Classic Literature and Struggling Readers in

Middle School Grades Five through Eight

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Abstract

Classic literature continues to complicate reading for middle school struggling readers. Although research has been conducted on struggling readers and strategies to help them, the purpose of this study was to examine struggling readers in conjunction with classic literature. Using the methodologies of historical research (Barone, 2011) and content analysis (Stahl & Hartman, 2011), the current study examined why students struggle to read and comprehend classic literature. Results suggest that text structure including organization and use of graphics complicate comprehension. Language features such as conventionality, vocabulary, sentence structure, and meaning complicate reading. The results also suggest that knowledge demands such as life experiences, intertextuality, and cultural knowledge complicate connecting to the text. Implications of results are discussed.

Section I

Introduction

      This project was an initial investigation into a content analysis of classic literature and current research on classic literature and struggling readers. This study provided the foundation for a future classroom program in which I will use the research to help students in grades five through eight comprehend classic literature.

Problem Statement

      Classic literature has always been a difficult genre to teach to middle schools students. Many teachers are unsure what literacy ideas and concepts students struggle with, and how to help these students succeed (Ivey, 1999). Casey (2009) states that, "the teachers who work with these struggling readers face their own challenges in supporting the literacy development of these students who may have a history of frustration and failure." (pg. 23)

Significance of the Problem

      Because struggling readers are prevalent in today's classrooms, a number of different research programs have investigated struggling readers from a number of different perspectives (Tovani, 2000). However, most of these studies focus on struggling readers reading modern literature, not classic literature. "Teaching the classics often creates a dislike for reading…most teenagers are not ready for classic literature because they do not address adolescent concerns: they are about adult issues and are written for well-educated adults who have the leisure time to read or who are university literature students" (Santoli & Wagner, 2004). So, with this research, I explored why students struggle with classic literature and the implications these findings have for instruction.

Purpose for the Study

However, before I considered the above hypotheses, I addressed an immediate problem with the project I proposed here. Modern research states that not all approaches to teaching struggling readers might be relevant in the instructional context (Ivey, 1999). The proposed project addressed this problem by exploring researched methods to help struggling readers comprehend classic literature including tracking student confusion, establishing a purpose for reading, student strategies and teacher tools, and setting a plan for reading (Tovani, 2000). Specifically, I studied the difficulties classic literature brings to reading and the implications for instruction connected to the Common Core Learning Standards.

Rationale

There was an interesting reason to pursue research in this area. Presumably, all students in grades five through eight read classic literature. This project was conducted under the premise that some students struggle with reading classic literature, and that differences exist between classic and modern literature. The premise is that the differences between classic and modern literature would account for some students struggling with comprehension. I will discuss the implications this has for instruction and teachers.

I completed this content analysis research because I feel that teachers should be more informed so that they are able to help their students who are struggling readers. It was also my hope that by completing this research I would gain new strategies to help these students, as I would like to be a teacher in grades seven through nine. I believe that this research will help many teachers understand how to teach their students who are struggling readers.

I was personally motivated by this research as I have seen many struggling readers in my time as a substitute teacher and teacher's assistant. I wanted to find ways to work with these

students in the classroom without having to pull the students out for remedial work. The research

I conducted will help to answer my questions and provide strategies for working with struggling

readers.

Section II: Literature Review

In this section, I will discuss literature related to classic literature and struggling readers. Currently, a great deal of research in the field of struggling readers and the strategies to help them exists as opposed to the research on the correlation between classic literature and struggling readers. My research is important in that it adds to the wealth of knowledge concerning the connections between classic literature and struggling readers. This literature review looks at several articles related to my research on struggling readers, classic literature, reading strategies and teaching tools.

Santoli and Wagner (2004), state that the research problem in this article is that "many English language arts teachers are determined to make their students read "real" literature. They believe that all the students need is an enthusiastic teacher and a little bit of exposure to "fine" literary works… but many students complain, balk, become impassive, and/or fall asleep. What they often fail to recognize is that many students do not enter the classroom with strong backgrounds in reading or with much exposure to different types of reading material" (pg. 66).

The purpose of Santoli & Wagner's study was to figure out why many teachers continue to build their curriculum upon the classics and ignore young adult novels. The authors of this article present three hypotheses for why teachers do not use young adult novels such as *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe, The Maze Runner* or *The Hunger Games*. These hypotheses are: 1) they are still not considered worthy of their students' attention; 2) English teachers are worried about losing time by trying to add the reading of young adult novels to their curricula; and 3) teacher guides traditionally do not allow for the use of young adult novels (Santoli & Wagner, 2004). The authors of this study completed a content analysis, so their data collection

included looking at curriculum and other research completed about classic and young adult literature.

The findings of Santoli & Wagner's study were that young adult novels could be used as bridges or links to the classics. For those teachers that feel the need to include the classics; yet desire to instill a love of reading within their students; a suggestion was to connect a classic to a young adult novel. It was also stated that young adult novels can prove to be valuable tools that encourage teen reading, lead to adult reading, and even initiate life-long reading. This article connects to my research in that it provides strategies for teaching classic literature to students by pairing them with young adult novels.

Bright (2011) states that the problem she wished to address was what inter-textual connections could be made between young adult novels and canonical (classic) literature. The purpose of Bright's research was to see what inter-textual connections there were between young adult novels and classic novel. Bright's article connects to Santoli and Wagner's article, in that it is a research study completed that looked at pairing a classic novel with a young adult novel.

The data collection Bright completed for her research included, looking at the definition of inter-textual connections; which is defined as the connections and relationships between novels that can help students comprehend what they are reading; and how it connected to the researchers' problem. The researcher also looked at different pairings of young adult novels and classic literature and the reasoning behind each pairing. The findings of Bright's study were that "the importance of inter-textuality in this context is that it affords middle school readers the chance to understand a greater breadth of literature by reading contemporary adolescent literature. "The canon becomes accessible to adolescent readers by making classical texts constitute the material that adolescents want to engage with, instead of deeming them too

difficult or unfamiliar" (Bright, 2011). This article relates to my research in that I am hoping to find strategies that teachers will be able to implement in their classroom to help readers with classic literature.

Ostenson and Wadham (2012) state that the problem addressed in their research is that, "the implementation of the CCLS English Language Arts (ELA) standards provides a significant opportunity to examine the tradition of text selection for ELA classrooms that emphasizes classic or canonical texts. And while there is value to this tradition, we argue that the research base and assumptions underlying the new standards actually make a compelling case to include more young adult titles in the classroom" (pg. 5).

The purpose of Ostenson & Wadham's research was to explore the history of young adult novels and how the Common Core supports the increased use of young adult titles in the ELA classroom. The data collection completed for this content analysis study looked at the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) for ELA and the chosen texts for study. They also looked at the different ways to choose texts, qualitatively or quantitatively, and explored their reasoning. The authors of this article also spent a lot of time looking at both young adult and classic literature and connecting those books to the CCLS ELA standards.

The findings of Ostenson & Wadham's study were that "the arrival of the CCLS provides a significant opportunity to reexamine practice and the goals we have for developing literate graduates. As teachers seek to build classrooms where students are engaged in meaningful, authentic activities related to reading, the Common Core provides solid standards to pursue. We encourage teachers to consider strongly the role that young adult literature can play in meeting these standards, especially in terms of the complexity of texts we should be using with students"

(Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). Ostenson and Wadham's article fits into my research because I would like to look at the Common Core closely to see how large of a role classic literature plays.

Maine and Waller (2011) state that the research problem of this study was to "make central children's and adult's responses to the same text and putting their role as readers at the heart of the process, and hearing their voices as valid interpreters and responders to text, rather than individuals who have merely achieved the skills and are now competent. It also acknowledges the response of children and adults as equally interesting" (pg. 357). The Ostenson & Wadham article connects to Maine and Waller's article in that it talks about the motivation and engagement needed for reading.

The purpose of Maine and Waller's research was to examine three dimensions that reflect a situated reading event: reader identity, immersion, and resilience. These three dimensions founded the basis for the research that the authors conducted. The data collection for Maine and Waller's research included choosing two groups of readers, one of children and the other of adults. All of the participants in the adult group had read the book before, and none of the participants in the child group had read the book. Both groups read the book in six sections, and then met with each group on a weekly basis and recorded their discussions. The authors looked at three dimensions including reader identity, immersion and resilience, and the reader's responses as a whole in both an adult reading group and a child reading group and synthesized the data they collected in order to find their themes.

The findings of Maine and Waller's study were that the identity of the reader, their past experiences, literary experiences, reading taste, immersion and how the readers engage through empathizing with characters and evoking images were all important to their study. They also stated that the resilience, and how the readers managed any difficulties that they encountered

were all equally important. Maine and Waller's article fits in with my research because it looks at reader motivation and engagement.

Youssef (2009) states that the research problem that the author addresses is the "challenge of engaging students in classical texts that are historically, geographically, and linguistically "alien" to them" (pg. 28). The purpose of this research was test a three-step instructional model that includes approximation, thematic relevance, and application to help students identify, engage, and interact with the texts. Youssef's article relates to the Maine and Waller article in that it talks about teaching classics in a modern world.

For data collection, Youssef took anecdotal notes while teaching her classes and observing other classes using the same method. She then came up with a coding system to figure out what the students were doing during each step; which included approximation, thematic relevance, and application; and the outcomes of those behaviors. The finding of Youssef's research is that using the steps through this approach is promising because it promotes the students' active participation in class and ownership of the course content by allowing the students to experience success with reading. Youssef's article relates to my research because it is a specific strategy that can be modified and used in a classroom to help students.

This final piece of literature connects to the Youssef article because it offers many strategies for teachers to use to help their students who are struggling readers. Tovani (2001) states that the problem this book seeks to answer is why adolescent readers struggle and how can us as teachers recognize these readers. The purpose of Tovani's book is to give realistic strategies that teachers can easily implement into their classroom and to give teachers the knowledge to help adolescent readers' develop their comprehension skills.

The procedures Tovani uses to collect data includes student observations, content analysis of different books and theories, and a look at the curriculum and how to implement different strategies. The findings of Tovani's book include the different types of struggling readers you may encounter in your classroom, looking at strategic reading and how it can be used in your classroom, what the realities of reading really are, and what we should do next. This book encompasses much of my research. It is a direct link to my research question about struggling readers in grades seven through nine and is the jumping point for most of my research.

In this section, I discussed research related to classic literature and struggling readers. Some of the research that I examined looked at the need for classic literature in the classroom but suggested including young adult literature, the intertextual connections between novels, the implementation of the CCLS and how to use them in the classroom, student's responses to classic literature, engaging students in classic literature, and strategies for helping students read classic literature. The field of research on struggling readers and the strategies to help them as well as research on classic literature is extensive. However, my research is important in that it adds to the wealth of knowledge concerning the connections between classic literature and struggling readers.

Section III: Study Design

Methodology Design

    I completed qualitative research in the form of a content analysis using a variety of methods supported by Barone and Stahl and Hartman (2011) including content analysis and historical research. Content analysis is a method of analysis used "to determine the meaning, purpose, or effect of any type of communication, as literature, newspapers, or broadcasts, by studying and evaluating the details, innuendoes, and implications of the content and recurrent themes" (Barone, 2011). Historical research is a method of research used to systematically examine and communicate an understanding of past events; it may involve interpretation to recapture the nuances, personalities, and ideas that influenced these events. However, it is not a mere accumulation of facts and dates or even a description of past events (Stahl & Hartman, 2011).

    This study was grounded in the educational theoretical framework of classic literature and struggling adolescent readers. I theorized that struggling readers in grades seven through nine fundamentally struggle with classic literature due to a lack of strategies and background knowledge. I drew mainly from the theories of sociolinguistics, which states that people are "social beings who experience and understand the world most often through language-mediated activities. Language is also a cultural means of expression that has multiple facets and uses. The foundational sociolinguistic principle – learning language…is about learning what to say and how to say it across endlessly diverse situations" (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). I also examined the sociocultural theory of language learning, which according to Genishi & Dyson (2009) states that for students, "learning is cultural and shaped by the socioeconomic, linguistic, and political circumstances surrounding their lives."(pg. 1) Another theory that I looked at was reading

fluency, as it is one of the more difficult aspects of reading skills to remediate in older struggling readers (Torgeson & Hudson, 2006). I also considered the cognitive theory's method for coaching students in the application of useful strategies. Readers who lack metacognitive skills struggle. Metacognition is knowing about knowing. In reading, the focus is on student awareness of comprehension and strategy use. Students need to be aware when they do not understand text and apply fix up strategies to repair their comprehension (Garner, 1987 as cited by Young, 2011). Most of the theories that I draw upon will help me to understand struggling readers and how they read classic literature and in understanding the implications for instruction and teachers.

Positionality as the researcher

I have been a substitute teacher in the Churchville- Chili school district for two years. I graduated from Roberts Wesleyan College with teaching certification in childhood education (1-6), special education (1-6), and middle school English (7-9). I began substitute teaching about six months after graduation, and I completed a long-term substitute position at the end of the 2012-2013 school year. I accepted a position as a special education teacher's assistant at the Churchville-Chili Senior High School for the 2014-2015 school year. I have been working on my master's degree at SUNY Brockport for the past year in Literacy Education B-12. I believe that literacy is a key factor in every aspect of life, and I strive to offer my students many opportunities to increase their literacy skills both at school and at home.

Research Questions

This study will attempt to answer the following questions:

- What features found in classic literature make reading difficult for struggling readers?

- What are the implications for teaching parallel to the CCLS?

- What can teachers do to help students read complicated text including teaching reading strategies, pre-reading and conducting small group literature circles?

Procedures of Study

I began gathering my research in the summer of 2014. First, I took one month to look over this data and determine the texts students need to read, and the text complexity and difficulty. Then I chose six books from the Common Core recommended reading list. I read these books and took notes about what might complicate reading for students. Next, I gathered the learning standards and module information on grades seven through nine from EngageNY.org. I took one month to look over this data and determine the texts students need to read, and the text complexity and difficulty. Next, I uncovered basic research done on struggling readers and found many reasons why students in these grades would struggle reading classic literature. I also found research done on different types of classic literature, such as content, complexity, structure, and language. I had all of my research completed by December of 2014, so that I could begin compiling my notes and creating a system of organization so that I could begin writing my culminating project in the spring of 2015.

Criteria for trustworthiness

The qualitative research practices that I used to ensure that my research design was valid were prolonged engagement with my six novels and research articles, as this project took place over eight months. Member checks were used, as peers checked the accuracy of data and the appropriateness of data analysis and reporting. I also used transferability and included the detailed descriptions of the research context. Dependability was used and the capstone project

includes detailed description of the research process. The last practice that was used was conformability, because the data will be available for review.

Data Collection and Analysis

To collect the required data for my content analysis I looked at grade level information from the CCLS related to classic literature books that could be read in each grade and chose six books that I would read, two from each grade level, to gain a better understanding of the literature that students have to read at these levels. I also compared the degrees of difficulty in reading level and material over the three-grade levels. Lastly, I looked at research done on struggling readers and made conclusions as to how classic literature could make students struggle. For the purpose of this content study, six novels were chosen based on their status as a classic novel and the potential degree of reading difficulty from the Common Core Modules (CCLS) that could be read in grades five through eight. The books chosen for this content analysis were *Dragonsong* by Anne McCaffrey, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott, *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell, and *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls. While reading each book, I took notes related to four text characteristics, text structure, meaning, language features and knowledge demands, based on the Text Complexity: Qualitative Measures Rubric from the CCLS (Appendix 5). Through my notes, I was able to identify twelve literary devices that could complicate comprehension for struggling readers. After carefully considering these literary devices, I aligned my chosen novels with the literary devices most prevalent in the novel and analyzed how these devices might complicate reading.

When looking at text structure I found that the organization of all of the novels was important information, but especially that of *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* as this

book originated in Great Britain, not America. *Little Women* and *Where the Red Fern Grows* were both excellent examples of a story-within-a-story and these novels helped to further my understanding of this device. After looking at the data related to text structure it is my analysis that the more complex a text is the more difficult it is to understand. It is also my opinion that reading a novel that has two storylines within it also complicates reading, as students would have to separate the two stories to understand both.

When looking at meaning I found that the theme, the subtext, and the difficulty of the text all complicated reading class literature. *The Outsiders* is an example of a book that contains multiple themes that are not explicit to the reader, and themes that can be specific to each reader. Subtext is another device that can complicate meaning. *The Island of The Blue Dolphins* contains subtext that tells the struggles of Karana's people that coincide with the struggles she faces. Although *Dragonsong* is an entertaining book with a wonderful storyline, because it is a fantasy novel, it is often too hard for students to understand, making the reading tedious and uninteresting. After looking at the data related to meaning, it is my analysis that the more explicit the theme the easier it is for students to understand. However, if the theme of a more difficult text were shared with the students it would make reading more interesting. Reading a book with subtext is not necessarily difficult, making sure to explain both stories would make comprehension easier. Meaning is perhaps the more difficult characteristic to deal with before reading a book with a class, but making a list of possible pitfalls that you may encounter will aid in comprehension as you read.

When looking at language features I found that conventionality, vocabulary, and sentence structure all complicated reading classic literature. When looking at conventionality the amount of complex language in a novel can make reading difficult. *Little Women* is a novel that contains

a great deal of complex language due to the setting and era in which it was written. Vocabulary is the easiest feature to predict where students might have trouble. *Dragonsong* is an example of a novel with difficult vocabulary. Since it is a science fiction novel, there are many words not part of the English language within the story. Sentence structure is another device that can complicate reading. *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* is a novel that has a slightly different sentence structure because of where it was first published. After looking at the data related to language features, it is my analysis that language features are the easiest feature to take control of and complete pre-reading activities in order to better acquaint your students with the text before they even read the story. As a teacher, taking care of as many language problems as you can before you read will make it easier to get through the novel and create excitement as you read.

When looking at knowledge demands I found that life experiences, Intertextuality, and cultural knowledge all complicated classic literature. *The Island of The Blue Dolphins*, as a historical novel contains many themes and ideas that students can relate to their background knowledge of history and science. Being able to make those connections between the book and their previous knowledge makes it easier for students to comprehend the novel. Intertextuality is another way for students to make connections between the book they are reading and other books with similar themes, motifs, characters, settings, and ideas. Sharing those connections in class may enhance other student's comprehension. Cultural knowledge is perhaps the most difficult aspect of knowledge demands to address. Each reader's cultural background and knowledge is different, so what each person brings to their reading is different. After looking at the data related to knowledge demands, it is my analysis that taking the time to share this knowledge will help every reader better comprehend the novel.

	Text Structure: ~ Organization ~ Use of Graphics	**Meaning:** ~Theme ~ Subtext ~ Text too difficult to understand	**Language Features:** ~ Conventionality ~ Vocabulary ~ Sentence Structure	**Knowledge Demands:** ~ Life Experiences ~Intertextuality ~ Cultural Knowledge
Dragonsong	~ Narrative ~Fantasy or Science Fiction ~ Poem at beginning of chapter ~ Map in the front of the book	~ Too difficult to understand: multiple levels of meaning, difficult language, no background knowledge	~ Words not part of English language ~ Single word with multiple meanings	~ Cultural knowledge: growing up in a small close-knit community ~ Life experiences: playing pretend, siblings, helicopter parents
The Outsiders	~ Narrative ~ Realistic Fiction ~ Young Adult Fiction	~ Themes: bridging the gap between rich and poor; honor among the lawless; male-female interactions; importance of friends and family	~ Vocabulary specific to characters and book setting, unique language of each gang	~ Connect setting to *Where the Red Fern Grows* ~ Relationships between groups of friends connection to *Harry Potter* ~ Death and intentions related to *The Hunger Games*
The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe	~ Narrative ~Chapter book ~ Large Font ~ Short chapters ~ Graphic at beginning of each chapter	~ subtext: story of the children but also of the animosity between Aslan and the Witch	~ Sentence structure more closely resembles British English rather than American English	~ Cultural knowledge of living with parents off at war ~ background knowledge: living in an imaginary world
Little Women	~ Narrative ~ Realistic Fiction ~ Graphic at beginning of each chapter	Subtext: Story of the March family and the father who is away at war told through letters	~ Dense and complex language ~ language not used in modern conversation	~ background knowledge: large family, all girls with a tomboy sister
The Island of the Blue Dolphins	~ Narrative ~ Historical Fiction	~ Subtext: Struggles with food shelter, vicious animals and survival, but underneath is the story of her people as well	~ Complex language related to vocabulary and sentence structure	~ Students can connect this book to the Iroquois and their experiences
Where the Red Fern Grows	~ Narrative ~ Realistic Fiction	~ Themes: growing up and maturing, friends and family, the struggle to get what you want	~ Some unique language unique to the time and setting	~ Location, age, gender, socioeconomic status, familial relationships ass lead to cultural knowledge

Section VI: Findings

Through my content analysis and literature review, I found evidence of four textual elements that affect a reader's comprehension. These four textual elements are text structure, meaning, language features, and knowledge demands. These textual elements can complicate reading a classic text in many ways. Text structure can affect a student's comprehension through story-within-a-story devices and the structure or linearity of the plot. The second element, meaning, can affect a student's comprehension through the comprehension of theme, the subtext, and that the text is too difficult to understand. Language features can affect a student's comprehension through conventionality, vocabulary, and sentence structure. The last element, knowledge demands, can affect a student's comprehension through a student's background knowledge, the intertextuality and cultural knowledge, and a student's engagement with the text

Qualitative Measures Reveal Text Characteristics that Affect Readability

The first textual element that emerged through my research was that of the text structure of the six novels I read. Included within this element are organization or format and the use of, or lack of, graphics. A few ways these elements can make reading difficult for struggling readers is that the story may contain more than one plot, and the structure and plot may not follow a single path but may instead jump back and forth between different points in the story. Another reason is that the use or lack of graphics may determine how difficult comprehension is for a student. The format of a book is one of the first things that a reader notices, and the format may either draw the reader in, or make them leery of reading the novel (Bright, 2011, CCLS, 2013). All of the novels I chose to read were in the form of a narrative. These included *Dragonsong, The Outsiders, The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe, Little Women, The Island of the Blue Dolphins,* and *Where the Red Fern Grows*.

The next textual element that emerged through my research was that of meaning. Classic literature often has more than one layer of meaning winding throughout its plot (Bright, 2011). The narrative structures that complicate meaning for readers are the comprehension of theme, the subtext, and that the text is too difficult to understand. Meaning is one of the most difficult textual elements to teach because each reader may draw a different meaning from the text based on his or her own experiences. However, having a reader understand the meaning behind a text is one of the most important parts in establishing comprehension. Whether the meaning and themes are simple or complex, singular or multiple, they are the key to unlocking a classic book (Bright, 2011).

Another textual element that I discovered through my research was that of language features. The narrative structures that can complicate language features are conventionality, vocabulary, and sentence structure. This element deals mostly with what the reader encounters as they read the text and looks specifically at words, sentences and paragraphs in detail, rather than the whole book. When looking at classic books in general, they "often contain difficult syntax and vocabulary, intricate plots and subplots, the use of multiple characters, unfamiliar geographical settings, and abstruse historical references that require more educational background than most high school students have" (Santoli & Wagner, 2004). All of these books touch on one or more of the aspects that Santoli and Wagner discusses, which makes it difficult to connect with and understand the text.

The last textual element that I found through my research was that of knowledge demands. The narrative structures that complicate language features for readers are a student's background knowledge, the intertextuality and cultural knowledge, and a student's engagement with the text. These are important concepts when dealing with knowledge demands. What

students bring with them to the classroom allows them to engage in and comprehend a text that would otherwise be too difficult. A student's background knowledge, the intertextuality and cultural knowledge, and a student's engagement with the text can all lead to difficulties when reading Classic Literature. But, "students are more able to engage with the learning material when its themes and applicability are more aligned with the concrete, immediate, or personal than the abstract, remote, or universal" (Youssef, 2010).

The four main qualitative measures that reveal text characteristics that affect readability are text structure, meaning, language features and knowledge demands. These textual elements are overarching topics that can include many different sub-topics within them. These sub-topics are easier to address than the whole and can have a greater effect on the comprehension of a classic novel.

Literary Devices that Affect Text Comprehension

Within the four main textual elements are several literary devices that can complicate reading classic literature. These literary devices include a story-within-a-story device, the structure and linearity of plot and the use of graphics which deal with text structure. Literary devices found within meaning are the comprehension of theme, the subtext and lack of general comprehension. Literary devices included in language features are conventionality, vocabulary, and sentence structure. The literary devices found within knowledge demands are a student's background knowledge, intertextuality, and cultural knowledge. The following is a discussion of these literary devices as they relate to the classic novels read for data collection.

The structure of classic novels can make reading classic literature difficult. Although all six books are fiction narratives, they can be put into different genres within that group of books. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is considered a chapter book, with large font and many

short chapters. *Dragonsong* is categorized as fantasy or science fiction, which adds the element of the unknown to the story. *Little Women, Where the Red Fern Grows* and *The Outsiders* are all examples of realistic fiction, meaning it is placed in a setting that students are more readily able to relate to. *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* is an example of historical fiction where students can apply what they have learned in social studies to the books events. Another category that *The Outsiders* is part of is young adult fiction, a genre that is growing in size and popularity and in which many classic books are included.

The first text structure literary device that affects comprehension of classic literature is when a book contains a story-within-a-story device (Ostenson & Wadham, 2012). This is often seen as flashbacks or jumps forward in the story where the reader is forced to leave one plot line and transition to another. An example of this is seen in Wilson Rawls *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Billy, the narrator of the story, introduces himself to the reader as an adult, living by himself in a house. He relates an incident where he took care of a stray dog before letting it go back in to the streets. This prompts Billy to remember when he was a small boy living in the Ozarks. The reader is then taken to when Billy was a ten-year-old boy who only wanted a dog. What follows is a tale of love and adventure, as you are introduced to Big Dan and Little Ann, Billy's two coonhounds, their lives and deaths and Billy's eventual move from the Ozarks. Although the flashback is short compared to the rest of the novel, the reader still has to make the switch between the present and the past in order to understand Billy's story.

Another book that contains the story-within-a-story plot is *Little Women.* Although there are no flashbacks to the past or jumps forward to the future, the reader has to navigate through the lives of Meg, Jo, Beth, Amy, their mother, called Marmee and Aunt March. Their stories are intertwined within each other and this novel contains a lot of dialogue between the characters,

which is sometimes hard to follow, but reveals much about the characters and their motivations. The secondary plot that is a part of this story is of Mr. March, the girl's father. His story is mostly told through letters and stories told by Marmee until he comes home towards the end of part one. The reader has to read multiple story lines and sift through the personalities of each character in order to understand the joy, triumph, and sadness that these characters feel. This can make reading an already extensive novel even more difficult, but the reader is rewarded with happy endings and a wonderful tale.

Another text structure literary device that affects comprehension in classic literature is the use, or lack of, graphics. Most novels have some type of cover graphic, whether it is a picture, drawing, or a representation of the novel as a whole. Of the six novels that were chosen for this content analysis, two of them have graphic at the beginning of each chapter that represent a scene within that chapter. This can help the reader to gain understanding about what the chapter is about and what the reader could see in later chapters. Another novel has a map at the beginning of the book, and a short vignette at the beginning of the chapter that allows the reader to visualize the content of the chapter. While these novels do not have formal graphics throughout the chapters, the reader is able to visualize the stories clearly, and the few books that do have graphics offer a launching pad for those visualizations.

Classic novels, such as the ones read for this content analysis, were often written in a chosen format because it is supposed to ingratiate the reader into the world, language, and mannerisms that the author had created. The format of the six chosen titles may not be varied, but it does show that the classic novels read in schools today do include some diversity and expose students to the many different formats of novels. The story-within-a-story device, the structure, the linearity of the plot, and the use of graphics are all examples of ways that the

format can complicate reading. However, without knowing what the book is about, the format is often lost on the reader, making meaning another important factor to consider when reading a book.

A textual meaning literary device that affects understanding is the comprehension of the theme. The theme of a novel is the central idea that the author wishes to convey to the reader. However, sometimes there are multiple themes that the reader can pull from a novel making it more difficult for the reader to understand. One novel that has multiple themes is *The Outsiders*. This novel tells the story of 14-year-old Ponyboy Curtis, his brothers Darrel and Sodapop, their gang the Greasers, and the encounter between the Greasers and Socs (Socials) that ends in a murder. Ponyboy narrates the story from his viewpoint of a kid growing up on the wrong side of the tracks, introducing the reader to gang-fights, drugs and alcohol, the relationships between the members of each gang, and how those ties obligate Ponyboy and his friends to protect and defend each other and even kill for each other. The themes of this novel are not easy to pick out, simply because the themes can be varied based on the reader. Some of the themes that stand out in this novel are bridging the gap between rich and poor, honor among the lawless, the treacherousness of male-female interactions, and the importance of friends and family. The multiple themes present in this book make it an engaging read, but also a complex one that may require students to read sections of the novel multiple times or use other reading strategies to aid in comprehension.

Another textual meaning literary device that can complicate reading classic literature is the subtext in a novel. When reading a novel, readers will often notice that there is an underlying dialogue running through the narrative. Whether this is done on purpose by the author or created by the reader, it adds a layer of information to the text. Nevertheless, this can also make

comprehension more difficult. This is true for *The Island of the Blue Dolphins*. The tale of one island girl is interwoven with the stories of her people, who left at the beginning of the story, the animals who continue to live on the island and the story of the white people who visit the island to hunt otter. The main narrative is of Karana, who has been left behind on the island after trying to rescue her brother. This novel then chronicles her struggles with food, shelter, vicious animals and survival. Karana weaves within her own story; through her thoughts, dialogue with the animals and flashbacks; the stories of the other people who occupied the island and their visitors. This subtext that runs through the story adds multifaceted layers of understanding to the novel and brings to life this historical fiction novel. However, this also adds the difficulty of separating the main story from the subtext and deriving comprehension from both before the reader is able to fully understand the novel.

A further textual meaning literary device that affects comprehension is that the text is too difficult to understand. Although most books chosen to read in middle school are appropriate for the student at that level, some books are more difficult to understand and read. This is true for *Dragonsong*, a science fiction novel that has difficult language, multiple levels of meaning and no background knowledge for students to draw upon to aid in comprehension. Although readers are often able to relate to Menolly's relationship with her parents, and her wishes to be someone other than who she is, the multiple levels of meaning overshadow these understandings and make it difficult for readers to connect to the story.

The first language feature literary device that affects comprehension is conventionality, which is perhaps the most difficult structure to understand. This element looks at the language and how dense and complex it is, and whether the text contains abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language (CCLS, 2010). *Little Women* is an example of a book that has complex and dense

language. First published in 1871, this book contains language not used in modern conversation. This makes it difficult for students to understand the text because they do not comprehend the words. Although this novel is very interesting and contains appealing stories, unless the student understands what they are reading, the interesting and appealing is lost. "It is necessary to understand *what* the text is saying first before recognizing *how* the text was saying it. The students need to read the text "efferently" first before they can read it "aesthetically"" (Youssef, 2010). Rosenblatt (1994) defines efferent reading as analyzing ideas and information to be used after the reading event. Whereas aesthetic reading focuses on what is being experienced during the reading. Using the techniques of reading "efferently" and "aesthetically", while not using that vocabulary with students, will aid in comprehension of difficult language.

The next language feature literary device that affects is vocabulary. This element looks at how complex, unfamiliar, archaic, or subject-specific the text is. This structure looks at the use of academic language throughout the text, and whether the text contains ambiguous language, or is purposefully misleading (CCLS, 2010). One novel that has difficult vocabulary is *Dragonsong*. Because this novel takes place in a fantasy setting, there are words that are not part of the English language used extensively throughout the novel. The meaning of some of the words is easy to figure out, such as death-song and tuning through the use of context clues and how the vocabulary is used in the novel. Others need more context clues, the use of other reading strategies and definitions for students to understand, such as thread-fall, harper, and Pern. This makes reading this novel difficult for students because if they are unable to understand the vocabulary as they read the novel, they will constantly have to define or gain understanding of a word before they can continue reading. Nevertheless, vocabulary is perhaps the easiest element to deal with. Introducing students to the language they will encounter as they read and constantly

checking to make sure that the students understand the language are very important when reading classic literature.

The last language feature literary device that affects comprehension is sentence structure. This element looks at how complex the sentences are and if they contain subordinate clauses or phrases, or multiple concepts (CCLS, 2010). A novel that has unique sentence structure is *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. First published in England in 1950, the language and sentence structure more closely resembles what one would in the United Kingdom, rather than the United States (Lewis, 1970). This novel contains a great deal of dialogue between the various characters, and although each line of speaking is spaced out, the author does not always specify which character is speaking in a single conversation. This makes it difficult to follow which character is speaking and with whom they are speaking. However, once the reader has assimilated the cadence of the novel, it becomes easier to follow and understand. Sentence structure is difficult to identify, as a reader has to look at each sentence individually to see if this applies to their book. Often in classic literature, semantic problems and false generic expectations can provide the largest challenges for a reader (Maine & Waller, 2011). Looking at the sentence structure of a book can help the reader to gauge how difficult it may be to read, but without actually reading the book a reader will never know how difficult it really is.

Looking at language features and the narrative structures of conventionality, vocabulary, and sentence structure of a book, a reader has the opportunity to learn a great deal about the author and their intent when writing the book. Language skills, literary literature and techniques, and literature lessons can all be taught through the classics and can help students to better understand the language features that make the book unique (Santoli & Wagner, 2004).

The first knowledge demand literary device that affects comprehension is a students' background knowledge or lack of background knowledge. This is especially true for historical fiction books such as *The Island of the Blue Dolphins*. This novel deals with a primitive tribe living on an island shaped like a dolphin. What the natives experience is similar to the Iroquois, which students learn about in fourth grade. These natives have to hunt for food, make their homes out of the plants available on the island, defend against enemies and protect their families. Although the majority of this novel is told from the perspective of Karana, we still meet her people at the beginning of the novel and share in their experiences. We also see Karana begin to rebuild her life after her people leave and readers are able to experience the native life from a singular viewpoint. However, students have to apply their knowledge of Native Americans to the novel as they read. A student's background knowledge, or lack thereof, can make a novel easy to comprehend or create difficulty for a reader.

The next knowledge demand literary device that affects comprehension is intertextuality. Intertextuality is defined as the connections and relationships between novels that can help students comprehend what they are reading. Intertextuality is not something that is explicitly taught; students naturally make connections and draw conclusions about one novel from other's they have read. This is true for *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. Although this book has many themes and motifs that can be drawn from its pages, there are a few that stand out. This novel takes place in Oklahoma, similar to *Where the Red Fern Grows*, however Ponyboy and his family live in the city whereas Billy and his family live in the country. Students would be able to make the connection between these books and draw conclusions about the difference between these two character's lives. Another idea that can be pulled from this novel is the relationship between the rival gangs. Both sides have their leaders, followers and instigators. The same can

be said for *The Harry Potter* series by J.K Rowling. Harry Potter and his friends Ron and Hermione often find themselves pitted against Draco Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. Students can make connections between these two novels and the arguments and fights that happen between the groups. The concept of death is also very important to this novel. While Ponyboy and Johnny do not intend to kill Bob, because he was threatening Ponyboy's life Johnny defended him. The same is true for Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*. To save Peeta and defend her friends and family, Katniss has to kill people she would rather not. Students could draw connections between these two books making it easier for them to comprehend the complex themes.

The last knowledge demand literary device that affects comprehension is cultural knowledge. This is a wide and varied subject and can include many different aspects when reading. Although cultural knowledge is similar to background knowledge, it focuses on more specific details; such as location, age, gender, socioeconomic status, and familial relationships. This is especially true for the novel *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls. Although there are many ways in which connections could be made to this novel, including having a large family, finding ways to earn money, or wanting a pet there are also many connections that students would not make because of their cultural background. This novel takes place in the Ozarks, a range of mountains which spread out over eastern Oklahoma and Western Arkansas. While some students may have experienced being in the woods fooling around or going camping, most have never lived there for long periods of time. The cultural connections are very different for students who live in an urban or suburban setting rather than a rural area. Another piece of knowledge that students would have to draw upon would be saving their money to buy something they really want. In the novel, the main character Billy saves his money for two years in order to buy his coon hounds. In that time, he only earns fifty dollars, which seems like a

small amount of money to the students of the twentieth century. To earn this money, he hunts and sells the furs, digs up worms to sell to anglers and does odd jobs around his home. Students today would find a job in a restaurant or retail in order to earn their money, making it difficult for them to draw connections to Billy and his family. Another way cultural knowledge could complicate students understanding is the internal dialogue from the narrator. Billy is a bright ten-year-old boy whose experiences are varied, but all contained to his small town. He carries a map of where he lives and the surrounding woods in his head; because it is assumed that he cannot read or write because there is no school in his town. This novel shows that cultural knowledge is just as important as background knowledge and that without knowing the culture of the novel, students will have a hard time comprehending and making connections.

There are many literary devices that can affect comprehension when reading classic literature. Organization and the use, or lack of, graphics can lead to a difficulty in understanding the text structure. Language features such as conventionality, vocabulary and sentence structure can complicate comprehension and make reading classic literature laborious. The meaning of a story is very important and the comprehension of theme, the amount of subtext and the difficulty of the text all aid or hinder a reader. Knowledge demands are perhaps the easiest literary device to for readers to bypass as they read. However, a readers life experiences, the intertextuality of a novel, and the readers cultural knowledge all play a part in the comprehension of a book. These literary devices are important factors to think about when reading classic literature and determining their difficulty.

Part V: Conclusions and Implications

After reading the chosen books and focusing on what makes students struggle, I was able to identify four main themes that could complicate reading for students. These themes included the text structure, meaning, language features, and knowledge demands. From these themes, I extrapolated several specific concepts that could potentially case students to struggle reading classic literature. These concepts included a story-within-a-story device, the structure and linearity of the plot, the use of graphics, lack of general comprehension, the subtext, the comprehension of theme, conventionality, vocabulary, and sentence structure, a student's background knowledge, engagement with the text, the Intertextuality, and student's cultural knowledge.

From my literature review, I found that the conducted research was on either struggling readers and reading as a whole or classic literature, usually related to high school or college students. One conclusion that came out of my research is that text complexity needs to be balanced with other factors including student engagement and interest. This is important, especially when trying to meet the Common Core Learning Standards (CCSS, 2010). Text complexity is a concept that is very prominent in the Common Core and each book's Lexile Level, which indicates an individual's reading ability or the difficulty of a text, is listed in the module, which is a group of lessons tied around a single theme. If a text is too difficult, without the proper scaffolding, which is when a teacher brings the student up to the level of the text with guided help, the students is unable to gain comprehension of the text they are reading. This is where student engagement and interest play a key role. If a teacher picks a complex text that is also engaging and interesting to the students, then the students will have better comprehension. Another conclusion that came out of my research is that there are many ways to work with

struggling readers in the classroom. "Teachers have a strong awareness of various coping skills used by struggling readers, but less of an understanding of how to mitigate and manage these behaviors in the classroom" (Moreau, 2014). Most teachers are trained to understand why students would struggle reading, but they are not trained on how to help these students in the classroom without using outside resources. If teachers understand why student struggle to read, and how to recognize these students, then they will be better prepared to help these students in the classroom. "Middle school teachers believe that their students should be competent grade level readers, and while it is their job to adapt the curriculum for their needs, it is not their job to improve reading skills" (Moreau, 2014). The last conclusion that came out of this research is that the CCSS's are not being used in classrooms to benefit students. Most schools, with the implementation of the CCSS, made a decision whether to have their teachers use or adapt the modules provided for each grade level. However, teachers did not have any experience with the CCSS and therefore were unsure of how to use the modules and standards to meet the new goals set before them. Because of the implementation of the CCSS and the lack of teacher knowledge, teachers have used what knowledge they have to make decisions regarding what books they will teach and how they will teach them. However, the new standards require that students use critical thinking and show their learning in many different ways, making it more difficult for students who are behind to catch up.

After looking at the data related to struggling readers and classic literature, I found there are many ways to interpret the data that I found through my research. This data can be used to identify different ways that reading classic literature can be complicated for struggling readers, and indeed that was the main purpose of my research. However, this data can be used to identify the complexity of a text to see if it is at an appropriate level for the readers in a class. The data

could also help teachers to create mini-lessons to teach students about different text characteristics and literary devices they may encounter in classic literature. My personal reflections about the meaning of this data is that it can be used for more than the intended research, and that it can inform teachers about how to teach and read classic literature in the classroom.

After reviewing the data and looking at the current research related to struggling readers and classic literature, I was able to synthesize some implications and suggestions for practice in the classroom. An implication for teachers and stakeholders regarding the insight that content analysis can provide into reasons some students struggle to read classic literature is that teachers need to have the knowledge needed to teach these students. This means that teachers should be properly certified to teach the grade levels they are in and a schools administration needs to make sure that teachers are properly informed of new data and are educating themselves on this data. Teachers also need to make sure that they are being pro-active and attending training sessions that relate to the students and grade level they are teaching. An implication for teachers and stakeholders regarding text complexity is that teachers need to understand the CCSS and text complexity. The CCSS can be very difficult to understand, and when teachers are unsure on how to use the information provided in the CCSS, then they do not properly assign books to the class, resulting in the books being too easy or too difficult. Another implication that is loosely associated with this is that teachers need to have the proper training on how to implement the CCSS and meet the associated goals for each grade level. This is important because teachers need to understand what they are supposed to teach their students and how what they teach will be assessed. An implication regarding working with struggling readers is that classroom teachers need to learn to match students and texts. If teachers choose books that are both engaging and

interesting, they may be able to choose a book that would normally be too difficult for a student and provide the proper scaffolding in order for the student to comprehend what they are reading. Teachers also have to make sure that students are choosing recreational reading books that are within their reading level so that they experience success with reading and are willing to try reading difficult texts, such as classic literature. Another implication associated with matching students and texts is that teachers need to know different strategies to use when working with struggling readers. Some of these strategies could include tracking student confusion, establishing a purpose for reading, implementing student strategies and teacher tools, and setting a purpose and plan for reading. Teachers have to be able to spot when their students are using coping skills, and whether these skills are detrimental to the students learning. If teachers know what strategies they can suggest to their students, they may be able to get students to stop using coping skills and start using strategies that can be used in any subject. This requires training, observation, and reflection on the teacher's part, but can be very rewarding for the students.

There are, however, a few limitations to the content analysis that was completed for this research. One limitation is that only a select group of six books chosen by the researcher was used as part of the data collection. In order for this study to be more impactful, added data from classic books analyzed under the same lens as the six chosen for this study would be needed. Another limitation would be that the researcher only focused on four grade levels, fifth through eighth, for the conclusions and implications. To make this study more relevant for a larger group of people, research would have to encompass more grade levels. This would tie into the first limitation, in that including more grade levels in the research would mean choosing classic literature from those grade levels to include in the data collection. The last limitation associated with this research is that no children were used as part of this study. To better understand how

classic literature complicates reading for students, a researcher could study children in a classroom setting reading classic literature and take anecdotal notes, conduct interviews with the students, teacher, and parents, and hand out surveys to use as part of the data collection.

After synthesizing my data, looking at current research related to my topic, and my conclusions and implications, there are some future research needs that I believe would be beneficial to this research. One future research need would be more time to spend on reading the chosen novels, making notes and coding those notes to understand the data thoroughly. This would allow for more conclusions and implications for practice to be found. Another research need would be the observation of students reading classic literature and regular conversations with students about their reading experiences. This would give the researcher more data to synthesize regarding the complications students face when reading classic literature. One last research need would be reading more classic literature novels to add a greater depth and scope to the data. This would allow me to draw out more potential complication students might face when reading classic literature and more implications for practice in the classroom.

The overall significance of this study was the research conducted on classic literature in conjunction with research conducted on struggling readers in middle school. I found that although there was research on these two topics individually, most research did not connect them and had no suggestions for teachers on how to read these books with their students. The contribution of this study was the combination of looking at the CCLS text complexity and aligning that with good teaching practices so that teachers had the ability to read classic literature in their classrooms and reach struggling readers. This qualitative content analysis helps to inform teachers about different pitfalls they may encounter as they teach necessary classic literature in their classroom, and different strategies they may use to reach all of their students.

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Data Collection Books

Alcott, L.M. (1871, 1989). *Little Women*. New York, New York: Bantam Books.

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Appendices

Appendix 1
<u>Books chosen to read for data collection:</u>

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1983, 1989)
The Island of the Blue Dolphins by Scott O'Dell (1960, 1988)
The Outsiders by S.E. Hinton (1967, 2006)
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis (1950, 1970)
Dragonsong by Anne McCaffrey (1976, 2003)
Where the Red Fern Grows by Wilson Rawls (1961, 2001)

<u>Data Reading for:</u>

1. Text Structure (TS)
  a) Organization (O)
  b) Use of Graphics (UG)

2. Meaning (M)

3. Language Features (LF)
  a) Conventionality (C)
  b) Vocabulary (V)
  c) Sentence Structure (SS)

4. Knowledge Demands (KD)
  a) Life Experiences (LE)
  b) Intertextuality and cultural knowledge (ICK)

<u>Other Resources:</u>

Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) Grades 5-8 (2013)
Common Core Modules Grades 5-8 (2013)

Appendix 2

Text Complexity: Qualitative Measures Rubric
LITERATURE

	Exceedingly Complex	Very Complex	Moderately Complex	Slightly Complex
Text Structure	**Organization:** Is intricate with regard to such elements as point of view, time shifts, multiple characters, storylines and detail **Use of Graphics:** If used, illustrations or graphics are essential for understanding the meaning of the text	**Organization:** May include subplots, time shifts and more complex characters **Use of Graphics:** If used, illustrations or graphics support or extend the meaning of the text	**Organization:** May have two or more storylines and occasionally be difficult to predict **Use of Graphics:** If used, a range of illustrations or graphics support selected parts of the text	**Organization:** Is clear, chronological or easy to predict o **Use of Graphics:** If used, either directly assist in interpreting the text or are not needed to understand the meaning of the text
Language Features	**Conventionality:** Dense and complex; contains abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language **Vocabulary:** Complex, generally unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic language; may be ambiguous or purposefully misleading **Sentence Structure:** Mainly complex sentences with several subordinate clauses or phrases; sentences often contain multiple concepts	**Conventionality:** Fairly complex; contains some abstract, ironic, and/or figurative language **Vocabulary:** Fairly complex language that is sometimes unfamiliar, archaic, subject-specific, or overly academic **Sentence Structure:** Many complex sentences with several subordinate phrases or clauses and transition words	**Conventionality:** Largely explicit and easy to understand with some occasions for more complex meaning **Vocabulary:** Mostly contemporary, familiar, conversational; rarely unfamiliar or overly academic **Sentence Structure:** Primarily simple and compound sentences, with some complex constructions	**Conventionality:** Explicit, literal, straightforward, easy to understand **Vocabulary:** Contemporary, familiar, conversational language **Sentence Structure:** Mainly simple sentences
Meaning	**Meaning:** Multiple competing levels of meaning that are difficult to identify and interpret; theme is implicit or subtle, often ambiguous and revealed over the whole text	**Meaning:** Multiple levels of meaning that may be difficult to identify or separate; theme is implicit or subtle and may be revealed over the whole text	**Meaning:** Multiple levels of meaning clearly distinguished from each other; theme is clear but may be conveyed with some subtlety	**Meaning:** One level of meaning; theme is obvious and revealed early in the text.
Knowledge Demands	**Life Experiences:** Explores complex, sophisticated or abstract themes; experiences portrayed are distinctly different from the common reader **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** Many references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	**Life Experiences:** Explores themes of varying levels of complexity or abstraction; experiences portrayed are uncommon to most readers **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** Some references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	**Life Experiences:** Explores several themes; experiences portrayed are common to many readers **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** Few references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements	**Life Experiences:** Explores a single theme; experiences portrayed are everyday and common to most readers **Intertextuality and Cultural Knowledge:** No references or allusions to other texts or cultural elements

Adapted from Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards, Common Core State

Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies and Science and Technical

Subjects (2010).