

Why Early Reading Matters and Improving Outcomes for Young Children At-Risk for Reading

Difficulties

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to communicate the importance of why early reading matters and to identify various methods to improve reading outcomes for all students regardless of race or background. The research conducted focused on students who are most at-risk for reading difficulties in preschool through third grade, including students who come from homes of a lower socioeconomic status (SES), students with identified disabilities, English language learners, those who struggle with social emotional skills, and those who have experienced trauma. In addition to defining what “at-risk” means and who is included, the paper highlights elements of effective literacy instruction. A variety of evidence-based methods that can be used to improve reading outcomes for these students were also investigated. Findings from research as well as data collected through in-depth interviews conducted with Maryland-based Reading Specialists, Special Education Teachers, Classroom Teachers and Early Interventionists is used to drive the content. The purpose of this research is to share information to help all students succeed in their learning, particularly in the area of reading. Early reading skills have a life-long impact. It is the job of educators and policymakers to promote equity and ensure that *all* young children are set down the right path for positive literacy outcomes.

Keywords: at-risk, socioeconomic status (SES), English Language Learners (ELL), social emotional learning

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Introduction

One common misconception in society is that children ‘automatically’ know how to read. That if you give a six-year-old a book, they will simply be able to read and understand it. However, this is not the case. Learning how to read takes many years, a variety of skills and support within the classroom and beyond. Children have to develop oral language, phonemic awareness, word recognition, decoding, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension skills and many more. Learning to read is no easy task but proficient reading is essential, and early childhood educators have the highly esteemed job of assisting students in their beginning reading journey. But, when learning and teaching students how to read, many other factors come into play, such as: a student’s home support, their English language proficiency, their other areas of development and the availability of resources. All of these factors, and others, will be addressed in this paper.

The research and topics discussed in this paper will focus on why it matters for children to have early reading experiences and who is at-risk for difficulties in reading. Additionally, different strategies and elements of effective reading programs will be discussed. Before discussing the research, it is important to note that every student is unique. There is no magic solution to help every student become a successful reader and there is not a one size fits all approach to teaching reading. The strategies that will be discussed in this paper are those that can benefit many students, and in some cases, a particular subgroup. However, as stated by the Institute of Education Sciences, “Although the same sets of linguistic and cognitive skills are involved in learning to read, children bring unique constellations of these skills to the classroom with important implications for instruction” (Connor et al., 2014, p. 28). Teachers must get to know each student and the personal experiences each one brings to the classroom in order to develop effective reading instruction.

Why Does Success in Reading Matter?

Having strong reading skills is essential in order to be successful in today's society. Not only does it help an individual within their education, but "the ability to read is highly valued and important for social and economic advancement" (National Research Council, 1998, p. 1). As demands for competency in one's literacy continue to increase, the number of students struggling to learn how to read is also becoming more apparent to educators. This is not to say that every child has an abnormally difficult time when learning how to read, but rather those who are struggling need to receive the necessary support as early as possible. This paper will address how to help students who are struggling with reading, but will also take a step back and examine what factors make a child more likely to encounter reading difficulties. It will primarily focus on students ranging from ages three to eight, but will also discuss those younger and the ramifications on students as they progress throughout elementary school.

Section I: What Does It Mean to be At-Risk for Reading Difficulties?

Before the discussion regarding who is at-risk for reading difficulties and how educators can support these children begins, what it means to be at-risk must first be established. However, before this is discussed it should be noted that a student should not be defined by this term. It is used in this paper to help provide common language when referring to students who are likely to need additional support in reading based on other factors. It is not used as a means of labeling students or defining their individual or educational worth.

A child who is at-risk is one that has been affected by one or more risk factors which has been linked to academic failure and poor health (Robbins et al., 2012). There are a variety of risk factors that can influence a child's likelihood of success in school, and children who are affected by three or more risk factors are the most likely to experience difficulty in school. There are several research

publications that define and discuss risk factors. For example, The National Center for Children in Poverty produces the *Young Child Risk Calculator*, which “provides national and state-specific information about the number of children who are at risk of poor outcomes in areas such as school performance, health, and mental health due to family or life circumstances” (Robbins et al., 2012, p.1). The point of identifying risk factors is not to assume that a child will fail due to the prevalence of one or more risk factors, as these factors should not be seen as something that makes poor reading achievement inevitable. Rather, they should be seen as a way to alert guardians, physicians and educators of potential obstacles a child may face so that interventions can be sought out and implemented (National Research Council, 1998).

Risk Factors

The *Young Child Risk Calculator* as well as data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NES) and a committee established by the National Academy of Sciences all provide information regarding various risk factors that may influence a child’s education. These range from students who come from a low-income or single parent household to a household where the primary language is not English. In this paper, risk factors will be discussed in relation to a young child’s reading. Several subgroups of children will be discussed, all of whom have a factor that puts them at greater risk for developing reading difficulties. The following subgroups will be the main focus: English Language Learners (ELLs), students with identified disabilities, students who come from a lower socioeconomic status and students who have difficulty with social emotional skills. Additionally, general education students who are struggling in reading but are outside of the other four subgroups will be discussed.

Section II: Who Is At-Risk for Reading Difficulties and Why?

In this section, the subgroups of children listed and their relation to reading difficulties will be explored. There are a multitude of other factors that can influence a child's reading development, and not every child fits into one of the four subgroups perfectly, but by addressing specific groups of children, more detailed research and strategies can be discussed.

Potential Stumbling Blocks for Reading Development

In 1998, the United States Department of Education and the United States Department of Health and Human Services asked the National Academy of Sciences to form a committee that would be tasked with examining the prevention of reading difficulties (National Research Council, 1998). This committee conducted a study surrounding the effectiveness of interventions for young children who are having difficulties in learning to read. The name of this committee was The Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children. The information the study found was monumental in reshaping people's understanding of how a child learns to read, providing ideas to prevent reading difficulties and guidance on helping students who struggle. This research was combined and formed into a book titled, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* and the author will be referred to as the National Research Council. The book will be referenced several times throughout this paper, as it is the base for a large amount of the information.

According to the findings of the committee, as tasked by the National Research Council, there are three potential stumbling blocks that are known to throw children off course on their journey towards skilled reading, regardless of the presence of risk factors (National Research Council, 1998). The first of these stumbling blocks is a difficulty understanding and using the alphabetic principle. The alphabetic principle is understanding that letters and letter patterns represent the sounds that are used in spoken language. Children learn that there are predictable relationships between sounds and

letters, and this allows them to apply these relationships to words which then aids fluency when reading (Texas Education Association, 2002). If students do not have a solid grasp on the alphabetic principle then word recognition becomes laborious and often inaccurate which, in turn, impacts comprehension (National Research Council, 1998). If a child puts all of their energy into recognizing the words, then it will be harder to comprehend the text. The second stumbling block is the inability to transfer comprehension skills of spoken language to written language. This means that a child cannot apply the skills they use when comprehending words spoken aloud when they are reading. The second part of this obstacle is a difficulty in acquiring new strategies that may be needed specifically for reading. The third stumbling block is an absence or loss of initial motivation to read or a failure to develop an appreciation of the rewards one gets from reading. This one is said to magnify the first two, as motivation to read plays a crucial part in reading success of children, “although most children begin school with positive attitudes and expectations for success, by the end of the primary grades, and increasingly thereafter, some children become disaffected” (National Research Council, 1998, p. 5).

These three stumbling blocks are mentioned because they are three obstacles that need to be noted when discussing teaching all students, particularly those who are at-risk, to read. If educators are made aware of these common obstacles, perhaps they will be more likely to notice and take steps to prevent them. It is imperative that steps are taken to help children overcome these obstacles during the primary grades (National Research Council, 1998). Next, the four subgroups listed above and their likelihood of being at-risk for reading difficulties will be discussed in greater detail.

English Language Learners (ELLs)

English Language Learners (ELLs) are students who have limited proficiency in the English language. ELLs come from homes where English is not the primary language spoken and typically

need modified or specified instruction. These students must be found eligible to participate in programs designed specifically for English Language Learners.

An important point to address is that ELLs are not a homogeneous group. There are a wide variety of characteristics that describe English Language Learners, not only what their first language is. For example, some ELLs are born in the United States while others are second or third generation immigrants. Even within those who are immigrants, there is a variety: some have had strong academic experiences in their home country while others may have little or no literacy in their first language. English Language Learners come from over 400 different language backgrounds and have a wide range of educational backgrounds (Gillet et al., 2017). Consequently, they should not all be treated the same and do not all need the same level or type of support.

The number of students who are English Language Learners in public schools within the United States is rising. In the fall of 2017, there were 1.2 million more English Language Learners enrolled in a public school in the United States than there were in the fall of 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). In the fall of 2017, there was also a higher percentage of ELLs in urbanized school districts as compared to school districts in less urbanized areas. In cities, 14.7% of the total public school enrollment was made up of ELLs, whereas it was only 9.6% in suburban areas, 6.8% in towns and 4.1% in rural areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). As the number of English Language Learners continues to rise across the United States, the number and quality of available programs that provide support for the students and their families should be rising as well. Students who are identified as ELLs are often eligible to participate in language assistance programs. The goal of these programs is not only to help students meet English proficiency but also guide them towards meeting appropriate academic content goals and achievement standards (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). According to the National Center for Education Statistics,

enrollment in these programs can improve English proficiency which has been tied to improved educational outcomes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a).

In the United States, English is the primary language used for all types of communication, therefore those who are not proficient in English have an automatic disadvantage. While this might not be considered fair, it is the reality, and if students can begin programs that will aid them in English proficiency early, the more benefits they will receive. This ties to the higher percentage of English Language Learners that is present in lower grades as compared to upper grades. In 2017, the National Center for Education Statistics attributed this to the fact that students are being identified as ELLs when they enter elementary school and are able to attain English proficiency before they reach upper grades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). Additional support should also be provided to families in order to ensure a home-school connection, but that is a different topic in itself. A student's culture and personal experiences they bring with them should be considered and valued as well.

How Does ELL Status Influence Reading Development?

As stated before, English is the primary language spoken in the United States, and this is true in U.S. schools as well. In the general education environment within a public school, students are receiving instruction in English, and students who do not speak English proficiently, often have an increased difficulty in reading the content provided. However, it should be noted that while ELLs can acquire emergent literacy and beginning literacy skills before they are fluent speakers, having limited oral language skills can interfere with their progress through other stages of reading development (Gillet et al., 2017). This is why there must be direct oral language instruction for ELLs. This is particularly true for 'academic English'. This refers to the formal and abstract language that is needed for success. In the educational world, there is a large amount of language that students must

understand and apply in order to be successful. For example, within the domain of reading, students must understand what it means to make a prediction and identify the theme or lesson of a story. Sometimes educators forget that not everyone uses this language in everyday life, particularly in different languages and cultures; therefore, ELLs need direct support surrounding this language.

There is also a noticeable difference in academic performance for ELLs. English Language Learners perform at a significantly lower level on reading measures as compared to their same aged peers who speak English as a first language (Gillet et al., 2017). Each year the National Center of Education Statistics publishes the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) also known as the Nation's Report Card. NAEP is a collection of measures conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics regarding the knowledge of students in various subjects throughout the nation, states and some urban districts and is given to a representative sample of students across the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020b). In 2007, ELLs in fourth grade scored 35 points below their non-ELL peers on reading measures (Gillet et al., 2017). In 2019, this gap remained significant as there was a 33 point difference (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). Within a twelve year time period, that is not a significant improvement, signaling that there is a need for continued development of quality programs and supports for ELLs. This is the gap in fourth grade, and by grade eight, it has increased by an additional 12 points (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019b). This shows that the gap continues to grow as students progress through school, and supports the need for identification and meaningful interventions in younger grades.

Students from a Lower Socioeconomic Status

When one hears the words socioeconomic status (SES), they often think of poverty. While income level is one aspect of socioeconomic status, it is not all that the term encompasses. Socioeconomic status is defined as, "the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often

measured as a combination of education, income and occupation” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). When combined, these three factors can give a general idea of one’s SES. Poverty will be discussed in this paper as a specific subgroup of SES; but, it is of importance to mention that when SES is stated, it is in reference to not only income but educational level and occupation as well.

Poverty versus Low SES

As stated previously, just because one comes from a home of a lower SES status, does not mean they live in poverty. In order to be considered living in poverty, one must live at or below the poverty threshold, as determined by place of residence and the number of people in the household (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Below is a chart from the U.S. Department of Health and Services 2020 Poverty Guidelines. As shown in Table 1, it outlines the guidelines for forty-eight states and the District of Columbia (D.C). The two states not included are Alaska and Hawaii.

Table 1

Poverty Guidelines

Persons in family/household	Poverty Guideline
1	\$12,760
2	\$17,240
3	\$21,720
4	\$26,200
5	\$30,680
6	\$35,160
7	\$39,640
8	\$44,120
For more than 8 people- add \$4,480 for each additional person	

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020)

As seen in Table 1, in order to be considered living in poverty and therefore meet eligibility for certain federal programs, a family of four must have an annual income of \$26,200 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). While the federal poverty line/poverty guidelines are crucial in making administrative decisions such as eligibility for federal programs, families who live above the poverty line can still qualify for additional assistance. For example, in order to qualify for a Free and Reduced Price Lunch, a student must come from a household with an income at or below 130% of the federal poverty threshold (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). For a family of four this means the household would have to make \$34,060 a year in order to qualify for a free and reduced price lunch in school. Why does this matter? Because the percentage of students receiving a free and reduced price lunch is often used to determine the number of students living in poverty that attend a school. For example, in 2012 a little over half of public school children were eligible for free or reduced price lunch, yet the actual poverty rate of public school students was 22%. While there is a correlation between poverty and the percentage of students receiving a free or reduced price lunch, there is also a growing difference which needs to be recognized by schools. Neither the free and reduced price lunch eligibility nor the poverty rate should be the only measure of SES (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The reason this discussion is needed in this research is that all students who come from a low-income family, making less than 200% of the federal poverty line, are at a disadvantage for reading development. It is also eye opening to see the income a household must make in order to be considered living in poverty or even in low-income. There are many students who live above this line, but are also at a disadvantage as they have other risk factors that come into play.

How Does Socioeconomic Status Influence Reading Development?

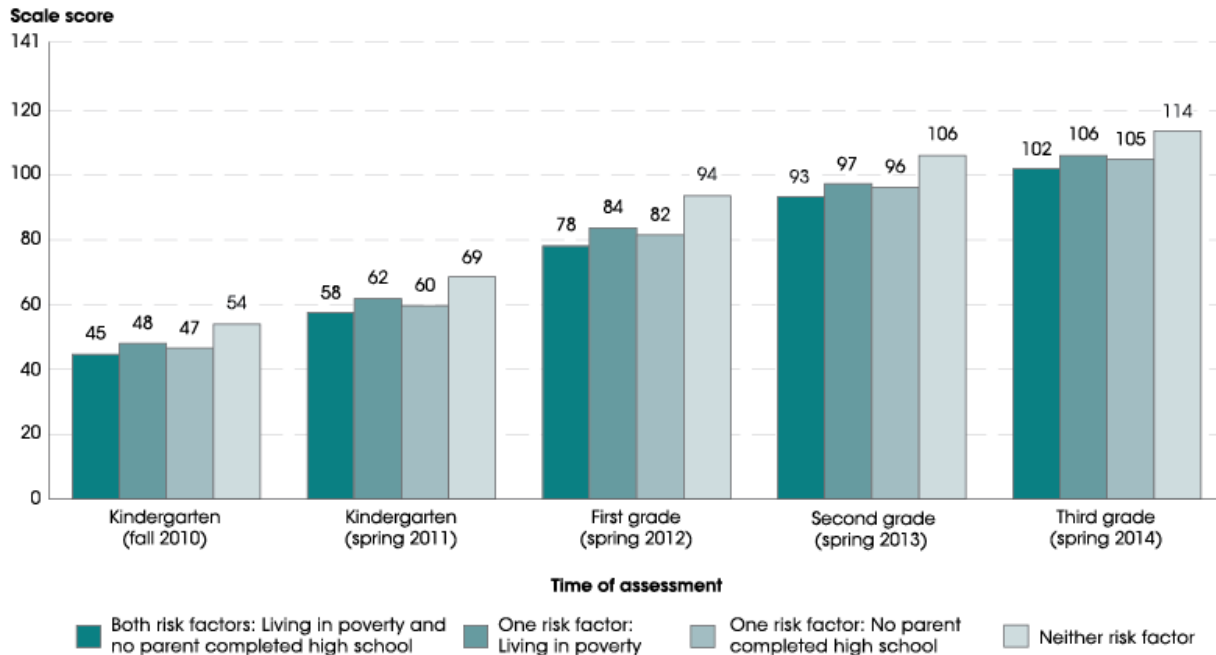
In this paper, the focus is on early childhood, yet it is noteworthy to state that socioeconomic status does act as a consistent and reliable predictor of a range of outcomes throughout one's lifespan. This includes physical as well as psychological health and academic success (American Psychological Association, 2017). There is a correlation between these outcomes and a child coming from a home of a lower SES in their childhood. Research shows that children from low-SES households may show a lack in their cognitive development, memory and socio-emotional processing (American Psychological Association, 2017). Cognitive development, memory and socio-emotional processing all play a role in one's ability to read. In fact, cognitive development is influential in all areas of education as are memory and socio-emotional skills. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that SES has an impact on reading development.

Just as there is a discrepancy in reading achievement in terms of academic scores for ELLs, there is also a discrepancy for students of a lower SES. The *Condition of Education* is a congressionally mandated annual report from the National Center of Educational Statistics. It contains key indicators on the condition of education in the U.S. at all levels ranging from pre-kindergarten to postsecondary. These indicators summarize important development and trends using the latest statistics, which are continuously updated (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020c). The *Condition of Education's* spotlight goes into more depth on certain topics within the report, and will be discussed next. One aspect of the spotlight is focused on children experiencing two types of risk factors: living in poverty and not having a parent who completed high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020d). In a study titled the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010-2011*, data surrounding academic scores were collected over four years. In all, kindergarten students who had one or both of the previously mentioned risk factors, scored

lower in reading over their first four years of school, as can be seen in Table 2 below (Rathbun & McFarland, 2017).

Table 2

Academic Scores: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010-2011



(Rathbun & McFarland, 2017)

The graph in Table 2 reflects an assessment that measured basic reading skills such as print familiarity, letter and word recognition, beginning and ending sounds, and rhyming words as well as vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. The highest possible score was 141 points. The trend in the graph shows that the group of kindergarteners who were studied and followed throughout their first four years of school, follow a pattern that depicts the impact of risk factors on a child's education. By the time the students reached third grade, the gap had increased. While initially a score difference of twelve points may not seem like a lot, if it is thought about in terms of the skills these students are lacking in their reading, that is a significant amount. Additionally, if that is where the gap

was in third grade, it can be predicted that this gap would continue to widen if the students continued to be tracked through high school. This directly relates to the need of catching and helping students as early as possible, which will be discussed throughout the paper, and extensively in section III.

The issue of equity in education is one that requires separate extensive research, but it is relevant in this discussion as the prevalence of risk factors in relation to race, ethnicity, home language and family composition differs. Of the students discussed in this research, it was more common for Hispanic students (15 percent) to have both risk factors as compared to Black and Asian students (8 percent each). Both were several percentage points higher than white students, of which 1 percent had both risk factors. Comparatively, 23 percent of the kindergarteners whose primary home language was not English had both risk factors as compared to 2 percent of kindergarteners whose primary home language was English (Rathbun & McFarland, 2017). This discrepancy cannot be ignored when programs are developed and implemented to help students achieve high academic standards. As stated in *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, “The association of poor reading outcomes with poverty and minority status no doubt reflects the accumulated effects of several of these risk factors, including lack of access to literacy-stimulating preschool experiences and to excellent, coherent literacy instruction” (p. 4). There is a clear gap in the level of experiences that one receives due to their socioeconomic status and this has an impact. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (2012), “As early as 24 months, children in low-income families have been found to show lags in cognitive and behavioral development compared to their peers in higher-income families” (p. 1). Therefore, action must be taken to close this gap and end these lags.

Students with Identified Disabilities

All students have the right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that guarantees this for children who

have a disability. IDEA is a federal law that governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to eligible youth with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). This includes infants and toddlers under Part C of IDEA and children and youth under Part B of IDEA. As of the 2018-2019 school year, more than 7.5 million children ages 3-21 were receiving services under IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). This law was monumental in education and the rights of individuals with disabilities.

In technical terms a disability is, “a physical, mental, cognitive or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person’s ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions” (“Definition of disability,” n.d). However, that definition does not encompass all of the unique characteristics that make an individual who they are. If a child is classified as having a disability, it means that they have been evaluated in accordance with IDEA and have been found to have a disability in one or more of the following thirteen categories: Autism, Deaf-Blindness, Deafness, Emotional Disturbance, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic Impairment, Other Health Impairment, Specific Learning Disability, Speech or Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury or Visual Impairment. Children ages three to nine, or seven in the state of Maryland, can also be classified as having a Developmental Delay. These children and students need additional support within and beyond the home and classroom, and therefore, are students who have or are at-risk for reading difficulties. While there are other disabilities that may influence one’s reading, this paper will focus on students with Specific Learning Disabilities and Autism.

Specific Learning Disability

According to IDEA, a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is, “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that

may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or do mathematical calculations” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This definition does not apply if a child’s educational difficulties are primarily due to visual, hearing, motor or intellectual disabilities, or if the child has an emotional disturbance or an environmental, cultural or economic disadvantage (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This is of importance because students who were discussed in the Socioeconomic Status subsection of this paper may not be found eligible if their learning difficulties are found to be a primary result of their home environment. As can be concluded from the definition of SLD, students who struggle with reading may be classified as having a Specific Learning Disability. Of all of the different kinds of learning difficulties children can have, those that impact reading ability are the most common (Gillet et al., 2017). A reading disorder is when a person has trouble with any part of the reading process. These are present from a young age and usually result from specific differences in how the brain processes language. However, this is not a type of intellectual and a developmental disorder and is not a sign of lower intelligence or unwillingness to learn (Gillet et al., 2017). That is a critical statement to make because having a reading disorder cannot be attributed to a lack of effort; rather, these students need additional support to learn due to a specific difference in language processing.

One SLD that is currently a hot topic in education and receiving additional research and attention is dyslexia. The International Dyslexia Association defines dyslexia as a specific learning disability that is, “characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities.” The website continued on to say that these difficulties typically result from, “a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction” (International Dyslexia Association, 2002). There may also be secondary consequences such as reading

comprehension difficulties and reduced reading experiences which can impede growth of one's vocabulary and background knowledge (International Dyslexia Association, 2002). Dyslexia is often thought of as flipping the letters when one reads, however this is not the only sign of dyslexia and not all people who have the learning disability do this. According to the International Dyslexia Association, about 85% of students who are classified as having a learning disability have a primary learning disability in reading and language processing. However, many more people have some of the symptoms of dyslexia, such as slow or inaccurate reading, poor spelling, poor writing or mixing up similar words, this percentage is estimated at 15-20% of the population as a whole (Dakin & Moats, n.d.). Therefore, many students are receiving special education services under the category of a Specific Learning Disability, dyslexia in particular, and many others may show signs and struggle with academic learning. Having dyslexia is not due to a lack of intelligence or desire to learn. With the appropriate teaching methods, people with dyslexia can learn successfully.

Casey Desrosiers, a special education teacher in the state of Maryland was interviewed for this paper. She spoke about one of her current students who has dyslexia, ways she has seen dyslexia impact a student's education, and instructional strategies she has implemented. She shared that this student and many others who have dyslexia benefit from assignments being broken down into smaller parts and direct instruction in lessons. She stated that these students cannot have 'fluff' in their lessons. They need to be told what they are learning, shown how to do it, and given an opportunity to practice the skill. Students have also benefited from checklists to make sure they have all of the components needed for an assignment, a multisensory and movement based approach to learning, and often need additional support in building their confidence. Desrosiers suggests teachers give students the tools they need by showing them how to complete a task, help them navigate it themselves, and then provide a visual chart to help them complete it independently. It is not that they cannot do the

assignment, it is that they need additional support and tools to complete tasks successfully (Desrosiers, 2021).

Desrosiers (2021) also shared that she has seen dyslexia have an impact beyond the content area of reading. If a student has dyslexia, this may impact their learning in other subjects as well. For example, in math, a student may not be able to successfully read and comprehend the word problems, therefore they are not able to receive the most out of this instruction either. Knowing this, teachers need to provide accommodations and support in all different subject areas for students, and putting these in place as early as possible provides students with even more support.

A crucial piece of information from the *Learning Disabilities Association of America* is that about five percent of all students in our nation's public schools are classified as having specific learning disabilities. This information goes on to say, "Every teacher can expect to find students with learning disabilities in their classroom" (Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2013). This information is crucial because with how today's classrooms are composed, every teacher will work with students who have a variety of learning needs and this includes those with a Specific Learning Disability in the area of reading. As a result, every teacher needs to be equipped with knowledge and resources to help them provide the needed support for their students.

Autism

According to IDEA, Autism is defined as, "a developmental delay [that] significantly affect[s] verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, [and] adversely affects a child's educational performance" (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Other characteristics that are often associated with autism are an engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, a resistance to change in daily routines or in the environment, and atypical responses to sensory experiences (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This definition does not

apply if a child's education is primarily being affected due to an emotional disturbance. In 2016, the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, determined that 1 in every 54 children that were 8 years old had been diagnosed with Autism. The percentages of children who were diagnosed varied among state and ethnic groups, so there are likely other children who have Autism but had not yet been diagnosed (National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities. 2020). The characteristics and behaviors that many children with Autism display can impact their learning and the impact on reading will briefly be discussed next.

One aspect of reading that may be impacted by Autism is comprehension. When discussing the relationship between Autism and reading, Desrosiers (2021) mentioned that she has seen Autism have a larger impact on comprehension as compared to foundational skills. There are several cognitive factors that could contribute to the difficulties that students with Autism have shown in the area of comprehension. One of these is referred to as *theory of mind*. *Theory of mind* is the ability to understand another person's point of view or perspective (Nguyen et al., n.d.). Students with Autism often struggle with the idea that people have thoughts other than their own and looking at a situation from another's perspective. When interviewing Desrosiers, she talked about students with Autism struggling with seeing others' points of view. She also noted that "beyond the text" questions such as, "How does this person feel?" or questions that are not explicitly stated in the text often prove difficult for students with Autism to understand.

A second cognitive factor that may impact comprehension is *central coherence*. *Central coherence* is the ability to bring details together into a whole concept or idea and students with Autism may struggle to bring their ideas together into one cohesive idea. Lastly, *executive functioning* may impact a student's ability to read and comprehend text. Executive functioning will be discussed in greater detail in the next subsection of this paper entitled "Students with Social

Emotional Difficulties”. Students with Autism commonly have difficulties with organizing, planning, and monitoring their comprehension, all of which fall under executive functioning (Nguyen et al., n.d.). When discussing this relationship, Desrosiers (2021) shared that the biggest aspect she has seen impacted is students’ executive functioning. She talked about this in relation to their working memory and flexible thinking which impacts planning for reading, sequencing, and organizing. However, Desrosiers also stated that not all students who have Autism struggle with reading and that “If you know one student with Autism, you know ONE student with Autism” (Desrosiers, 2021). As every student is unique.

Students with Social Emotional Difficulties

A child’s social emotional development and learning directly impacts their education. Social emotional learning is the process that children and adults go through to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Schlund, 2019). All of these components come into play when one is constructing and applying knowledge in their education; therefore, attention needs to be given to this area of development. Social emotional learning gives all young people opportunities to demonstrate their strengths, express their needs, and pursue their sense of purpose (Schlund, 2019).

What many people do not realize is that literacy can provide rich opportunities for social emotional learning to take place. In an article written by Justina Schlund, the Director of Field Learning for the *Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning* (CASEL), the relationship between effective literacy instruction and social emotional learning is explored. Social emotional learning can positively impact one’s literacy development and vice versa. The social emotional skills one has can support one’s literacy goals by helping them make meaning of the

content being addressed, deepening their engagement, and boosting their academic performance (Schlund, 2019). On the other side, some rich opportunities that literacy provides for social emotional learning and development include reflecting on the connections between thoughts, feelings and actions; taking on the perspective of someone else; and using language and writing to navigate social dynamics and build relationships (Schlund, 2019). Therefore, it is essential that educators embed social emotional learning into their literacy instruction and consider a child's social emotional development. There are many different reasons that a child may experience difficulty with social emotional skills, such as trauma in childhood, executive functioning difficulties, not having their basic needs met, and anxiety or mental health issues. The first three will be discussed next.

Trauma

“1 in every 7 children, and nearly 1 out of every 40 infants, in the United States experience some form of maltreatment, including chronic neglect or physical, emotional, or sexual abuse” (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010). This is an alarming statistic, but is one that must be acknowledged. This means that at least 1 in every 7 children are put at a disadvantage in their education, and this is only in terms of abuse, not other risk factors. Experiences such as abuse and exposure to violence in one's life can have a serious impact on an individual. This is true for adults, and is magnified for young children. If a young child is exposed to violence, it can result in fear and chronic anxiety. Unfortunately, “Nearly half of children living in poverty witness violence or are indirectly victims of violence” (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010).

One thing that can have adverse impacts on a child's social emotional development is trauma in childhood. The experience of trauma is often referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs. There are three types of ACEs: abuse, neglect and household dysfunction. Abuse can be physical, emotional, or sexual. Neglect can be physical or emotional, and household dysfunction

includes the following: mental illness, incarcerated relative, mother treated violently, substance abuse and divorce (National Education Association, n.d.). One can deduce that any of these experiences would have a negative impact on a child. ACEs can have an impact on one's brain and other areas of development, academics, and behavior. Many educators encounter these trauma-affected students throughout their career. Some signs of ACEs are, "a sudden change in behavior, from social withdrawal to violent outbursts or self-harm" (National Education Association, n.d.). The presence of these behaviors can impact not only a child's learning but their classmates as well. Therefore, teachers need to be developing a 'trauma-informed' or 'trauma-sensitive' environment in which every student feels safe to learn. According to the National Education Association (n.d.), if school systems put practices into play to support these students' needs, they will be enabled to come to school ready to learn and meet academic challenges. There is a direct correlation between one's experience of trauma in their life and social emotional development, which, in turn, impacts a student's ability to access their education. Therefore, educators and policymakers need to put extra supports in place for children who have experienced trauma.

Executive Functioning

Another reason students may struggle in regulating their emotions and forming effective relationships is a difficulty in executive functioning. Executive functioning is composed of self-regulation skills. Executive functioning is defined as, "the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions and juggle multiple tasks successfully" (Center on the Developing Child, 2020). A strong analogy for executive functioning skills is an air traffic control system. Picture an air traffic control system at a busy airport. This system is responsible for managing the arrivals and departures of many aircrafts on multiple runways and ensuring that all of these travels occur safely. Just like this system is essential to an airport, the brain needs this to filter distractions,

prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals and control impulses (Center on the Developing Child, 2020).

The development of these skills depends on three interrelated types of brain functions: working memory, mental flexibility and self-control. Working memory is one's ability to retain and manipulate pieces of information over a short period of time. For example, if a child is asked to predict what happens in the story, remember this prediction and then listen to a story, they must be able to listen to the story without losing the prediction. Mental flexibility is one's ability to take in new information and apply that knowledge in different contexts. Additionally, it is one's ability to adapt to change easily. The third component of executive functioning is self-regulation which is one's ability to set priorities and resist impulsive actions or responses (Center on the Developing Child, 2020). It is the ability to stop, think, and act.

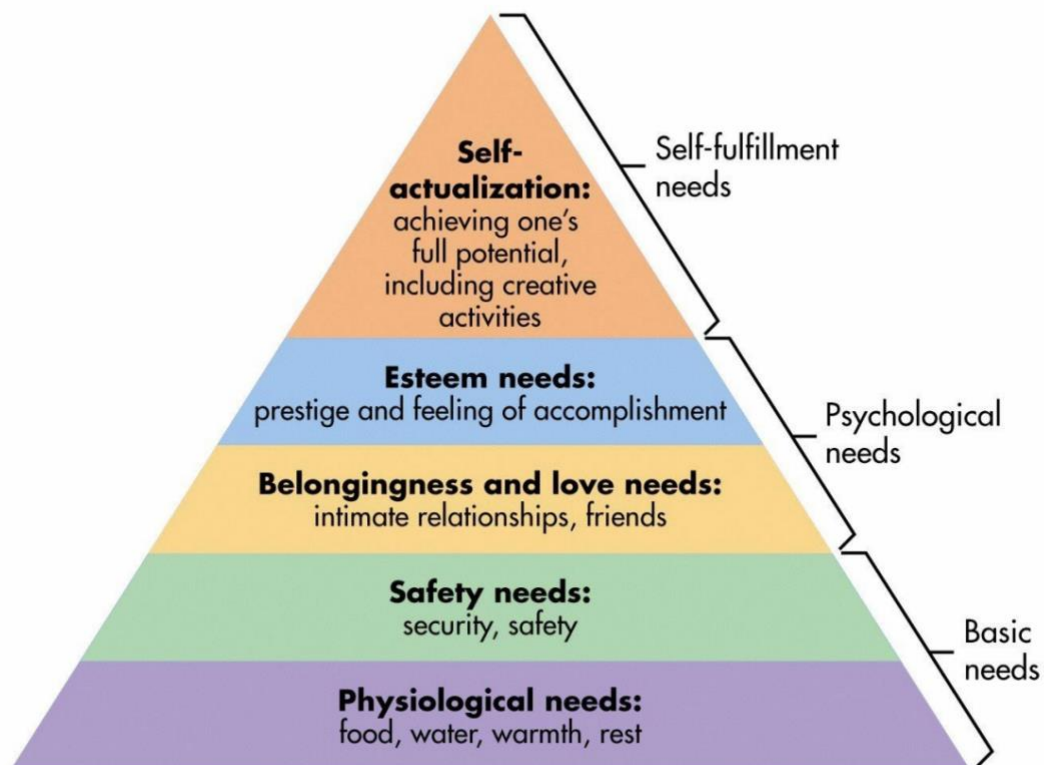
Executive functioning can influence one's ability to access academics fully and, in turn, their ability to read. Verbal working memory has been linked to reading comprehension. A strong working memory allows comprehension to occur as children are able to simultaneously engage in multiple reading processes such as decoding unfamiliar words, retrieving semantic knowledge of familiar words, recalling previously read text, and predicting where a passage is going (Sesma et.al, 2009). Children who struggle with executive functioning may have a harder time using all of these skills at the same time as they are unable to regulate and manipulate multiple things at once. However, executive functioning is not something children are born with, they need support in developing these skills, and some need more support than others. Executive functioning may be a challenge for students with disabilities such as Autism and Specific Learning Disabilities. Therefore, teachers need to provide growth supporting environments that facilitate the development of children's executive functioning skills. This includes establishing routines, modeling social behaviors, and creating and maintaining supportive relationships (Center on the Developing Child, 2020).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs

A theory developed in 1954 by behavior scientist Abraham Maslow contributes to the discussion regarding the importance of one's basic needs being met. Not only does this theory relate to one's social emotional development, but other needs as well including health and safety. Maslow developed a theory about the rank and satisfaction of human needs. His theory is that one person cannot recognize or pursue the next need until their current one is substantially or completely satisfied (Gawel, 1996). This theory consists of five tiers of human needs and is often depicted in the shape of a pyramid. The pyramid can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs



(McLeod, 2018)

As can be seen in Figure 1, one's basic needs and psychological needs must first be met before they can reach the stage of self-actualization. Basic needs being met ties back to the conversation surrounding students of a lower socioeconomic status. If a child is coming to school hungry or not knowing where they will be sleeping at night, how can they focus on their learning? Even adults cannot make the most out of their day when they are hungry, tired or cold, so how can we expect children to?

The next group of needs are psychological needs. This refers to the feeling of belonging and one's self-esteem. Managing and regulating emotions would also fall under this category. How does this come into play in education? This theory has made major contributions to teaching and classroom management. It all comes down to students feeling emotionally and physically safe in the classroom. With trauma-informed practices driving a teacher's classroom environment, this feeling of safety is more likely to be reached.

How Does Social Emotional Learning Impact Reading?

All three of the discussed factors, and many more, can influence one's social emotional development and skills. Yet, how does that, in turn, impact reading? In an interview with Maggie Plunkett (2021), a Special Education Teacher in a Title 1 elementary school, she stated that "a student's social emotional level will have everything to do with their learning." She went on to state that as a teacher, the relationship and trust you build with a student is everything; for, if the students do not feel as though you are a trusted adult in their life, they will not be able to access their learning to their best ability (Plunkett, 2021). Section IV of this paper will discuss more specific ways to support a student's social emotional learning, but a very powerful statement to consider is that social emotional learning and attention to a student's social emotional needs should be at the forefront of every educator's teaching practice.

Students Who Struggle but are Outside of the Previous Subgroups

In every classroom, particularly early childhood classrooms, there will be students who struggle with reading but neither receive any outside intervention nor qualify for an Individualized Education Plan. Classroom teachers must provide additional support to these students beyond what the whole class is receiving. For this research, two classroom teachers in Frederick County Public Schools in Maryland were interviewed. One teaches second grade and the other teaches kindergarten. Both of these teachers said they use small group and individualized instruction to address the needs of these students. These methods will be discussed in section IV of this paper, but it is necessary to include students who struggle and are outside of the previous subgroups as an additional subsection, as it is equally important that these students receive the support that is needed for them to succeed in reading.

Section III: The Power of Early Reading

For all students, especially those of the addressed subgroups, it is incredibly important that reading begins early. There is a preconceived notion that children do not begin to read until they are in kindergarten. That they must know written letters and their sounds before they can put meaning to literacy-related activities such as reading or listening to a book. When in reality, literacy skills begin to develop in infancy. In this section, the importance of beginning support early and what this looks like will be discussed in relation to at-risk students. A large amount of information that will be discussed in this section will come from a Special Education teacher, named Anna Beaver, who works at the Frederick County Developmental Center in the Infants and Toddlers Program. Beaver (2021) has had a wide range of professional experiences, including working in public school special education, teaching at a special education pre-k, and working at Frederick County's Infants and Toddlers Program. When asked why it matters to start children off on the right path in their literacy

development, she said “the sooner you start the better” and that sums it up. According to Beaver (2021) and others, if it is possible to help children early, why would one wait?

Within the State of Maryland, an Infants and Toddlers program exists in each individual county. A variety of service providers work to support children ages birth to three and their families. The job of these providers is to equip children and their families with support and resources to help meet the educational, emotional, social, and physical needs of young children with developmental delays (Frederick County Infants and Toddlers Program). The service providers include teachers, occupational and physical therapists, speech and language pathologists, and service coordinators. Before a child can receive services, they must be found eligible through an Initial Eligibility Evaluation (IEE). Children can be found eligible in one of three ways:

- A 25% delay in one or more of the following areas of development: cognitive, physical, communication, social emotional or adaptive
- “Atypical development or behavior, which is demonstrated by abnormal quality of performance and function in one or more of the above specified developmental areas, interferes with current development, and is likely to result in subsequent delay”, or
- A diagnosed physical or mental condition that has high probability of resulting in developmental delay. Examples include children with sensory impairments, fetal alcohol syndrome, epilepsy, Down syndrome and other chromosomal abnormalities (Frederick County Infants and Toddlers Program).

After a child is found eligible, a Family Assessment/Routines Based Interview is conducted to determine outcomes and services for the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). Once this has been finalized, services can begin (Lafferty, 2021). A key component of early intervention is family involvement. While the child is the center of an IEP, the child and their family are the center of an

IFSP. A primary service provider's main goal is to help families help their child. This is referred to as the coaching model and consists of a family and the service provider discussing and agreeing upon an event or activity that is of concern in the child's everyday routine or life (Lafferty, 2021).

Beaver (2021) noted that family education often consists of building on what a family already knows and does in their daily life. Families often think they must make big, dramatic shifts in order to help their child make gains in literacy, and some may not have the time to do this. However, simple daily tasks can be embellished by incorporating literacy. For example, when putting your child to bed, read them a story or ask them to hold a book. While you're changing their diaper, practice communication (Beaver, 2021). Simple interactions like these have a big payoff in the long run.

The presence of these programs is essential in that research over the past decade has demonstrated that early intervention is effective for many young children with or at risk for reading disabilities (Connor et al., 2014). Research has also found that the longer one waits to get a child help, the larger the gap becomes as, "Children who do not acquire foundational concepts about print are at risk of struggling with beginning reading and subsequently falling behind their peers unless extraordinary steps are taken to help them" (Gillet et al., 2017, p. 12). So the question posed is: *how can teachers help all students develop these concepts?* It all stems from an educator's understanding of emergent literacy: the first stage in reading development. Emergent literacy refers to "the developmental precursors of formal reading that have their origins early in the life of a child" (Neuman & Dickinson, 2000, as cited in Gillet et al., 2017, p.12). This strays from the older perspective that the process of learning to read begins with formal school-based instruction. Emergent literacy is composed of the skills that correspond to a child's understanding of print such as writing corresponds to spoken words, spoken words contain smaller units of sounds (phonemes), the print tells the story, and print is composed of a certain set of letters arranged in a certain way on a page.

Understanding this puts teachers in a position where they can support a child's literacy which includes filling gaps in literacy-related concepts (Gillet et al., 2017). If the research proves that there is power in early intervention, then it can be concluded that the prevalence of these early intervention programs and supports should continue to grow.

For this research, seven different educators were interviewed. Those included are employed in two different counties in the state of Maryland. Their positions and professional experiences were of a wide range, including: classroom teachers, special education teachers, reading specialists and an early intervention teacher. When asked the question, "If you were to have the opportunity to talk to policymakers what would you want them to know about the importance of early reading and improving outcomes for young children at-risk for reading difficulties?" All of the interviewees mentioned that there needs to be more early intervention available to families and this should include preschool and pre-k for all students. This speaks volumes because no matter what age the interview participants worked with or their discipline of focus, every person said early intervention is essential. According to Beaver (2021), the more you can put into early intervention, the better. Early Intervention helps set students up for success.

Section IV: How Educators Can Help- Elements of Effective Literacy Instruction

While it is key that early childhood educators know the research discussed, the power is in how educators use this knowledge to shape their instruction and meet the varied needs of young children in their classrooms. Educators must design and implement instruction that is student-centered, evidence-based, and takes into account all of the different factors that influence a child's growth and development. In this section, five elements of effective literacy instruction will be discussed.

The Importance of Relationships

In order for a teacher to have student-centered instruction that takes into account all of the different factors that come into play in a child's life, they must first get to know the student on a personal level. This means a teacher must develop meaningful relationships with their students. Why does this matter? It matters because if a child is going to reach their full potential, then they must feel safe, secure and believe they are in the presence of a trusted adult. This directly relates back to Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs, and the safety needs section of the pyramid (Figure 1). The pyramid is a powerful visual to show that the base of a child's learning goes back to their psychological and basic needs. Teacher-student relationships fall into the psychological category.

There is a variety of research that supports the statement that student-teacher relationships are key. Not only do teachers see the effects of positive relationships firsthand through the types of interactions they have and a child's willingness to participate and take risks, but there is qualitative and quantitative evidence to prove this. In a study done surrounding the relationship between class achievement and both student-teacher and parent-teacher relationships, it was concluded that a student's sense of belonging in school is linked to engaged school identities and learning outcomes (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Furthermore, "research suggests that children's social relatedness in the primary grades may establish patterns of school engagement and motivation that have long-term consequences for their academic motivation and achievement" (Hughes & Kwok, 2007, p.1). This supports the premise of this paper: early educational experiences matter.

The level of importance of a student-teacher relationship is multiplied in a Title 1 school. A Title 1 school is one that has high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families. Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, schools classified as Title 1 receive federal funds to help ensure that every child in the school has the opportunity to meet the appropriate

academic expectations and standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Why are relationships of increased importance in these schools? As discussed earlier in this paper, students from a low-income household are at greater risk for reading difficulties, and they have a higher chance of having social emotional difficulties due to negative experiences they may have encountered. For this paper, I interviewed three educators who work at a Title 1 school located in Frederick County, Maryland. Plunkett, the special education teacher cited earlier in this paper, works primarily with students in kindergarten and first grade. Plunkett spoke extensively about the importance of relationships. She said, “The relationship and trust you build with a student is everything” (Plunkett, 2021). Only when a teacher knows their students on a level beyond academic, can they provide a strong and effective education. Jill Bowser, a literacy specialist who works at the same school, stated that nothing happens without a relationship with a student; teachers need to spend time developing this first. The student must first know that you care, because they will not respond otherwise (Bowser, 2021).

The Importance of Family Engagement

In order for the relationship a teacher builds with a student to be successful, teachers must extend this relationship to the child’s family. Family can mean many different things, but the majority of children have at least one caregiver in their lives who want them to succeed. Part of a teacher’s job is to get to know the family and engage them in their child’s education. This should begin at the start of the school year. Teachers may create a classroom family tree, adding pictures or different visuals that represent each child. They may reach out to families via phone or send a sheet home for families to tell the teacher about what makes their child unique and how they can ensure a successful education. Small acts such as these show families that they are a partner in their child’s learning and the teacher is one to be trusted. When interviewing Charis Loomer, a kindergarten teacher at a Title 1 school in Maryland, she said she is a huge advocate for family involvement. A quote that speaks

volumes from Loomer is, “The more you can get on their level, the better the relationship, the better the instruction and the better the respect because they understand this isn’t as hard as it may seem... this teacher is with me and on my side and in my kids life” (2021). It is important to show families that the teacher cares for their student beyond an academic level and this compassion extends to the family.

Family engagement and family involvement are not synonymous. A family may be involved in their child’s education: they know what they are learning, they do the activities at home, they send the teacher emails, but they may not be engaged. Engagement means a family is an active participant and interactions between home and school life are occurring. One way to encourage family engagement is inviting them into the school and classroom. During her interview, Rebecca Sacash, a second grade teacher stated, “we can send things home- materials and books- but they may not be used, so anytime we can get them in the school and have events, that is so important” (Sacash, 2021). As can be concluded from the quote, Sacash (2021) values literacy nights and events with families, and one of her favorite ideas is hosting a Poetry Cafe. In second grade, students learn about poetry and compose their own poems. She hopes to have an event where families can come in and listen to their students sharing their poetry. This helps make a bridge between home and school, and allows families to see first hand what the child has been learning.

In a study that tested a model of early school adaptation which integrates research on the centrality of social factors in a student’s academic motivation, researchers found that often minority and low-SES families experience less positive relationships with teachers than Caucasian and higher SES-parents. This may be due to the fact that some teachers “perceive ethnic minority parents as engaging in fewer involvement behaviors and as less cooperative than Caucasian parents” (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). If a teacher has these negative perceptions about a family’s involvement, it may

adversely impact the amount of interaction the teacher has with the family. Teachers need to stray from these negative assumptions and gain knowledge of a family's cultural and family values, as "One possible negative consequence of a mismatch between the culture of the school and the culture of the family is a weaker alliance between home and school and lower parent involvement in school" (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Both of these things may negatively impact the child's school adjustment. The difference in family relationships based on race, culture, and socioeconomic status is another extensive research paper in itself. However, it is important to note in the context of this paper that family engagement is an element of effective literacy instruction.

Expanding on the research just stated, a negative assumption about Title 1 schools and families who do not speak English as their primary language is that they cannot be engaged in their child's education. Loomer (2021) says families who do not speak English as their primary language want to be providing the same types of concepts that you are at home, and by inviting them into your classroom, they can receive information about these concepts. She said the family support in a Title 1 school often comes down to the scheduling. As the teacher, you need to make sure your scheduling and events best meet their lifestyle. This may include offering different times and trying different approaches, but it is built on reaching out to the family and asking them for their availability, what works for them and trying to meet in the middle. For most families, if you take the initiative to develop a relationship, they will return the effort and show a desire.

Research has shown that there is a correlation between early school adjustment and engagement and the teacher-family relationship. In general, if a student's family participates in their education, both at home and at school, and experiences a relationship with a teacher that is mutual, inviting, and based on respect, there is a positive impact on the children. Students achieve more, demonstrate increased motivation and exhibit higher levels of emotional, social, and behavioral

adjustment (Hughes & Kwok, 2007). Consequently, parents and families need to be engaged through events such as literacy nights, classroom volunteering, and maintaining open communication with their child's teacher.

The Importance of Effective Teacher Training

“No matter the program, the program is only as good as the teacher who is teaching it. We need to put money and resources into the teacher versus the program you [the school] are going to buy” (Bowser, 2021). That is a gripping quote shared by Bowser, the primary-grade literacy specialist, and when one takes time to reflect on it, the truth that it contains rises to the surface. A program or lesson may be multimodal, research driven, and amazing on paper, but if the teacher who is implementing it is not strong, then the relevance and meaningfulness of that program is diminished.

In the same question discussed earlier, “If you were to have the opportunity to talk to policymakers what would you want them to know about the importance of early reading and improving outcomes for young children at-risk for reading difficulties?” Sacash, the second grade teacher, said that teachers need to be trained in literacy. As research changes and time goes on, literacy education is continuously changing (Sacash, 2021). However, it cannot be assumed that all teachers know this research and how to incorporate it into their instruction, particularly veteran teachers. Ongoing Professional Learning is very important when it comes to teacher education. Just as research grows, teachers need to as well.

In a report by the Institute of Education Sciences, the authors claimed, “We cannot bring research into the classroom and improve students’ reading skills if we cannot effectively support teachers’ efforts to use efficacious or evidence-based interventions and instructional strategies” (Connor et al., 2014, p. 10). But how do we support teachers? The report emphasized that multiple professional development strategies should be combined including coaching, linking assessment data

to instruction, using technology, and participating in communities of practice. These strategies can support teachers' learning and implementation of research-based reading instruction (Connor et al., 2014). Within this report, several studies were discussed, and one stands out in regards to this subject.

In 2011, Carlisle, a published author in the area of effective language and literacy instruction and a researcher in professional development of elementary literacy teachers, conducted a study surrounding different professional development models and combinations ("Joanne F. Carlisle," 2020). Carlisle and her team tested three combinations in this study. The combinations were as follows:

- (a): workshops designed to improve teacher's knowledge about literacy concept and practice;
- (b): workshops plus learning how to evaluate their students' reading skills and then using these results to improve practices;
- (c): workshops, student evaluation, plus the opportunity to work with a literacy coach and to collaborate with one another in communities of practice.

In all of these combinations, teachers had training which targeted improving their specialized knowledge. The researchers found that combination c, which encompasses all three elements, was associated with the most improvements in teacher practice compared to the other two (Connor et al., 2014). Therefore, it can be concluded that improving teacher knowledge and improving practice are tied to improving student reading outcomes. The fact that coaching is more expensive does need to be taken into consideration; however, in this case, it can be argued that the benefit outweighs the cost as it is a critical component of professional development/learning.

Two literacy specialists were interviewed as a part of my research and were asked about their experiences coaching and leading other teachers in professional development. Both literacy specialists shared that they have provided professional development in almost all areas of literacy and

covered a multitude of topics. These include: what does small reading group instruction look like, how to choose appropriate books for instruction, what is the Science of Reading, and Ehri's Phases of Reading, vocabulary, and word study instruction.

Susan Copen, a literacy specialist who works with all grade levels at her elementary school, shared that she values coaching and modeling for teachers and believes that this is the type of professional development that is needed. Copen shared that unfortunately she does not have the amount of time to dedicate to coaching as she would like due to the high number of students who are in need of reading intervention. Since she is not able to go into every teacher's classroom to model effective literacy instruction, she will often go into one classroom, record a lesson, and share this with the applicable educators. This way she is still able to reach many teachers and share models for them to see. When she is able to go into classrooms, Copen has modeled small group instruction, as has Bowser, the literacy specialist at the Title 1 school. Both specialists shared that this is an area of instruction that teachers often ask for support in (Bowser, 2021; Copen 2021)

The specialists spoke to the importance of following a teacher's lead and letting them share what they need as it relates to literacy teaching and learning. They shared that creating this relationship helps teachers know that they are always there to help and provide support where it is needed. If specialists are able to develop a relationship with teachers that is based on a mutual level of support and respect, then teachers will be more likely to ask for help and guidance when they need it (Bowser, 2021; Copen 2021).

The Need for Reliable, Valid and Effective Assessments

As discussed in the previous element, teachers need to have knowledge on how to evaluate their students' literacy knowledge. This first begins with knowing their students as individuals, which addresses the first element: the importance of relationships. Once relationships are formed, evaluation

can occur through assessment of students. There are several different types of assessments that educators incorporate within their classrooms, some examples include diagnostic assessment, formative assessment, summative assessment, and progress monitoring.

Diagnostic assessment, often referred to as pre-assessment, is what teachers use to gain knowledge of what their students already know. This is often used to measure a student's specific ability so that further specified instruction, and perhaps assessment, can occur. Formative assessment is what teachers use on a daily basis throughout their lessons. Some examples include asking a variety of questions to students, observing and taking anecdotal notes, and collecting and analyzing classwork. Formative assessment occurs during the learning process and the purpose is to modify teaching and learning in order to improve student outcomes. Summative assessment is often used at the end of a learning segment in order for a teacher to gain information and data about what the students have learned. For example, a student may be progressively working on a narrative story. At the end of the unit, this story is turned in and graded by the teacher. This is usually scored with a rubric and is always being compared toward a standard or objective, which should be true of all forms of assessment. Progress monitoring is used to help teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction. This may be in relation to individual students or an entire class (McLane, n.d.). This begins with a teacher first collecting baseline data, second determining goals and instructional techniques, and third implementing instruction. Then a teacher measures the progress a student or students are making towards the specified goal of instruction. It is important that each measure given has the same level of difficulty so that the teacher can compare the two scores and make an accurate conclusion about the amount of progress that is being made (McLane, n.d.). A crucial component of progress monitoring is reflection and data driven changes. For all assessments, teachers need to make sure that the data is being examined and used to guide instruction. If a teacher gives an assessment for

the sake of giving one and never looks at the data through an evaluative lens, the assessment loses its purpose.

When looking at data, educators may become overwhelmed and not know exactly how to analyze it, especially given the variety of measures that exist. This is where literacy specialists and coaches come in. Copen (2021) and Bowser (2021) both talked about the support they provide to teachers as they collect and analyze their reading assessment data. Copen says she encourages teachers to go beyond the mandated assessments and use other measures to gain additional information on their students. She discussed using a phonics survey with students or simply having a student read a passage or page of text aloud. Copen said that an educator can learn a lot just by listening to a child read aloud. Bowser shared that she likes to have some guiding questions that she asks teachers to help them gather information from the assessment. One example of a question she may ask is, “how are they showing you that they are mastering the standard?” Asking these questions helps teachers to think about the student that they are discussing and focus on a specific question.

Why do we need assessment? The overarching goal of all of these types of assessment is for an educator to gain insight into what a student knows, what they need additional instruction on and where they need to be challenged with enrichment activities. However assessments must be reliable, valid, and effective. A reliable assessment is one that is consistent across administrators and time. Validity is the extent to which an assessment measures what it is intended to measure. Effective assessments are both reliable and valid. Effective assessments provide clear expectations to the staff and students, are embedded within learning experiences, provide opportunities for feedback and the product is constantly evaluated (Siddiqui, 2017). The assessments that teachers are administering need to be evaluated by taking into account all of these different measures. Teachers cannot simply pick an assessment and administer it, it needs to be reviewed and determined to be reliable, valid, and

effective before it should be given to students. If teachers are to use the data from the assessment to guide their instructional focus and tactics and student eligibility for additional interventions for special education, the assessment must be effective.

When discussing assessment and the referral process for intervention, both Copen and Bowser continuously brought up the need for decisions to be data driven and that teachers need to be assessing students daily. Therefore, it is essential that teachers know how to collect and analyze data, are equipped with reliable and valid assessment tools to measure their students' knowledge, and there are supports in place to help them.

Teaching to the 'Whole Child' and Developing a Positive Classroom Environment

When teaching children, educators need to get to know the 'whole child' not just their academic skill set. This ties back to the importance of relationships with both the child and the family. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) is a nonprofit organization that provides professional development opportunities for educators, is an advocate for strong education policy and funding and focuses on a Whole Child Approach. The Whole Child Approach is an effort to transition from a focus on academic achievement to one that promotes long-term development and success of all children. It ensures that a student is healthy, safe, engaged, supported and challenged (The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, n.d.). There are five main tenants that compose the whole child approach to learning, and, when implemented, they can develop successful, student-centered education. According to ASCD (n.d.), the five tenants are as follows:

1. Each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
2. Each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults.

3. Each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
4. Each student has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults.
5. Each student is challenged academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment and participation in a global environment.

In the next section of this paper, evidence-based programs and models that encompass these five tenants will be discussed. Tenant number two is one that needs to be embellished on and discussed further.

Teachers need to create an environment that feels welcoming and safe for students. In a Title 1 school, and even a non-Title 1 school, for many students, their classroom is their safe place. Students need to know that the classroom is theirs as much as their teacher's and when they enter it they are valued and important. To specify further, teachers need to develop an environment that supports early literacy development. When discussing the development of this classroom environment, both Loomer (2021) and Sacash (2021) mentioned environmental print and labels around the classroom. Environmental print refers to the print of everyday life. These are things that children see everyday and may not even realize are literacy rich. For example, street signs, candy wrappers, logos on stores, buildings and products. Children "read" these without even knowing, and this print is embedded in the journey of early reading for children. Both teachers said they put examples of environmental print in their classrooms, such as a Starbucks sign, a poster with different environmental print included, or including it in centers. This allows students to see what they already know and make a connection between school and their life beyond the classroom.

Labeling things around the classroom develops print awareness and helps students gain independence. Pictorial labels and organization can help students locate different things in the

classroom and carry out different activities and directions independently. Time needs to be devoted to pointing out and discussing these different labels with students, and students could even help create the labels themselves.

A comment from Loomer (2021) that stood out to me during the interview is “pairing literacy and agency”. She believes that a large part of a classroom environment is ownership over what is being shown, created and celebrated. Students need to understand that what they are learning reflects reality and that what they are doing has a purpose. This often takes form in creating things for the classroom that are student-created and driven. For example, making an anchor chart together as a class and displaying this in the classroom for later reference. This helps students take ownership of their learning and their classroom (Loomer, 2021).

Creating a literacy rich environment, developing a relationship with families and students, using reliable, valid and effective assessments, having meaningful teacher training, and teaching to the whole child are five elements that need to be at the center of an educator’s literacy instruction.

Section V: Evidence-Based Ways to Improve Reading Outcomes

There are a range of programs and models that can be implemented in an early childhood educator’s classroom; however, they must ensure that those selected incorporate all of the elements of effective literacy instruction that were discussed in the previous section. In this section, three programs and/or models of literacy instruction will be discussed, all of which are evidence-based ways to improve reading outcomes for the students being discussed. Additionally, three “simple ways to help” in the classroom will be discussed. However, before these can be discussed the point must be mentioned again that there is no one size fits all program and the program is only as good as the teacher who is teaching it, as stated by Bowser (2021), Copen (2021) and Sacash (2021). If a teacher

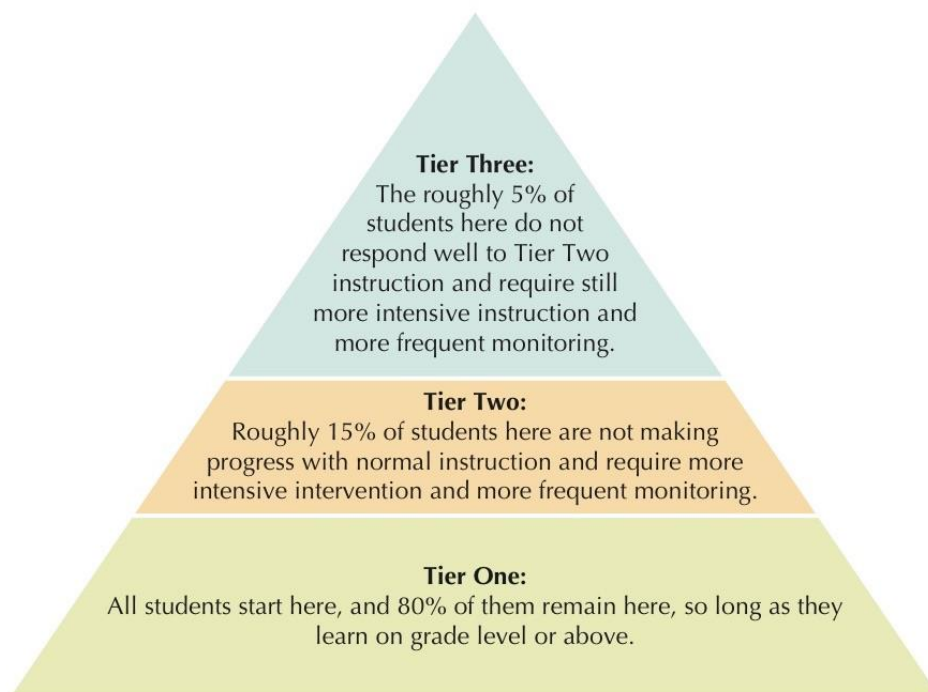
does not have sufficient training in the area of literacy instruction nor understand that every child is unique, the programs and models will not prove successful.

Response to Intervention (RTI) Model

The first model of instruction that is an evidence-based way to improve reading outcomes and embeds the different elements of effective literacy instruction is a Response to Intervention (RTI) model of instruction. RTI is a model where students who fail to respond to instruction gradually receive increasingly intensive intervention (Connor et al., 2014). The choice to increase a student's intensity and level of intervention is data-driven. The model is shaped like a pyramid and is best understood by seeing the visual in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Response to Intervention



(Gillet et al., 2017, p. 26)

Tier one in the RTI model consists of the general education program that is usually conducted by a qualified classroom teacher. This helps to ensure that reading difficulties are not due to inadequate instruction. Tier one is where all students begin and roughly 80% remain. Tier one is also where teachers implement a variety of instructional strategies to ensure that the learning needs of their range of learners are being met. This includes whole group instruction, small group instruction and individualized one-on-one instruction within the classroom. When teachers are concerned about a student, they follow a process referred to as the Student Service Team or SST process in Frederick County. The process is similar but goes by a different title in Anne Arundel County. The SST process begins when a teacher is concerned about a student and has tried a wide variety of tier one strategies to help them. A student may be taken through the process if they are continuously performing low, not meeting benchmarks or expectations (Sacash, 2021). Before this process begins, a teacher takes the student to their grade-level team for discussion. They discuss the student and share additional strategies the teacher may implement. If there is still little to no improvement, then the teacher fills out a form to take the student to the SST. The team consists of the general education teacher, administration, math specialist, reading specialist, a special educator, and the English Language Specialist, if needed. This team comes up with an instructional plan to help the student, may recommend interventions to be put in place and/or give the teacher instructional tools to implement (Bowser, 2021). Within this process, many personnel will be involved and have different roles to play or tasks to complete. The reason SST is discussed within this subsection of research is because its structure follows and falls within an RTI model. Teachers only bring a student to the SST if they have tried various strategies within the general education classroom and remain concerned and need additional ideas and support. Then, this team works together to implement strategies and decide what is best for the student before referring them to testing for special education.

This is important because, just as RTI does, it helps to prevent an immediate jump to special education testing and qualification. For many students, receiving different types of instruction, support or intervention may be all they need, and a referral is not warranted. A misconception is that all students who struggle need to be receiving special education services, when this is not the case. After Tier three in the RTI model is when a special education referral would begin. When discussing reading intervention and the special education referral process, Plunkett (2021) shared that having an SST meeting before referral occurs is very important as it documents data, develops and implements a plan and ensures that you have enough data and support in place before special education referral begins. Understanding RTI, following its model, and putting structures in place such as an SST helps to clear up misconceptions and ensure that many instructional strategies are put into place before special education is considered.

Integrating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into Literacy

As discussed throughout this paper, social emotional development is instrumental in a student's success. Consequently, SEL needs to be integrated into all areas of instruction, with a focus on literacy for this paper. Embedding SEL into content areas is not as difficult as it may sound. It all begins with fostering a growth mindset in the classroom. Growth mindset is the idea that I can't do this yet; I may not be able to do it right now, but I will be able to. Instilling this in children at a young age has a large amount of power and helps students see themselves as learners and having something to contribute (Schlund, 2019). Growth mindset can continuously be discussed and brought up to students as well as reinforced with students. In addition to fostering a growth mindset, other ways to integrate SEL and literacy are movement and focused attention activities, giving tools and language to identify emotions, and helping them recognize that emotion doesn't have to take over. In Frederick County Public Schools, a program called PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) is

taught in all grade levels. PATHS teaches students how to identify their emotions and equips them with different strategies to use when the emotions feel powerful and they need to take action. Sacash (2021), Loomer (2021) and Bowser (2021) all mentioned PATHS as a strong program to use with students, particularly those who need additional support with their social emotional skills. The PATHS program is differentiated based on the age of students and Loomer (2021) shared that it is amazing for her young learners in kindergarten, “Once they understand patience and what it feels like when they are starting to get upset, it very much sets the groundwork for them to be able to access learning. They are able to process those confusing and heavy feelings so they can attend to what is next”. PATHS might be a separate program but in Frederick County it is referred to and discussed throughout the day. Students access the strategies in all different subjects and, as Loomer shared, they are better able to access learning (2021).

A third way to embed SEL is using instructional practices that encourage student-led discussions, interactions and teamwork. In Metro Nashville Public Schools in Tennessee, teachers are encouraged to center their integration of SEL into academic instruction on three guiding questions:

1. How do we get all learners to do the thinking and heavy lifting first before teachers weigh in with their thoughts?
2. How do we get the voices of all learners to exceed teacher talk?
3. How do we get all learners to regularly reflect on SEL and academic skills? (Schlund, 2019)

These three guiding questions can help teachers think through how and in what ways they are integrating the two areas. While there are neverending ways of embedding SEL into academics, fostering a growth mindset, including movement based activities, and using a program such as

PATHS are three ideas that can help teachers start down a path of an emotional and feelings based academics instruction.

Structured Literacy

The last program or model that will be discussed is Structured Literacy. Structured Literacy is an approach to reading that emphasizes highly explicit and systematic teaching of all important components of literacy (Louise, 2019). Explicit instruction means that the teacher clearly explains and models key skills and systematic means that there is a well organized sequence of instruction. This sequence of instruction consists of students learning prerequisite skills prior to more advanced skills. While this may seem like a given in education, skills are not consistently taught this way in all classrooms.

The components of Structured Literacy include oral language abilities such as phonemic awareness, foundational skills such as decoding and spelling as well as higher-level literacy skills such as reading comprehension (Louise, 2019). These components are taught through teacher-led instruction which enables the teacher to provide prompt and targeted feedback to children. But, this instruction does not need to be boring. Educators use instructional materials such as books and phonics games that are explicit but engaging for students. Structured Literacy has been shown to be especially beneficial for students who have dyslexia and other learning problems. Students with dyslexia often have difficulties with phonemic awareness and other phonological processing skills. A Structured Literacy approach explicitly teaches students these skills while also giving them time to practice. The International Dyslexia Association provides ten hallmark features of a Structured Literacy approach in their brief titled, “Structured Literacy: An Introductory Guide.” The features are as follows:

1. Instructional tasks are modeled and clearly explained, especially when first introduced or when a child is having difficulty.
2. Highly explicit instruction is provided, not only in important foundational skills, but also in higher-level aspects of literacy.
3. Important prerequisite skills are taught before students are expected to learn more advanced skills.
4. Meaningful interactions with language occur during the lesson.
5. Multiple opportunities are provided to practice instructional tasks.
6. Well targeted corrective feedback is provided after initial student responses.
7. Student effort is encouraged.
8. Lesson engagement during teacher-led instruction is monitored and scaffolded.
9. Lesson engagement during independent work is monitored and facilitated.
10. Students successfully complete activities at a high criterion level of performance before moving on to more advanced skills (International Dyslexia Association, 2019).

These ten hallmark features are important for a teacher to keep in mind when following a Structured Literacy approach as well as when designing and planning all literacy instruction.

“Simple Ways to Help” in the Classroom

Within a general education classroom, there are many ways teachers can help students who are struggling in reading. The strategies teachers can use are abundant and vary depending on their focus. Therefore, three different ideas and strategies based upon research and teacher experiences will be discussed in this paper. They are referred to as “Simple Ways to Help” as they are not exceptionally difficult things for teachers to do and are incorporated in best teaching practice already. However, these simple ways can have large impacts.

Peer Activities

“Peer-assisted or cooperative learning is a promising method to increase the intensity of instruction for students and improving their reading outcomes” (Connor et al., 2014, p.10). In a typical school year, most teachers have students working with their peers in several different ways as this can strengthen students' collaboration and teamwork skills as well as integrate SEL. Peer activities allow all students involved to practice different skills. Teachers may pair a student who is struggling with a student who is excelling so they can see a strong model or they may pair students with similar skill sets. Different partnering opportunities also allow relationships to be strengthened and students to work with different types of learners. Something Loomer (2021) said in her interview that stood out was when she shared that “the greatest way to learn is to teach another.” This is true for students who are having difficulties and students who need to be pushed farther. When a student teaches another student, it helps grow their confidence and requires the student to talk through a skill and answer questions which solidifies learning.

It is also important that students who are having difficulties have opportunities to be the teacher. Every student has strengths and every student has something they can help others with. Loomer (2021) shared the idea of having a student who is struggling in one area but excelling in another help a student who is struggling in a different area. This helps both students, particularly the one who is teaching because it shows them that they have something to offer too. Peer interactions do not always have to occur in scenarios where one student is teaching another. Students may play focused academic games together, read to one another, or have discussions about the lesson that is being taught. Teachers must think of different ways to promote students' engagement with each other and ensure that students are not always working with similar leveled peers.

Differentiation

Differentiation is when a teacher tailors their instruction to meet the individual needs of their students. This is where a large amount of the power of education lies. Differentiating instruction can occur by varying the content, process, products, or learning environment that instruction is occurring in. Some examples of differentiation include using reading materials that have a range of readability levels, presenting ideas through auditory, visual, kinesthetic and tactile learning means, using tiered activities, and giving students choice (Tomlinson, n.d.). Any of these examples may occur during whole group instruction, but true differentiation occurs more during small group and one-on-one instruction.

Personalized learning, or individualized instruction, means a teacher is not teaching to the needs of the whole class at once, but rather working with a small group of students or an individual child. Teachers learn what their students need as individuals based on assessment data, observations and family input. They then use this information to drive instruction. There is power in small group and individual instruction. Unfortunately, there is not always time to do these components as much as desired or needed, but teachers make the effort to do so when possible. When interviewed, Loomer (2021) and Sacash (2021) both discussed “double dipping” students who are struggling. This means that a student receives small group instruction more than once. Loomer (2021) shared that she typically has the student participate in a small group with students who are of a similar reading level or working on similar skills but also participate in another group. These multiple groupings allow the student to see what is possible and see strategies being used by their peers, which makes it seem more attainable. She sometimes tells the other students that there will be a star guest joining them today who is going to look and see who can read their very best. This helps promote hard work in the other

students and the target student feels as though they have a special place, while also being exposed to different reading strategies.

Sacash (2021) shared that she will often keep a student with her after a small group and work on a skill they are struggling with, complete an informal running record or simply have the student read to her and work through those difficulties. She shared that to help students who are struggling but are not identified as having a disability or do not receive any outside services she sends many opportunities to practice skills at home. This can help all students, but especially targets those who need additional support. This may include sending a word ring or word list home to practice specific phonics concepts or additional books, or calling a family's attention to resources. By doing this, it also shows the family that you are a team and as a teacher, committed to their student's learning.

Differentiation is a powerful topic in itself and one that has been researched by many different people and continues to be investigated and strengthened. When instruction is differentiated in different forms and ways, it can make a large impact on a student's success and give teachers a lot of insight into a child's current skills.

Opportunities to Practice Oral Language and Develop Vocabulary

Oral language is the backbone of reading. Oral language is the system that one uses to express knowledge, ideas, and feelings through spoken words. It is essential in reading, as speaking and listening skills are used extensively when one is reading. The development of oral language begins at birth with infants hearing spoken language around them. This helps build receptive and then expressive vocabulary and a vocabulary-rich environment in the earliest years helps provide children with a boost for success in school. However, by the age of three, children from affluent families have heard thirty million more words than children living in poverty (Maryland State Department of Education Division of Early Childhood Development, 2015). Educators must be equipped with this

knowledge and help to close this word gap both in early intervention and once children enter their classrooms. This is important as, “Children who have larger vocabularies and greater understanding of spoken language do better on measures of reading ability later in life” (Maryland State Department of Education Division of Early Childhood Development, 2015). Not only do educators need to provide additional support to strengthen the vocabulary of students who come from a lower socioeconomic status, but English Language Learners as well.

Monocacy Elementary School in Frederick County is a school that follows the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) Model (SIOP, n.d.). This is a model that helps address the academic needs, particularly related to vocabulary, for English Language Learners. However, many of the model’s tools and techniques can be beneficial for all learners. During interviews, both Loomer (2021) and Bowser (2021) mentioned the SIOP model and how they find it beneficial for their learners. Bowser (2021) shared that one way she supports English Language Learners is by providing enriched vocabulary instruction. The SIOP model is a way to accomplish this.

Loomer (2021) discussed that it provides additional vocabulary support that is geared towards ELLs, but as a Title 1 school with high need students across the board, it supports every learner. She shared that the SIOP model requires teachers to break down instruction and lessons into very detailed components on multiple levels so that all students can understand. She has seen this model support students in understanding not only what is being taught, but why it is being taught and how it is relevant to their lives. The instruction also allows students to be fully immersed and instruction is constantly geared towards them rather than an exuberant amount of pull-out services occurring. The SIOP model provides a range of professional development opportunities, a checklist for teachers to use when developing lesson plans and many strategies that they can use when working with English Language Learners (SIOP, n.d.). There are eight components of the SIOP model and analyzing these

components as lessons are developed can help all teachers ensure that their lessons are meeting the needs of their students. The eight components are as follows: lesson preparation, building background, comprehensible input, strategies, interaction, practice and application, lesson delivery, and review and assessment (SIOP, n.d.). Even if the school an educator works at is not a SIOP school, as this is determined by school demographics, the eight components listed and strategies available for reading can be considered and implemented in any classroom.

Other ways to build students' oral language and vocabulary include reading aloud to students, engaging students in conversation before reading begins, participating in a lesson that follows the Language Experience Approach, and Dialogic Reading. A simple way to strengthen vocabulary and oral language is through play. According to the National Academy of Sciences, during play, children interact and use language as they plan, negotiate, compose and carry out the “script” of their play. The researchers went on to say that during play, “children practice verbal and narrative skills that are important to the development of reading comprehension” (Gentile & Hoot, 1983 as cited in National Research Council, 1998, p. 183). Time to play in the classroom cannot be overlooked or cut short due to other demands. Time must be allotted for play to occur in order for children to develop these pre-requisite skills. When discussing what she would tell policymakers about the importance of early reading, Bowser (2021) discussed the importance of all day pre-k in that it provides social exposure and opportunities to develop oral language in a school setting. Both of these skills are prerequisites to reading. The research literature, the National Research Council, and experienced classroom teachers and literacy specialists agree: oral language is important.

By establishing a classroom environment where differentiation is at the center, oral language and vocabulary are fostered, and peer interactions are a regular occurrence, teachers have created a place that helps young readers be set up for success.

Conclusion

As can be gathered from the research discussed, early reading is powerful and every student deserves the chance to become a successful reader. When a student is given the proper support to succeed, has an educator who believes in them, is provided a literacy-rich environment, and receives a well-rounded, strong literacy education that is integrated with social emotional learning, they are better equipped to become strong readers and contributing members of society. There are many different factors that can put a child at-risk for reading difficulties and any one of the subgroups discussed in this paper could be an extensive research project in itself. However, just because a student is considered at-risk, does not mean they do not have a strong desire to learn and cannot reach their full potential. It cannot be stressed enough that every child is unique and therefore needs an individualized education.

Teachers must first build relationships with students and their families before effective literacy instruction can begin. Then, when designing instruction, teachers need to be sure the following elements are incorporated: forming strong relationships with students, participating in effective teacher training, encouraging family engagement, implementing reliable and valid assessments, and teaching to the whole child. Incorporating these five elements aids teachers in meeting the needs of all students in their classroom, including those who are considered at-risk.

Early childhood educators have the ability to start students on the right path in their literacy development, no matter their background. Reading opens doors for children and it is the job of educators, guardians, and policymakers to put supports in place so all young children are prepared to open those doors.

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[literacy/#:~:text=Structured%20literacy%20\(SL\)%20approaches%20emphasize,reading%20comprehension%2C%20written%20expression](https://dyslexiaida.org/heres-why-schools-should-use-structured-literacy/#:~:text=Structured%20literacy%20(SL)%20approaches%20emphasize,reading%20comprehension%2C%20written%20expression).

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