

## **The Complexity of Disrupting the “Struggling Reader” Label: The Potential for Cross-Pollinating Disability Studies and Dynamic Models of Comprehension in Literacy Teacher Education**

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*There have been numerous recent calls in literacy research and teacher education to disrupt the ‘struggling reader’ label, but a dearth of empirical studies on the topic. This qualitative analysis explores the complex issues preservice teachers (PSTs) faced as they examined young readers’ sense-making through a reading assessment assignment. Our research question asked: How do PSTs challenge and/or reinforce the ‘struggling reader’ label as they examine young readers’ sense-making? Using a conceptual lens that cross-pollinates dynamic models of reading comprehension with Disability Studies in Education, we look across three cases to identify ways PSTs challenged and reinforced the ‘struggling reader’ label as they examined intermediate-grade readers’ interactions with texts. Ultimately, we argue that embracing a dynamic model of comprehension--on its own--is an insufficient focus in literacy teacher education in order to disrupt harmful labeling practices in schools.*

### **Introduction**

Schooling--particularly in today’s neoliberal context (Lipman, 2003)-- powerfully encourages practices of labeling, categorizing, and sorting children (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). There have been numerous recent calls to disrupt the ‘struggling reader’ label (Frankel & Brooks, 2018; Sailors et al., 2017), which is used to describe students who are unsuccessful in some way with reading at school (Alvermann, 2006). While often intended to provide access to services and support teachers in designing differentiated instruction that focuses on readers’ specific needs (see Dudley-Marling, 2011), being categorized as ‘low’ or ‘struggling’ readers can negatively impact children’s identities (Enriquez, 2014; Learned, 2018), prove difficult to shed over time, and restrict young people’s engagements with texts and instructional opportunities (Kucan & Palinscar, 2011).

With an interest in literacy teacher education, we found limited research on how preservice teachers (PSTs) engage with positionings of ‘struggling readers’ while learning to teach. Thus, this qualitative analysis explores the complex issues PSTs faced in their examination of young readers’ sense-making through a reading assessment assignment. Our research question asks: *How do PSTs challenge and/or reinforce the ‘struggling reader’ label as they examine young readers’ sense-making?*

### **Conceptual Framing: A Cross-Pollination of Disability Studies in Education and Dynamic Models of Comprehension**

Our analysis is guided by a conceptual framing that cross-pollinates dynamic models of comprehension with Disability Studies in Education (DSE). Cross-pollination has been defined (e.g., Thorne, 2008) and used in educational research to support “an interchange of ideas. . . [that can] enable existing elements of each framework to remain intact while considerations from one framework extend and enhance the ways in which elements from the other have been defined and enacted” (Waitoller & King Thorius, 2016, pp. 366-367). This goes beyond finding synergies towards considering how different frameworks can meaningfully inform and augment one another. For example, Waitoller and King Thorius (2016) cross-pollinate culturally sustaining pedagogy and Universal Design for Learning to encourage interdisciplinary dialogue that better accounts for student disability in emancipatory pedagogies. In our cross-pollination, we similarly bring together ideas from multiple disciplines in order to better account for the social construction of ability in comprehension assessment.

#### **Dynamic Models of Reading Comprehension**

In our pre-service literacy courses, we draw from one dynamic model of comprehension from the RAND Reading Study Group (Snow, 2002). They define comprehension as an active process in which readers extract and construct meaning from text, involving a dynamic interplay among factors specific to a reader (e.g., background knowledge, cognitive strategies, and motivation), text (e.g., content, coherence), and activity (e.g., reader’s purpose or context for reading, and the degree to which these are authentic and meaningful) (Snow, 2002). This model of comprehension recognizes that the construction of meaning with/from text is the result of a dynamic interaction among these factors (Frankel & Brooks, 2018). As factors change, the interaction is affected, and the reader’s comprehension shifts. For example, a reader is likely to have stronger comprehension of a text about a topic that they have deep background knowledge of or are motivated to learn about. This dynamic view of comprehension, with its attention to *particular* interactions, and acknowledgment that all readers experience challenges and successes in different situations (Frankel & Brooks, 2018), has the potential to disrupt static positionings of reading ability.

This model gives cursory attention to the broader sociocultural context, suggesting that, “If the education community is to ensure universal success in reading comprehension. . . [we] must understand the full range of sociocultural differences in communicative practices [e.g., by income, race, ethnicity, native language]” (Snow, 2002, p. xvi). However, it does not attend to the institutional structures and practices (e.g., labeling and sorting practices; biased assessments) that inform teachers’ perceptions of comprehension ability (Willis, 2008)--in other words, how the social construction of ability impacts teachers’ assessment practices. Hence, we turned to Disability Studies in Education (DSE)--a field that engages centrally with the social construction of ability.

#### **Disability Studies in Education**

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DSE is an interdisciplinary area of scholarship that moves from a medical model of disability that positions disabilities as abnormal deficits to be corrected, towards a social model that situates “cognitive, embodied, and communicative differences as part of the natural spectrum of human diversity” (Collins et al., 2018, p. 114). It attends to the social construction of disability in schools, and how differences are sometimes pathologized as problems and assigned stigmatizing labels. DSE shifts teachers’ “professional gaze from identifying what is ‘wrong’ with individual students to what we have power to change in the instructional environment to facilitate the full participation of each student” (Collins et al., 2018, p. 114).

Collins and Ferri (2016) have articulated a cross-pollination of literacy teaching and DSE, where they suggest three habits of mind: (1) start with the position that everyone in the classroom community belongs, and the teacher’s job is to support everyone’s meaningful participation; (2) presume competence, assuming that “each learner has something valuable to contribute and wants to participate” (p. 4); and (3) recognize that struggle is located in interactions between learners and the learning environment.

### **Cross-Pollinating Dynamic Models of Comprehension and Disability Studies in Education**

Both dynamic models of comprehension and DSE are premised on attention to the interactions between learners and the learning environment. A teacher taking either of these perspectives would recognize that all “readers experience circumstances under which reading is a challenge...” (Frankel & Brooks, 2018, pp. 111-112). However, tenets from DSE can enhance the ways literacy teachers situate assessments of readers in a sociocultural context that constantly encourages categorizing and sorting. DSE--with its emphasis on how ideas about ability, difference, and normalcy are constructed--illuminates the ways in which everyday aspects of reading assessment and instruction (e.g, reading groups, leveled texts, test scores, grade benchmarks) inform teachers’ ideas about children's abilities to comprehend. Furthermore, dynamic theories of comprehension can enhance DSE by providing complementary disciplinary-specific ideas that support teachers to move from inclusive theory to practice. Deep knowledge of comprehension supports teachers to gain confidence and competence in their own abilities to effectively teach readers with a variety of strengths and needs related to comprehension. This cross-pollination offers the potential to better account for the social construction of ability in/through teachers’ dynamic comprehension assessment.

### **Literature Review: Supporting PSTs to Disrupt the ‘Struggling Reader’ Label in School**

Literature on readers characterized as struggling “covers a broad spectrum and varies in specificity according to the perceived reasons behind the struggle” (Alvermann, 2006, p. 3). Much of the literature either explicitly or implicitly accepts the label ‘struggling reader.’ However, we draw from sociocultural perspectives that recognize the evolution of the 'struggling reader' label. Dudley-Marling (2011), in a piece where he rejects the ‘struggling reader’ label, describes how the term initially appealed to him, because it “didn’t seem to be burdened by the deficit-oriented thinking of terms like remedial reader and learning-disabled that situate learning failure in the minds of students. Struggling readers also seemed more inclusive, capturing all students for whom school was a struggle, regardless of the labels they had been given” (p. 3). In other words, this term has (and continues) to be employed by some with efforts to reduce harm

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and offer support to students. However, there are well-documented negative consequences of labeling readers as struggling.

Specifically, the ‘struggling reader’ label limits instructional opportunities. Readers identified as struggling are often categorized with a learning disability and referred to special education teachers and school psychologists who lack specialized knowledge of reading assessment and instruction (Nelson & Macheck, 2007; see also Johnston, 2011). Their support tends to happen in segregated spaces and to include more skills-focused instruction and simplistic instructional methods (Collins & Ferri, 2016), limiting opportunities to engage with complex texts and holistic reading processes (Allington, 1984).

Furthermore, literacy research shows that readers’ “participation in--or exclusion from--a discursive community has profound consequences on a person’s identity” (Kucan & Palinscar, 2011, p. 352). McKay and Dean (2017) found that students who were placed in reading interventions saw themselves as ‘dumb’ and their intervention classes as boring and irrelevant. Enriquez (2014), in a yearlong ethnography with four adolescent readers, found that once students had been identified by teachers and peers and struggling, they had difficulty shifting those opinions, even when demonstrating competency. Learned’s (2018) work following eight ninth-graders labeled as struggling documented the use of one-dimensional assessments to identify ‘struggling readers’, who are then ascribed as ‘poor learners’ and placed in low-tracked classes.

Research suggests that part of the problem is that many practicing teachers and PSTs do not feel confident working with readers characterized as struggling (Triplett, 2007). For example, in a case study, Scharlach (2008) found that the majority of PSTs “did not believe they were capable of or responsible for teaching all students to read” (p. 158), citing inhibiting factors such as a lack of parental involvement, motivation, possible disability, and/or poor behavior. Brodeur & Ortman (2018), in research examining PSTs’ work in a tutoring practicum, found that their instructional approaches were affected by their beliefs about readers, and that some saw students’ motivation to read as static.

While there are some examples in literacy research of in-service teachers resisting the ‘struggling reader’ label (Francois, 2013; Greenleaf & Hinchman, 2009; Stewart, 2015), we found fewer examples emphasizing how to support PSTs to do this. Thus, we looked for examples of teacher education research on disrupting labeling practices from inclusive teacher education programs, which are premised on principles of DSE and challenge conceptualizations of normality (Oyler, 2011).

Ashby (2012) describes an inclusive education program’s attention to “the language of education...[which has] a strong emphasis on identification and labeling of difference” (p. 93; see also Naraian & Schlesinger, 2017). When encouraging PSTs to problematize the language of education, their teacher educators ask questions such as “Why do we have a system so dependent on labels? . . . [and] Why are certain populations of students more or less likely to ‘earn’ certain labels?” (p. 93). In a qualitative study of PSTs who were prepared in an inclusive education program using a DSE-informed framework, Naraian and Schlessinger (2017) found that PSTs unanimously recognized the harmful effects of labeling children. However, they seemed more

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focused on seeing students’ competencies in order to enable their potential than on “locating the student in the midst of unjust social conditions” (p. 89). While this research from inclusive education gives insights into disrupting labeling, generally, it does not focus specifically on the kinds of issues reading teachers face, specifically--a necessary emphasis for literacy teacher education, and a contribution of this study.

Beyond pre-service contexts, research has documented the complexities of consistently implementing inclusive practices in schools. As PSTs in inclusive education programs move into their early years of teaching, they often acknowledge a discursive dissonance between their visions for equity and inclusion, and the language and ideas advanced in their schools (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). McKay (2016), in a study that followed six teachers from teacher education into their first year teaching, found that their growth as inclusive educators was complex, “...[it] stalled, changed direction, erupted and changed form...” (p. 13). One teacher who was invested in including all learners expressed frustration at the excessive time spent with one learner while others needed help, and another teacher described being more optimistic about inclusion at the beginning of his first year teaching than at the end. Similar findings about the complexity of fostering inclusive practices can be found in Dyson’s (1995) year-long teacher study group focused on exploring what difference “difference” makes in the work of teaching literacy. The group explored issues such as “who decides who and what is ‘different’” (p. 81), and “the identification of differences as problems or possibilities” at particular schools (p. 86). Ultimately, they suggested that “. . . there can be no rigid prescriptions...but opportunities to come together...and talk about kids *will* help. . .to explore the complexities of difference, and of the institutional and relational factors that frame those differences as potential problems or resources” (pp. 136-137).

Other research echoes the importance of paying attention to children as a primary lever towards more inclusive and asset-oriented perspectives. Aukerman (2006) suggested that as teachers generate “assessment narratives” with rich, thematic descriptions of children’s performance on assessments, they may be less likely to focus on readers’ limitations and ‘problems,’ and to support their evaluations with observational evidence. Drawing from Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), Shalaby (2017) uses similar observation methods called portraiture to describe “what is good” about the behaviors of youngsters who have been labeled as “troublemakers.”

While we did not find much research about how to specifically support PSTs to disrupt the ‘struggling reader’ label, research on inclusive education that is informed by tenets of DSE offers insights into how literacy teacher educators might begin to engage with this work. If reading researchers/educators want to learn more about the complexity of disrupting the ‘struggling reader’ label, in practice—the goal of the study—we believe there is great potential in a cross-pollination between these fields. This study’s contribution comes from examining how a conceptual framework that cross-pollinates dynamic models of literacy and DSE (e.g, Collins & Ferri, 2016) can help literacy teacher educators to better understand/analyze PSTs’ positionings of young readers during/through reading assessments.

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## Methods

We situate our work among scholars who are committed to generating knowledge by conducting research within their teacher preparation contexts (e.g., Hoffman et al., 2016), as well as those who “prioritize the preparation and development of asset-, equity-, and justice-oriented teachers” (Souto-Manning, 2019, p. 14; see Schutz et al., 2019; Schutz & Woodard, 2020). Thus, we conduct on-going research in the context of our courses in order to inform subsequent iterations, and to build knowledge for the fields of teacher preparation and literacy instruction.

We sought to understand how PSTs in one of our literacy methods courses challenged and/or reinforced the “struggling reader” label in their examinations of young readers' interactions with texts through a course assignment. Specifically, we engaged in a close analysis of how PSTs talked about readers in papers they wrote after conducting a think-aloud assessment with children in grades 3-6. Qualitative methods were appropriate, given our interest in a “complex description and interpretation of the problem” (Creswell & Poh, 2016, p. 37).

## Course Context

The data were drawn from an intermediate-grades literacy methods course, a program requirement in our teacher preparation program at a large, urban university. The four-year program is organized around a decolonizing framework that recognizes that schools are designed for acculturation and colonization, and prepares teachers who simultaneously teach in and resist that context (Trinder, 2021). Utilizing the framework, faculty across all four years of the program support PSTs to read texts and engage with activities to help them shift their lenses away from pathology, to encourage the presumption of children’s brilliance, and to recognize various ways of knowing.

PSTs take a series of literacy methods courses over three semesters beginning in their third year of the program. The literacy methods courses are developmentally sequenced and encourage critical approaches to literacy teaching and learning (Schutz et al., 2019; Schutz & Woodard, 2020). The data for this analysis were drawn from a course assignment in the second literacy methods course that focuses on teaching intermediate-grade students. During this course, PSTs spent two days each week in elementary classrooms. PSTs completed course assignments, including the focal assignment, under the guidance of their cooperating teachers in these classrooms.

Kristine and Rebecca lead and teach across the methods course sequence, with Amanda serving as a teaching assistant in the focal course. We are all former K–12 classroom teachers committed to critical ELA pedagogies. Kristine and Becca are White women who each have 15+ years experience as teacher educators. Amanda is a mixed Latinx and White woman, and a doctoral student.

## *Focal Module: Seeing Readers as Sense-makers*

This analysis focuses on one assignment in a module aimed at supporting PSTs to understand comprehension as dynamic (Snow, 2002) and to adopt a comprehension-as-sense-making

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orientation (Aukerman, 2013). We call this module, “Seeing Readers as Sense-makers.” In the unit, we draw from the RAND model of reading comprehension (Snow, 2002) to support PSTs to consider various windows into children’s sense-making as they interact with texts, including through think-aloud protocols that offer structured opportunities to gain insight into readers’ in-the-moment thinking (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). As a child reads a text during a think-aloud, they are prompted to verbalize their thinking at predetermined places.

Think-alouds tend to provide a cognitive view of how children are engaging with ideas in a text as opposed to a more socially situated view; however, we utilize think-alouds because they provide an opportunity for PSTs to see comprehension as an active process and to consider the multiple factors that influence a reader's comprehension. Think-alouds can be a formative assessment to inform instruction designed to support children's sense-making.

Within the focal module, PSTs read texts and engaged in activities designed to position comprehension as a fluid and context-sensitive process (e.g., Snow, 2002; Duke & Carlisle, 2011). We wanted them to recognize that all readers—including themselves and the children they will teach—struggle *at times* and with *particular* kinds of texts and topics. For example, in class, they read a complex disciplinary-specific text and identified aspects of the text-activity-reader that made it challenging for some of them. In another in-class activity, we listened to audio-recordings of children’s think-alouds, considering how they appeared to be making sense of the text, identifying what strategies each child employed, and articulating instructional recommendations. We also explored the potentially detrimental consequences of limiting the texts children have access to according to text levels (see Tatum, 2017).

### ***Primary Data Source: The Readers as Sense-makers Assignment***

At the conclusion of the module, PSTs completed an assignment called *Readers as Sense-makers*, which involved observing and conducting think-alouds with two readers and writing a paper (approximately 10 pages long). This assignment did not explicitly prompt PSTs to attend to labeling practices or social constructions of readers' abilities. Rather, it asked PSTs to identify "two children with different reading profiles." Many PSTs relied on recommendations from their cooperating teachers in their field placements.

We provided PSTs with a collection of four texts that were marked with pre-identified stopping points where PSTs would prompt the child to share their thinking. PSTs selected one of those texts to use. The cases reported on in this paper all used the same realistic fiction story, *The Talent Contest* by Howard Gabe (2009). *The Talent Contest* begins with the main character, Danny, spilling a glass of milk at lunch time and visibly appearing upset. His friend, Elena, offers words of encouragement, and Danny quickly responds that he is not upset about the spilled milk; rather, he is upset that he cannot figure out an act for the upcoming talent contest and fears his peers will laugh at him. Elena offers more words of encouragement, this time focusing on how Danny is capable and helps him brainstorm ideas for the contest. She makes multiple suggestions that Danny turns down with verve. His dramatic responses prompt Elena to suggest that Danny do a dramatic reading. At that point, Danny pauses, thanks Elena for being a great friend, and the story concludes, leaving the reader to infer that he was pleased with Elena’s idea.

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PSTs completed the assignment based on their field placement assignments--either individually, or in a pair or trio. Before conducting the think-alouds, PSTs had conversations with each child about their reading habits and identities. PSTs recorded the think-alouds and transcribed them. Then, they analyzed and interpreted them, and collaboratively prepared a paper in which they were asked to: describe each reader; identify the strategies each child used while reading (e.g., inferencing, monitoring, summarizing); explain how each reader appeared to make sense of the text; identify resources each reader relied upon to construct those understandings (e.g., aspects of the text; prior knowledge); summarize what they learned about each reader; and share instructional recommendations. These papers are the primary data source for this study.

### **Participants**

All PSTs taking the course were invited to participate in the study, and 33 agreed. Participants reflected the program demographics at the time of the study: 86% female and 14% male; 54.5% Hispanic, 23% White, 14% Asian, 6.6% Black, 1.5% two or more races, and .4% Indigenous or Native.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data for this analysis are Readers as Sense-makers papers (n=15; 161 total pages), which were either written individually, in pairs, or in triads, depending on PSTs' field placements. We only analyzed papers where all PST in the partnership/triad consented.

We enhanced validity, or accuracy of our analyses, through triangulation with a secondary source: PSTs' responses on end-of-module surveys about comprehension assessment and instruction. This survey included questions, such as: What did you learn about readers from our work both in class and in the field analyzing think-alouds? What is complex about comprehension? When a colleague at your school approaches you to talk about a 'struggling reader,' how do you respond?

### **Data Analysis**

Both data collection and preliminary data analysis were driven by inductive reasoning, or a “bottom up” approach, that involves looking for patterns and then constructing theoretical propositions (see Creswell & Poh, 2016). We first read all the *Readers as Sensemakers Assignments* and noted what stood out to us. We noticed that while almost none of the PSTs used the term ‘struggling reader’ to describe readers, many of them did use language that reinforced static/fixed understandings of readers’ abilities (e.g., “lower level reader,” “reads below grade level,” “good reader,” “strong reader”). As literacy researchers committed to supporting dynamic views of comprehension, we felt that this warranted formal investigation using conceptually-grounded, qualitative analysis. We wondered: How do PSTs challenge and/or reinforce the ‘struggling reader’ label as they examine young readers’ sense-making?

Thus, formal data analysis consisted of two phases, guided in part by deductive reasoning, or a “top down” approach which involves using a priori concepts from the literature (see Creswell & Poh, 2016). We used our conceptual framework, a cross-pollination of dynamic theories of



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reading comprehension with Disability Studies in Education, as an analytic lens to inform our reading and understanding of the data, while also remaining open to other ideas that emerged.

In phase 1, all three authors read across all the focal Readers as Sense-makers papers (n=15), with an intention to identify “segments of data that seem important or meaningful in some way” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 107). We attended to explicit and implicit positionings of children’s abilities, identifying instances where PSTs *challenged* (e.g., Andres and Sophia wrote, “Although Hugo was chosen for the project by the teacher because of his low reading proficiency I believe he interprets text and reads very well,”), *reinforced* (e.g., Vera and Anne wrote, “The second student we worked with ... is at a lower reading level”), or *simultaneously challenged and reinforced* (e.g., “We also noted that [student] understood various facts... [during] stopping points... Since [student] is a below grade level we feel that reading more often, and reading different genres, he would widen his reading capabilities”) a ‘struggling reader’ positioning.

After identifying these instances, we engaged in a process of “patterning [and] classifying. . . each datum into emergent categories for further analysis” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 95). We created categories to describe *how* PSTs challenged (e.g., presumed competence, positioned reading as dynamic, positioned struggle as an action), and/or reinforced a ‘struggling reader’ positioning (e.g., utilized ability markers/labels, framed readers’ abilities as static, positioned struggle as a characteristic of a reader). Many of the names of these categories were informed by ideas from dynamic models of comprehension, or from DSE. Kristine and Rebecca collaboratively developed an initial coding scheme to capture the moves PSTs made as they challenged and/or reinforced ability labels. Amanda then independently coded the entire data set to find examples and counterexamples to increase reliability. Finally, all three authors collaborated to clarify and revise the categories, and confirm the coding. The resulting coding scheme derived from this multi-step analytic process is exhibited in Table 1.

In phase 2, we sought to better understand the complexity of factors that influenced how PSTs challenged and/or reinforced the ‘struggling reader’ label in their papers. We authored analytic memos about each *Readers as Sensemakers* paper to highlight this complexity (approximately 22 pages). Analytic memos “expand on the meanings of the truncated codes as a transitional stage into a more coherent narrative” (Saldaña, 2009, p.103), and can involve reflecting on “emergent patterns, categories, themes, concepts, assertions or propositions” (Saldaña, 2009, pp. 61-64). The memos focused on if/how PSTs demonstrated a dynamic view of comprehension (e.g., “Andres and Sophia noted their readers both experienced some sort of difficulty in certain areas of the text and they were both able to understand [the text]...and synthesize and summarize the text despite some difficulty”; Noelle, Teresa, and Sabrina, who worked in a trio, named students’ relationship to the text and activity as being central to their understanding of the text). The memos also explored the complexity of PSTs’ positionings of children’s abilities and labeling practices (e.g., Alani and Victoria described selecting a reader to work with because “he is very smart and the teacher told us he is a great reader”; Emma and Petra worked with a student who “is considered to be below grade level at reading.”).

We used the phase 1 codes for consistency in describing the moves that PSTs were making, but as we authored the memos, we attended to the relationship between dynamic views of comprehension and positionings of children’s abilities and labeling practices to make visible the

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related and often nested relationship. For example, we highlighted moments where, like Alani and Victoria, even when PSTs avoid positioning readers as ‘struggling,’ they sometimes engaged in positionings that inherently accept comprehension ability as fixed.

	<b>Teacher Moves</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Challenged Labels</b>	Positioned reading as dynamic	Noted the challenges of a particular text as influencing a reader’s comprehension.
	Presumed competence	Described a reader who had been characterized as “struggling” as “being a clear thinker who utilizes background knowledge to help her with comprehension.”
	Drew from knowledge of the child’s reading/identities beyond the activity	Drew from a conversation with a child (e.g, “Even though he [the child] didn’t say in the think out loud [sic] that he was visualizing, he did mention. . .that he likes to do that when he reads.”).
	Highlighted the teacher’s responsibility for teaching all students	When describing a student who was considered a ‘slow’ reader, PSTs wrote “As an educator, we might easily categorize students based on the obvious speed of their reading but we need to consider if they are able to comprehend what they read no matter how long it takes them to read it.”
	Shifted the use of “struggle” from an adjective to a verb	Rather than describing a student as a struggling reader, a PST described one instance where she watched the student as she “struggled with reading aloud.”
	Recognized that struggle was located in interactions between learners and the learning environments	When describing a reader, a PST emphasized the social activity out-of-school reading played in the student’s life.
<b>Reinforced Labels</b>	Utilized static ability labels	Describing students as “higher level” and “lower level” readers.
	Relied on/did not question a test score as an indicator of ability	PSTs describe students as being “in the second lowest reading group in the class because of her NWEA testing scores.”
	Signified expectations of ‘typical’ literacy development	Described students as below grade level at reading.
	Framed children’s reading ability as static	Offered instructional recommendations based on initial labels assigned to readers as opposed to their observations
	Positioned struggle as characteristic of individual learners	Instructional recommendations focused on students changing personal traits and/or approaches to reading absent the role of the teacher or explicit instruction.
	Suggested instructional recommendations that reinforced leveling or labeling	Recommended “struggling” or “low level” readers read simpler texts with “higher” reader students reading “texts that are deeper and more complex.”

**Table 1.** *Coding Scheme of the Ways PSTs Challenged and Reinforced Labels as They Examined Readers’ Interactions with Texts*

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It was during analytic memoing that we triangulated our analysis by examining the secondary data source of PSTs’ end-of-unit surveys. We compared their work on the *Readers as Sensemakers Assignment* with how they forwarded ideas about the complexity of comprehension in the survey, and how they responded to a hypothetical situation where a colleague approaches them to talk about a ‘struggling reader.’ For example, we noted how Andres and Sophia’s emphasis on the role of the reader was visible in both the focal assignment and their survey responses. Another PST, Ariana, drew on her knowledge from the *Readers as Sensemakers* assignment and wrote in her survey that she would attempt to reorient the way her colleague conceptualized the student as she gathered more information. She wrote she would then “try to help my colleague come up with ways to help the student practice and develop the reading skills.” This view of reading as dynamic and struggle as being located in the interaction aligned with how this PST wrote about reading and the role of instruction in her analysis. We looked across the memos to identify how many of the papers: did not position a child as a ‘struggling reader’ (n=5), accepted/forwarded positioning of a child as a ‘struggling reader’ (n=1), or positioned at least one child as a ‘struggling reader’ but made explicit attempts to disrupt this positioning (n=9).

We turned our attention to the nine papers where PSTs made attempts to disrupt characterizations of children as ‘struggling,’ in order to understand the complexity of this work. We conducted a thematic analysis of these memos, focusing on describing trends in how PSTs were navigating the complexity of disrupting fixed-ability thinking. Three different kinds of complexity emerged, including: (1) disputing the label of ‘struggling reader’ for an individual reader, but accepting it as a broader category; (2) resisting ‘struggling reader’ as a broad category, but also perpetuating static views of some aspects of reading ability (e.g., fluency); and (3) relying on a single data source to construct ability instead of putting multiple sources into conversation.

While these themes were visible across the data set, we selected 3 “telling cases” (Mitchell, 1984) that best represent these themes and make the connections to theory most clear: Andres and Sophia, who worked together in a sixth-grade classroom; Sylvia and Inez, who worked together in a fourth-grade classroom; and Faith, who worked alone in a fourth-grade classroom (all names are pseudonyms). These three cases all used the same text for the think-alouds, *The Talent Contest*.

### Findings

These three telling cases represent examples of the major themes from the findings. Each demonstrates a different complexity related to how the PSTs in this study challenged and/or reinforced understandings of children as ‘struggling readers’ in their analyses of young readers’ sense-making. Andres and Sophia’s case demonstrates how PSTs disputed the label of ‘struggling reader’ for an individual reader, but accepted it as a broader category; Sylvia and Inez’s case showcases how PSTs resisted ‘struggling reader’ as a broad category, but also perpetuated static views of some aspects of reading ability (e.g., fluency); and Faith’s case shows an example of how PSTs relied on a single data source to construct ability instead of putting multiple sources into conversation.

**Andres & Sophia: “He Does Not Seem Like a Low Reader”**

Andres and Sophia chose their focal children based on input from their sixth-grade cooperating teacher. We focus on their analysis of a boy, Hugo, who their cooperating teacher described as a “lower level reader...[who is] struggling in reading at level and the comprehension of the text.” Andres and Sophia reported that Hugo felt nervous reading in school. While he had few books at home, his parents checked out books from the library, and he liked when they read aloud to him, including in Spanish.

Andres and Sophia believed that Hugo “engaged in using background knowledge, inferring, interpreting, synthesizing, and summarizing” while reading *The Talent Contest*. They shared examples of Hugo’s initial focus on the milk-spilling accident, and his developing understanding that the main character was *actually* worried about the talent show. While noting that Hugo slowed down at some words to break up multisyllabic words, they recognized that he understood that “the story was not about a soggy sandwich and instead about Danny getting nervous because he had no idea what to do for the talent show.” Ultimately, Andres and Sophia suggested that:

Although Hugo was chosen for the project by the teacher because of his low reading proficiency. . . [we] believe he interprets text and reads very well. . . he does not seem like a low reader. He relies on the text and background knowledge to make his predictions, interpretations, inferences, and synthesis and summary.

In their analysis of Hugo’s think-aloud, Andres and Sophia presumed competence, offering grounded descriptions of the reader’s interactions with the text. They also drew from their learning about him as a reader beyond this activity. However, in suggesting that, “Hugo does not seem like a low reader,” Andres and Sophia disputed Hugo's classification but at least tacitly accepted the validity of the categorization of “lower level reader.”

We noticed a heightened attention to the individual reader in multiple aspects of Andres and Sophia’s analysis. For example, when discussing their instructional recommendations for Hugo, they primarily focused on the strategies he used (e.g., visualizing; using background knowledge; word solving strategies), and other factors specific to the reader that they would encourage (e.g., building vocabulary). They did not consider the particular aspects of the text, *The Talent Contest*, that might have influenced his meaning-making (e.g., text coherence; genre features) or the relationship between the reader and text (i.e., Hugo's own background experiences and interest in the topic and the story itself). Nor did they critically examine how the context of the reading--including the teacher’s role or the think-aloud activity, itself--may have informed Hugo’s performance.

This primary focus on the reader was also visible in Andres and Sophia’s survey responses. For example, when asked how they would respond to a colleague who wants help supporting a ‘struggling’ reader, Andres said that it is important to figure out “what it is [specifically] that the reader seems to struggle at” and Sophia said that she would ask her colleague to “tell me about your student (home life?, outside school help?, after school help? etc.).” Both responses reinforce the notion that struggle is a characteristic of a reader rather than the result of a dynamic

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interaction that occurs as readers comprehend text. And, as in their analysis of Hugo’s think-aloud, they implicitly accepted the ‘struggling reader’ label as a valid categorization.

### **Sylvia & Inez: “We Need to Consider If They are Able to Comprehend What They Read No Matter How Long It Takes Them to Read It”**

Sylvia and Inez asked their cooperating teacher to recommend two readers for them to work with who “may slightly struggle with comprehension of the chosen text.” The fourth-grade teacher suggested Darius because he “currently reads at a Level P,” and was “considered one of the lower level readers in class based on his speed and lack of fluency.” Sylvia and Inez reported that Darius preferred to read texts with no pictures so that he could visualize what was happening, and read at home with his mother and grandmother.

They noted that Darius read *The Talent Contest* slower than the other reader they worked with, but made sophisticated inferences about the main character’s feelings while reading. For example, they described how at the part of the story where a secondary character (Elena) mistakes the main character’s (Danny) distress over the talent contest for frustration related to spilling his milk on his sandwich, Darius correctly recognized that Danny was actually worried about the talent contest. Overall, Sylvia and Inez believed that Darius “had a better understanding of what he read even though [the other reader] is a more fluent reader.” They wrote that:

. . . Darius is considered one of the lower level readers in class...but he showed an understanding of our assigned text despite the time it took for him to read it. As an educator, we might easily categorize students based on the obvious speed of their reading, but we need to consider if they are able to comprehend what they read no matter how long it takes them to read it.

Sylvia and Inez repositioned Darius as competent and tried to see beyond the “low level reader” label that had been attached to him. They suggested that his teacher’s thinking about speed and fluency inaccurately influenced her perceptions of his ability to comprehend. However, Sylvia and Inez also reified static categorizations of aspects of Darius’s ability. For example, they suggested that Darius’s classmate was a “more fluent reader,” and they did not dispute his teacher’s claim about his “lack of fluency.” In these instances, Sylvia and Inez seemed to position fluency as a static ability, one that does not vary in particular interactions of text-reader-activity. Seeing readers as having a “lack of fluency” or “more fluency”—just as seeing some as “low level” or “high level” readers—flattens the complexity of how children engage with different texts in different moments. Ultimately, this static view of fluency can also limit what educators see about children’s reading abilities. Their surveys also reveal that these PSTs are still developing their understandings of the complexities of reading. While Inez and Sylvia both noted the importance of a student’s background knowledge in comprehension, with Sylvia also noting complexities exist because “students all vary in their thinking,” they did not situate comprehension beyond the reader (i.e., in an interaction with a text or activity).

**Faith: “Her NWEA Scores Show That She Needs to Work on Literacy Skills for Her Grade”**

Faith’s cooperating teacher suggested that she work with two readers based on their assigned reading groups, which had been determined by their Northwestern Evaluation Association (NWEA) MAP assessment scores. NWEA-MAP is a prominent reading test administered online that sorts students into above average, average, and below average norm groups. Based on this recommendation, Faith selected Kiara, whom she described as being “placed in the second lowest reading group because her NWEA scores show that she needs to work on literacy skills for her grade,” and Caleb, whom she described as “in the top reading group of the class” and having “[top] NWEA scores for literacy.” Faith both disrupted and reinforced these labels as she analyzed Kiara and Caleb’s think-alouds.

Faith noted that Kiara had considered herself a good reader until this year/grade, and had many positive memories of reading with her family. Despite being “placed. . . in the second lowest reading group,” Faith described how the strategies Kiara employed while reading were well-matched with the text and supported her meaning-making. She provided examples of how Kiara drew from her background knowledge to make and revise her predictions while reading the text and to make inferences about how Danny was feeling in relation to the conflict in the text. Ultimately, Faith believed that Kiara “does a great job with comprehending the text.”

Through her analysis, Faith presumed competence in a way that enabled her to see beyond the label that had been assigned to Kiara based on her NWEA-MAP scores. It is possible that the way in which Faith had begun to learn about Kiara’s reading life helped her to approach the analysis with a different lens, although she did not articulate this. Yet, what is clear through the analysis is that Faith focused on the information she gathered through the think-aloud to describe Kiara’s meaning-making and strengths as a reader.

Faith’s approach to analyzing the second child’s think-aloud demonstrated the same level of close analysis. She noted that although Caleb was placed “in the top reading group,” he missed some of the deeper meanings in this text. For example, Caleb focused on the soggy sandwich which obscured his understanding that this text was primarily about identifying a talent contest act for Danny. Through her analysis, Faith was able to tease apart Caleb’s confusion with the text and draw attention to the challenges he faced as a result of an inconsiderate text--factors like dialogue tags and *seductive detail* (Beck et al., 1991). This close analysis demonstrated her understanding of reading comprehension as a dynamic interaction influenced by factors outside the reader, such as the text.

Faith implicitly challenged the labels and categories assigned to both Kiara and Caleb by developing robust portraits that highlighted their sense-making with *The Talent Contest*. However, she still relied on and reinforced labeling and categorization. For example, in the end-of-module survey, she described how comprehension is complex because “not all readers are at the same level.” She also applied labels as she used language like “lower reading group” throughout her paper. The use of test scores to determine leveled groupings is a common instructional practice for ELA teachers that is reinforced by school and district structures. Thus,

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it is not surprising that Faith saw such practices of labeling and categorizing as serving a function in her teaching practice.

Faith also did not seem to see the limitations of relying on static markers of ability. Although her analysis and interpretation demonstrate a view of the readers’ understandings that appear to misalign with the leveled groupings in the classroom and NWEA scores, Faith never drew explicit attention to the conflict between her own data and the initial source of data (i.e., NWEA scores), interrogated the NWEA assessment as a whole, or her cooperating teacher’s practice of using NWEA scores as the sole determination in grouping.

Ultimately, Faith’s analysis highlights the importance of putting multiple sources of data in conversation with one another. Although the think-aloud analysis revealed compelling information about the readers, it is a record of a child’s reading of *one* text at *one* moment in time. Although Faith demonstrated her ability to engage in portraiture and see readers’ processes in action, she did not think of the multiple sources of information she had--information from NWEA test scores, understandings about children’s reading identities from conversations with children, and a close analysis of one think-aloud--as being in conversation with one another.

### Discussion

Our research question asked: *How do PSTs challenge and/or reinforce the ‘struggling reader’ label as they examine young readers’ sense-making?* Here, we synthesize across the data set in order to answer this question. First, we identify the *ways* these PSTs challenged and/or reinforced the ‘struggling reader’ label as they examined intermediate-grade readers’ interactions with texts, highlighting the complexities PSTs and teacher educators may face in attempts to disrupt blanket ‘struggling reader’ positionings. Then, we return to the conceptual framework that guided our analysis: a cross-pollination of dynamic models of comprehension and Disability Studies in Education. Using data from the findings, we make the case that our instructional emphasis that forwarded a dynamic model of comprehension--on its own--was not enough to disrupt PSTs’ labeling practices in reading instruction. Rather, the findings from this study demonstrate a need for instruction in reading teacher education that embraces a cross-pollination between comprehension research and DSE.

Many of the PSTs across this study--including those from the telling cases above--resisted already-existing ‘struggling reader’ labels assigned to individual children, in some ways. In fact, only one of the fifteen papers we examined unquestioningly forwarded this label. However, only three of the papers consistently challenged ‘struggling reader’ as a valid category, as represented by Sylvia and Inez’s telling case. None of the PSTs explicitly disputed broader social structures that encouraged sorting readers. Furthermore, in all cases across the data set, PSTs sometimes reinforced static constructions of readers’ abilities. These findings align with research on how field-based efforts towards inclusive education can be “messy,” “complex” and sometimes inconsistent (McKay, 2016). As we looked across cases, we attempted to name the *ways* PSTs challenged and/or reinforces the ‘struggling reader’ label.

### Ways PSTs Challenged the ‘Struggling Reader’ Label

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Across the focal cases, PSTs sometimes challenged the ‘struggling reader’ label by positioning comprehension as dynamic, recognizing that it shifts across texts and contexts (Snow, 2002). For example, Faith identified how features like absent dialogue tags and seductive detail made *The Talent Contest* an inconsiderate text for Calvin, demonstrating her understanding that text factors impact comprehension. Sylvia and Inez also recognized that comprehension varies depending on text-reader-activity interactions.

Another way the PSTs challenged the ‘struggling reader’ label was by presuming children’s competence (see Collins & Ferri, 2016). For example, despite what they had been told about Hugo, Andres and Sophia began with an assumption that he was capable, and went in looking for what he *could* do rather than what he *could not*. Across cases, the teachers complemented their grounded descriptions of each reader’s interactions with *The Talent Contest* with their knowledge of the child’s reading habits and identities beyond the activity, as in the ways Faith discussed Kiara’s positive feelings about reading at home. This supports existing research that PSTs’ instructional approaches to reading are impacted by their beliefs about readers (Brodeur & Ortmann, 2018), and that holistic assessments of children may encourage reframing beyond a focus on ‘problems’ and ‘limitations’ (Aukerman, 2006; Shalaby, 2017).

Finally, consistent with literature from inclusive education about how PSTs are able to recognize labeling as problematic (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017), PSTs in this study sometimes shifted their application of the word ‘struggle’ from a generalized adjective to a specific verb. For example, in the end-of-module survey, Andres suggested reframing a colleague’s request to discuss a ‘struggling reader’ label to focus on “what it is [specifically] that the reader seems to struggle at.”

### **Ways PSTs Reinforced the ‘Struggling Reader’ Label**

However, in practice, the PSTs often reinforced the ‘struggling reader’ label, too. One way that static constructions of struggle were reinforced is when PSTs shared expectations for ‘typical’ literacy development. For example, one pair of PSTs in the class claimed that a child’s “comprehension matches her grade level.” In other instances, like in Faith’s case, PSTs accepted static indicators of ability (e.g., test scores). We find this problematic because one data point, such as one test score, is not enough to adequately assess a child’s reading abilities. However, because so much of the “language of education” (Ashby, 2012)—and associated practices—involve sorting and labeling, this is hardly a surprise.

PSTs also reinforced the ‘struggling reader’ label by utilizing static ability labels like ‘struggling reader,’ ‘low reader,’ or ‘striving reader.’ Recall, for example, how Andres and Sophia suggested that, “[Hugo] does not seem like a low reader.” In this moment, they simultaneously rejected the label assigned to Hugo by his teacher, while revealing that they believe in the idea of a ‘low reader.’ As in Naraian and Schlessinger’s (2017) work, PSTs in this study were beginning to recognize the harmful effects of labeling in schools, but were more focused on seeing individual students’ competencies than on “locating the student in the midst of unjust social conditions” (p. 89).

### **Why Embracing a Dynamic Model of Comprehension in Literacy Teacher Education is Not Enough to Disrupt the ‘Struggling Reader’ Label**



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While dynamic models of reading comprehension such as the RAND Reading Study Group model emphasize how comprehension is an interaction that occurs at the intersection of multiple dimensions, these findings suggest that embracing such a model in literacy teacher education is an insufficient pathway to disrupt the ‘struggling reader’ label.

Recall that our instruction was guided by a dynamic model of comprehension. Although many PSTs did challenge labels in the *Readers as Sensemakers* assignment, they also expressed static ideas within particular dimensions of the model. Furthermore, most PSTs did not explicitly interrogate the institutional structures that informed their assessments of comprehension.

### *Static Constructions of Aspects of Ability Within a Dynamic Model*

Even PSTs who embraced a dynamic model of comprehension sometimes framed particular aspects of children’s reading ability as static, like the way Sylvia and Inez discussed Darius’s fluency. In dynamic models of comprehension, like the RAND Reading Study Group model, many characteristics of the reader are named as influencing the overall interaction that occurs as meaning is made; this includes cognitive, linguistic, and motivational characteristics aspects like word recognition and fluency (Snow, 2002). When schools encourage teachers to see so many of these characteristics of readers as static (e.g., “they are an unmotivated reader”; “she does not read fluently”), how can teachers see both comprehension and ability as dynamic?

The PSTs in this study had to contend with the ways reading instruction in school is structured around categorizing and sorting (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017), and with persistent discourses of ability that inform teachers’ work with children (Ashby, 2012). In reading education, there is a stickiness of these practices--which can be reinforced by attempts to ‘standardize’ education.

### *Insufficient Attention to Institutional Structures and Practices in Schools*

While the RAND Reading Study Group’s model of comprehension acknowledges that interactions among text-reader-activity occur in a broader sociocultural context, and suggests the importance of further research “regarding the relationship between membership in certain groups . . . and reading comprehension” (Snow, 2002, p. xvi), they do not give enough emphasis to understanding the institutional structures and sociohistorical practices that inform teachers’ thinking about comprehension. We echo Willis (2008) that there is an “incongruity between their pronouncements of sociocultural concerns and the use of cognitive components of reading instruction [e.g., vocabulary, word knowledge, motivation]” (p. 296).

We found that complex ways the PSTs in this study challenged and/or reinforced constructions of ‘struggling readers’ had to be situated more broadly. These teachers’ ideas about children’s abilities were socially constructed through multiple static sources of information (e.g., text scores; reading groups; home lives), even before they sat down to read with the children. There is a fundamental problem underlying most reading assessments in school, which are utilized “to sort children on a single dimension by using a single method” (Snow, 2002, p. 12). After working closely with children to develop a more holistic portrait of their reading abilities (see Dyson, 1995; Aukerman, 2006; Shalaby, 2017), the PSTs did expand their sources of

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information, but did not necessarily put these new sources of data in conversation, as exemplified in Faith’s telling case.

Overall, similar to Naraian and Schlessinger’s study (2017) of PSTs in an inclusive education program, the PSTs in this study attempted to highlight individual readers’ competencies, but were less focused on disrupting injustice in the broader sociocultural context. This is perhaps unsurprising, given how think-aloud protocols privilege attention to a reader and their cognition. However, some PSTs recognized the role that text-specific factors play in interaction with the reader (e.g., Faith), and other PSTs analyzed the think-alouds to demonstrate the inaccuracy of the labels assigned to readers (e.g., Andres and Sofia). The pragmatic and tidy ways in which schools seek to categorize and sort readers for ease of differentiation, text selection, and identification for intervention often colors the lens that teachers apply when assessing comprehension. Even with an intentional awareness of that lens and a commitment to resisting the discourses of schooling, disruption in the service of justice can be difficult, even for experienced teachers.

### **How Cross-pollination Can Help: The Importance of Centering Tenets of DSE in Understandings of Comprehension**

To more successfully *disrupt* the ‘struggling reader’ label, teachers must not only understand comprehension as a dynamic process and be able to see readers’ sense-making in action; they must also notice, describe, and intervene in the broader institutional practices that have made labeling and sorting practices prevalent in reading assessment, instruction, and curriculum. This is an important way that DSE approaches, which view disability as “the product of social, political, economic, and cultural practice” (Baglieri, 2011, p. 270), can enhance contemporary theories of comprehension. It makes a broad, pluralistic, and fluid view of readers and their abilities foundational to assessment practices.

Teachers’ understanding of comprehension must *begin* with articulating “the relationship of sociohistorical and sociocultural concerns of the underserved to reading comprehension” (Willis, 2008, p. 295), including considerations of how disability is constructed in schools. Without a deep conceptual grounding understanding of the social construction of ability--as suggested in DSE--we found that PSTs’ use of a dynamic model of comprehension was insufficient to disrupt harmful labeling practices. Some knowledge of cultural differences related to reading comprehension may influence how teachers see particular interactions between text-reader-activity, but will fail to disrupt these broader labeling practices. In literacy teacher education and research, cross-pollinating tenets of DSE with dynamic theories of comprehension has potential to address these issues in meaningful ways.

DSE can also help literacy educators to see differences as normal. It is typical to have readers with a wide range of strengths and needs related to comprehension, including those with diagnoses like dyslexia. We don’t need to steer PSTs away from acknowledging children’s disabilities and differences. However, when we position readers as ‘unusual’ or ‘atypical’ or as a ‘problem,’ we set up a context for disabling social practices. This necessitates a shift in teaching practices from vague labeling practices and static perceptions of readers toward rich descriptions about readers’ dynamic sense-making processes. When we resist labeling children as ‘struggling

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readers,’ and instead lean into describing their comprehension processes with specific texts in specific contexts, those descriptions can serve as useful information about the reader and thus inform our design of comprehension instruction (e.g., texts we select, activity we design) and our broader school conversations about readers who need additional support.

While we focus on the power of cross-pollinating DSE with comprehension theories, there is tremendous potential in cross-pollinating it with other disciplinary-specific theories, too. What sorts of labeling practices are prevalent in math, in science, in social studies? How might the theories undergirding these disciplines and their assessment practices be reinforcing labeling and sorting practices? Cross-pollination is one way we can better move beyond acknowledging that labeling is harmful towards understanding how it looks in practice and why it is so complex to disrupt.

### Implications

Teachers are bombarded with influential messaging encouraging, and often requiring, them to categorize and sort children. We offer implications for elementary literacy teaching, teacher education, and research to disrupt and reshape this broader context.

#### Implications for Elementary Teaching

For literacy teachers interested in disrupting the ‘struggling reader’ label, we must surface our guiding theories of comprehension, and pay close attention to how theory and practice inform each other (Schutz & Hoffman, 2017). We can engage in collaborative inquiries that utilize the kind of cross-pollination we describe here, similar to the collective inquiry work by Dyson et al. (1995) where they explored what difference ‘difference’ makes in their literacy teaching. Tools such as “assessment narratives” (Aukerman, 2006) or “portraiture” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997; Shalaby, 2017), which require rich description, can support us to look and listen closely to children in order to identify the varied kinds of struggles that impact comprehension.

And, when we notice struggle, we can ask questions that center dynamicity: *Where was the mismatch between this text and what this child brought to the reading? What do I know about this child, both as a learner and a human? What do I notice about this text? What kind of support did I provide (or not)?* By understanding the struggles experienced by particular children, with particular texts, in particular situations, we can then work to adapt the factors in the learning environment to ensure that the learning environment is more responsive to the unique needs of every child. If we hope to prepare PSTs who feel confident to work with *all* readers (see Triplett, 2007), we must make sure that they understand how comprehension works and the various factors that they can change to create a more inclusive learning context.

Additionally, it is critical for literacy educators to become aware of and challenge pervasive categorizing practices. This includes understanding how sorting mechanisms based on high-stakes tests are part of neoliberal educational policies (Lipman, 2003), and the harm they do. DSE and work in inclusive education offer many insights we can embrace, including noticing the pervasiveness of the language of education that encourages labeling of differences (Ashby, 2012), interrogating how children are included/excluded, and disrupting how classifications of

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ability are situated in unjust social situations (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017). We must also recognize the limitations of single stories told by single data sources, and strive to create richer portraits of readers’ abilities.

### **Implications for Teacher Preparation**

Although some models for inclusive teacher preparation programs do exist, the preparation of elementary teachers and special education teachers largely remains siloed. We echo Collins and Ferri (2016) to advocate for a cross-pollination across programs that seek to intertwine fundamental tenets of DSE and reading/literacy instruction in order to better prepare both special educators and elementary generalists to meet the diverse needs of readers. For example, teacher educators can design experiences where PSTs collaborate across programs to assess, design, and self-reflect on instruction guided by principles of DSE (e.g., Parker-Katz & Rao, 2020).

As part of our on-going research in our own teacher education courses, these findings also encouraged us to critically reflect on and revise our own curriculum. In the subsequent semester, we: positioned disruption of common beliefs/ideas/myths that are infused in literacy instruction as a core responsibility of literacy teachers; drew attention to coded language and practices used to label and exclude young people by reading *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children in School* (Shalaby, 2017); and modified the Readers as Sense-makers module to add elements of portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997) to meaningfully expand the data sources PSTs draw from while assessing readers.

### **Implications for Research**

For researchers, it is necessary to continue to explore the complexity of disrupting the 'struggling reader' label and other static labels assigned to children in schools, perhaps through longitudinal examinations of teachers’ attempts towards inclusive education (e.g., Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017; McKay, 2016). This may include fine-grained analysis of language that is situated in broader social theory, as we attempted to do in this analysis.

Collaborative research between PSTs, practicing teachers, and researchers to disrupt labels perpetuated by discourse of schooling, curriculum, and instruction is also important (e.g., university-school partnerships and school-based inquiry groups). For example, teacher educators can partner with teachers in school sites to design field-based methods courses focused on fostering inclusion across disciplines, learning together as we collectively strive to disrupt harmful schooling practices.

### **Conclusion: Reframing Struggle as an Action, not an Attribute**

In “a broad schooling context...[that] seeks to standardize, label, segregate, and remediate students based on learning difference” (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018, p. 81), there is a pressing need for teachers, teacher educators, and researchers to reframe struggle as an action, not an attribute. We must diligently position struggle as a verb to describe something someone does in a particular moment and context, not as an adjective that is permanently attached to them.

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Inclusive education and DSE can offer aspirational frameworks and useful tools as we seek (and sometimes struggle) in schools to engage with difference in valued ways.

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