sitting or lying on the floor. In fact, I spent many of my classroom visits stepping over and around small bodies as I observed their reading behaviors. One third-grade student, however, felt more comfortable reading at her seat, especially when she thought that students in other places were likely to disturb her reading. She explained, “Sometimes I just can’t stand it when it’s just loud and noisy when I read so I enjoy quiet spaces when I read, like my desk. I like to stick where I am” (interview, February 9, 2011). Apparently providing students with choices regarding their reading spaces allows them to select places in which they feel they will be most successful or comfortable as readers.

While students are encouraged to choose their own places to read, the attributes of picking a good place to read were often taught and then expected as a positive reading behavior in these classrooms. Amanda explained that she models for her students from the beginning of the year “finding a good spot, staying in your spot, working the whole time and really focusing on your learning” (interview, November 16, 2010). She expects her students to be purposeful in their choice of reading location as one aspect of what good readers do; she states that “we’ve talked about that too, finding that good spot and what that means to you and where you need to be and you need to make sure you are being successful” (interview, February 9, 2011).

**Book choices.** Teacher participants in this study indicated that one of the cornerstones of independent reading, in their view, is providing students with opportunities to read books of their own choosing. Teachers emphasize the importance of allowing students to select reading
materials that reflect the topics, genres, series, and authors that appeal to students. Amanda states that one of her goals for independent reading for her students is “that freedom to choose and learning what books I like as a reader” (interview, November 16, 2011). Penni justifies her emphasis on providing students with opportunities to read books in which they are interested:

I want them to love to read and if they’re not reading what they want to read I don’t think they’re gonna love it. And sometimes they have to read stuff for me: This is the book we’re reading for book club; you don’t get a choice on that, sorry. But during independent reading they have quite a bit of choice. (interview, December 13, 2011)

Every teacher expressed a similar conviction that independent reading time is an opportunity for students to exercise their reading choices. However, none of the teachers provide carte blanche to their students to select books completely free of teacher supervision. Teacher direction was evident in the form of ensuring students were reading books at an appropriate reading level, encouraging or requiring variety in reading materials, and providing reading suggestions. Oversight for students’ independent reading choices was most apparent among the teachers of younger students, with increasingly less teacher control as the grade levels increased. Tammy explained that her first graders are most successful when “kids are choosing their own books and there’s monitoring of that choice, and you’re checking up on them (interview, November 2, 2010). Jennifer’s first graders are permitted to choose their books but the books must be included in each child’s proximal range, as indicated by the Accelerated Reader program. On the other hand, Elizabeth and Francis, the fourth- and fifth-grade teachers, respectively, state that they less closely monitor their students’ reading choices, as long as they are reading.
“Just-right” books. One of the most common themes among these teachers’ understanding of independent reading is that it be conducted at an appropriate level for each student reader. For nearly all, this entails ensuring that students spend most of their time reading books at their independent reading levels, which almost all of them label just-right or good-fit books. Tammy expresses sentiments conveyed by most of the teachers in her explanation that students need

a just-right book to learn how to become a better reader; when there’s books that are too hard or books that are too easy, they’re not becoming a better reader. When they have to be independent with it, I would say the best thing to do would be make sure the books are at the right level so that they have some confidence with the reading. (interview, February 11, 2011)

Tammy’s first-grade students choose new books for their reading bags each Friday morning, in a flurry of activity they call book shopping. It includes students moving throughout the room among numerous labeled book bins divided by reading level, returning books from their reading bags to the bins and choosing new books for the week. One day that I observed this activity, it continued for nearly 30 minutes, with students who finished early beginning to read their books and some students book shopping for almost the entire time. It appeared to be productively noisy as students talked about their book choices with each other, with their teacher, and sometimes just to themselves. The teacher’s oversight of this endeavor was obvious as she moved about the room talking with students about their choices. Most of her interactions appeared to be aimed at encouraging students to consider books at their appropriate reading levels, which they were expected to be aware of based on a numeric system. Some of her exchanges with students included comments like “I can’t wait to see some good choices here.
Are you opening it up and taking a peek?” (field notes, February 11, 2011) and “I want to see appropriate books this time. Eights and nines, maybe a ten.” She checked through the book bag of one boy, saying “This is too hard and this is too hard. I’m gonna help you choose.” He followed her to a tub, where she showed him the title of a book and opened to show him some pages, saying “See if you can read some of the words in here.” To one of her higher level readers she said, “Did you consider any of these books in here? Uh oh, too easy. I’d like you to consider some on this shelf.” She directed her to a bin containing early chapter books. While students selected their own books from the many leveled tubs, Tammy’s supervision of students’ choices based on their reading levels was clear.

Tammy was vigilant about overseeing her students’ selections because she firmly believes in the necessity of appropriately leveled books for students’ reading development. She also acknowledges that her young readers sometimes have difficulty following the system:

I think you can’t just let them choose because sometimes they don’t always choose wisely. I have one in particular, who ignores the guidelines and goes for books that are impossible to read for her. And I’ll say, “Here are the three tubs that you can choose from,” and there are many books in the three tubs, and she’s going to where other children are choosing books because she likes the picture in the front or she wants to be next to whoever while they’re picking books, so I think you need to monitor somewhat. I say, “That’s too easy. Go put that back, that’s not going to help you as a reader.” I would agree to an extent that they need choice and they need lots of books to choose from but I wouldn't give them sole responsibility for their choices. I think at first grade they’re too little to know exactly how that works. (interview, February 11, 2011)
However, Tammy discusses the ways that she has altered her system to accommodate books that students strongly want to read but that don’t meet the just-right expectation:

I have several little people this year, for example, who were dying to read X book, and it was four or five levels too high. But I might have said to a couple of them, “Okay, read a page,” and they were getting through it. Their desire was so high to read that I said, “Okay, you can keep this in your BOB bag and when you come in in the morning and we’re not working on our just right books, go ahead and give that a try. I’m not asking children not to be better readers, cause with that high interest… It might have been something we read aloud and there were lots of familiar words in it but it was just a little higher.

During my observation, the first-grade students in Tammy’s room appeared to be well aware of the book leveling system in place, though some of them seemed to ignore it when they selected books to put into their book bags. With little direction prior to the book shopping, most of them moved to the appropriately leveled tubs and looked through them to select books. One girl was especially articulate in explaining to me the reasoning behind paying careful attention to book choice, referring to a chart that Tammy has posted using pictures of three chairs to exemplify the differences between too-hard, too-easy, and just-right books.

Normally I’ll open up a book and see, is it just right for me. Like over there, that soft chair means you don’t even have to read it really and the hard chair means it’s way too hard, you barely have to figure out any words, but the hard-and-soft chair is just right because there’s two or three words on the page that you cannot figure out. Normally if it’s like interesting, like this book. Or it’s a really good book that I wanna read. Cause
sometimes I get a book and I don’t really like it so I won’t read it that much. (interview, February 11, 2011)

In other classrooms, students also paid attention to book levels in different ways. In the book selection process I observed in Jennifer’s room, children start each morning choosing books to read and then move to computers for Accelerated Reader (AR) quizzes on the books, with the expectation that they will take an AR quiz each day. While students get to choose their own books from the many tubs, they know that they must adhere to the AR reading level with which each book is labeled, “unless they’re ready for a challenge,” as Jennifer explains (interview, November 3, 2010). When students in her class were asked how they chose books for independent reading, they discuss the books’ AR levels as a major consideration.

Numerous other students across the grades were able to articulate their attention to book level when they chose material for independent reading time. A third-grader in Penni’s room explained that when he chooses books,

I usually take a look at it first and see if it’s a good fit book for me. It means you can really read it and not let it be too easy for you or too hard for you. Some words you get stuck on but they’re not that hard. Usually on nonfiction books they look really interesting to me. Like octupuses look interesting to me so I have a couple books of those. (interview, February 8, 2011)

The teachers in this study share some techniques to better enable their students to read appropriately leveled books during independent reading times. All of them provide instruction and modeling, especially at the beginning of the year, regarding how to choose a just-right book, and they all continue to discuss it with their students throughout the year. In addition, most of the teachers check in with their students frequently about the books they are reading. Penni states:
We hit book choice more at the beginning of the year and just kind of go through the library and that kind of thing. If they’ve been here, they’ve learned it since first grade, so those kids are really good at picking books. Some of them, I don’t care how long you teach them how to pick books, they’re still going to pick books that are too hard or they’re gonna pick books that are too easy. So that’s why I like to check in with them once a week in reading group, and “take out your books and let’s talk about what you’ve got and why you’ve got.” (interview, December 13, 2010)

While all of the teachers mentioned the importance of appropriately leveled books for independent reading, this was most strongly enforced with the younger students and held increasingly less significance for teachers as the students’ grade levels increased. Though Penni attends to the book levels of her students, she takes into account their interests as well:

I try really hard to not be like “You can’t read that,” but you’re not going to be a better reader if you’re looking at books that you can’t read. So I really try to steer them away from that. And that’s why I check in with them on their book bags and stuff like that. I loosely monitor their levels. Because I have kids who are awesome readers who love picture books that still wouldn’t be considered at their level but they’re reading at a whatever, off the charts, but they love the story, they want to read it again, just like we do, so I’m not going to say, “No you’re an O, can’t read a K,” or whatever. (interview, December 13, 2010)

Julie explains that her fourth graders have become more practiced at making good choices overall so that she spends less time intervening into their book choices:

In primary they think they can read anything so they’ll pick a really super hard book, but fourth graders don’t do that. I find that they pick something that they can read. I think the
reading level is raised up to what I have in my library. They’ll read some of the funny little picture book things, and that’s okay with me too because I think there’s some value in the poetry and part of that is for enjoyment, so I don’t care. (interview, February 15, 2011)

**Quality literature.** While all of the teacher participants have extensive and varied classroom libraries, few of them mention the quality of the reading materials their students select for independent reading time. Only Francis discusses the impact of quality literature on her students’ reading choices, stating that she tries

To immerse my kids in good literature and to model for them what it means to be a literate person. When I do my conferencing with them we talk about, “Is this a good fit book for you, what’s the genre, are you getting a balanced diet? If you’re doing nothing but reading Captain Underpants you’re not going to grow as a reader.” (interview, December 14, 2010)

Others teachers pay some attention to the type of reading materials their students choose, either formally or informally. Penni and Amanda sometimes put requirements on the genres their students include in their weekly book collections. For example, on a day that I observed students choosing books in Amanda’s room, students were required to select a picture book, a chapter book, and a poetry book, as directed by the teacher. She moved about offering advice regarding the genres of books students expressed interest in and watching that they attended to the reading levels of the books as they chose from the many baskets in the room. One boy asked her if the book he had chosen was fantasy and they talked about the characteristics of fantasy books. Amanda directed two girls to return some picture books they had that were informational and not
useful for the fluency practice she had in mind. She explains that she struggles with the decision not to allow her students free reign over their book choices:

I thought, I shouldn’t tell these kids to put these books away that they’re interested in but I thought, okay, we still have to have some accountability about the books we’re reading. I think if it were just my classroom it would be easier to just, to be able to monitor that we’re finishing their books but it gets to be kind of complicated with the two classes, so I feel like, if Mrs. Carter has a book in her room you wanna read in her room, that’s fine but during reading time you’re going to read these certain books. At one point I thought, gosh, I don’t wanna squash this child from reading this book but…And then the other thing too is, I want that picture book to be practicing their fluency, and then we’ll add in that informational book as we go. So have different genres and different types of books to choose from in the basket. Anyway, that’s a struggle right now. (interview, November 16, 2010)

**Book recommendations.** Though the teachers in this study advocate for students’ choice of reading materials, they often provide students with book suggestions and create opportunities for students to recommend books to each other. On many occasions when I observed whole classes or groups of students selecting books for independent reading, teachers were available to provide advice on students’ choices or to steer students in the direction of books the teachers thought might interest them. On one occasion, Sara provided help to a girl who was having trouble locating a book, saying, “Let’s go find a just-right book for you” (field notes, January 19, 2011). As they looked through baskets, Sara remarked about one, “These are so good!” She pointed out several possibilities, naming the books’ attributes and titles. “Oh, that’s a good one too.” Sara pointed the girl toward a particular set of books, telling her “Remember, we’re looking
in the I-J-K basket.” When the girl found a book, Sara said: “Open the book to a page and do the five-finger test,” and watched while the student complied. Sara followed the student back to her space and listened to her read the new book. It was clear from their behavior that students I observed in these classrooms have great respect for their teachers’ book recommendations. A student in Francis’ room stated about his teacher that “if she recommends a book it’s probably a really good book!” (interview, February 22, 2011).

I observed students informally suggesting books to one another but teachers also structured opportunities for those kinds of peer recommendations to happen. Sara and Francis both mentioned the importance of students talking to each other about books they’ve liked. Amanda created a space on her wall for students to place completed peer book recommendations, which came in handy for a student who was having difficulty finding an appropriately leveled book that he wanted to read. On a day I conducted an observation in Amanda’s classroom, Carl, who Amanda identified as a low reader, spent many minutes flipping through books baskets looking for a chapter book. He grabbed several advanced chapter books from a basket, glanced at their covers, read a page inside each, and then put them back. When Carl finally selected one and took it to Amanda to show her, she told him to open it and read to her, holding up a finger if he comes to a word he’s not sure about. Eventually she pointed out to him that he was not quite finished with the page but was already holding up five fingers. Amanda told him this might not be a good fit but there are lots of others that are. Carl returned to the shelves and repeated this process twice more, both times bringing books that were much too difficult for him to manage independently. Finally Amanda led him to the student book recommendation notes posted on a wall, and they read some together. She pointed out one for Flat Stanley and led him to it on the shelf. He read aloud, holding up fingers as he miscued; he
was holding up two fingers at the end of the page. Carl added it to his basket, saying, “Cameron said this book was really funny and he really liked it” (field notes, February 9, 2011). In many of the classrooms both teacher and peer book recommendations provided advice to students looking to make good book choices.

**Problem-solving.** Teacher participants in this study expect their students to engage in independent reading activities without constant oversight from adults. Naomi stated her independent reading expectations for students:

I see independent being not depending on me, showing that, you know, “I’m done with this, now what am I supposed to do? I’m supposed to go get a book I can read and I’m supposed to sit down here and I can read.” (interview, November 10, 2010)

Teachers also view independent reading as an opportunity for students to practice their growing knowledge about reading as they interact with text on their own. Elizabeth explained that independent reading “means you ought to be able to practice the strategies that we’ve been working on, by yourself” (interview, November 30, 2010). Francis adds that “independent reading, to me, means being able to read without teacher coaching, without the prompting, the structure of an adult who is literate, being able to do that independently” (interview, December 14, 2010).

However, carrying on with reading independently does not, in these teachers’ views, entail students being without assistance when it is needed. Naomi explains that when her students run into a roadblock, they have options:

If you don’t know, if there are words that you don’t understand then you need to be able to go and write that word down and come to me and ask me about it when the time’s
right. If not, then you can go ask a friend; being independent, not always depending on me. (interview, November 10, 2010)

Several of the teachers also had on their walls posters exhibiting strategies students could use to solve their reading problems. Displays included comprehension and word identification strategies as well as ways to practice fluency and increase vocabulary development during independent reading activities. Elizabeth’s room also included posters with suggestions for reading different types of materials, such as expository text.

**Goal setting.** About half of the teachers mention students’ setting goals for their reading as a component of the independent reading that occurs in their classrooms. For some this happens in individual conferences during independent reading time. Amanda has the most formal system in place to enable students to think about goals they have for themselves as readers, based on elements of *The Daily 5* and *The Reading Cafe* (Boushey & Moser, 2006), and to make reading choices based on their objectives. Each of her third-graders has a literacy binder that accompanies them on their reading time each day. Among other pieces, it contains a sheet that asks students to record goals for their reading, which are discussed and agreed upon at each individual student conference. She explains:

> The Cafe is more setting goals and really thinking about what you can do to improve as a reader and as a writer; really about the four basic areas of comprehension, accuracy, fluency, and expand vocabulary, so you focus in on those different areas. And you’re conferencing with children and listening to them and talking about what they can be doing to improve as a reader. (interview, November 16, 2010)

Prior to one session of her students’ independent reading time I observed Amanda discussing some of these reading elements with her class, guiding them through the process of deciding
which they would focus on during that day’s reading and writing it in their literacy binders.

Later, during an individual conference she asked about the vocabulary goal a girl had set for herself and what on the page had helped her work on it.

Sara and Jennifer emphasize the significance of reading goals for their students, which are based on the students’ completion of the STAR test linked to the Accelerated Reader (AR) program. Students are expected to read books and take accompanying quizzes based on the proximal reading levels indentified for students by the STAR test, acquiring a required number of points in a specified time period. Both teachers referred to these as the students’ reading goals. It appears that the goals are set chiefly by the teachers, based on the child’s performance on the STAR test and their completion of AR quizzes, though Jennifer mentions that her students supply input for adjusting the goal levels:

The STAR test gives us that range and then I work within it. As I can see a child reach for their ability further and further they usually ask, but they set goals. We set goals. We discuss their scores. I think for the ability for students to set their own goals, to discuss it with me, to think about, “you know, have I chosen a book that was too difficult? Maybe I need to come back and revisit this book in a couple of weeks. Am I reaching too far? Am I not reaching far enough? I haven’t been getting points, I haven’t been gaining.” They usually take a look at that when they take their STAR test. You know, if they haven’t moved as much as they would like to see themselves move. “What can I do to increase my score next time?” (interview, November 3, 2010)

Motivation. Since teachers expect students to carry on with independent reading without constant adult oversight, they promote independent reading as a desirable pursuit in a variety of ways. I witnessed many interactions in which independent reading was advanced by the teachers
as a valuable activity, in hopes of motivating their students’ reading endeavors. During one observation conducted in Amanda’s room, as the students prepared to go to lunch, a boy announced, “I’d rather sit inside the classroom and read during recess” (field notes, October 25, 2010). Amanda replied, “That is joy to my heart to hear that!” When I interviewed students regarding their own thoughts about reading, the students’ attitudes reflected a similar perspective. In Sara’s room Collin told me simply that “if I keep on reading I’ll get better and better and better” (interview, February 16, 2011).

In several of the teachers’ classrooms there are attempts to motivate students’ increased reading through various extrinsic systems. Sara explained that being able to use the computers to take Accelerated Reader (AR) quizzes motivates her students to read more. During independent reading times in her classroom, Sara’s students appear very eager to get a chance to take AR quizzes. Jennifer’s students earn certificates based on the AR quizzes they complete; the certificates hang on the wall right outside the classroom door. Jennifer’s students also color paper rockets marked with AR reading levels. On every occasion I observed independent reading in Jennifer’s room, her students eagerly followed their reading and quiz completion by coloring the levels on their rocket sheets and commenting about their advancing book levels. Francis’ students vie for a trophy based on Reading Counts points that is offered by her school’s parent association, and Penni’s students earn certificates for free pizza based on their independent reading.

Independent Reading Behavior

Teachers in this study were quite clear about the expectations they hold regarding their students’ independent reading behavior. Jennifer stated that she had a simple requirement for her students:
I just expect behavior that enhances learning, that promotes learning. If learning is happening, that’s what I expect. I expect learning to happen and all behavior to promote that. Not to interfere with it, not to stop it. So that’s my expectation, that learning happens. (interview, November 3, 2010)

Many of the specific expectations outlined by the other teachers were similar to those expressed by Tammy:

Kids choose a place to sit. On our stamina chart they are supposed to be reading the whole time and looking like a reader; they have a book in their hand, their eyes are on the text. They’re sitting quietly, they’re sitting by themselves. They stay in the spot where they’ve first chosen and they’re not interrupting other people’s thinking by side talk. So really it’s supposed to be a sustained period of time where they’re forced to interact with the text. (interview, November 2, 2010)

All teachers in the study held common expectations for students to participate in independent reading activities in ways that would contribute to learning. However, several of them acknowledged that they took their students’ age levels into account in their behavioral requirements. The first-grade teachers were especially vocal about the need to structure independent reading events that were developmentally appropriate for their young readers. Jennifer stated:

It isn’t really truly in the beginning independent reading. You aren’t an independent reader when you first start out, so you’ve gotta kinda put that jigsaw puzzle together and make that be a part of independent reading. It is really reading practice, because you’re practicing all of the skills you need to become an independent reader. But you know, that’s what we’re building. (interview, November 3, 2010)
Tammy agreed, stating, “I’m glad we took out the “independent silent” reading, so there are opportunities for kids to get a little help” (interview, November 2, 2010).

**Silent reading?** An independent reading behavior on which teachers’ opinions wavered was reading silently versus reading aloud. Teachers of the younger students stated that although silent reading was a goal they held, many of their students were not able to fully meet that expectation. In fact Tammy explained her contention that reading aloud aids the reading abilities of her first-graders:

> We expect kids to be doing some talking. We want them to be discussing what they’re looking at, what they’re reading and sharing. I don’t think kids can be silent anymore, hardly. It’s almost an unreasonable expectation, especially for early readers, with sub-vocalizing and rereading and they talk to themselves too. And I think it’s more like around 14 or 16 where kids are able to internalize that voice. Mostly they have to whisper it to hear it, and even detect if it’s the right word because they’re not fluent enough, they don’t have enough sight word bank. They need to hear the story being told to them.

(interview, November 2, 2010)

Several teachers of the younger students made accommodations by allowing whisper reading as an acceptable practice or supplying whisper phones, pipe-like devices that students hold to their ears while reading quietly. I observed students in first through third grades utilizing this option in classrooms on a number of occasions. Though Sara had whisper phones available, I observed her on several occasions reminding students to read silently when they were whisper reading.

Even the fourth-grade and fifth-grade teachers accept reading aloud as inevitable for many of their students while still acknowledging the importance of silent reading. Surprisingly, it was in these two classrooms that I observed the greatest amount of choral reading of materials
that I expected would be read silently at this grade level. Both Elizabeth and Francis state that having their students read aloud provides them with opportunities to offer instruction and ensure accountability that is not possible during silent reading episodes. Francis explains that

I try very conscientiously to have them do a portion of the reading and then we talk about it but when we’re reading out loud it allows me to hear or to see or to get into what’s going on, it enables me to hold them more accountable. It is more efficient to my way of thinking. I think that that oral, that auditory feedback is… And I may just be intuitive about that but then again, one of the strategies for improving fluency with reading naturally is to hear someone else read, the choral reading, the readers theatre kind of things. Neurological impress is out loud. So I guess it’s not just that I’m a very auditory learner but I think that intuitively I think that there’s some reasons for that. And I suppose empirically there are some reasons for that as well. (interview, December 14, 2010)

**Behavioral support.** As highly effective teachers, the participants in this study are adept at classroom management decisions and this includes not only considering behavioral requirements but also articulating them to students. Teachers talk about ways that they demonstrate these behaviors to their students, including explicitly modeling what being an independent reader looks like. On numerous occasions I witnessed teachers reviewing behavioral expectations with the class prior to participating in independent reading events. On two separate visits I observed both Sara and Amanda reviewing reading expectations before freeing their students to begin reading. Tammy asked her students to remind her about their reading behaviors, ending the quick review by saying “You should look like a reader and act like a reader” (field notes, October 22, 2010).
Several of these teachers’ classrooms contain posters outlining behaviors to be practiced during independent reading time. Tammy has a poster on her wall outlining, in student words, methods of increasing stamina for reading and another poster containing a rubric for independent reading behavior. Sara has posted reminders of what partner reading looks and sounds like. Penni’s poster contains columns labeled “Wow!” and “Oh no!” listing positive and negative independent reading behaviors. Teachers have numerous supports like these in place to aid students in self-regulating their independent reading actions and they frequently review them with students.

While teachers expect their students to carry on with minimal adult oversight during independent reading activities, they continued to monitor students’ behavior even as teachers carried with other tasks. I considered the students I witnessed to be generally well-behaved and cooperative. They were frequently self-directed, often participating in independent reading even without a teacher directive to do so, and many remaining fairly well focused on their reading activities most of the time. However, their behavior was not perfect and I observed numerous examples of teachers issuing reminders to individual students regarding behaviors that the teachers considered inconsistent with their reading activity. Such behaviors consisted of visiting with other students during reading time, failing to be reading or working on the reading-related task, or lacking the appropriate materials for the activity. Less often I observed teachers praising students for meeting their independent reading behavior expectations. Rarely I saw teachers stop the entire class to deliver a reprimand regarding their reading behavior and a reminder about what they should be doing. This teacher oversight seemed fairly spread over the grade levels, with the exception of the fifth grade class. I observed few behavioral reminders from Francis to her class during independent reading events. During my first classroom visit I asked if her
students were exhibiting their usual behavior or if they were especially well-behaved as a result of having a visitor in the room. Francis replied that their behavior was “pretty typical. I run a pretty tight ship” (interview, November 15, 2010).

**Conducting Independent Reading**

Each teacher participant in this study utilized independent reading somewhat differently than the others. However, there were numerous commonalities that became apparent after observing their classroom practices and listening to teacher and student perspectives, including ways that the teachers maintained a focus on student growth and ways that they utilized activities in pursuit of literacy learning.

**Focus on Student Growth**

Most of the teachers indicate that they would love to provide opportunities for their students to read for the mere pleasure of the experience. All of the teachers emphasize that one of their primary goals for independent reading is prompting their students’ love for reading. Amanda’s explanation echoes that of the other teachers on this issue:

> I think with the independent reading, having children learn to love to read. Really I hope that we instill that they want to be reading, that they know how to find a good book that’s one that they’re going to love to read, that they’re going to want to read. I think that’s my main goal, is to really create students who are lifetime readers and learners. (interview, February 9, 2011)

Several of the teachers believe that for many of their students, the independent reading experience itself motivates their students toward that love of reading that the teachers desire for them. I overheard numerous comments from students expressing a love of reading or books in
my classroom visits, often accompanying requests to their teachers for extending independent reading time.

In spite of their belief in independent reading to prompt reading interest, however, all of the teachers agree that the independent reading in which their students actually participate is a purposeful event structured to promote student literacy learning. They indicate multiple goals toward which their students are expected to strive during reading times, but they hold in common the idea that the focus of independent reading time in their classrooms goes beyond mere enjoyment to advancing student reading growth. In fact, Tammy explains that

it would be nice if you could not evaluate anything and you could only have kids reading for pleasure but I think they’re only going to derive pleasure from it if they’re successful and if they see themselves as readers. (interview, February 11, 2011)

Amanda explains that when she was in school she participated in reading done merely for pleasure and she didn’t get as much out of the experience as she could have:

I can remember independent reading in school; we’d drop everything and read and there was no accountability. I didn’t know what I should be doing while I was reading. I wasn’t asking questions, so I didn’t have that structure as a student. So it’s really teaching children how to read; the reading piece has become so important. It’s just, it’s huge.

(interview, November 16, 2010)

Elizabeth agrees, stating that the message she would send to other teachers about independent reading is the importance of a purpose for every reading event:

I would make sure there’s a point, make sure there’s some kind of outcome to it. I think our time is too valuable just to have that 25 to 30 minutes without some kind of result that you’re looking for. Whether or not their practicing what they’ve been doing throughout
the day or... I think there needs to be some connection. So I would say, make sure that there’s something that you’re asking them to look for. I think there should be some kind of a point to it. Time is just too valuable. (interview, February 15, 2011)

While keeping the purpose of reading events uppermost in their own minds, the teachers also emphasize that they frequently communicate the purpose of reading events to their students as well. These purposes often include practicing reading skills and strategies including decoding, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. These purposes require teachers to carefully structure independent reading times to meet the goals they have for their students. As Tammy explained,

I think it’s just all the emphasis anymore on intentionality, on being intentional. That’s always at the forefront, that things aren’t just lucky. That we choreograph and orchestrate to have an end result, and the end result would be better readers, so we have to be very thoughtful about what we ask kids to do and how they do it. And be very intentional about how we teach it. (interview, November 2, 2010)

This intentionality is reflected in the efforts the teachers make to hold students accountable for their reading.

**Accountability.** In keeping with these teachers’ belief in the value of independent reading as a purposeful literacy learning activity, all of them have enacted measures to ensure that their students are engaged and learning during the process. Tammy explained:

For me, I think the whole purpose of that reading activity is to be a better reader. And if you’re not being held accountable for actually reading, then what’s the point of practicing? For children, the purpose of independent reading, from my point of view, is to promote good readers. And to become a good reader you have to practice. And I know I’ve quoted Richard Allington before: You have to practice with books that are right, you
have to practice a lot, the books have to be at the right level, the longer the kids have the books in their hands and their eyes are on the text, the better readers they’ll become. And that, for me, is the purpose of that and I believe with all of our benchmark testing I am accountable for their reading so, by golly, they’re going to be accountable for it too.

(interview, (February 11, 2011)

Demonstrating the emphasis on independent reading as a learning endeavor, Sara added,

Where we’re held accountable for what they’re learning, I think you need something that shows what they’re learning. There has to be some accountability. I think you have to know what they know. If they don’t get it, I think you have to have some way to know what they need extra help with. (interview, February 16, 2011)

While all of the teacher participants expressed the conviction that student accountability is essential to the successful utilization of independent reading, they practice those beliefs in different ways. Several of the teachers require written documentation of students’ reading endeavors, such as tracking their reading in logs or on graphs, or in writing responses to their reading. Other teachers utilize oral conversation to monitor their students’ reading, either during individual conferences or in large group share circles after reading ends. Tammy explains that she listens for evidence of book engagement during the conversations her students have while reading and when they read aloud to her. During one observation in Naomi’s room, in the midst of several days’ lessons on characters, Naomi tells her students that during independent reading time they will write a description of a character from their just right book. She reminds them to reread for more information about the characters. During reading time she circulates through the students’ desks, offering reading support and talking individually to students about the characters they have chosen to write about. At the end of reading time Naomi checks on the students’
understanding of character by allowing them to share their descriptions with their peers while she offers feedback and prompts students to reflect on their character writings.

As mentioned previously, some of the teachers rely on the results of Accelerated Reader (AR) or Reading Counts systems to hold their students accountable for their reading. During an independent reading event in Jennifer’s room, she conducts a conversation with a student about the results of his AR quiz. The boy reports his score to her, saying, “I got a 40 [out of 100%]. Cause I couldn’t remember.” (field notes, October 11, 2010). She responds, “What do you think will help? Reading out loud? Do you think it was a too-difficult book, then?” Jennifer continues to discuss with the child how to read the book, saying, “I just had a thought. How about take it home and read to Cari?” They continue to discuss possible reasons for his low score, with Jennifer suggesting, “Maybe it was in the reading of the test.” She notes that he did a “fine fine job reading” when he read it aloud to her earlier. Though these teachers use a variety of methods in monitoring their students, they have all enacted checks to hold their students accountable for demonstrating that learning is happening during independent reading.

**Inequitable time to read.** The teacher participants in this study emphasize their conviction in the power of independent reading to positively impact their students’ reading growth, and they all hold high expectations for the achievement of all of their students. However, observations revealed that in every classroom some students receive more, and sometimes far more, independent reading time than others.

These inequities occur for a variety of reasons, often as a result of students’ own behaviors. Explaining the impact of student behavior, Francis states that “some kids get more of it than other kids. And it depends on their ability to manage themselves. I mean, some kids just simply aren’t able, they aren’t there yet” (interview, December 14, 2010). For example, a large
portion of Amanda’s morning literacy instruction consists of time when she conducts individual conferences with students while the others are expected to read independently. During one observation, I noted that for an entire 18-minute period during which most of the students appeared to stay focused on their books, one boy sat at a back table with a book in front of him but never opened it. He spent his time sitting quietly, seeming to observe the activities of his fellow students, his failure to read apparently escaping the attention of his teacher.

While observing in Sara’s room, during a 17-minute period devoted to independent reading and taking Accelerated Reader (AR) quizzes, I noted students engaging in the following actions:

At 12:05 the teacher directed students to read their just-right books anywhere in the room. Students got books from the bags in their desks and scattered throughout room. A check at 12:10 revealed four students reading silently on the floor, three still getting settled, and two holding books and looking around the room, while others worked with a classroom aide. Subsequently a boy asked Sara if he could take an AR quiz and then a girl also requested permission, which was granted. At 12:15 four students were reading silently, three were holding books but not reading, and two were at computers taking AR quizzes. A boy who hadn’t yet been reading asked permission to go to the bathroom. Sara reminded him that he should have done that before but let him go. Following this exchange, a boy asked to trade a book from his bag because “it’s too easy and I’ve already read it.” At 12:18 two more students moved to the computers to take AR quizzes. At 12:20 three students were reading silently, two were whispering to each other about a book and then returned to reading, four students were taking AR quizzes, and one boy was looking in baskets and piling up books in his arms. He eventually selected one book
without opening it. The teacher directed students to put their books away at 12:22. (field notes, January 19, 2011)

During this time period a handful of the students were engaged in reading independently most of the time, others spent some minutes reading around other activities taking place, and some students spent very little or no time engaged with text. These were scenarios I saw repeated on a number of occasions in all the classrooms I visited, in spite of the teachers’ vigilance about reminding students about behavioral expectations both before and during independent reading time and taking steps to monitor their students’ actions.

In several of the classrooms independent reading time commences when students finish other assigned tasks, a scene I witnessed during numerous classroom visits. As a result, students who are repeatedly slower than their peers at completing work receive less reading time on a daily basis. In both Penni’s and Naomi’s rooms I observed students who took out books to read after they finished a math assignment, without teacher direction to do so. In each case about half of the students in the class received some time to read before the period ended. Students who were slower at finishing their written work did no reading at this time.

Most prevalent is the reduced time provided to lower level readers when they are removed from independent reading for supplementary skill-based lessons. Molly, a lower achieving reader in Elizabeth’s class, notices that she doesn’t get as much time to read as her peers because of her supplemental reading instruction:

During independent reading when we finish all our work we can read, but sometimes I’m a little behind because I have to go to Mrs. Harvey’s and so I don’t get much time but sometimes I do. Sometimes I wish I had a little more time because sometimes I feel like reading a lot, but sometimes I don’t have enough time. (interview, February 15, 2011)
Several of the teachers explain that often their struggling readers require additional instructional time that takes away from the time that other students in the class spend on independent reading, as exemplified by Elizabeth’s explanation: “Do they all get as much independent reading time? Maybe not. But they’re the ones still having trouble with decoding and have learning disabilities, so I can’t take that time away from them, so they probably don’t as often” (interview, February 15, 2011).

All of the teachers recognize and express concern over this inequity and many explain steps they have taken to address it. Tammy lists several behavioral steps she takes when one of her students engages in behavior that distracts from her expectations for independent reading:

We know how kids are; they’ll seek our interruptions, especially those children who are pretty fragile, and don’t want to take risks with their own reading. So sometimes at least by relocating we can at least separate them from interfering with other children’s reading time, and if they don’t have an audience they will often engage, but not always. So it’s a struggle. If I’m conferring at the table, I may have two or three kids here and I’m just rotating through, listening to them read; I could have somebody who’s struggling with behavior, just close proximity, and that’s how we address. But yeah, children’s own behavior and their choices interfere with their learning across the table, (interview, February 11, 2011)

Several teachers mention that scheduling has been coordinated so that students being removed from the classroom for extra help will not miss independent reading time on a regular basis.

**Independent Reading Activities**

Based on the practices and perspectives of the eight teachers in this study, independent reading is far more than just students reading books. In these classrooms, independent reading is
conducted in a number of different forms and occurs individually and socially. The teachers in this study provide instructional support around independent reading directly and through the use of reading-related tasks; they consider all of these varied elements to be essential in promoting students’ reading growth in the context of independent reading events.

**Forms of independent reading.** All of the teachers in this study schedule a time during the school day that is designated as independent reading time, though it carries a variety of labels in the different classrooms and consists of each individual teacher’s unique collection of activities. Independent reading time is sometimes an event unto itself, sometimes occurs as one of a number of instructional activities, or is sometimes a transitional episode set between other parts of the schedule. Regardless of the form it takes, all of the teachers agree that it is an essential part of every school day.

**Independent reading as the focus.** In some classrooms this time is devoted strictly to independent reading pursuits and all students are expected to participate. During classroom observations with more than half of the teachers, I witnessed periods of time devoted to whole-class independent reading, when teachers directed all students to read their student-chosen materials. The focus remains on reading text, though in most of the classrooms students are expected to combine reading with some activity directly related to the independent reading material, such as taking Accelerated Reader (AR) quizzes related to the text, marking their thinking with sticky notes, or completing reading logs. The teachers’ usual responsibilities consisted of working with individual students around their reading and in providing behavioral support.

Sara calls this period of time DIRT (Daily Independent Reading Time) and it usually occurs in her classroom for 15 to 20 minutes right after lunch recess. Three students each day are
permitted to read “any book, anywhere,” (field notes, November 9, 2010) in which they select books without regard for reading level and choose a spot anywhere in the room to read. The others get their just-right books from the bags in their desks and read at their seats. On the three occasions that I observed this activity in Sara’s classroom, the atmosphere varied from calm and quiet to more hectic. Few students remained in their places the entire time; there was a lot of movement as a result of some students going to computers at the back of the room to take AR quizzes and some students selecting books. There was rarely a time when the room was quiet as students asked Sara for permission to take an AR quiz, reported back to her after it was completed, discussed their books with one another, or whisper-read their books. Sara sometimes conducted individual conferences with students about their books and more often provided help with the AR quizzes and monitored student behavior. The movement and noise occasionally appeared to distract students from their reading as they often looked up as students passed them or as Sara called to other students about behavior or other issues. A few students stayed focused on reading the entire time while others were focused periodically.

Independent reading time in Jennifer’s room occurs first thing in the morning and follows a pattern similar to that found in Sara’s classroom. All students participate in independent reading, which is also based around reading Accelerated Reader (AR) books and taking AR quizzes. On a day that I observed this activity, there was a lot of movement and quiet noise that accompanied students selecting books, reading them, moving to the computers, and then completing reading charts marking their quiz results. A few students appeared engaged in their reading most of the time but many seemed to focus on books for only short periods of time before moving to the AR quizzes. Even more so than Sara, Jennifer’s attention in independent reading appears to be focused primarily on monitoring the AR activities, providing computer
help and aiding students in coloring their AR charts. Both teachers were observed guiding students in book selection, as well.

In Naomi’s, Amanda’s, and Tammy’s rooms, independent reading is not based on students taking AR quizzes. As a result there appeared to be less movement during the time in which the whole class was expected to engage in independent reading. However, there was still quiet noise and occasionally students moved around the room for various reasons. Many of the students appeared to stay focused on their books for most of the reading period, with occasional students attending elsewhere besides their text. Naomi spent part of this time talking quietly with students about their books but sometimes engaged in other tasks such as checking students’ homework or providing direction on other tasks. Amanda and Tammy spent the majority of students’ independent reading time conferencing with individual students about their reading.

**Independent reading as one of several literacy activities.** In other classrooms independent reading is one of several endeavors occurring in the midst of literacy instruction time; other activities include such things as reading group instruction or writing work. In Penni’s, Elizabeth’s, and Francis’ room I observed independent reading time primarily conducted simultaneously with other literacy activities that were disconnected from independent reading. During this chunk of time students might complete an assigned literacy task, meet with their teacher for group reading instruction, and spend a period of time reading independently. The atmosphere most of the time appeared to be productive; most students stayed focused their required tasks, whether they were written work or reading self-selected materials. Occasional students were observed to be off-task, sometimes for large chunks of time, but they remained quiet and often appeared to go unnoticed by their teachers. When independent reading was conducted in this situation, the teachers’ attention appeared to be focused on their instructional
duties; there was little teacher involvement in students’ independent reading activities, other than behavior monitoring. However, sometimes teachers discussed students’ independent reading when groups were gathered for instruction.

**Independent reading as a transition.** Most of the teachers encourage or require students to engage in independent reading when there is a lull in other work time, such as when they finish another task early and are waiting for classmates to finish. In every classroom I witnessed this opportunity for students to read independently at some point during the school day. Sometimes teachers explicitly directed students to read when they finished their written task but often students simply took a book from their desks or off the shelf and read while waiting for other students to finish their work. Amanda explained that while this has always been an opportunity for reading in her room, she acknowledges a change in how she views independent reading as more than just a time-filler:

> I think that shift from just reading to reading to learn. Also, I would find myself… students who were finished early, you know, “Go read.” Kind of that, what do I do with my students who are finished before anyone else? When I first started it was very workbook-oriented, which just right away felt like, “This does not feel right to me.” So it was really, what do I do with those students who need to be challenged; it was more, “Okay, go ahead and read.” But now that shift from just an extracurricular activity to actually learning through our reading, and applying that to our writing and our reading goals. (interview, November 16, 2010)

While every teacher prompts students to engage in independent reading during transition times such as when students finish other work early, none limits their students’ participation to that purpose alone.
Social interaction. While it seems that independent reading would inherently be an individual endeavor, the teachers in this study view interactions between class members as a positive component of independent reading activities. This attitude was prevalent among the lower grade teachers, who advocate for their students to engage in cooperative learning ventures that include learning from their independent reading events. Jennifer explained that for her first graders, reading alone isn’t necessarily the most beneficial way to practice but with a supportive peer, reading growth could occur:

It isn’t really truly in the beginnings independent reading. In order to cover that we have reading buddies. The older kids come down once a week and read with younger kids. And as you can see with a mixed grade level, as the older kids finish they’ll volunteer. “Can I read with Madison? Can I listen to this person read?” They buddy up. They just do it naturally, so that’s a big part of that. You aren’t an independent reader when you first start out; you’re practicing all of the skills you need to become an independent reader. (interview, November 3, 2010)

The upper level teachers also acknowledged that the social interaction that occurs around students discussing text provides opportunities for learning that might not be happen for students reading alone. Penni explained:

If they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing, which they aren’t always, but if they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing, they’re getting just as much out of that, if not more, as they are on their own. By definition it probably isn’t independent, but to me it’s just…it can be just as valuable as when they’re sitting with a book in front of them, because if they’re with a buddy, hopefully from time to time they’re helping each
other out or, “oh, I just realized that,” or whatever; they’re having those discussions.

(interview, December 13, 2010)

By their very nature elementary students have a propensity to be social; I witnessed student social interactions during every classroom visit I made over the course of the study. Sometimes this behavior, if not steered in the right direction, became an impediment to student learning. During a number of occasions that I observed independent reading events, students’ behavior appeared to interrupt or distract themselves or their peers from reading involvement. However, I also witnessed numerous episodes during which student communication seemed to enhance the learning experiences the students were having during independent reading time.

Socially based learning happened every day that I observed independent reading among Tammy’s first graders. Independent reading in Tammy’s room happens early in the day. Students take their reading bags, labeled BOB (Bag of Books) bags, and are free to sit wherever they like around the room. They are expected to carry on independently since Tammy spends this time conferencing with individual students or with small groups. She explains, “We expect kids to be doing some talking. We want them to be discussing what they’re looking at, what they’re reading and sharing. But I do want it to be quiet, because we can’t interfere” (interview, November 2, 2010). On one occasion, I noted the following quiet conversation between two students who were holding nonfiction books related to their science unit of bugs:

Student 1: “I saw a butterfly eating a spider.”

Student 2: “No, that’s a praying mantis. That’s the same page.”

Student 2: “What is he doing?”

Student 1: “There’s a spider.”

Student 2: “Insects and spiders…we learned about that.” (field notes, November 2, 2010)
One of the students pointed out a page to the teacher, who carried on a brief conversation with him. In another pair of students, a boy drew a chart on paper and copied words from his friend’s book. He wrote “t-t”. He compared his writing to the book he held and then showed his friends. A girl sitting next to him shouted “text to text!” The boy continued to copy words.

Following the independent reading on this day, students were provided time to talk about their reading. Some lined up on the carpet holding their books and they explained their discoveries one at a time. They shared things such as showing and labeling pictures that were fiction & nonfiction; stating that ants are social, remembered from a science lesson; connecting something they read to a song they learned; and noting vocabulary they noticed. One student shared the connection he had made with his friend’s book, stating to the class, “That’s a text to text connection!” In my field notes that day I wrote:

Students are not quiet about their reading: they read aloud, discuss pictures and other items of interest with classmates. The room isn’t quiet but almost all of the noise is book-related. In spite of the fact that these first-graders’ independent reading time may not have looked like the textbook version, or what we would typically consider “independent” or consider “silent reading” it was apparent from the follow-up group sharing that they were engaged as readers. (November 2, 2010)

Students in these classrooms also appear to realize the advantages to be gained from occasionally engaging in text events with their peers. During conversations with them about independent reading, several mentioned the benefits of partner reading. Molly, a lower-level reader in Elizabeth’s classroom stated, “Sometimes I need a little bit of help on the words and if I don’t know them I ask somebody. It makes me feel more comfortable if I read with someone” (interview, February 15, 2011). Carol, a first-grader in Tammy’s room explained:
One time Jack was the same level book as me and we kind of read together and talked about our books and that was okay too. Sometimes I just want to talk about it to someone about what the book was about so I could just tell Jack. (interview, February 9, 2011)

**Instruction.** While the term *independent reading* might imply a solitary activity bookended by the times that a student opens and closes a text, the teacher participants in this study view it as a far more encompassing activity that holds rich possibilities for reading instruction. Tammy’s explanation reflects the beliefs held by many of the teacher participants:

The old model of the SSR, or whatever we used to call it, DEAR reading; when we were just learning about the importance of kids reading, teachers were supposed to sit in the back and read or sit in the desk and read and everybody was going to be reading and we were going to be honoring that belief by reading as a model; but I think at this level in particular and probably every level we need to have interaction with kids, so that should be a time that we should be listening to children read, noting their strategies, having a little conversation about how they’re doing in their reading and maybe setting some of their own goals. Cause I think kids probably do believe I can read. I think that people were looking at this to engage children, to show them that they can enjoy reading, but I don’t think they ever figured that this would be an instructional time, and that that would be necessary for kids as they learned to read, that they couldn’t enjoy it unless they know how. So we’ve moved way ahead since those days. (interview, November 2, 2010)

Some of the ways that the teachers extend independent reading events include providing information about reading and how to be a reader; requiring reading-related activities that further student involvement with text; conducting whole group, small group, and individual teaching
events and support; and assessing students’ independent performance to guide reading instruction.

**Teacher as a reading model.** All of these teacher participants agree that it is important for their students to have models of effective readers but none of them participate in independent reading of their own along with their students. They offer their students other opportunities for learning how to be readers. All of the teachers talk with their students frequently about books and about how they feel about reading. I observed on numerous occasions teachers having discussions with students about books they enjoyed or recommended and they frequently expressed to students their own love for books and reading. All of the students interviewed for this study are quite clear on the reading message their teachers have tried to convey; not a single one hesitated in responding that his or her teacher appreciates books and reading. Lisa, a second-grader in Naomi’s room, explained her teacher “thinks it’s really fun to read and it’s good for us to read at nighttime and in her class. She checks around and looks at our books to see if they’re good books for us (interview, February 28, 2011). Kimberly, from Sara’s room, explained that her teacher says, “Reading’s great! Because she reads to us; she reads us good books. She says that some of them she read when she grew up” (interview, February 16, 2011). And Pamela stated that her teacher, Elizabeth,

> thinks it’s great and it really helps out, especially for nonfiction and science stuff because we do a lot of that. She does lots of stuff like giving us thumbs up if we’re reading really good or really hard chapter books. Sometimes she’ll say, “read this book.” (interview, February 15, 2011)

The teachers also provide planned or impromptu modeling of the actions they engage in themselves as readers. During one post-independent reading discussion, students in Penni’s room
shared their thinking about books they had just read. When one student noted that he had made
pictures in his head, Penni replied, “Good readers think about those things. When I’m reading I
kind of do the same thing” (field notes, November 8, 2010). During a read-aloud in Francis’
classroom she deliberately stopped at one point in the reading, explaining to her students that she
wasn’t quite clear on the message she was getting from the text. She said, “I’m going to
backtrack because that’s what we need to do. Good readers make sense of the text” (field notes,
January 21, 2011). Even though students might not see these teachers participating in their own
independent reading, the teachers create many opportunities to model reading behaviors.

**Reading-related activities.** Another way that the teachers in this study extend the learning
of independent reading events is to provide activities that directly relate to the text being read.
Each of the teachers, during at least part of their independent reading time, requires that some
sort of task be completed during or directly after the time students are involved with the text.
Elizabeth explains her reasoning behind this decision:

> Sometimes when I’m just not being creative, it’s just, let them read. Don’t have them do
> anything. But with this one I’m trying to use that 20-25 minutes more constructively, you
> know? You can still read for enjoyment but be thinking about cause and effect or humor
> or something else, some other literary piece, tension or whatever. You can still be looking
> for those things. I guess I feel guilty if I let them do 20 minutes without something in the
> back of their heads that they’re looking for. And so I expect something constructive to
> come out of it. (interview, November 30, 2010)

Penni explains that while she sees the value in the accompanying tasks she requires of her third-
grade readers, she also feels pressured by her school principal to justify her independent reading
time through the use of written tasks. In describing the purpose behind the reading-related activities she includes in her student’s independent reading time she states:

Part of the purpose is because I want to see if they are able to independently do some of the stuff that I’m teaching whole group. Like, are they able to apply it. And part of it, honestly, I feel like I have a principal that if I don’t produce some kind of work, [sic] he wants that. I would probably not do as much of that or as long a period of time. I think I know pretty well who knows it and who doesn’t and so I wouldn’t necessary need to have that much evidence but I feel like I have to for him. (interview, February 15, 2011)

Many of the reading-related activities I observed being used in the teachers’ classrooms were some type of reflection on the reading. Teachers required students to mark their comprehension strategy use with sticky notes, write chapter summaries, and record elements of story grammar. In several rooms students noted vocabulary that they had difficulty with or that they found interesting. On a day that I observed an independent reading episode in Elizabeth’s room, she required her students to note evidence of cause and effect by providing the following directions: “Your job today is to continue to look for cause & effect. You have to find it in your independent reading book today” (field notes, October 27, 2010). She explained that it’s not just important in this book, it’s important in all books. “Cause and effect helps you with your comprehension.” During the reading time the students stayed very focused on the task at hand, splitting their time between reading their books and writing on their cause-and-effect sheets. Near the end of the reading period she reminded several students who had been reading at the back of the room the entire time that they needed to remember to record the cause and effect instances they found. It was clear that this independent reading event had a very specific purpose beyond merely reading text.
Linking a purpose to independent reading and requiring a written outcome was a common occurrence in most of the independent reading episodes I witnessed. Sometimes the task was very brief and didn’t appear to deter students from reading text. On other occasions the reading-related task seemed to take up most of the students’ attention, resulting in students spending very little time with engaged reading. Tammy explains that this is the reasoning behind the brevity of the related tasks she requires of her students during independent reading time. Two days per week she reinforces a taught strategy by requiring students to mark their thinking with sticky notes in their books. She requires that they only read on the other days, emphasizing that she doesn’t want the related tasks to become the focus of students’ independent reading efforts:

Days that I am introducing a thinking strategy or reinforcing a strategy, you would see me giving them the sticky notes and they would be tracking their thinking, especially if it’s a new thinking, and I’ll periodically go back and do that. And as we do introductions of long vowels or different spellings of long vowel sounds we might be looking for that. But I feel that the other independent reading times are sacred reading times, so if they’re being asked to read, we’re trying to get them to be able to read uninterrupted for a period of time. Often, the tracking their thinking is just a little part of it and we don’t want to make that the goal, so that they’re flipping through looking for details rather than actually immersing themselves in the text. I’d rather keep it on reading, so they can start using those strategies and not interrupt themselves with having to do a writing task or getting up for supplies or finding more post-its, or making that activity interfere with their sustained reading. (interview, February 11, 2011)

**Teaching.** Based on the observations that I conducted, the amount of direct instruction related to independent reading that occurs in these classrooms varies. Several of the teachers
mentioned that they often conduct mini lessons related to independent reading strategies prior to the independent reading itself, though formal mini lessons were infrequent during my observations. Elizabeth explains that the direct instruction she conducts before independent reading is planned to better enable students to carry on with their reading during times when they are expected to be independent:

I would say that most of the lessons are designed so that they hopefully apply those strategies when they go back and do it. So for example when we read expository, we’ve had lessons on that you’re supposed to read the title, you read the heading, you read the subheading, you read the pictures, you read captions, you read the first sentence…I’ve taught them how to skim. So hopefully my instruction allows them to be better readers when they are doing the independent reading. (interview, February 15, 2011)

Before independent reading on one occasion, I witnessed Penni conduct a mini lesson about zooming in on details when reading nonfiction, which she told them they would use while reading nonfiction during their independent reading time. I observed Amanda teaching a new comprehension strategy of asking questions while you read and then discussing how the students could apply that in their subsequent reading time.

More common than pre-independent reading instruction in these classrooms were unscripted comments made by teachers regarding strategies students could use or lessons at other times of the day that included information that could be applied to independent reading. For example, during a read-aloud Naomi stopped at the name Emilio and asked her students, “What if I was reading by myself? What would I do?” (field notes, October 6, 2010). Jennifer taught a lesson on predicting and said to her students, “You were thinking about what would happen next.
That is predicting. Good readers, as they are reading, think about what is going to happen next” (field notes, October 11, 2010).

Half of the teachers conduct regular one-on-one student conferences during independent reading time. In the conferences the teachers keep the focus on the book the child is reading but use the time to provide instruction on skills or strategies that will extend the learning. For Amanda and Tammy these conferences are a major component of their reading instruction and occur almost daily. Amanda explains that in her student conferences,

it’s that checking back and conferencing independently with students, having them pick a spot and read to me and be talking about strategies, so it really comes back to that. And that also gives them tools, “Okay, what do I do next? What can I be working on?” So that is a continual process. (interview, February 9, 2011)

During one independent reading session in Amanda’s classroom I observe her as she calls students back individually to discuss the books they are reading. To one student she says, “Let’s talk about what you’re reading right now” (field notes, January 11, 2011). The girl tells a little about the story and Amanda asks about what happened at the beginning. Amanda asks her to predict what will happen. Amanda takes notes throughout the session. She asks the student to read aloud. When she can’t pronounce a word, Amanda says “What should we do?” The girl suggests looking in a dictionary; she finds the definition and they discuss it. Amanda reminds the student about adding words to her personal dictionary and other ideas in her reading journal. Throughout the interaction the focus is on the book the student is reading, with Amanda providing support that extends the learning to include instruction about word identification and comprehension strategies that she can use in future reading experiences.
Another teaching opportunity that a few of the teachers utilize is to follow the independent reading exercise with a group discussion about their books, often called a share circle. There is usually a specific focus for the conversation, such as a comprehension strategy that students were instructed to attend to as they read. One such episode in Penni’s room occurred following an independent reading event in which students were instructed to mark questions they had as they read their books. In response to students’ discussion, some of Penni’s comments were:

- It’s okay if you don’t have a question this round.
- Who thinks they have a really good question that’s helping them understand their story?
- Why do you think they did that?”
- You probably have a connection to that.
- What do you think? (field notes, November 8, 2010)

She allowed students to talk about the books in a focused way that extended their understanding about the comprehension strategy under discussion.

**Assessment.** Though the teachers appear to perform ongoing monitoring of their students’ reading and adjust their instruction accordingly, I observed several of the teachers explicitly assessing their students’ independent reading skills and behaviors. For Jennifer and Sara this occurred in large part through Accelerated Reader (AR) quizzes that students completed after reading AR books each day. These teachers monitor accumulated quiz scores, setting reading goals and advancing students into higher-level books as they pass the quizzes. Amanda and Tammy, on the other hand, keep written records of their student conferences, noting students’ reading behaviors, talking to students about their current reading goals, and discussing possibilities for future reading objectives. I also observed Tammy conducting running record
assessments with students on one occasion. For the other four teachers I didn’t observe assessment being conducted strictly on the basis of independent reading activities, though I did see several assessing in other ways such as through the use of informal reading inventories.

Addressing the Research Question

In keeping with the theoretical framework of this study, I integrated teachers’ understandings about instruction and teachers’ practices during instruction (Ruddell & Unrau, 2004) to paint a picture of the perspectives and practices of the eight highly effective teacher participants. They all hold knowledge and beliefs about independent reading that are uniquely their own, and as a result conduct independent reading in distinctive ways in their individual classrooms. However, an examination reveals many commonalities in the ways that these highly effective classroom teachers understand and utilize independent reading for their students. A synthesis of this evidence provides answers to the research question on which this study is based: What attributes of independent reading are unique and what attributes are commonly held by teachers regarded as highly effective teachers of literacy?

Multiple Influences on Teachers’ Utilization of Independent Reading

Information gathered from teachers makes it clear that a number of factors shape their classroom use of independent reading. Teachers’ statements and behaviors indicate that they rely on ongoing learning opportunities and outside sources of encouragement to form the knowledge and belief systems evident in the independent reading programs they have created. The strong conviction they hold regarding the value of independent reading prompts them to shape their practice in ways that are consistent with this belief in spite of numerous challenges to be overcome in utilizing independent reading in their classrooms.
Ongoing professional learning. All of the teachers discuss the sources on which they rely generally for information about literacy instruction and specifically for knowledge regarding independent reading. What becomes clear in examining these teachers’ beliefs about their information sources is that they view the formal learning endeavors that earned them degrees as far less influential on their understanding than less conventional learning opportunities. Collectively the teachers credit ongoing learning efforts such as professional reading and conferences along with personal and collaborative reflection for enhancing their literacy instruction. They acknowledge both nationally known experts as well as local teacher colleagues for supporting and expanding their knowledge and use of independent reading. The evidence points to the conclusion that these teacher participants have taken a life-long learning approach to their literacy understanding and rely on multiple sources for support that move far beyond collegiate efforts.

Encouragement from outside factors. Teachers’ perceptions were mixed concerning the influence of outside factors on their classroom use of independent reading. Some discussed the move toward greater educational accountability of reading instruction but there was little consensus regarding their belief in the impact it has made on their literacy programs. One teacher firmly believes that outside accountability measures have negatively affected her ability to utilize independent reading in the ways she believes are in her students’ best interests. However, several others insist that outside accountability has had little or no influence on their use of independent reading with their students. There was greater agreement among the teachers regarding their perceptions of sources of encouragement for the inclusion of independent reading. Nearly all of the teachers referenced national or local entities that they believe favor their utilization of independent reading as a component of literacy learning. The evidence from these teachers
points toward their belief in the greater influence of external factors that promote rather than
detract from their independent reading efforts. What is less clear is whether this reflects a greater
exposure to encouraging factors or whether they have chosen to disregard opposition in favor of
sources that share their common belief in the value of independent reading.

**Efforts to overcome classroom impediments.** Teachers mention a number of classroom
factors that pose potential roadblocks to their use of independent reading, including a lack of
necessary resources, complicated management issues, and adverse student characteristics. In
nearly every case, however, teachers explain how they have found ways to offset these potential
impediments in order to continue to provide independent reading in ways they believe are most
advantageous for their students’ learning. Teachers describe buying their own materials or
advocating for independent reading resources, restructuring independent reading to
accommodate challenging time and behavioral concerns, and reorganizing independent reading
to allow it to better meet their students’ individual needs. The first-grade teachers were
especially adamant regarding their confidence in using their own forms of independent reading
that they believe are most beneficial for the unique needs of their young learners. The evidence
demonstrates that all of the teachers in this study have taken great strides to ensure that they are
able to continue to offer independent reading opportunities to their students and will not be
waylaid by the sometimes significant challenges that exist in its implementation.

**Confidence in their reading structures.** Teachers’ determination to continue their
independent reading programs in spite of apparent obstacles reflects their common belief in the
benefits of independent reading for their students’ reading success. All of the teachers express
their conviction that the use of independent reading is an essential component of their students’
literacy learning. They are also fairly consistent in the confidence they express regarding the
ways that they structure independent reading activities for their students. Several of the teachers mention specific areas of their practice that they would like to learn more about and indicate that they would make changes if they could be sure that alterations would positively impact their students’ interactions with books. However, the evidence demonstrates that all of the teachers feel certain that they have created independent reading structures that benefit their students’ literacy growth.

**Essential Components of Independent Reading**

Integrating the teachers’ perspectives and practices provides insight into the elements of independent reading that they consider essential for classroom use. As demonstrated in descriptions of the independent reading events conducted by each teacher, there is no blueprint that illustrates independent reading across these elementary classrooms; all carry the stamp of the teachers’ individual understandings, perspectives, and contexts. However, even within the individuality exemplified in these programs, the evidence demonstrates significant commonalities that allow conclusions to be drawn regarding optimal components of independent reading as conducted in these elementary classrooms.

**Student choices with teacher oversight.** One essential factor in the independent reading programs of these teachers is student choice balanced with teacher control. Each of the teachers agree that student autonomy is a cornerstone of independent reading, and their practices often reflect opportunities for students to exercise control over aspects of their reading experiences. Teachers explain that they enable students to make decisions about issues such as behavior management, book choice, and goal setting; and observations of independent reading events demonstrate numerous opportunities for students to participate in decision-making. However, observational data demonstrates that on all of these issues teachers provide guidance and
oversight and clearly hold the final word on all independent reading decisions. Evidence indicates that in spite of a belief in the importance of student choice, teachers clearly assume responsibility for students conducting independent reading activities in ways that the teachers believe are most advantageous to student learning.

**Book choice versus just-right books.** A significant commonality among these teachers is a dueling belief in providing students with opportunities to choose books in which the students hold interest while at the same time expecting students to spend their reading time with text that is at their appropriate independent reading level. Teachers are convinced that student motivation and resulting engagement with reading is most likely when students get to read materials that they choose themselves. The teachers all spend significant time and effort providing books that appeal to students and that reflect their interests. Conversely, the teachers also share a common belief in the importance of students reading appropriately leveled books; the evidence suggests that they are convinced of the importance of students practicing in books that reflect their individual independent reading levels.

The teachers accommodate these divergent goals in a number of similar ways. First, they provide students with many resources from which to choose by maintaining classroom libraries that cover a wide range of interests and reading levels so that students of all abilities have many books available. Next, the teachers provide instruction to students on making wise book choices. As part of their commitment to maintaining students’ independence in the reading process, they enable students by teaching them methods that allow the students themselves to understand the need for reading appropriately leveled books and to locate books that meet their individual needs. In addition, they conduct many book-related conversations that provide teacher and peer recommendations regarding books that students might find interesting. Finally, the teachers
monitor students’ choices to ensure that the majority of their independent reading is spent with books at appropriate reading levels. The level of this oversight varies from classroom to classroom, with more supervision typically seen at the lower grades. However, all of the teachers check in on their students’ choices at least periodically to ensure that they are experiencing reading practice with books at their independent reading levels. The evidence demonstrates that the teachers remain true to their dual beliefs of ensuring students are reading books in which they are invested while at the same time ensuring that students are practicing with text that reflects the levels at which they will be most successful. Students are provided with opportunities to choose books that reflect their interests but teachers oversee their choices and maintain the final decision-making power based on their regard for student reading needs.

**Student self-management versus teacher support.** Consistent with their view of independent reading as an opportunity for students to exhibit some degree of autonomy, evidence reveals that these teachers expect students to carry on with independent reading tasks, including setting goals and practicing behaviors that will aid in meeting them, without constant teacher management. All of the teachers carry on other tasks such as small group instruction, individual conferences, or other activities while students read, and students are expected to conduct their reading independently. While self-management appears to be the goal for students, the evidence demonstrates that there is a high level of teacher support that enables students’ independent reading behavior. Most of the teachers mention providing direct instruction on how to carry on independently; student knowledge of these behaviors is not assumed. Often this instruction is ongoing throughout the year, and displays such as posters serve as reminders to students about behavioral expectations. In addition, observations reveal that all of the teachers monitor student
behaviors around their other instructional tasks and teachers provide support as needed when they feel that students are conducting their reading in the ways not conducive to student learning.

**Focus on student reading development.** An essential element of independent reading for these teachers is a concerted focus on student reading growth. Teachers in this study do not view independent reading as a supplemental activity but rather as an integral part of their literacy program. Evidence reveals that, to varying degrees, these teachers utilize independent reading to advance the reading growth of their students, not only as an opportunity for reading practice but also as a time to provide instruction or practice of reading skills and strategies. For some of the teachers, all or most of their reading instruction is embedded in independent reading events. For others, independent reading holds a lesser role in instruction but continues to provide students with opportunities for teacher-directed practice of reading skills. For all of them, the focus of independent reading time is student growth across a gamut of reading behaviors.

**Intentionality.** In order for independent reading to contribute to students’ reading achievement, teachers understand that they must be purposeful in the ways that they prompt students to engage in independent reading. I witnessed no scheduled independent reading events conducted merely for the pleasure of reading. All of the independent reading activity in these teachers’ classrooms is deliberately aimed at increasing students’ reading abilities. While teachers acknowledge that one of their objectives is to boost students’ interest in reading, their explanations make clear independent reading is intentionally structured toward an end goal that moves beyond student reading enjoyment to providing directed practice with reading skills and strategies.

**Accountability.** In conjunction with the intentionality with which teachers orchestrate independent reading activity in their classrooms, they have checks in place to monitor and assess
students’ independent reading efforts. While several teachers mention that they would enjoy the option to allow their students to read without constant oversight, all of the teachers emphasize the importance they place on the ability to hold students accountable for the reading in which they participate. Observations of teachers’ practice corroborate the importance they place on holding student responsible for achieving an end result through their reading, with numerous types of accountability measures in place across the classrooms.

**Opportunity for instruction.** Utilizing independent reading as a focused literacy learning opportunity requires these teachers to embed it with ongoing instruction. While all of the teachers appear to value reading for its own sake, observations of their perspectives and use of independent reading reflect a commitment to providing focused literacy instruction connected with independent reading events. There are a number of ways that teacher utilize the instructional possibilities of independent reading to boost students’ reading growth, including inserting models of independent reading behavior, requiring that related activities accompany students’ reading of text, providing direct instruction linked to reading events, and assessing students’ independent reading performance. There is no data to suggest that teachers view independent reading merely as a recreational activity. On the contrary, evidence demonstrates that for these teachers, independent reading is an integral part of their reading instruction as they create linked opportunities for both direct and indirect instruction of reading behaviors and reading skills and strategies.

**Silent reading a goal, not a requirement.** Teachers do not consider silence to be a mandatory component of their students’ independent reading behaviors; none of them expect independent reading to occur silently at all times. Teachers’ comments reveal that they hold silent reading as an objective for their students, and observational data shows that many of them
encourage silent reading behavior by direct means such as reminders or indirectly through expectations for a quiet classroom atmosphere during independent reading events. However, all of them but especially the teachers of the younger students acknowledge that silent reading isn’t always consistent with their students’ developmental needs. Some of the teachers explain that oral reading and accompanying peer discussion is advantageous for their students’ reading and for teachers’ abilities to assess their students’ reading growth. Data from this study demonstrates that while teachers hold up silent reading as a goal of their students’ reading development, none require that classroom independent reading always occur as a silent activity.

**Social interactions around reading.** An essential component of independent reading for these teachers is the social learning that enables reading growth. The teachers in this study discuss as well as demonstrate the positive value they place on collaborative reading activities. While independent reading often occurs as a solitary activity, sometimes students are deliberately placed with another student for reading time or have the option to conduct independent reading with a partner. At other times students appear to seek out someone with whom they can share information from their reading even without teacher approval. In addition, in numerous classrooms teachers provide organized opportunities for students to share about their reading in small or large groups, usually after the actual reading has occurred. Based on evidence from this study, the teachers acknowledge the inherent power of reading as a social activity and provide opportunities for students to participate in collaborative literacy learning, which they often still label *independent reading*. While they frequently encourage or require students to engage in independent reading alone, they appear aware of the needs of their young
readers to conduct reading as a social event and appear unwilling to prohibit students’ reading interactions merely on the basis of the label *independent*.

**Summary**

An examination of the perspectives and practices of these eight highly effective teachers provides information that allows me to address the research question on which this study is based. First, the evidence demonstrates that these teachers rely on multiple sources to inform their knowledge of independent reading and that their learning continues across the course of their teaching careers. While numerous factors act to influence their practice, the teachers’ strongly held beliefs in the importance of independent reading cause them to take action to ensure that independent reading continues to occur in their classrooms in the ways they believe are most impactful for their students’ learning.

Second, while each teacher provides unique independent reading experiences for her students, evidence reveals that they share some overarching goals, beliefs, and understandings that guide the implementation of independent reading in their elementary classrooms. An investigation of their beliefs and practices exposes several factors that these teachers consider vital to the ways they use independent reading to affect the reading growth of their students. The essential components, including the provision of student choices under the guidance of expert adults, a focus on activities that promote student learning, and implementation that allows for participation based on differing student needs, can be used to conceptualize independent reading as it occurs in the classrooms of these teachers. While the specific ways that these fundamental elements are enacted might differ, an awareness of the essential components provides a basic structure on which to better understand independent reading as it occurs under the auspices of these highly effective teachers.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate and expose teachers’ beliefs, understandings and practices around the classroom use of independent reading. While a review of the literacy research reveals numerous studies linking increased reading to gains in various aspects of reading achievement, questions remain regarding the specific nature of the relationship between independent reading and student reading success. Especially significant is a lack of information regarding independent reading as it is utilized in real classrooms populated by real teachers and students. This lack of clarity contributes to an inability to authentically conceptualize independent reading and to outline a structure through which it can be used to promote reading growth. Focusing on the perspectives that highly effective teachers hold about independent reading and the ways these views are manifest in classroom literacy practices may prompt a deeper understanding of the potential of independent reading to be used with greatest success with elementary students.

In this study I integrated data from classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, a teacher survey, and classroom artifacts to create a picture of the independent reading events that occur in these classrooms, linked to the teacher understandings and beliefs on which they are based. In analyzing this data, commonalities surfaced in the ways that teachers learn about, understand, and use independent reading, leading to some conclusions about the essential components of independent reading through the perspectives of highly effective teachers. Examining these elements in light of literacy scholarship, considering their implications for influencing practice, and making recommendations for future research might lead to new possibilities for independent reading to act as a promising piece of effective literacy teaching.
Essential Components of Independent Reading

An important outcome of this study has been an identification of factors considered to be essential to the practice of highly effective teachers’ utilization of independent reading. Some reading scholars have participated in work attempting to identify the elements of independent reading that allow it to be most effective (Kamil, 2008; Reutzel et al., 2010). Findings regarding the fundamental components of independent reading, grounded in the perspectives and practices of highly effective teachers, encourage a focused conceptualization of independent reading as it is understood and used by skilled practitioners. Better awareness of these essential components may provide a clearer understanding of independent reading and prompt more effective utilization of independent reading with elementary students.

Student Empowerment and Teacher Support

The finding that teachers enact independent reading opportunities with a shared eye toward empowering students’ choices while monitoring their decision-making prompts an understanding of independent reading that belies its independent label. These teachers are committed to enabling students to make choices within independent reading events. They base this decision on their beliefs in the motivational impact that making choices provides (Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1998; Zahorik, 1996; Flowerday & Schraw, 2000). Studies confirm that providing elementary students with opportunities to make choices on various aspects of reading activities increases their motivation to participate (McLoyd, 1979; Reynolds & Symons, 2001). However, these teachers are also convinced that their oversight is required to allow independent reading to be utilized to its fullest potential for student reading growth. Other scholars also identify the importance of teacher guidance of student independent reading behaviors (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008). Hairrell, Edmonds, Vaughn, and
Simmons (2010) are convinced that teacher support during independent reading is of special importance for struggling readers, who may lack the structures to fully engage in independent reading events.

**Book choice.** One element of independent reading that teachers view as an occasion for students to exercise guided choices is in book selection. The tendency of the teacher participants in this study to provide their students with many opportunities to read books of students’ own choosing is consistent with literacy scholarship that demonstrates the motivational advantages of this approach. As Turner found (1995), students who choose their reading materials and use them during reading times are more motivated to engage in reading. Students are also more likely to engage in reading even when not required to do so when allowed to read books of personal interest to them (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002; Morrow, 1992). The meta-analysis of Guthrie and Humenick (2004) demonstrates a powerful impact of book choice on student motivation and comprehension.

Permitting student self-selection of books does not mean, however, that teachers don’t closely monitor book choices to ensure that students are reading books of appropriate difficulty levels. Reutzel et al. (2010) point out that “unguided choice can become a negative force” (p. 133) when students spend much of their time with reading materials that are too easy or too hard. Students who spend most of their reading practice in books that are too easy (Baker & Wigfield, 1999) or books that are too difficult (Anderson, Higgins, & Wurster, 1985) fail to make the reading gains possible when reading books that are appropriately challenging. Studies demonstrate the importance of students practicing with texts that they can read with high levels of fluency, accuracy, and comprehension (i.e. Gambrell, Wilson, & Gannt, 1981; Juel, 1994; O’Connor et al, 2002; Kuhn et al, 2006).
A landmark study by Betts (1946) established three levels of text difficulty that are still used today: independent, instructional, and frustration. These levels provide criteria for selecting appropriate student reading materials. Texts at an independent reading level are those considered most appropriate for students receiving little or no assistance, a circumstance most likely to be found in independent reading episodes. It is of most significance during independent reading events, when students have less direct oversight by teachers, that students practice with texts that they can read accurately without teacher support (Stahl & Heubach, 2006). Teachers in this study agree that their students need to be reading books that are at their independent reading levels, which they typically label just-right books.

Understanding the joint significance of enabling students’ book self-selection and ensuring reading practice in appropriately leveled materials has implications for literacy practitioners who utilize independent reading as a support for their students’ reading growth. In the example set by these teachers, students receive many opportunities to select books in which they have interest and that will ensure their engagement. This choice of books is coupled with providing books at a wide range of reading levels and supporting students in selecting books that hold promise for advancing their reading growth.

**Classroom libraries.** To address the joint needs of their students to read books of interest that are also at appropriate difficulty levels, these teachers create extensive classroom libraries. Within existing research, many scholars demonstrate the positive effects of sufficient access to books on student literacy (Chambliss & McKillop, 2000; Morrow, 1991; Neuman & Celano, 2001). In order to accommodate the multiple reading levels and varied interests of elementary readers, even within a single classroom, teachers need to accumulate and display hundreds of books in their own classrooms. The teachers in this study refuse to rely solely on resources that
might be available in school or neighborhood libraries or in students’ homes. Their commitment to adequate reading materials necessitates the creation of extensive libraries in their own classrooms to ensure that students of all abilities will be able to find books of interest among those available.

**Guided choices.** For these teachers, enabling students to make book choices that benefit their students’ reading needs goes beyond the mere provision of reading materials. They provide direct instruction on topics of book selection and then monitor students’ choices on a regular basis. As other scholars note, students who lack guidance in book selection often choose books that are too easy or too hard (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006; Stahl, 2004). Difficulty choosing appropriately leveled materials is especially prevalent among struggling readers (Donovan, Smolkin, & Lomax, 2000; Fresch, 1995). Teacher guidance of book choices allows independent reading to prompt reading growth in numerous other ways such as exposing them to unfamiliar genres or previously undiscovered topics, in addition to helping them understand the importance of attending to book levels (Reutzel et al., 2008; Trudel, 2007). Consistent with literacy research, the teachers in this study consider it vital to their independent reading programs to teach students how to make appropriate book selections based on interests and reading levels and to guide students’ subsequent reading choices.

**Behavior management.** Encouraging students’ self-management around reading events is a goal of the teachers’ independent reading programs. However, they acknowledge that providing students with unsupervised reading time may not create the learning opportunities they envision for independent reading events. A number of researchers have noted the need for teachers to monitor students’ independent reading behavior as students develop abilities to engage with reading in ways that prompt reading growth (Chua, 2008; Parr & Maguiness, 2005).
Other studies have exposed the limited time some students spend actually engaged in reading activities during independent reading events (Stahl, Suttles, & Pagnucco, 1996; Garan & DeVoogd, 2008; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006).

Even with the seemingly tight control most of the teachers in this study maintained on student behavior, students in all classrooms were occasionally observed to be off-task during independent reading times. Time spent in engaged reading has been implicated in positively affecting reading achievement (Fisher & Berliner, 1985; Keisling, 1978; Taylor et al., 1990). Thus, the establishment of procedures that aid in ensuring that students spend the majority of their independent reading time actively engaged with reading tasks is of utmost importance to its potential for student reading growth.

**Practical implication: Guided independent reading.** Based on an integration of findings regarding the perspectives and practices of the teacher participants in this study with those from existing scholarship, independent reading is considered most beneficial to student reading growth when conducted under the guidance of expert teachers. Though the label independent has often been applied to the practice of providing students with time with text without direct teacher oversight, true student autonomy appears to apply only in limited circumstances and in limited degrees. Independent reading is a time for students to participate in reading choices and to exert control over their reading processes. However, agreement seems to exist that the independent component of independent reading is actually a developmental process that occurs most beneficially under the guidance of expert adults who can monitor, support, and encourage students as they learn how to self-manage their reading actions and behaviors. It has been the lack of guidance and oversight inherent in some independent reading practices that have caused scholars to question its effectiveness as a literacy practice (Kelley & Clausen-Grace,
Therefore, enacting independent reading fully embedded with teacher support might allow teachers to use independent reading with greater confidence in its ability to prompt student reading progress.

**Focus on Student Growth**

Contrary to a view of independent reading as a recreational activity for students’ enjoyment, independent reading as it is conducted by the teachers in this study is a learning endeavor with many elements enacted specifically for the instructional possibilities they hold. The way it is understood and used by these teachers is far removed from the model of independent reading known as sustained silent reading (SSR) that was introduced by Hunt at the International Reading Association Annual Convention in 1966. Manning, Lewis, and Lewis (2010) explain that the primary goal of SSR was the development of a positive attitude toward reading; measures of accountability and assessment were carefully avoided so that students could focus on the enjoyment of the reading experience. While the teacher participants hold student motivation for reading in high regard, they move far beyond mere enjoyment of reading in their goals for student participation. They cite both external and internal factors for ensuring that the time students spend reading in the classrooms is used for purposes of increasing students’ reading abilities, and they articulate beliefs and exhibit efforts aimed at meeting that objective.

**Student accountability.** In order to view independent reading events as opportunities for student growth, these teachers provide intentional instruction, assign related tasks, and hold students accountable for demonstrating their learning. Reutzel et al. (2010) point out that failing to hold students accountable for their reading may result in students who don’t actively engage in independent reading events. Stahl (2004) agrees, pointing out the importance of ongoing teacher monitoring of student activity and progress while engaged in independent reading. A number of
the accountability options exercised by these teachers mimic those advocated by others, including reading logs, story summaries, reader responses, and anecdotal records (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008; Reutzel et al. 2008; Trudel, 2007). The advantages for student reading growth appear worthy of the daily accountability efforts that teachers carry out to ensure students’ engagement with their reading.

**Reading instruction.** As opposed to a view of independent reading as a break from the real instruction that occurs during the rest of the school day, these practitioners view independent reading as an equally important opportunity to provide direct and indirect teaching through interactions around text. Worthy and Broaddus (2001) advocate for instruction embedded in independent reading events and Parr and Maguiness (2005) point out the increased advantages of such focused lessons for reluctant readers. One effective option for teaching around independent reading is through the use of direct instruction during either mini lessons or student conferences (Garan & DeVoogd, 2008; Manning & Manning, 1984), an option exercised often by teachers in this study.

Consistent with an objective of demonstrating expert reading behaviors, teachers also act as models of reading by discussing their actions as readers and making explicit the ways those actions can be enacted by student independent readers. Freebody (2003) explains that students are acculturated into the content knowledge, procedures, and cultural expectations of school through a sort of apprenticeship under the “expert navigators” (p. 91) who lead their classroom experiences. In literacy classrooms, the meaning that students take from their experiences is imbedded in the practices around them that have been created by their teachers. The ways that students see independent reading modeled, promoted, and put into practice impact the understanding they hold regarding its use.
These classroom teachers did not model silent reading in front of students, engaging instead in more involved participation. Several researchers question the value of teachers modeling silent reading for students, including Gambrell (1996), who explains that such a passive model of reading is less effective than a model who reads aloud, discusses, and promotes books. Others studies have failed to demonstrate any increases in student motivation or engagement by teachers modeling silent reading during independent reading times (Widdowson, Dixon, & Moore, 1996). It appears that teachers who view themselves as active promoters of reading and books are more effective reading models than those who sit and read silently with their students.

Practical implication: Concentration on student learning. These teachers’ enactments of independent reading along with scholarship that encourages focused teacher interventions provide implications for elementary teachers’ utilization of independent reading. Inserting intentional opportunities for reading instruction and holding students accountable for the learning that ensues allow independent reading to hold increased possibilities for influencing student reading growth. In an era in which teachers feel pressured to ensure that every classroom event is purposeful, encouraging the use of independent reading with a focus on student learning outcomes allows independent reading to take its place as a valuable component of a literacy program.

Student-Based Programs

Lacking a firmly entrenched concept of independent reading as a defined practice, the teacher participants in this study have adapted their practice to meet the perceived needs of their students. The label independent might prompt a strict interpretation that requires reading to occur in a silent and solitary manner. However, these teachers choose to design independent reading
activities that accommodate their students’ needs to explore text in ways that defy a more literal construction of independent reading. These adaptations include acknowledging the needs of students, especially younger readers, for oral reading; and encouraging literacy learning through social interactions.

**Silent and oral reading.** Teachers in this study acknowledge that silent reading is a goal they hold for their students but they refuse to inhibit their students’ reading with strict adherence to that requirement. Wright, Sherman, and Jones (2010) explain that the ability to read silently with adequate comprehension is held out as the pinnacle of expert reading behavior. Past studies have indicated that reading aloud inhibits the proficiency of reading, especially in relation to rate and comprehension (Smith & Dechant, 1961; Smith, 1973). However, others report that oral reading is only related to comprehension in the younger grades and that by third grade the negative impacts of oral reading on comprehension are negligible (Schwanenflugel, Kuhn, Meisinger, Bradley, & Stahl, 2003), or have reported mixed results on the impact of oral reading (McCallum et al., 2004). The teachers explain their belief that many of their students need to vocalize to fully benefit from the reading experience. Their understanding is confirmed by a number of studies that explain the tendency of readers to subvocalize and fully vocalize speech in the act of reading (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Wright, Sherman, & Jones, 2004). Cunningham (1978) and Bruinsma (1980) point out that these behaviors are especially important substitutes for silent reading among beginning and struggling readers.

These teacher participants allow their students to engage in reading silently or quietly aloud in ways that fit their needs while encouraging them to gradually adopt silent reading behaviors. Some researchers (Adams, 1994; Davies, 1972) warn that attempting to eliminate vocalizing behaviors before young readers are ready might inhibit reading comprehension.
Wright et al. (2004) demonstrate that elementary students might begin reading using subvocal and vocal behaviors but tend to reduce the use of these behaviors over time. The teacher participants and reading scholars agree that allowing students to perform independent reading with the speech types that are developmentally appropriate for them is most effective for promising reading performance.

Social learning. Bowing to the inclination of their elementary readers to engage in social behaviors, teachers in this study often harness those tendencies in the pursuit of independent reading involvement. Halliday (2004) explains that from a child’s earliest days attempts to link meaning with language are conducted in a social context. Similarly, students in this study were observed on numerous occasions engaging in conversations around the meanings they found in their independent reading texts. Studies demonstrate the advantages for reading motivation and development of higher order literacy skills through collaborative reading episodes (Almasi, 1995; Guthrie, Schafer, Wang, & Afflerbach, 1995). Valuable opportunities for social interactions around independently read text are found in teacher-to-student and student-to-student discussions (Cole, 2003; Garan & DeVoogd, 2008), which can provide motivation, deeper understanding, and a sense of ownership for the reading experience (Reutzel et al., 2010). Utilizing such social interactions in independent reading events lends itself to enhancing literacy learning opportunities in developmentally appropriate ways.

Practical implication: Privileging student needs. Linking the beliefs and practices of the teacher practitioners in this study with perspectives found in literacy scholarship prompts an understanding of independent reading as an opportunity for meeting the reading needs of student participants rather than as a static literacy practice. Consistent with the developmental and social needs of elementary readers, teachers have the opportunity to create independent reading
programs that are appropriate for the student audiences they serve. Forcing students into reading roles that feel unnatural or at odds with their developmental inclinations might discourage the kind of self-efficacy or motivation needed for engaged readers (Swan, Coddington, & Guthrie, 2010). Alternately, structuring independent reading events that take into consideration students’ needs allows independent reading to be a source of differentiated learning for all elementary readers.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings from this study, grounded in the perspectives and practices of teachers’ use of independent reading, prompt a number of considerations for future research. Manning et al. (2010) point out that research around the topic of independent reading is at its lowest level in decades. This lack of attention might stem from the National Reading Panel’s (2000) conclusions on the value of the classroom use of independent reading. Manning et al. recommend research on many of the unresolved issues involved with the classroom use of independent reading, some of which are brought to light in the results of this study.

First, this exploration was conducted in the classrooms of elementary teachers identified as highly effective. Research aimed at exploring the understandings and uses of independent reading in a broader range of classrooms might offer a clearer picture of the overall utilization of independent reading in all elementary classrooms. Comparisons between the independent reading beliefs and practices of highly effective teachers and less effective teachers might allow a delineation of those practices that prompt literacy teaching success. It could also provide information about the range of understandings that exist, leading the literacy field to understand the magnitude of the need for professional learning efforts around the topic of independent reading.
An exploration of the other players in an elementary school setting that might influence students’ reading participation provides another opportunity to broaden the research on classroom independent reading. While this study was focused on the perspectives of teachers and included some student input, the understandings and practices of groups such as administration, parents, support personnel, and other significant figures in the learning process were excluded. A broader study that includes input from these significant entities could enrich understanding of the many factors impacting teacher and student use of independent reading.

Perhaps the most significant need for future research on the topic of independent reading stems from the failure of the National Reading Panel to locate data pointing to the benefits of independent reading on student reading success. Most of the studies on which their analysis was based examined the results of sustained silent reading (SSR) and similarly constructed programs. Pilgreen (2000) investigated thirty-two studies of free reading to determine those characteristics that SSR programs hold in common. Her list of eight desired components of SSR programs, that she labels “factors for SSR success” (p. 8), includes: 1) students’ direct access to reading materials in school, 2) reading materials that are of interest to students and that span a wide range of readability levels, 3) a comfortable quiet environment that is conducive to reading, 4) adult support and encouragement for reading, which often included adults modeling the act of reading, 5) staff training that better enables teachers to create and manage free reading programs, 6) the omission of activities that hold students accountable for their reading, 7) follow-up activities that permit students to exhibit their excitement over their reading selections but that are non-evaluative, and 8) regular time to read, varying in amount from a minimum of twice a week to every day.

While some of those characteristics are found in the independent reading programs of the
teacher participants in this study, their use of independent reading differs from SSR programs in important ways. For example, while teachers in the current study promote student reading choice, they seem committed to requiring students to read books at their independent levels. SSR advocates recommend that little censorship of student reading materials occur; students should be permitted to read books chosen by themselves, with an eye toward student enjoyment rather than reading level. In addition, teachers in the current study view their role of providing support to be far different than the modeling role expected of teachers in SSR programs. The teachers in the current study maintain oversight of every aspect of the independent reading process with a focus on student reading engagement rather than their own silent reading. Finally, teachers in this study require of students ongoing accountability measures during and after independent reading, with student literacy learning at the heart of the activity. Guidelines for SSR specifically eliminate any sort of evaluative follow-up activity, focusing instead on students reading for enjoyment. It is clear that the teachers in this study understand and conduct their independent reading events very differently than the structures in place for leading SSR.

The troubling aspect of this disconnect for literacy policy is that the National Reading Panel (2000) report, arguably the most important study of independent reading conducted in decades and on which scores of subsequent literacy decisions have been based, formed its conclusions on studies of SSR and similar programs. Pearson and Goodin (2010) explain that independent reading as a classroom activity has endured a serious challenge to its credibility based on the interpretation of those conclusions, which often was that independent reading during class time was ineffective. While it is unknown to what extent independent reading practices of other teachers share the components of SSR, it is clear from the findings of this
study that these highly effective teacher participants conduct independent reading in ways that differ significantly.

While the National Reading Panel (2000) conducted its examination on a specific type of independent reading, the conclusions drawn from its study have resulted in all classroom uses of independent reading being questioned. An important research follow-up to the results of this study is a re-examination of the impact on student reading achievement of independent reading experiences conducted in a manner more akin to the practices of these teacher practitioners. This would provide information regarding the efficacy of independent reading conducted in ways other than through SSR programs and would provide teachers with information regarding those independent reading practices that might better benefit students’ reading growth.

Limitations

In this investigation I examined the perspectives and practices of highly effective teachers in order to allow their knowledge and uses of independent reading to inform a deeper insight into the ways it is employed in elementary classrooms. One limitation of this study is the limited range from which this understanding stems. There were eight teachers involved in the study, all female, and all of their classrooms are located in the same state. Observation of their practice was limited to a span of five months in a single school year. However, in a number of ways the demographics of these teacher participants mirror those of many other elementary teachers. Also, I continued data collection until there were indications that saturation had occurred in a number of areas. Nonetheless, a greater number and diversity of participants along with a longer time period in which to observe their practice might have revealed more variable results. This limited range might reduce the generalizability with which conclusions and implications regarding independent reading can be applied to the larger contingent of classroom teachers.
A second limitation of this study results from the labeling of these teachers as highly effective. Participants were nominated by their principals as highly effective teachers of literacy, and I compared their actions with a list of characteristics of highly effective literacy teachers to further confirm that their actions were consistent with behaviors identified as highly effective in scholarship. However, no measures such as assessments of student achievement were used to evaluate teachers’ effectiveness regarding their students’ learning. Therefore, the teachers’ effectiveness was based on the perceptions of their school principals and my interpretations of their actions related to characteristics identified in research studies; effectiveness was not directly linked to student performance. This may call into question the labeling of these teacher participants as highly effective.

Another limitation of this study stems from teachers’ comments. The possibility exists that they did not fully reflect the beliefs and understandings participants hold about independent reading. I based much of my understanding of teachers’ perspectives on interviews I conducted with them as well as on informal comments they made to me during classroom observations, allowing their words to round out my understanding of their classroom practices. Freebody (2003) emphasizes the possibilities for interviewing to provide explanations for events that become visible through observation. He points out the significance of individuals’ accounts of those events in moving toward a truer understanding of the context in which they are embedded. Listening to individuals’ accounts can provide insights into the ways they view the connections between their constructed understandings and their exhibited practices. However, Freebody and others (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Baker, 1997) caution against looking to interviews for some ultimate Truth inherent in interviewers’ revelations. In fact, Baker recommends viewing the material gained from interviews as a starting point for generating
understanding rather than as the end of the line. Participants’ perspectives during an interview are words spoken at a particular time, in a particular frame of mind, in a particular context, and responding to a particular interviewer who also holds a complex and arguably non-neutral position (Fontana & Frey). Freebody contends that responding to interviews as one of many opportunities to interpret participants’ practice rather than the quintessential option is more “empirically defensible” (p. 169) than previously held notions about the superiority of interview data. He points out that this enhances the possibilities for interview research to be viewed with greater validity and reliability when such limitations are acknowledged. Therefore, relying on teachers’ explanations of their beliefs and understandings in this study might be expecting too much from the limited opportunities they had to express their perspectives regarding their practices.

In addition, a limitation might lie in my role as a researcher who holds background experiences in elementary classrooms, resulting in interpretations that might differ from those of non-teacher researchers. In exploring and analyzing the perspectives and practices of the teacher participants in this study, I am the catalyst between the occurrence and the reporting of classroom events and teacher beliefs. Corbin and Strauss (2008) explain that researchers use their past knowledge and experiences to build understanding from the data, stating that “findings are a product of data plus what the researcher brings to the analysis” (p. 33). They warn against the mistaken notion that it is the data alone that allows the creation of understanding, when in reality “it is the data talking through the ‘eyes’ of the researcher” (p. 33) that provides opportunities for interpretations. I attempted to maintain a focus on participants’ perceptions of events in order to allow their meanings to remain in the forefront and I linked all conclusions to collected data. However, my background experiences might cloud the neutral stance I attempted to hold
regarding collection of data, analysis of results, and indications of findings.

Conclusion

Freebody (2003) expresses his belief that the overwhelming amount of research attention paid to reading has created a rift between our theoretical understanding and opportunities for impacting real classroom practices. He explains that the abundance of “empirical studies, theoretical accounts, and professional recommendations” (p. 222) have turned reading into an idealization of what actually occurs in learning and teaching reading. A disconnect has developed between the theoretical characterization of reading and the situated social practice that reading is in real classrooms. Freebody states that the result of this disconnect is that ordinary literacy learning and teaching events are assessed against a series of theoretical constructs that may hold little relationship to the reading context in which they take place.

In examining how highly effective literacy teachers view and use independent reading in elementary classrooms, I hoped to address the gap that exists between independent reading as a theoretical concept and the utilization of independent reading in real practice. While independent reading holds wide appeal as a literacy routine, a better understanding of the ways teachers actually perceive and use it might contribute to greater awareness of its true potential in reading classrooms. Holding a clearer description of independent reading, embedded in the perspectives and practices of highly effective elementary teachers, provides possible implications for professional development and preferred classroom practice. However, these possibilities prompt a final question and suggest an important next step: Do teachers who use independent reading like Penni, Naomi, Elizabeth, Jennifer, Sara, Amanda, Francis, and Tammy do impact students’ reading achievement? I look forward to joining others in exploring the point that really matters: the potential of any practice to influence student achievement.
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### Appendix A

**Characteristics of Highly Effective Literacy Teachers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Classroom evidence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent classroom management (1, 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced literacy instruction (1, 2, 3)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Implementation of instructional density &amp; higher order thinking activities (2, 3)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Extensive use of scaffolding (1, 2, 3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement of self-regulation of literacy skills &amp; strategies (1, 2, 3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High expectations for all students (2, 3)</td>
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**Excellent classroom management**: (2) “These teachers managed not only student behavior-preventing misbehavior before it could occur—but time, activities, student interactions, and outside resource people as well. Their management efforts clearly involved both planned and impromptu decisions” (p. 120). (3) “…little to no disciplinary events were observed in these classrooms, with only minimal redirection used to get students on task. From the beginning of the year, effective teachers established rules and routines for classroom behavior and consistently upheld these standards across the school year (Bohn et al., 2004). They established a predictable pattern of expectations for behavior, so that students knew what to expect and were aware of consequences of misbehavior. When misbehavior did occur, effective teachers used positive
tactics to redirect behavior rather than resorting to punishment or scolding, and they minimized misbehavior and chaotic transitions by developing organized plans for each activity.” (p. 112).

**Balanced literacy instruction:** (1) “Excellent elementary literacy teachers balance skills instruction with more holistic teaching.” (p. 9). (2) “some combination of high-quality literature with many opportunities for authentic reading and writing (consistent with the whole language perspective) as well as explicit instruction in the basic skills of reading and writing (consistent with a more hierarchical skills-based approach to instruction)” (p. 113); “reading and writing were interwoven” (p. 118). (3) “…skill and strategy instruction that happened in effective classrooms was that almost all occurred in the context of authentic reading and writing experiences.” (p. 109)

**Implementation of instructional density & higher order thinking activities:** (1) “…effective instruction emphasized higher-order meaning making much more than lower-order skills. The more the teacher emphasized actual reading of text, rather than drilling of skills, the higher the student achievement.” (p. 5). (2) “integrated multiple goals into a single lesson” (p. 115); “teachers were not only aware of the multiple goals they were meeting but had planned them” (p. 116). (3) Instructional density, which describes the amount of classroom time devoted to academic activities, in effective classrooms was very high, with much of the school day used for learning, especially learning to read and write. (p. 109).

**Extensive use of scaffolding:** (1) “Teachers use scaffolded instruction when they notice students having difficulty and provide support such as cues or organizers so that students are able to make progress.” (p. 9). (2) “teacher monitors students' learning carefully and steps in to provide assistance on an as-needed basis” (p. 116). (3) Effective literacy teachers identified individual needs for each student, even students who did not struggle to read and write, and provided just enough support so that each student made progress on their reading and writing.

**Encouragement of self-regulation of literacy skills & strategies:** (1) “Effective teachers expect and encourage their students to use the skills they learn in a self-regulated fashion, explaining to and modeling for students how to coordinate multiple strategies…” (p. 6). (2) “teachers encouraged students to monitor their progress and understanding and taught students what to do when they encountered difficulty” (p. 117). (3) “Effective teachers modeled their own metacognitive awareness about their planning and monitoring strategies to students and then encouraged students to do the same in their own work. Not only did effective teachers encourage students to use strategies, but they also had students evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies and make adjustments if needed…” (p. 112).

**High expectations for all students:** (2) "I think that all the kids ... who come to me ... are capable of learning to read—when they're given an approach to reading that they are comfortable with, and they're going to feel successful with" (p. 119). (3) “Effective teachers communicated individually appropriate high expectations for all their students and supported their students in meeting those expectations. As such, it was common to observe effective teachers encouraging students to read slightly more challenging books and write slightly longer compositions than ones written in the past. There was a clear message to all students that they could be successful at reading and writing...” (p. 112).

(2) Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston (1998)

(3) Mohan, Lundeberg, and Reffitt (2008)
Appendix B

Teacher Interview 1

1. Tell me about your professional background. (When and where did you receive your teacher training? What teaching experiences have you had?)

2. Tell me about your present teaching situation. (How long have you been in this school/district? Tell me about the school and about the student population.)

3. What do you feel are the most important instructional techniques you use to provide literacy instruction to your students?

4. How have you acquired your knowledge about literacy instruction?

5. When I mention independent reading, what does that mean to you?

6. In what ways do you currently use independent reading with your students? What does it look like in your classroom? What are your expectations for your students during IR?

7. Has your use of independent reading changed in any major ways since you began teaching? What caused the change, if any?

8. What experiences have you had that have influenced the decisions you make about IR in your classroom?

9. What are some of the pros and cons you see in using independent reading with your students?

10. What impact do you think independent reading has on your students’ reading growth?

11. In what ways (within the classroom, in the school/district, in the community, in the national context) are you encouraged/discouraged from using independent reading in your classroom?
Teacher Interview 2

I’ve been observing in classrooms and talking to teachers for the past four months, looking at the ways that you and the other teachers talk about and use independent reading. I’ve developed some ideas that I want to discuss with you, based on those observations.

1. I’ve been thinking about the balance between the time students spend actually reading and the time they spend on reading-related activities. For example, in your room… What is your reasoning for the related activities? What do the related activities add that would be missing from students “just reading”?

2. I’ve been thinking about the issue of student autonomy versus teacher support in independent reading. In what ways do you provide support for your students’ independent reading before, during, or after independent reading episodes? Is independent reading truly independent in your room?

3. I’ve been thinking about the inequitable amounts of time allotted for student readers. For example, in your room… Should this be a concern, over the long run? Are there possible solutions to this inequity?

4. I’ve been thinking about some of the reading programs that I’ve seen used to support independent reading in various classrooms. How important is each of these programs in supporting independent reading in your classroom? What are their advantages & disadvantages related to independent reading?

   - AR
   - Reading Counts
   - Daily 5
   - your basal series

5. In some models of independent reading, there are certain characteristics that their creators consider important to students’ success with independent reading. I’m going to name each characteristic; please tell me if it is or is not an important part of your reading program and why.

   - students’ direct access to reading materials in school
   - reading materials that are of interest to students and that span a wide range of readability levels, with little censorship of student reading materials
   - a comfortable quiet environment that is conducive to reading
• adult support and encouragement for reading, which often included adults modeling the act of reading (reading along with students)
• staff training that better enables teachers to create and manage free reading programs
• the omission of activities that hold students accountable for their reading
• follow-up activities that permit students to exhibit their excitement over their reading selections but that are non-evaluative
• regular time to read

6. You know that I teach pre-service teachers, about to go out into the world as teachers of elementary students. What message would you send them about using independent reading in their classrooms? Do you have any specific suggestions?
Appendix C

Student Interview

1. What kinds of things do you like to read? What topics do you like to read about?

2. Do you ever read by yourself in your classroom? When?

3. How do you decide which books you’ll choose to read by yourself?

4. What does your teacher think of reading? How do you know? What kinds of things does your teacher say/do that make you think that?

5. Are there any things your teacher could do that would make it easier/better for you to be able to read in your classroom?

6. Do you think getting a chance to read by yourself at school makes you a better reader? Why/how?
Appendix D
Teacher Survey

Directions: Please respond to the following questions that inquire about reading instruction in your elementary classroom.

Teacher education and professional development
1. What is your current teaching position? (Mark as many as apply.)
   _____ Classroom teacher-Kindergarten
   _____ Classroom teacher-Grade 1
   _____ Classroom teacher-Grade 2
   _____ Classroom teacher-Grade 3
   _____ Classroom teacher-Grade 4
   _____ Classroom teacher-Grade 5
   _____ Classroom teacher-Grade 6
   _____ Other (please specify) ________________________________

2. What is the highest education degree you currently hold?
   _____ Bachelor's
   _____ Master's
   _____ Doctorate
   _____ Other (Please specify) ________________________________

3. Do you hold National Board Certification?
   _____ Yes  Certification area: ________________________________
   _____ No

4. What year did you first teach elementary school? _________

5. How many total years have you worked as an elementary teacher? _________
6. What kind of teacher education program led to your elementary certification?

_____ regular 4-year B.A. or B.S. certification program
_____ 5-year B.A. or B.S. program (which might include hours toward a master's degree)
_____ postbaccalaureate certification program (i.e., you earned a bachelor's degree and then got certified)
_____ master's degree certification program (i.e., you got certified while earning a master's)
_____ "alternative" postbaccalaureate certification program (i.e., some other certification route following your completion of a B.A. or B.S. degree outside education)
_____ I am not certified to teach at the elementary level

7. What activities do you engage in to further your professional knowledge and skill regarding teaching reading? (Indicate all that apply)

_____ attend workshops, in-services, or staff development courses
_____ attend professional conferences
_____ present at professional conferences
_____ enroll in college or university courses in education
_____ enroll in a graduate degree program in education
_____ read professional magazines or journals
_____ write articles for professional education newsletters, periodical, or journals
_____ hold membership in professional organizations
_____ regularly attend meetings of professional organizations
_____ conduct research in your own classroom, either alone or in collaboration with others
_____ regularly meet with colleagues to collaborate on professional topics
_____ other (please specify) ______________________________________________________

8. How would you rate your knowledge base regarding classroom use of independent reading?

_____ Very well-informed
_____ Fairly well-informed
_____ Not very well-informed
_____ Not at all informed
**Student demographics**

9. How many students do you have in your classroom?
   - ____ regular education students
   - ____ children identified as special/exceptional students (included on a full-time or part-time basis)

10. What is your assessment of the economic situation of the families of all students in your classroom? (Estimate the percentage of students who fit within each classification.)
   - ____ % of my students' families are at a low-income level
   - ____ % of my students' families are at a middle-income level
   - ____ % of my students' families are at an upper-income level

11. What is your assessment of the racial or cultural make-up of all students in your classroom? (Estimate the percentage of students who fit within each classification.)
   - ____ % white or European American students
   - ____ % Hispanic or Latino students
   - ____ % Asian or Pacific Islander students
   - ____ % Native American or Eskimo students
   - ____ % multirace students
   - ____ % students of other racial or ethnic groups

12. What is your assessment of the overall reading achievement level of all students in your classroom at the present time? (Estimate the percentage of students who fit within each classification.)
   - ____ % of my students are above-average readers (reading more than 1 level above their grade placement)
   - ____ % of my students are average readers (reading at grade level or within 1 level plus or minus of their grade placement)
   - ____ % of my students are below-average readers (reading more than 1 level below their grade placement)
13. What is your assessment of the first language or "home language" spoken by all students in your classroom? (Estimate the percentage of students who fit within each classification.)

_____ % of my students speak English as their first language

_____ % of my students speak a language other than English as their first language

Overall classroom reading program

14. How much total time do you typically devote each day for all reading instruction & activities?

_____ Less than 30 minutes

_____ 30-59 minutes

_____ 60-89 minutes

_____ 90-119 minutes

_____ 2 hours or longer

15. How much of the total time you typically devote each day for all reading instruction & activities is spent on the following reading activities?

_____ # minutes specifically for whole-class, small group, or individual direct reading instruction (e.g., reading groups, skill or strategy lessons, teacher-guided reading activities)

_____ # minutes specifically for teacher read-alouds

_____ # minutes specifically for whole-class student independent reading

_____ # minutes specifically for other (please specify) ________________________________

_____ # minutes specifically for other (please specify) ________________________________
16. How do you use basal reading materials and trade books (i.e., children's books or library books) in your class-room reading program? (mark one)

_____ I use basal reading materials as the only reading instructional materials in my classroom; that is, I use no trade books to teach reading.

_____ I use basal reading materials as the foundation of my reading program; in other words, my reading program is structured around the basal, but I incorporate trade books within my reading instruction.

_____ I use trade books as the foundation for my reading program; in other words, my instruction is trade book based, but I use basals some of the time to supplement the trade books.

_____ I use trade books as the only reading instructional materials in my classroom; that is, I use no basal materials to teach reading.

17. What kind of library facilities are available to your students? (Mark as many items as are applicable.)

_____ There is a central library in my school but my students rarely access the books there.

_____ There is a central library in my school that contains books my students use.

_____ I have my own classroom library.

18. If you indicated that you have your own classroom library, how many books does it contain?

_____ fewer than 50 books

_____ 51-100 books

_____ 101-300 books

_____ 301-500 books

_____ more than 500 books
19. How would you rate yourself on your overall classroom reading program on the following criteria? Mark the box that best describes how you would rate yourself on each criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>5 Highly Effective</th>
<th>4 Effective</th>
<th>3 Ineffective</th>
<th>2 Ineffective</th>
<th>1 Highly Ineffective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing readers who are skillful and strategic in word identification, fluency, and reading comprehension</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing readers who are critical and thoughtful in using reading and writing to learn about people and ideas, and how they might use literacy to positively affect the world in which they live</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing readers who are independent in choosing, appreciating, and enjoying literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing readers who are knowledgeable about literary forms or genres and about different text types or structures</td>
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<td>Involving parents and caregivers in their children’s literacy learning.</td>
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**Independent Reading Activities**

20. How often is time specifically devoted to whole-class (most or all of the students are expected to participate) independent reading in your classroom?

_____ Daily
_____ 3-4 days per week
_____ 1-2 days per week
_____ Rarely/Never (If you rarely/never devote any time during the school day/week to whole-class independent reading time, skip to question #26)
21. How often do you conduct the following activities before, during, or after your whole-class independent reading time? Mark the box that best describes how often you engage in each activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Usually</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Never</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent reading <strong>pre</strong>-activities (any discussion, instruction, or activity directly related to the independent reading to follow)</td>
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<td>Independent reading-related activities <strong>during</strong> independent reading (any discussion, instruction, or activity directly related to the independent reading presently occurring)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Independent reading <strong>follow</strong>-up activities (any discussion, instruction, or activity directly related to the independent reading that just occurred)</td>
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</table>

22. How many of the books used by students during independent reading are chosen **by the students**?

- None
- Some
- Most
- All
23. Which best describes the levels of the books chosen by students for use during independent reading?
   _____ Most/all students read books at their independent reading level.
   _____ Most/all students read books at their instructional reading level.
   _____ Most/all students read books at their frustration reading level.
   _____ Students read books at a variety of reading levels.
   _____ Student reading levels are not monitored.

24. During whole-class independent reading time, what is the teacher usually doing?
   _____ Reading silently
   _____ Conducting administrative activities (grading student work, lesson preparation, etc.)
   _____ Conducting student instruction/assessment unrelated to the independent reading
   _____ Engaging in student interactions (conferences, instruction, etc.) related to the independent reading
   _____ Other (please specify) ______________________________________________________

25. Do you utilize any formal or informal assessment specifically related to independent reading?
   _____ No
   _____ Yes (please specify) _______________________________________________________

26. How often do individual students engage in independent reading in your classroom?
   _____ Daily
   _____ 3-4 days per week
   _____ 1-2 days per week
   _____ Rarely/Never (If individual students rarely/never engage in independent reading in your classroom, skip to question # 28.)

27. Under what circumstances do individual students engage in independent reading in your classroom?
   (Mark as many as are applicable.)
   _____ As a time-filler when their regular work is done
   _____ As a reward
   _____ As a free choice or learning center activity
   _____ As a follow-up to teacher-led instruction
   _____ As a part of reading workshop
   _____ Other (please specify) ______________________________________________________
**Teacher beliefs/philosophical orientation**

28. How well do the following statements align with your views of various perspectives, philosophies, or beliefs toward the teaching and learning of reading? Mark the box that best describes your view of each statement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I align myself with one predominant attitude toward reading instruction, drawing from that perspective in choosing materials and planning my reading program.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I have an &quot;eclectic&quot; attitude toward reading instruction, which means that I would draw from multiple perspectives and sets of materials when teaching reading.</td>
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<td>I would describe myself as a whole language teacher.</td>
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<td>I believe in a balanced approach to reading instruction, which combines skills development with literature and language-rich activities.</td>
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<td>I believe that teaching students to decode words is one of my most important goals for early reading instruction.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>I believe that phonics needs to be taught directly to beginning readers in order for students to become fluent, skillful readers.</td>
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<td>I believe in a literature-based approach to reading instruction in which trade books (i.e., children's books or library books) would be used exclusively or heavily.</td>
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<td>I believe that basal reading materials are useful tools for teaching students to read, either as the primary instructional material or along with trade books (i.e., children's books or library books).</td>
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<tr>
<td>I believe students need to be immersed in literature and literacy experiences in order to become fluent readers.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I believe students need to spend substantial amounts of class time reading independently to boost reading achievement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I believe it is important for students to spend substantial amounts of time reading materials of their own choice.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neither agree nor disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is my primary goal to develop readers who are skillful and strategic in word identification, fluency, and reading comprehension.</td>
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Appendix E

Codes

1. outside pressures influencing independent reading
2. independent reading as an assigned task
3. students’ behavior during independent reading
4. teachers’ monitoring/accountability of independent reading
5. teachers defining for students traits of readers
6. teachers naming to students independent reading strategies
7. just-right/leveled books
8. independent reading as a task when other work completed
9. independent reading as one of several tasks occurring simultaneously
10. independent reading as homework
11. assigned tasks related to independent reading
12. teacher-student conference
13. student reading goals/reflection
14. independent reading assessment
15. book choice
16. focus on reading achievement/improvement
17. professional learning
18. teach intuitively
19. reading programs/models
20. reading scholars/professionals
21. teacher modeling reading behaviors
22. teachers’ love for reading
23. partner reading

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24. student motivation
25. teacher literacy knowledge from experiences
26. teachers’ definition of components of independent reading
27. social interaction
28. beginning readers
29. teachers’ behavioral expectations
30. consistency
31. family involvement
32. independent reading related to other content areas
33. encouragement for teachers’ use of independent reading
34. teacher confidence about independent reading/reading program
35. teacher disregard for outside pressure
36. independent reading as a part of the daily routine
37. choice of type of independent reading activity
38. book recommendations
39. teacher monitoring independent reading behavior
40. class discussion following independent reading
41. student-initiated independent reading activity
42. teachers’ use of professional opinion for decision-making
43. teacher lack of confidence/uncertainty
44. inequities in student independent reading time
45. extrinsic student motivation
46. student interest in reading
47. silent versus oral reading
48. basis in research
49. teacher-related benefits of independent reading
50. teacher-related challenges of independent reading
51. teacher activities during independent reading
52. “just let them read” or not
53. teacher praise for student reading
54. teacher support during reading
55. independent reading resources
56. implications of independent reading for earliest readers
57. teacher collaboration
58. growth in independent reading ability
59. following through with books/repeated readings
60. genre
61. learning as a reader
62. teacher learning from peers
63. higher-level thinking
64. challenging student learning
65. differentiated learning
66. focus on reading skills
67. schema/background knowledge
68. instruction prior to independent reading
69. “reading” beyond the text
70. teacher reflection
71. teacher intentionality
72. reading stamina
73. challenges of ELLs
74. reader frustration
75. reading practice
76. necessity to hold reading skills
77. student engagement
78. teachers’ defense of practices
79. issue of time for independent reading
80. purpose for reading
81. quality literature
82. “it’s authentic”
83. teacher discussion of the study
84. reading avoidance/distraction activities
85. balanced reading program
Appendix F

Categories

Factors influencing teachers’ use of independent reading

- Acquisition of literacy knowledge and beliefs
- Perceived outside influences
- Classroom components
- Affective Factors

Understanding independent reading

- Student autonomy and teacher involvement
- Independent reading behaviors

Conducting independent reading

- Focus on student growth
- Independent reading activities