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**APPLYING FLOW THEORY TO SIXTH GRADE LANGUAGE ARTS**

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study documents the observed and reported experiences of twenty-two sixth grade students and their teacher as they apply flow theory within a language arts inclusion classroom in a suburban middle school. This study defines flow theory according to the research of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who found that optimal experiences in life are characterized by one or more of the following factors: (1) skills balanced with challenges, (2) complete engagement, (3) goals are clear, (4) feedback is immediate, (5) sense of control, (6) loss of concern for self, (7) sense that time flies, (8) desire to repeat the activity. Csikszentmihalyi used the term “flow” to represent the positive feeling associated with engagement in an activity leading to the intrinsic desire to pursue that activity. The author questions how current reform efforts pressuring schools to implement traditional teaching and testing methods impact the quality of classroom experience. The study explores how the teacher monitored and evaluated the learning environment to create flow experiences for students to help them explore the intrinsic rewards associated with learning. The study engages students as co-researchers to define flow, analyze experiences for flow, and contribute to the implementation of enjoyable learning activities. The study suggests that the teacher influences flow in the classroom by providing rules and structure, understanding student interest, monitoring need, listening to student

voices, and designing learning activities with flow factors in mind. The study also suggests a presence of two types of curriculum; a “flow based” curriculum, controlled by the teacher and a “non-flow based” curriculum, dependent upon traditional textbook, skills based methods. The co-investigation suggests additional flow factors such as real life connections, novelty, social opportunities, and student voice, to increase the quality of experience for students. The author questions mandated curriculum and calls for a review of the quality of school experience in relation to flow and empowerment of educators to seek alternative ways to meet curricular standards by viewing classroom experience according to flow theory to promote the joy associated with learning.

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I am thankful for the wise guidance of flow centered professors like Dr. Joseph Shosh and Dr. Robert Mayer. They provided flow experiences in my graduate studies by sequencing goals, offering appropriate means and resources to meet challenges, by offering choices, control, and constructive feedback within a collegial setting. Learning at Moravian was a flow experience for me. I learned that teaching was more than a job; it was a passion. Upon my completion of the Masters program at Moravian I have not only evolved into a reflective person seeking meaning and purpose not only in my teaching practice, but my life as well. This explains why the idea of flow theory entered the scene one summer afternoon in Border’s and how I now view qualitative research as a flow experience as well. I would also like to thank my committee for their support, and understanding.

I need to thank my friends, colleagues, and family for their support. This was a difficult year. Inquiry into my practice became an inquiry into my life. Tools like trusting in the process, observing, planning, and acting came into practice when my father became terminally ill. He supported me even though he was the one who needed the support. My dad was great teacher to me. He was patient, gentle and kind and never pressured or demanded. He lived his life one day at a time even towards the end, always positive. I think he must have been in the flow a lot. But now he has reached the place of eternal flow. I know he would have enjoyed reading my thesis.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	x
RESEARCHER STANCE.....	1
Finding flow?.....	1
What is flow? .....	4
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	15
Observations.....	18
Reflective Memos.....	19
Student Work.....	19
Post Activity Rating Scale.....	19
Interviews.....	20
THE STORY OF THIS FLOW STUDY.....	21
Flow Set-up for Ownership, Rules, and Procedures.....	21
The Flow of Getting to Know You-A Friendly Letter.....	23
Keys to Success-A Flow Plan.....	31
Students and Co-researchers.....	35
Finding Flow in Ownership.....	37
Clouds and Flow??? .....	38

In and Out of Flow.....	40
Mary.....	42
Diane.....	42
Karina.....	42
Todd.....	43
Sam.....	43
Modifying Mandated Curriculum for Flow.....	44
It May Not Be Flow, But It’s Fun .....	50
Defining Flow Theory using an Activity Rating Scale.....	52
Sequencing and Connecting 40 Minutes a Day.....	58
Important Poems.....	62
If I Were In Charge of the World.....	64
Flow and Writing a Personal Narrative.....	67
Flow in Writing Graphic Organizer.....	85
Students Experience Flow as Co-Researchers.....	87
Comparison of Flow Factors according to MC, teacher, student..	92
An Essay Writing Test Can Be Fun???...Flow??? .....	96
It’s Flowtime! Caveman Idol.....	106
A Normal Teacher Wouldn’t.....	108
What Students Said Flow Was.....	110
DATA ANALYSIS.....	114



RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	117
THE NEXT ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE.....	127
REFERENCES.....	130
APPENDIXES	
A    HSIRB Approval Letter.....	134
B    Principal Consent Letter.....	135
C    Participant Consent Letter.....	136

## LIST OF FIGURES

1	Friendly Letter to students (page 1).....	24
2	Friendly Letter to students (page 2).....	25
3	John’s Letter.....	26
4	Diane’s Letter.....	28
5	Todd’s Letter.....	29
6	Diane’s Key.....	33
7	John’s Key.....	33
8	The All Star Team “Keys to Success” bulletin board.....	35
9	Wall chart containing “All American Slurp” prompt.....	45
10	Post-it Note Wall Chart.....	48
11	Activity Rating Scale.....	51
12	“Good Writing” Wall Chart.....	60
13	Contents of Handout Packet.....	61-62
14	Will’s Important Poem.....	63
15	Mary’s “If I Were In Charge”.....	66
16	Diane’s Brainhouse.....	71
17	Todd’s Brainhouse.....	73
18	Diane’s rough draft I.....	75
19	Diane’s rough draft II.....	76
20	Todd’s rough draft.....	78

21	Diane's final copy.....	80
22	Todd's final copy.....	81
23	Plan for Flow Graphic Organizer.....	86
24	Comparing Flow Factors in Enjoyable Experiences.....	95
25	Group Four Square Transparency.....	99
26	Research Findings Graphic Organizer.....	117
27	Activity Rating Summary.....	127

## RESEARCHER STANCE

### **Finding flow?**

Summertime book browsing in Borders will never be the same for me again! A book on the psychology shelf caught my eye, a book about *flow* that would stimulate my thinking enough to escalate into an action research study about enjoyment in learning for my upcoming master's thesis...

Out of the hundreds of books on the shelves I picked this one. Maybe it was the bright yellow spine, maybe it was the blurry clock on the cover, maybe it was that delicate red-scripted word "flow". I read the title, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (1997). I was intrigued by the author's name, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced "ME-high Chick-SENT-me-high"). I saw he was a professor of psychology and education at the University of Chicago. In my graduate courses I remembered learning that John Dewey taught there and his "laboratory school" was affiliated with the University of Chicago! Maybe there was a connection.

I considered myself to be a person who always "went with the flow," especially in the world of teaching where changes occur in everything from the daily schedule to student needs to mandated curriculum, all of which require one to be flexible. But, then I scanned the back cover. The words *inattention*, *anxiety*, and *boredom* popped out, reminding me of those frustrating times in my classroom when I saw students with blank pages and blank stares reluctant to

participate in their own learning. I was haunted by students moaning, “School is so boring” and “I hate school” because I loved school, and I always had. Of course kids are really anxious these days about standardized testing. I’ve seen the tears and the frowns and I’ve seen some students shut down. I’ve heard, “I’m so nervous taking this test” and “I know I’ll fail.” These signs of frustration had set the course for my pilot study on engaging reluctant readers. Maybe my reluctant readers were expressing a need for flow.

Continuing my scan of the back cover, I connected three more words, *engagement*, *ownership*, and *happiness*, to a finding of that pilot study. Students were more willing to read independently when they took ownership of their experience. This was after being given the voice to create an incentive program as well as a choice in reading materials. They said that getting tickets for reading and writing summaries was fun. Somehow, I figured, flow must have something to do with these things.

Scanning further, I recognized that Howard Gardner, the multiple intelligence expert was quoted on the back cover saying, “Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has a genius for illuminating phenomena that perplex most behavioral scientists. In this brilliant synthesis, he shows how all of us can enhance our work, our play, our lives.” Wow, would enhancing my life also help me improve my teaching? My graduate study had already shaped my view of curriculum as “shared experience” and I thought of Connelly and Clandinin

(1988), who said, “The kind of teacher that we are reflects the kind of life that we lead. The same may be said of our students” (p. 27). I learned through reflection and action research that a teacher had the power to change her classroom. I then wondered if I could possibly help my students enhance their lives through learning? I also thought about Connelly and Clandinin’s (2002) notion that reform efforts have ignored the central role that the teacher’s life experience plays in the classroom.

As I studied just what we mean by curriculum, my classmates and I examined current reform efforts like NCLB, PA Standards, and the concomitant testing. I continued to be frustrated by current reform efforts that looked to outsiders, instead of empowering teachers to correct problems in the classroom. Prompted and pressured by these laws and the threat of poor ratings due to low test scores, our district purchased expensive new text book series and programs designed to improve low test scores in reading and math. Our district also purchased a program called Accelerated Reader to improve independent reading skills. The program marketers made it sound simple; students would choose a book marked AR, read, and take a test on the computer and earn reward points for passing the test. In turn, this would foster a love of reading and motivate them to read more. To encourage teachers to use the program, AR became part of the reading curriculum, where the number of points earned determined a portion of the reading grade each marking period. For several years, I went along with the

AR program as prescribed by the district. Over time I noticed that my students were not reading more. In fact, they were complaining; even my highest achievers were anxious over the tests. The low level readers just plain stopped trying to pass the tests. I began to realize that, instead of this being an educative experience for many of my students, AR was downright mis-educative. According to John Dewey(1938), “Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience” (p. 25). Back then it was a time for action research!

All of a sudden I looked at my watch and realized that what was meant to be a “browse” in *Borders* turned out to be a ninety minute reflection, contemplation, flashback about teaching. I bought two books on flow, and drove home thinking that summer would be over before I knew it, and that I had a lot of new reading that I wanted to do.

### **What is flow?**

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) wanted to explain the phenomena of “getting lost in one’s work” or the “intense joy” associated with optimal experience. For over two decades he collected descriptive accounts of peak performances reported by hundreds of men and women while they engaged in favored activities like rock climbing, surgery, basketball, chess, or painting. From these accounts he derived the term *flow* to describe the blissful feeling of spontaneous joy resulting from engagement in an optimal experience. To enter this state of flow people become

so absorbed in what they are doing, their awareness merges with action. They lose track of time and sense of self. There is no worry, boredom or anxiety. Because the experience feels so good, it is intrinsically rewarding, and people will expend a great deal of energy to feel it-even if it is difficult or dangerous. Although flow experiences may occur spontaneously, it is more likely that flow results from intentionally focusing on the task or engaging in a task which slightly challenges present skills. Csikszentmihalyi maintains that an individual can learn to recognize and create flow by being aware of the eight characteristics universal to all flow experiences. The conditions during flow experience are as follows:

- *challenge is balanced with skill*
- *complete engagement*
- *goals are clear*
- *feedback is immediate*
- *a sense of control*
- *a loss of concern for self*
- *a sense that time flies*
- *a desire to repeat activity*

Reading about flow theory from the viewpoint of an educator made me think about the possibility of creating flow experiences in school. If school provided more opportunities for flow, learning would be enjoyable, and maybe more students would want to learn. I had always believed that learning hinged on



the emotional health of the classroom, especially after reading Daniel Goleman's (1995) *Emotional Intelligence*. The classroom must be a place that allows for emotional growth as well as cognitive growth. According to Goleman, emotions like anxiety, anger, frustration and boredom can impede learning. Helping students find flow in learning may be a way to nurture positive emotions associated with cognitive growth. When I looked back to my pilot study, the ticket incentive program may have "accidentally" created conditions for flow which motivated reluctant readers.

Back then I took the risk to ask students why they weren't reading independently, and they were more than willing to tell me. They said they were frustrated with AR tests or bored with the books they were reading. Together we developed a ticket incentive program and made reading more "fun." Students *choose* books that interested them, set *goals* to read a certain amount of pages, and wrote summaries in their reading log in order to earn tickets. Eventually even the most reluctant reader in the class found a "sports series" that he enjoyed reading-even at lunchtime. His friends even joked and asked what was "wrong" with him. I remembered that when reluctant readers were given more *choice* and *control* over independent reading, they would ask, "Can you read my summaries? I'm ready for tickets," and then "May I go to the library to get another book?"

AR scores increased and students looked forward to silent reading time in class, but there was no way to tell the long range effect on their desire to read.

They said reading for tickets made it more fun. Tickets may have been the extrinsic motivator some readers needed to “force” themselves to engage long enough to experience some success. Honestly, I had hoped that the good feelings associated with success would add up and lead to an intrinsic desire to read.

On the other hand students in writing class were having “fun” without an incentive program. Over the years in writing classes, the students would be so involved in the steps of the writing process that they would say, “Is class over already?” or “That was really fun!” When I announced, “Time’s up!” I was often surprised by how time flew by without me stopping to say, “Stay focused,” or “Now get back to work.” Maybe it was because we were in the flow, engaged in learning, having fun. I couldn’t help but think that conditions for flow had existed back then. Would there be a way to recreate those conditions to motivate more students to do well in school? Could it be that when students said something was “fun” it was much more than just “fun?”

After my summer reading and reflecting on past experiences teaching reading and writing I knew I wanted to engage all students in learning and hear them say, “It’s flow, let’s do it again!” I also knew that I would invite students to be co-researchers in this next cycle of action research where we would examine the quality of experience in the classroom. Therefore the following question would guide the inquiry into fun, flow and learning: *How can flow theory provide*

*a lens for viewing and shaping the learning environment of my 6<sup>th</sup> grade language arts classroom?*

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A handful of studies across various school settings have examined flow theory as a lens through which to view the quality of classroom experience Abbott (2002), Boyer and Lamoreaux (1997), and Custodero (2002), Egbert (2003), Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi (1996), Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider and Shernoff (2003), Smith and Wilhelm(2002), Whalen and Csikszentmihalyi (1991). They are all based on the body of research conducted by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who has also engaged in his own classroom research as well. Csikszentmihalyi (2000) believes teachers who understand the conditions for flow are in the position to turn learning experiences into flow experiences and help students develop the desire to learn.

Data to measure flow in classrooms have been collected quantitatively to measure student perception of flow using Likert scales and rating scales where students numerically rate components of flow perceived during an activity. Qualitative researchers have used observations, surveys, interviews, and student work to examine flow factors at work in classrooms.

Whalen and Csikszentmihalyi (1991) collected data in the Flow Activities Room at the Key School in Indianapolis. This “play” room was teacher monitored and designed to provide opportunities for concentration, orderliness, choice,

diversity of activities, and challenge. Students engaged in free activities, namely games, puzzles, and manipulatives. Educators participating in the study hoped that if students learned school was fun in this room that this would transfer to other educational experiences. In order to compare student perceptions of flow factors in different activities, students numerically rated favorite activities in and out of school. Combined with observations, interviews, and student work coded for flow factors, the researchers found that children pursuing their favorite games in a flow room closely match adult flow experiences, namely choice, control and balance between skill and challenge. However it could not be determined if a transfer took place to other areas of learning.

Later Hektner and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) gathered data from high school students throughout the United States that suggested a transfer of flow in outside life to inside school. The students responded thirty-two times over the course of one week to wristwatch beepers as employed by the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) developed earlier by Csikszentmihalyi. They repeated the process again eighteen months later. Each time research participants logged affective and cognitive states on a Likert scale, ranked daily experiences using rating scales, and wrote free responses later coded for flow. Flow was measured as the balance between challenge and skill and calculated by finding the arithmetic mean of raw-scored challenge and skill. The difference in these scores showed that those students who increased in flow in life increased in intrinsic

motivation, self-esteem, time spent doing school work and activities relevant to future career goals.

Sherhoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider and Sherhoff (2003) used similar data collection methods in a five year study in order to determine how flow affected student engagement. The participants included 526 students ranging from grades six to twelve. Researchers found that engagement increased when the perceived challenge matched skill, when instruction was relevant, and when the learning environment was under their control. Students were also more engaged when working in groups or individually rather than listening to lectures, watching videos, or taking tests. This appears to concur with Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) statement, "When goals are clear, feedback relevant, and challenges and skills are in balance, attention becomes ordered and fully vested. Because of the total demand on psychic energy, a person in flow is completely focused" (p. 31).

In order to determine if flow occurred in the foreign language classroom, researcher Egbert (2003) gathered data using a combination of methods from high school Spanish students. She used a post activity survey in the Likert format to determine student perceptions of classroom activities related to flow factors of interest, control, focus and challenge. Also during her study her team gathered observational data using a checklist of flow factors using a similar scale. Finally she coded interviews and student products for flow factors. Analysis of the data led to the finding that tasks could be ranked according to flow. It also appeared

that computer-based tasks provided more opportunity for flow than teacher-centered tasks.

Another group of researchers used only qualitative data collection methods. Abbott (2002), Boyer and Lamoreaux (1997), and Custodero (2002) observed, surveyed, interviewed and examined student work through the flow lens in order to determine how the classroom environment affected intrinsic motivation or enjoyment in the respective subject areas of writing, science and music.

Both Abbott (2002) and Custodero (2002) found that the adult in charge or teacher contributed to the flow equation. Flow experiences for the participants occurred within the context of an autonomous and supportive environment maintained by the teacher. Abbott studied two fifth grade boys already identified as avid writers in order to explain the context of flow in writing. After coding her interviews and observations she determined that flow, as described figuratively by these boys as “blinking out” or “having the touch” occurred when the teacher allowed them to pursue their own interests in writing and make choices along the way. Custodero (2002) researched flow exhibited in the actions and words of eleven 4 to 5 year olds during group music instruction in the first year, and later, with a longitudinal follow-up with five of the same children at age 11 to 12. Teachers who learned to read cues and behaviors specific to music students were able to provide necessary challenges to guide students in their active quest for

flow. Deliberate gesturing as opposed to unfocused careless physical movement represented a flow factor, demonstration of self assignment and self correction was another. Adult intervention provided access to clear goals and feedback, another flow factor. When adult intervention interfered with the child's taking ownership, flow was obstructed. Both researchers found that in flow situations the teacher maintained appropriate challenges, provided clear goals and feedback, and kept children engaged by providing authentic tasks. Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development and the role of a more able individual may account for the findings in both studies. For students to experience flow, teachers need to recognize when to provide appropriate activities that challenge the learner and the necessary feedback to help set goals to scaffold students to next level of learning. Vygotsky (1978) said, "Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults" (p. 88).

Realizing that students rarely reported enjoyable experiences in school, Boyer and Lamoreaux (1997) used flow as a lens to analyze the learning environment of Boyer's seventh grade science class. As a teacher researcher Boyer first reflected on his practice, next he observed and recorded student reaction to instruction. In the meantime he conducted three student surveys about enjoyment out of school, in school, then enjoyment specific to science class. His most significant results were based on these survey responses coded according to

flow factors. Like Csikszentmihalyi (1984) he concluded that students rarely attained flow in the classroom. Boyer's findings are significant in that they suggest factors reported by students that were missing, which prevented flow in the classroom. Quite significantly, the students perceived a lack of control over proceedings, studies, and movement in the classroom. Students reported the biggest blockage to flow as distractions that prevented concentration on the task at hand. Other blockages to flow reported by students included: not enough time to complete tasks, boredom and anxiety, unclear goals, and delayed feedback. He came to no conclusion about teacher impact on the environment.

Smith and Wilhelm (2002) used flow theory as lens in which to view their teaching and plan for enjoyable classroom experiences. Their book, *Reading Don't Fix No Chevy's: Literacy in the Lives of Young Boys* is the result of a qualitative study of literacy in the lives of adolescent boys. Like Boyer and Lamoreaux (1997), they found through interest surveys and interviews that all of the participants experienced flow in outside school activities. Realizing that as teachers they could not meet the interest of every student, Smith and Wilhelm concluded that they could create conditions of flow experience by designing inquiry based literary activities to encourage more students to engage in learning. The inquiry units created the conditions for flow experience by providing a sense of control, appropriate challenge, clear goals and immediate feedback. Thinking



about their teaching through a flow lens helped change their approach to teaching reading.

After reviewing the research on flow I realized that the definition of flow in a classroom was different than the pursuit of flow outside of school. I noticed how an individual seeking flow outside of school has much more control over choice of activity and is more likely to achieve flow. I realized that in most situations, individuals within the school system have less control and fewer choices, making flow a rare occurrence. I wondered how control and choice would play out for students and me.

Students experienced flow when teachers provided authentic tasks, appropriate challenges, clear goals and feedback in an autonomous environment. In order to meet these criteria, I realized I needed to set up an environment to nurture autonomy where students could take ownership of the classroom. In the meantime I needed to get to know the students' interests and abilities to create authentic tasks that they would enjoy.

No studies mentioned "teacher flow" something I would investigate through reflection as a teacher researcher. No researchers actually discussed the concept of flow with students. I planned to find a way to open that discussion with students. The flow room activity rating scale gave me an idea on how to make flow more concrete for students. After reviewing the research I was convinced that sixth grade students would probably enjoy being a part of the discussion of

flow in the classroom. When it came to ideas on how to make learning a flow experience, who would know better than the students?

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

I remembered what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi said to Howard Gardner in a videotaped interview (2003), “We have barely scratched the potential of introducing joy into education.” I set out to meet this challenge by conducting an action research study. The question that would guide my inquiry was, “How can flow theory provide a framework to view and shape the learning environment of my sixth grade language arts classroom?” I designed my research study to help students experience meaningful learning activities and set goals for learning that could be fun within the context of the English and reading curricula that I was responsible to teach them. I didn’t want preparing for PSSA writing assessments to be a “high pressure” situation. I wanted the reading curriculum to engage readers and be more meaningful.

I asked students to be co-researchers in order to involve them as stakeholders in the process. Together we investigated what made experiences enjoyable in and out of school, and we analyzed these experiences for flow factors. Students also reflected on learning experiences in order to understand their needs. My hope was to better understand the conditions for generating flow in order to transform learning tasks into flow experiences for students as well as for me. I was looking at flow as a framework in which to understand the complex

interaction of learner, task, teacher and context in order to make informed decisions regarding learning experiences for different learners. I wanted all students to experience joy in learning.

I teach sixth grade in a suburban middle school organized by teams housing grades five through eight. I am on the inclusion team along with two other regular education teachers, one special education teacher, and instructional aid who divide their time among the three classrooms according to student needs. Our sixth grade students transition from the self-contained fifth grade classroom to changing classrooms in sixth grade for the major subjects. The student and teacher day is divided into 10 periods on a rotating 5 day schedule. Sixth grade teachers are required to teach a major subject, like English, Science or Social Studies to the three sections of students in the team, Reading/Spelling to our homeroom section of students, and math to yet another homogenous grouped section. Hence, I teach three separate curriculums one for English (which was originally grammar based and now is writing based), the other for Reading/Spelling (a district-wide reading series), and then math. I teach English, Reading/Spelling and math to a total of over 100 students a day.

I chose the students in my homeroom section as participants in the study because I spend the most time each day with them, including on average one 40 minute English period, and an 80 minute Reading/Spelling block. Teaching in the inclusion setting for the past three years has challenged as well as enriched my

experience because of the opportunity to work with students possessing a variety of learning styles. This year's mix included eleven girls and eleven boys, including two African American females, one Hispanic male, and one Asian male. Reading levels ranged from third grade to eighth grade. Academic levels, as determined by fifth grade report cards included high achievers (one gifted), middle, and low achieving students. This year seven students, about one-third of my class, were identified with special learning needs. Four girls and three boys had IEPs, in reading, spelling, or written expression. Five of these students qualified for an SRA pull-out reading program during Social Studies or Science designed to improve reading fluency. Two of these students have their learning needs compounded by special emotional needs as evidenced by fifth grade data. This year's mix was evidence once again to me that no child or classroom could easily fit into a prefabricated mold.

Before official data collection began I shared my plan with my teacher research support group, professor, and the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) at Moravian college. This board reviewed my plan to ensure the safety and confidentiality of the participants in my study. Upon the approval of my plan by HSIRB (Appendix A) I sought and received the permission of my principal and the parents of all 22 participants in my study. I also assured the confidentiality of my participants by masking identities with pseudonyms. The

principal informed consent letter, and the parent permission letter are included as Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively.

My approach centered on inquiry and observation, action, and reflection Duckworth (1987) where the action research process itself becomes part of the instructional practice within the classroom as students and teacher jointly inquire what it means to find flow in school. I maintained a field log from September 20, 2004 to February 20, 2005 in chronological order containing my observations, reflections, surveys, interviews, and student work, and analyses (Bogdan and Bilken, 1998; Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul, 1991). Qualitative methods (Bogdan and Bilken, 1998) best served my efforts to maintain a reflective and responsive practice as a teacher. I collected data in the following ways:

*Observations:* At least twice a week I wrote field notes on student behaviors and comments in order to document the happenings during learning activities in my classroom. During the times when I was part of the action, I wrote participant observations (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001). Later on I re-read these observations in order to add details, reflective notes, or observer comments concerning the understandings of flow and no flow occurrences. According to Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997), descriptive details about actual events and observer comments together work to help the researcher develop new understandings. I bracketed the observer comments in my log to delineate my opinions from what was actually said and done during a learning activity. This

helped me separate my frustrations or joys in the field from what I actually saw and heard.

*Reflective Memos:* I wrote to examine my view and clarify my new understandings about flow in the classroom setting. Memos served as a place to write about how I made curricular decisions based on flow and as a place to examine how and when I would gather and use student input. I used memos as a place to share my frustrations and to help me clarify what I wanted to try next. I also examined signs for teacher flow and how these signs affected my practice.

*Student Work:* During the study student writing was a major vehicle in which to examine flow experiences. Writing was also a way for students to have their voices heard. Through their writing, students would examine personal experiences related to flow and coded for flow factors. Students participated in a workshop setting and also maintained writing folders containing assignments (Atwell, 1998). Student work was a way to assess and determine student academic need.

*Post Activity Rating Scale:* Students filled out three activity rating scales in order to understand, compare, and evaluate these activities for flow factors. They rated two “in school” activities, a spelling test and a personal narrative. The third was an “out of school” activity selected in response to being asked, “If you could choose anything to do right now what would it be?” As research partners,

we discussed the evaluations in terms of the flow factors in order to suggest ways to improve learning experiences.

*Interviews:* In order to understand student perspectives, I offered interview opportunities to all students in order to follow-up on my observations as well as ask them for feedback on activities. Interviews occurred on an informal basis and were open ended in nature (Arhar, Holly, and Kasten, 2001). I interviewed students as a whole group and anyone who wanted to would comment. Interviews were natural follow-ups to student perspectives on activities. Interviews often evolved into class conversations about the quality of experiences we were having together.

I wanted to be trustworthy when interpreting the data in my study. According to Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) my interpretations would be trustworthy through the triangulation of multiple sources of data. I collected data for five months to ensure credibility of my inquiry. I observed on a consistent basis how students were reacting to learning activities as well as my own behaviors. To further reflect I added observer comments to observations as well as wrote reflective memos. I gained student perspective and feedback by giving my students voice as co-researchers. I provided opportunities for interviews, writing, and class discussions within a safe environment. I gave my students opportunities to reflect upon their own learning. Based on the data I made every attempt within the curriculum to respond to their ideas, needs and concerns. I

shared data with colleagues in order to gain further perspective and response to research drafts. Being with colleagues provided a forum in which to revisit data and check that my interpretations were reasonable (Maclean and Mohr, 1999). I reviewed the literature concerning flow in school and structured my study around it.

I used the data to tell my story of flow as a framework for viewing and shaping the learning environment using a variety of narrative forms. These narrative forms include anecdotes, vignettes, and pastiches. A vignette is a composition of data gathered over time to illustrate a finding. A pastiche is an interweaving of data gathered from multiple perspectives used to illustrate a theme (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997).

## **THE STORY OF THIS FLOW STUDY**

### **Flow Set-up for Ownership, Rules, and Procedures**

In the beginning we were ALL looking forward to having fun while learning in sixth grade. We were known as the “All Star Team,” and each day the pod banner greeted us with the motto crafted for the study, “Learning is FUN and FUN is Learning.” I was looking forward to the new school year and the challenges ahead. For now I had simplified matters and defined flow informally as the feeling when you say, “Wow, that was fun!” or “I can’t believe how time flew!”



From the very beginning my goal was to establish and maintain a structured yet nurturing environment in which we could operate as a group of people out to have fun...learning...together. I thought of us as flow seekers. From day one I shared ownership of the classroom by giving students control over certain classroom duties. Students learned to maintain the weekly job roster as well as perform duties like attendance, calendar, snack passer, spelling checkers, homework board, messenger etc. It was also my job to set up rules and procedures to communicate expectations of everyday operations as well as behavior. Next I worked to facilitate our getting to know one another. I was in line with what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) had discovered about the importance of environment and flow. He found that children who grew up in family contexts that facilitated clarity of goals, feedback, feeling of control, concentration on the task at hand, and challenge would have a better chance to develop an *autotelic personality*, one who is able to transform ordinary experience into flow.

This year because of my interest in flow, I viewed the classroom environment as that “family structure” in which to nurture autotelic personalities, including my own. I suspected that classroom environment had quite a bit to do with student flow and teacher flow. I also suspected that there might be something called community flow, or group flow. And then there was also the flow that I felt was associated with connectedness of experience. I was out to explore the complex web of classroom interaction in sixth grade English and reading class.

It was easy in the beginning; everyone was starting with a clean slate. I erased all cautions from fifth grade teachers about behavior, emotional and motivational problems with several of my students. I thought flow would be the answer. In theory as long as I could maintain flow factors as *italicized* ...set *clear goals* for students, make sure they acquire the *skills* needed to perform tasks, offer proper *feedback* in increments, hand all assignments back on time, give students *choice* and voice, *engage* them with *interesting* activities, and *challenge* them appropriately, all would be well. How could one person figure this out all at once? I was beginning to see the complexity of planning for flow. I had to think of flow as fun at first to simplify things and trust in the action research process in see how the flow factors would play out in a real classroom. I wanted to study Flow Theory as an integrated approach to view quality of experience for teacher, learner, and task within a context. Would there be teacher flow, student flow, activity flow, classroom flow? No classroom is a perfect world so flow would play out in its own way, in its own time.

### **The Flow of Getting to Know You-A Friendly Letter**

This year, like every year, I wrote a letter to the students introducing myself to them as well as to engage students in an authentic writing activity by asking them to write back. I wanted to see what kind of writers they were and even anticipated that my letter's closing invitation to them to participate in my

flow study as “co-researchers” would trigger a discussion. I distributed copies of my two page letter, as seen in the following, and read it aloud to my class.

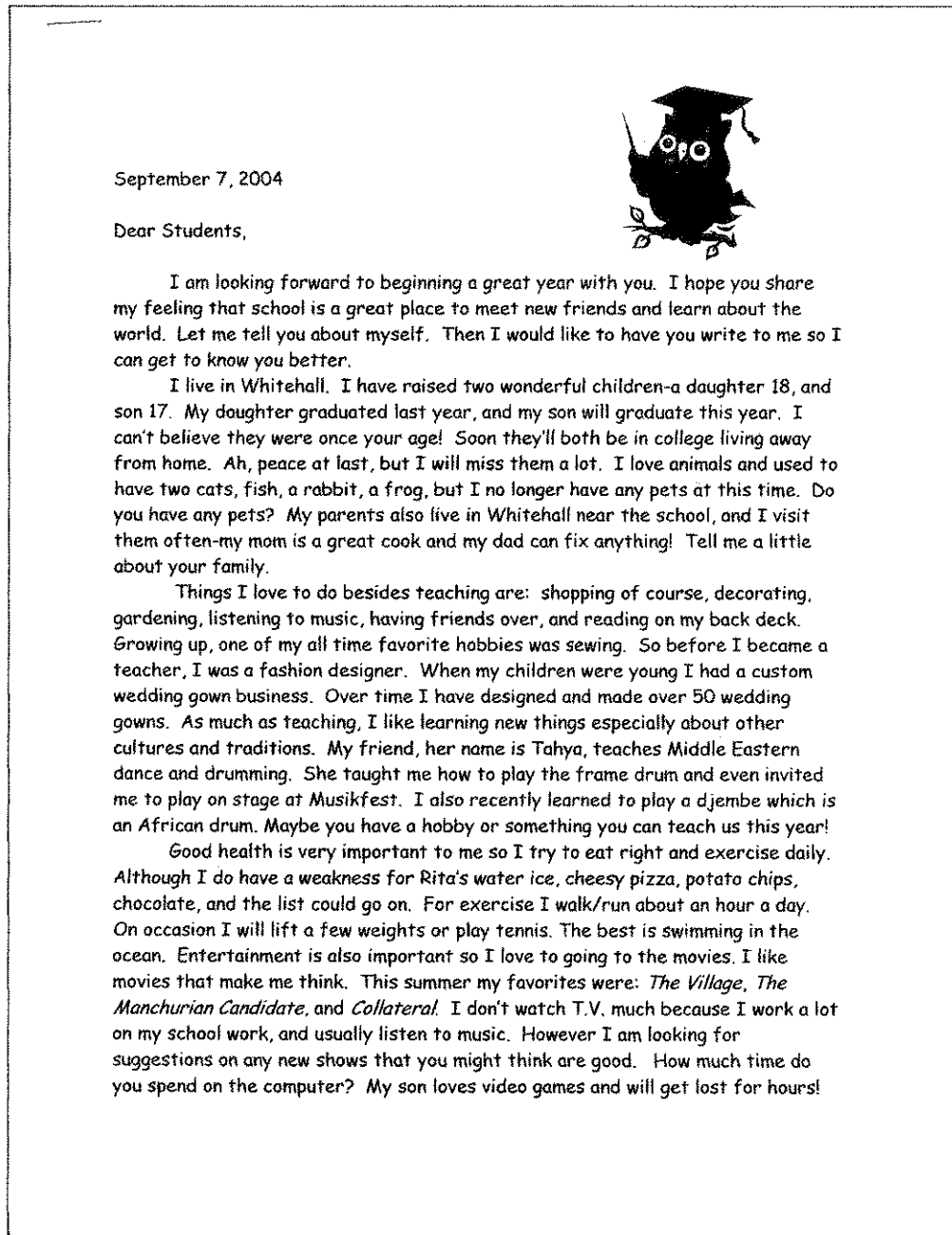


Figure 1. Friendly letter to students (page 1)

I also spend a lot of time on my computer writing, doing research and emailing my brothers who live in Indiana and Arizona, and my sister who lives in NJ. I also email my assignments to my professors. I wonder how it would work if you could email assignments to me here at school. What do you think?

My secret ambition is to travel around the world, be a college professor and a poet. What is your ambition, or what do you want to be when you grow up? I love to read and write poetry and keep a journal -you will see me writing things down all year long. Post-its are my favorite invention ever. Words are an amazing thing. I collect quotes from poems, books, songs, advertisements, even students. Students come up with the most clever things! I love to read. Of course all teachers say that! My favorite book for kids is *Holes*, by Louis Sachar. I also read the newspaper everyday because I like to know what is going on in the world and our community. Did you keep up with the Olympics this summer, or are you thinking about the presidential election? The Lehigh Valley has a lot going on. Did you go to any live performances like plays, interesting restaurants, Musikfest, or the Allentown Fair this summer?

What is your favorite subject in school? My favorite subject to teach is writing because I like to help sixth graders discover all of the marvelous, important things they have to say. Remember that you have the best imaginations ever. I also like math because I like to figure things out. What do you want to learn more about this year?

Tell me three goals you might have this year. Three goals I have for this year are...to challenge my students, read a lot of good books, and earn my master's degree. This year I am required to conduct a research study in order to earn my master's degree at Moravian College. I invite you to participate with me in my research project. You will be co-researchers studying what makes school enjoyable. I will be asking for your ideas and will share the research process with you along the way. I have heard students say that "school is boring" and I would like to get your ideas on how to make learning as fun as possible. We will study something called flow theory. Who knows, maybe one day you will want to conduct your own research study!

That's all for now. I am looking forward to reading your letter.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Bell

Figure 2. Friendly letter to students (page 2)

Since there were no questions to discuss, next I reviewed the writing process. They chuckled as I held up my “messy” pre-write and revised draft. I instructed them where to find paper and they immediately went to work pre-writing, drafting, and finalizing. John finished first, walked over to me and asked, “Can I read you my letter?”

I replied, “Sure!”

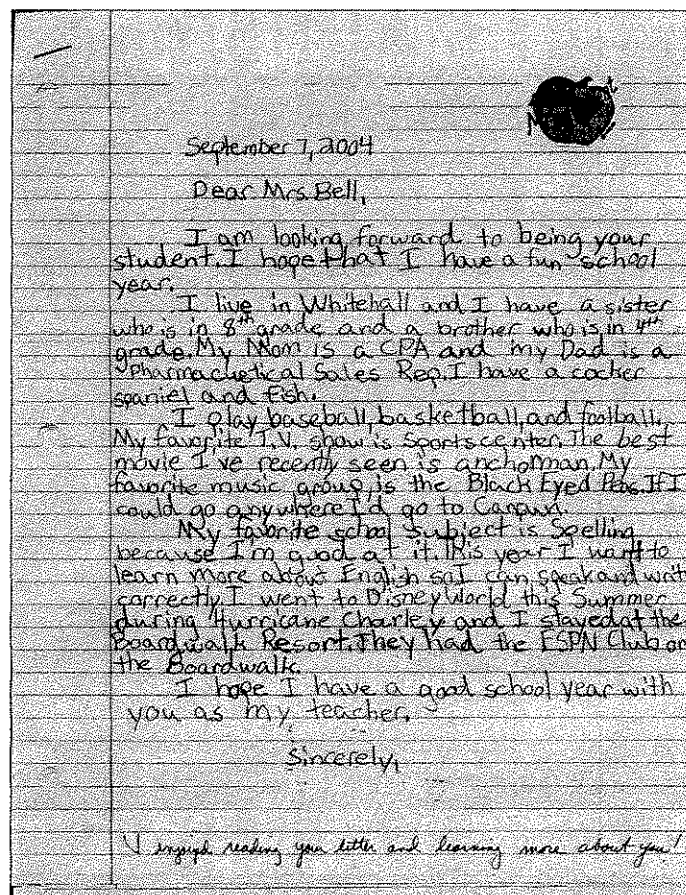


Figure 3. John's letter

He began reading aloud, “Dear Mrs. Bell, I am looking forward to being your student. I hope that I have a fun school year. I live...” I had to stop him because a line of students had formed behind John, smiling and waving their letters, wanting to share too. I looked at the clock and realized the period was over.

I muttered to myself, “That really went fast.” Then I announced, “Sorry guys; you need to get packed up for science. I’ll go tell Mrs. Lane that we lost track of time.” I heard moans and “Ohs” coming from the dispersing line.

Diane asked with a slight frown, “But, when will we get to read you our letters?”

I appreciated that she expressed her need and suspected that she was not the only one who felt this way. I could adjust my plans accordingly. So I said, “How about tomorrow? Maybe you could share your favorite part or your favorite thing you like to do, so everyone who wants to share will get a chance?”

She smiled and replied, “Oh thank you, Mrs. Bell,” and walked across the hall to science class.

The next day Diane shared, “I’m looking forward to sixth grade...”

September 8, 2004

Dear Mrs. Bell,

I'm looking forward to sixth grade. I've been ready since mid July. I'm ready to learn as much as I can. Let me tell you more about myself.

I have three other sisters. There's one who's 16 in her junior year in high school. There's one who's 13 and this is the last year in middle school. There's one who's 9 in fourth grade this year. My mom's a hair dresser and my dad works in Fibra as a welder. I used to have four cats.

I love all sports, but my favorites are swimming, soccer, and volleyball. I do Whitehall Staves all year long and compete in the summer. My favorite swimmer is Michael Phelps. I just love being in the water. I've been also playing soccer since I was three or four. But I took a break this year to swim all year long.

I love school. My favorite subject is social studies. I just love learning about our history. But my favorite part to study is geography.

When I grow up I'd like to be a marine biologist, the first woman president, or make the summer Olympics for swimming.

Those are all the things that make me, me.

Sincerely,

Thank you for sharing so many neat things about you! I am so happy to have another in class!

Figure 4. Diane's letter

Then Sally shared about how she likes to dance, then Brenda that she wants to be a fashion designer, then Sharon who wants to be a teacher, and Mary who loves camping, and Kerrie who loves her cat even though it scratches her. Many more shared. Then came Todd who helps at home by cutting the grass,

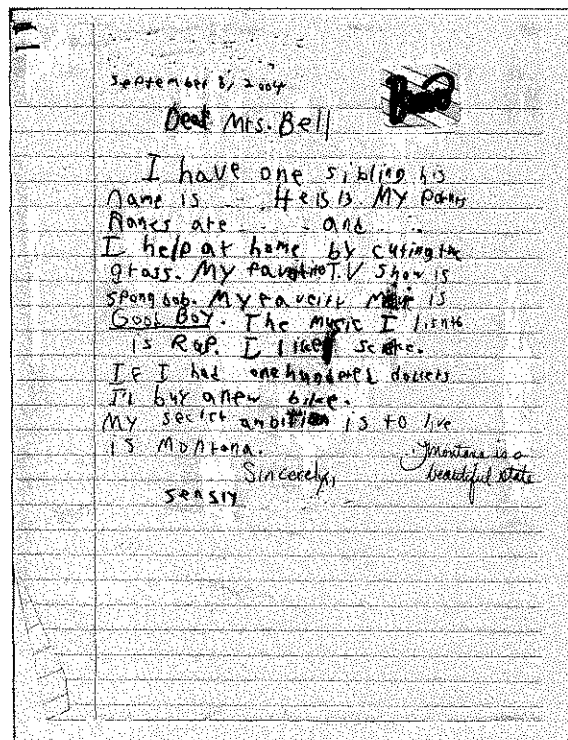


Figure 5. Todd's Letter

and last was Sam who loves fishing. Both boys had just finished with the help of the instructional aid, Mrs. Jones. I closed by announcing, "Thank you for sharing. It sounds like you have many interests, are all good writers, and are all happy to be in sixth grade!" Heads nodded in agreement. "Time for music class." On their



way to line up the students showed that they knew the routine. Already they put their “stapled packets” showing the writing process they followed- final copy, rough draft, pre-write in the English mailbox marked with red dot for their section. After reading their letters I immediately knew that differences in student performance would *challenge* me.

I wondered why they hadn’t asked me any questions about the content of my letter. It was long enough, maybe too long but had “exciting things” about me. At first I was somewhat disappointed that my letter did not by itself spark that flow theory discussion that I was eager to begin. But then I realized that this was not my true intent. My goal was clear to students. I wanted them to write back about themselves, and that is exactly what they did. And from what I knew about sixth graders, it was very normal for them to concentrate on themselves. Maybe it was more important to get to know each other first anyway. From what I had learned in my pilot study, a good rapport with students is necessary before a genuine dialogue can occur. It was like when you ask someone, “How are you?” and they reply, “Fine,” without asking you back, “And you?” I knew it was not yet time to ask them to co-research. I continued to get to know my students.

I also began viewing the learning experience with flow factors in mind. I identified the flow factors in italicized print that I considered when planning a “Keys to Success” activity in the following anecdote.

### Keys to Success-A Flow Plan

Without knowing my students or their *interests* that well, I went along with my belief that, “All students want to be successful,” and they might have fun reading and talking to peers about what famous people have said about success. To promote balance of *skills and challenge* I planned each group to contain students with varied levels of fluency, comprehension and written expression. So far the class members had been very willing to scaffold one another learning. Some quotes contained more *challenging* vocabulary, like ‘legacy’, or ‘maximum utilization.’ I also thought that they would enjoy the *control* of writing quotes of their own on their *choice* of fluorescent colored key. I also thought they would enjoy the positive *feedback* from sharing and posting their quotes on the hallway bulletin board. *Goals* would remain clear and *engagement* more likely because each student would have a handout to write on. The action would take place in an environment structured for learning.

English, reading or math class routinely opened with, “Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen!” our the signal that it was time to begin.

“Good morning Mrs. Bell,” replied students in unison.

I smiled and proceeded, “Just think, you all start off the year with “A’s”...in everything!” They smiled and cheered as I walked over to the daily agenda written on the chalkboard. “To keep those “A’s” going, we will read what some famous people said about success. You will work in groups to read, discuss,

and write your own quote for the team bulletin board. Also we will practice working in groups. In your groups I'd like you to discuss what you think each quote means and jot a few words under each one. Then I want you to write your own quote." I held up a stack of fluorescent-colored strips printed with a key for our "Keys to Success" bulletin board. "I want green!" someone shouted. I asked the paper passers to distribute the handouts. Meanwhile I called groups by setting out index cards labeled with student names on the chalk ledge. "Number 1 person will start by reading quote #1, followed by 2, 3, and 4."

While students read and discussed among themselves, I joined in and listened briefly about what Henry Ford, Walt Disney, Albert Einstein and Shakespeare had meant.

Linda explained, "He [Disney] just means you can do anything. You just have to try hard enough."

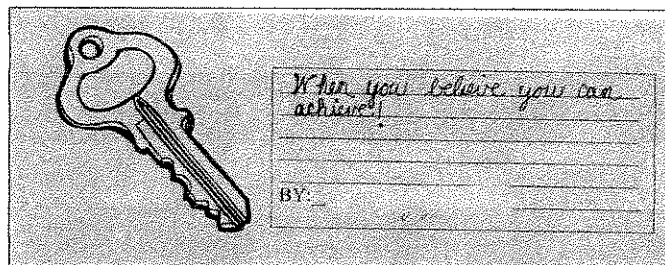
"Lincoln meant something like, if you have a bad day, have a positive attitude and it will all be worth it in the end," added Beth.

Sam asked, "What is legacy?"

John replied, "Well, I think it's kinda like something you pass down."

I stepped back for a few moments and viewed the classroom as a whole and thought, "This is a classroom in flow of some sort; *everyone appears to be on task*, talking, reading or writing." I felt happy.

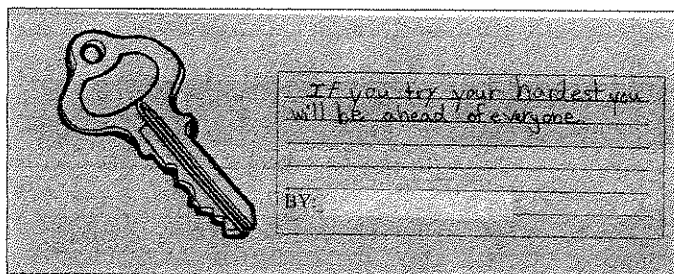
Next I invited students to come forward to get a key to write on. Students smiled as they chose their favorite color, returned to their seat and penned their own quotes. A few minutes later, Diane stood before me smiling and read, “When you believe you can achieve!”



**Figure 6. Diane's Key**

I gave my “thumbs up” as *feedback* and handed her the stapler to hang her key on the bulletin board. All of a sudden students were lined up to share.

John read, “If you try your hardest you will be ahead of everyone.”



**Figure 7. John's Key**

Noting that Diane and John finished first again, I thought, “They might be students who needed more *challenges* perhaps.” Thumbs up, and I handed him a stapler. Sensing that we were out of time, I announced, “We need to finish up, so read your quotes to each other, and see how they sound. If anyone needs help with

spelling see me.” Students turned to each other and read. Over came Sam waving a blank key, and Todd who wanted his quote proofread. I had to help them later, for class was now over for the day. “Time for gym class!”

So far they were a nice group to work with. On the way to gym several students shouted, “There’s our bulletin board!” Then Sam tugged my arm and quietly asked, “When I’m done, Mrs. Bell, can I hang it anywhere I want?” I smiled and nodded. I was looking forward to the next activity in English class and suspected that they were too! I felt a sense of community building. I felt this was a flow activity. The environment was structured by assigning groups, using the handout, having them write and share. All students were active and engaged in reading at least one quote to their group, and they all jotted down their interpretation for at least two or three. All students met the goal of writing their own quote and hanging it up on the team bulletin board. As for myself, I was engaged in instructing and offering feedback to students. Satisfied as well as a little tired, I wondered if I could keep up the pace. I began to notice that flow had something to do with planning, good teaching practice, and meeting student needs. I was also looking forward to keeping the flow going with input from students. I was ready to introduce the study and ask them to become my co-researchers.



Figure 8. The All Star Team “Keys to Success” bulletin board

### Students a Co-researchers

About three weeks later as students were transitioning from gym class to reading class, Mary blurted out, “Hey, when are you going to tell us about that ‘flow thing’?” I was annoyed at her constant “blurring out” but this time I was thankful. So were the students. They cheered as I announced, “We’re going to do something different today in reading class.” The time seemed right to introduce the study, especially because I had their attention and smiles. Was I going with the flow? To me this seemed like the natural thing to do. Earlier that week I had

received an e-mail from a parent thanking me for “getting her son off to a good start” and that “he comes home with many positive things to say about you.” This bit of feedback helped me realize that maybe parents would also be ready to support my research idea. I needed to keep it simple at first and talk about flow as “fun”. I pulled out my file folder of consent letters that would become the focus of our reading lesson. To begin the discussion of the study I asked, “Does anyone here think school is boring sometimes?” Many hands shot up; some students nervously giggled. Others looked around in disbelief.

Paul piped in, “No one ever asked us that before.”

I simplified matters by saying, “I am going to school at Moravian College in order to learn how to make learning fun for students, and I think you guys can help me.” I began to share some of my own woes about going to class at night, having a lot of homework and writing 20 plus page reports. We then read the consent letter together, and students got a kick out of learning how to pronounce Mihayli Csikszentmihayli. “How many of you think that you can read this letter to your parents tonight and get it signed so that you can be my co-researchers?” All hands went up. Then we moved on to the issue of pseudonyms. Mary asked, “Can we pick our own names?” The room buzzed with excitement over this notion, so I let them have fun sharing possible names. Happy I had their attention and support, I went from desk to desk signing my name to the consent letter. As I came to John, Sally and Diane, they wondered aloud, “Are we the only class that

will help you with this?" I answered, "Yes, we spend the most time together!"

They all smiled. Within the next few days I had consent from all 22 students who were now eager to serve as co-researchers and make suggestions to make things flow for them.

### **Finding Flow in Ownership**

After the spelling and reading quiz each week it seemed to flow best if I could plan the next period as silent reading time. That week I noticed that students were enjoying sharing responsibilities in the classroom. I had also heard Paul and Linda talking about clouds and sensed that they had ideas to share today. The following anecdote depicts a scene showing students in the flow by taking ownership of classroom duties as well as their roles as co-researchers.

After Mary gave the spelling test (because she scored a 100% on the pretest) I heard Diane cheer, "Good job, Mary!" Then the rest of the class clapped and cheered. Gavin, the snack passer, asked if he could pass out Jolly Ranchers. I said, "Yes." Meanwhile the spelling/reading checkers collected the tests and proceeded to the back table to engage in their duties. I instructed the rest of the class to use the remainder of the time for SSR. Students then fished out their SSR books and reading logs from their desks and backpacks. Then Diane asked if she could pass out reading tickets. I said, "Yes." Students who needed tickets signed up on the chalkboard. Diane proceeded first to Natalie's desk to check her reading log summary and gave her three tickets. The spelling and reading checkers were



busy in their own flow. With red and green pens in hand Mark, John, Will and Bruce were busy grading and recording the stack of tests. Once they got their Jolly Ranchers, Todd and Sam asked if they could go next door and read their SSR book with Mrs. Jones. I said, “Yes.”

Paul, who had not found his book yet, raised his hand. “Mrs. Bell I have an idea for a fun activity.” Heads raised and students smiled, all except the checkers in the back of the room. I sensed students were eager to share their ideas and reminded the class, “Now remember that our ideas have to be educational, like things we need to become better readers and writers.” My fear was students would get silly or impractical. It was my job to keep learning the focus. I smiled and held up my pen and clipboard to signal that I was ready to listen and record their ideas.

The following pastiche entitled by what I thought at first when Paul suggested we go outside and look at clouds. I created *Clouds and Flow???* from what students said that day as I listened to their ideas. Knowing that I would not be able to fulfill their requests all at once, I thought about what deeper needs they may have been expressing. In italics are my thoughts in response to about what students said about going outside and looking at clouds. I tried to think in this way whenever students shared their ideas.

*Clouds and Flow???*

“We can go outside and look up at the clouds...” said Paul.

*He just needs to go outside and be free or run around. Maybe he is not serious about improving his skills. Maybe he's waiting to see what I will say, I'll let him keep going.*

Paul added, "Then write sentences. We can write about all different shapes we see. Not too long though."

*He now knows that he needs to tie in reading or writing. He doesn't want to write a lot so maybe poetry would be better. We could build vocabulary that way. Writing prose might take away from the whole nature experience.*

Todd waved his hand and suggested, "Why can't we videotape? Then we could not have to worry about writing things down when we are trying to look at the clouds."

*Todd knows he has poor handwriting and was really listening and anticipating his needs. I think it is good that he is able to express an idea to make it easier for him.*

Brenda and several others liked Todd's idea. Brenda said, "We could even take photographs. We could we bring blankets outside to sit on."

*Photos might be easier to refer to than videotape. Maybe each person could snap a picture on the digital camera and attach it to their writing assignment. We would have to wait for a cloudy day in the spring.*

Students chattered about their ideas. Hands were waving. They really liked the cloud idea. Linda wanted to read historical fiction and write an autobiography including a family tree. Mary wanted to rewrite a paragraph from a favorite book. Karina and Sally loved to perform. Sally wanted to get in groups and make a play or skit. Karina wanted to sing and play music. Diane's idea was the last idea shared that day. She wanted to see what it was like to develop something to sell, work in groups, make it, and advertise it. I was impressed by their ideas. By the end of our discussion the checkers had graded and recorded all of the tests and quizzes and returned them to fellow students. Now that was immediate feedback. For now, the flow in our classroom stopped because it was time for the next class.

### **In and Out of Flow**

Reality hit. The novelty of September's "fun" beginning to the school year was wearing off. Official business was upon us-the reading series, the spelling tests, unit tests, reading response logs, AR points, and PSSA writing. My concerns grew as I assessed the different needs of my students. I have found sixth grade to be a particularly demanding year for most students as they enter into those awkward teen years with different maturity levels, different social skills, and even different sizes. Some students needed bigger desks than what were available. There were lots of books, binders and papers. Backpacks were big and heavy; lockers got jammed; there was a changing of classes; different teachers

expected different things; and there was lots of homework. I had heard, “Sixth grade is so hard compared to fifth” and “There’s too much homework” from students and parents of high and low achievers alike. On back to school night, I explained to concerned parents that sixth grade offers more opportunities to students to develop organizational skills, social skills and cognitive skills. “It just takes time for your children to adjust.”

This year when “the gap widened” and different student needs surfaced I felt challenged. I wondered how much curriculum had to do with students falling out of the flow. Students like Todd, Karina, and Sam who were not in the flow with reading homework completion and they rarely studied for spelling tests. I became frustrated with excuses like, “I left my notebook at home” or “I forgot.” Students like Mary and Diane seemed to be able to finish most of the homework assignments in class. I wondered how much they were really being challenged.

As the reading curriculum progressed according to the team schedule, one story a week, I felt a lack of control. I noticed my own greeting, “Good Morning Ladies and Gentlemen,” losing enthusiasm before reading class. I thought maybe it would not be practical to expect flow all of the time.

Challenging or frustrating as it may be, as a teacher I would need to differentiate (adapt) instruction to meet the needs of students like Mary or Diane as well as inclusion students like Todd and Sam. Below are vignettes created from

observations of classroom activities so far this year that helped me to understand different student needs.

**Mary**

*I'm a girl scout. I know first aid. I know I am the smartest one in the class. I am gifted so I get to go to enrichment class. Good thing because sometimes class can be really boring. I can really write a story. I use similes and metaphors quite well. I learned to read when I was four, my big sister who is in college now taught me. I have read every good book there is. I love to read. I got an award for high AR points last year. My teachers get mad at me sometimes because I tend to call out in class. It's just that I know a lot.*

**Diane**

*I love school. I love to write. I love to read. I love to swim. I love soccer. I can't wait to show Mrs. Bell more of my writing talent. I know I'm smart because I take Pre-Algebra in sixth grade and that is a year ahead. Both of my sisters had Mrs. Bell and they loved the writing projects in English class. I love to read my stories to the class. I hated English last year. We never got to decide what we could write about.*

**Karina**

*I don't get it. My report card stinks, 3 F's. My mom says I'm lazy. I hate going to that special reading class. I'd rather go to art with everyone else. I'm getting really mad at those girls who tease me on the bus. Why are people always*

*spreading rumors about me? I'm going to beat them up, and I don't care if I get in trouble. "Everybody's always talkin' bout me." Tarisha says they're not. "I'm so mad, can I go see Mr. Weller (guidance counselor)?" I'm going to be a singer.*

### **Todd**

*I hate to write. I have a hard time thinking about what to write. I need help. "Write more" is all I hear, never "Good job." Then my teachers complain that they can't read my handwriting. Hey I can't spell either, never could, but they just keep pushing. I quit long ago. I never study those lists even though they are shorter than everyone else's. I'd rather read a book with lots of pictures, but I can't earn AR points that way. I like to ride my bike. I'd ride my bike all day long and never go to school if I could. I'll just tell the teacher I left my homework at home, or ask to go to the bathroom. She'll forget about me.*

### **Sam**

*By the time I find my pencil and my paper everyone is finished and packing up for the next class. I like to write stories, but I need help, because by the time I write the first word I forget what I'm thinking. If Mrs. Bell can't help me I can go find Mrs. Jones or Mrs. Smith. My dad wants me to move to another class for slow learners. He says I'm a disappointment. I wish he could be proud of me for once. I want to do a good job. Maybe my teachers can tell him I'm doing good.*

I suspected that students like Mary and Diane would find flow in school, even if I did not plan lessons according to flow criteria. On the other hand, I knew

that identified students like Sam and Todd may have trouble finding flow even if I did plan according to flow criteria. I considered what Csikszentmihalyi (2002) had said - that a learning disability could be an obstacle to flow because of the inability to concentrate. I had often found myself thinking of ways to get all students to focus their attention on learning. In the inclusion setting, students often depended on the support of the aid, Mrs. Jones, or the special education teacher, Mrs. Smith, to redirect their attention or pull them aside for small group instruction.

### **Modifying Mandated Curriculum for Flow**

According to the teacher's manual the plan today for sixth grade was a guided reading of, "The All American Slurp," a story about a Chinese family who faced difficulties adapting to American culture. The manual tells the teacher where to stop and how to model thinking about sequence of events while students listen. After the story students usually answer comprehension questions, do a skills work sheet and take a quiz. Over the years my guided readings and story activities became less dependent on the manual. Modifying mandated curriculum for flow was not easy. I spent a lot of time creating writing lessons for flow because I had more control and it was more enjoyable.

In place of the five story questions this week I planned a reading-response prompt. I wanted students to connect reading and writing class. The social studies and science teachers often reminded me that students "forgot" good writing habits

in other classes. As teachers we needed to help students make these connections. The school schedule breaks the day into ten 40 minute blocks. We constantly stop and start. It was hard to find flow that way.

Below is the wall chart containing the prompt for “The All American Slurp.” I hung visuals like this to remind students an assignment was due, as well help them see the connection between writing and reading class. I explained that to answer the reading prompt they would use the same processes we were learning to write personal narratives in writing class: prewriting, drafting, editing, while focusing on introductions, details, transitions and conclusions.

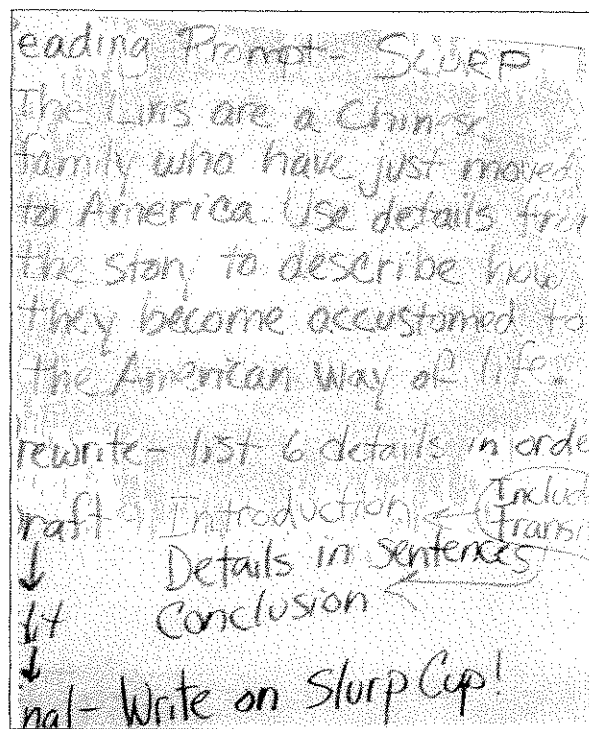


Figure 9. Wall chart containing “All American Slurp” prompt



For the guided reading lesson that day I didn't have the special education support or the confidence yet in the rest of the class to stay on task for me to pull a small group of students. I knew that the inclusion students needed the support, but I had to do the best that I could for now. It was not practical to plan every lesson for flow. In school the reality was that sometimes students would just have to sit and listen. In some of the studies I read it was just this type of "passive activity" that was "less likely to lead to flow."

The following passage is part of my participant observation that day where it became very clear that asking students sit, listen, and read along to the audio version of a story was a flow-breaker for some students.

*I pressed "start" on the CD player set up in the front of the room and said, "Now follow along everyone." I used this opportunity to observe reading behaviors. My attention soon focused on several of my inclusion students who seemed to be out of the flow. Karina and Todd, books open were staring blankly at me. I pointed to my book to redirect their focus. Heads snapped down. As I strolled the aisle with clipboard in hand I noticed Sam looking at the pictures, tapping his pencil, and scratching his nose. Kerrie was on the wrong page. I redirected her. Gavin was shaking his head violently. I tapped his desk to redirect. I made my way back to the front and sat at the desk. Karina was now looking at the floor. Sharon was yawning. Sam was following along with his pencil, but he was on the wrong page. Now Karina was yawning, and Kerrie was*

*playing with her pencil snapping it in two. Gavin was now looking out the window. The rest of the class was reading along with their eyes."*

I felt bad. I let myself get flustered observing and trying to refocus students. I hadn't stopped the CD player enough times to complete the chart to be used as the pre-write for the reading response. I put the teacher's manual aside and kept going. I wanted to get them to focus their attention so that they could meet the expectations of the writing response. The remedy was to use post-its. All students loved post-its. I challenged the class to go back to the story and find at least five difficulties the Lin family faced and write each one on a post-it. Students got right to work digging out post-its, flipping through the story, and discussing details with their neighbors. All students were eager and I was impressed with how cooperatively students worked together to create our class chart. I was able to assist students like Todd and Sam and point Karina, and Sharon towards their peers or to Mrs. Jones, who was now available. Diane and John each added seven post-its and organized the chart with the help of Linda and Sally. Mary was finished also and was now started on a class book, "1,000,000 Ways to Use Post-it Notes." I closed our double period reading class that day relieved and proud of our chart entitled, "Details About How the Lin Family Had to Adapt to American Culture." I think students were too. The chart is on the following page.

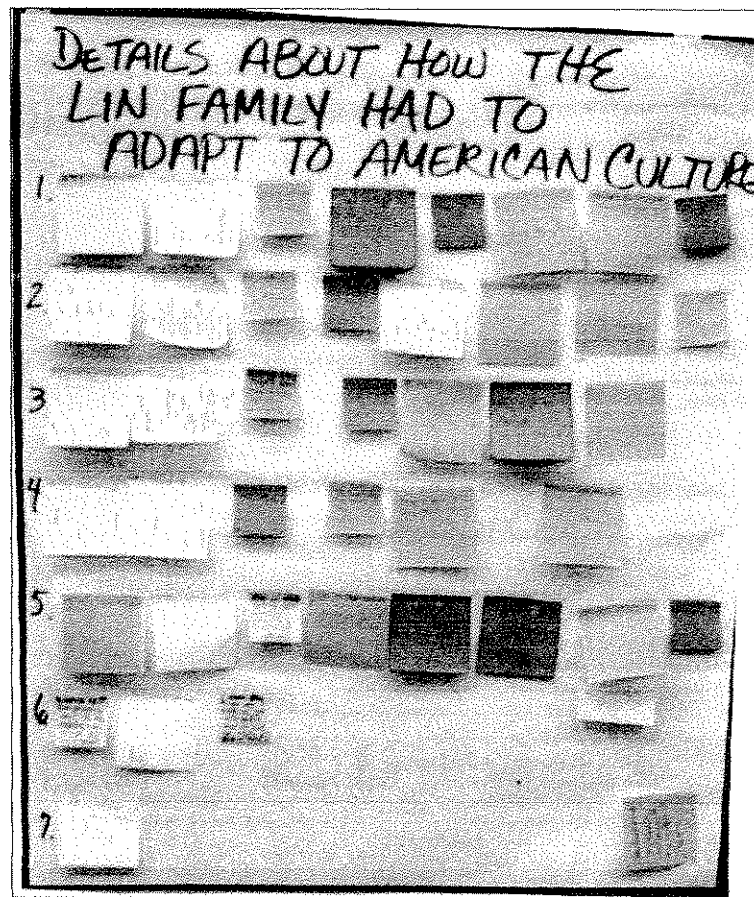


Figure 10. Post-it Note Wall Chart

Over the next few reading periods, students referred to the chart to write their summaries. They added descriptive details and used transitions applying skills recently learned in English class. Eventually all students had either conferenced with Mrs. Jones or me to have their final drafts approved. Soon Mary asked me, “Can I bring in cotton balls, straws, and cups to make our final copy look like a real “Slurp Cup” like in the story?”

I replied, “Sure.”

Linda asked, “Can we hang them from the ceiling? I have yarn.” Student writing eventually evolved into pieces of art hanging from the ceiling. Each student had created his or her own three dimensional “Slurp Cup” complete with cotton ball foam, a straw, and cherry on top.

I noticed how the post-it notes and “Slurp Cups” had made the assignment a little more interesting, a little more active, a little more fun for students. Passive activities were a traditional part of school, and I was figuring out that it was not only teaching strategies, but novelties that could motivate students to finish assignments. After coding my field log, I noticed many times I had used novelties to try to make things fun. They were planned or spontaneous. Sometimes they were devised by the students themselves. Novelties were also a way to get attention. Novelties were the fun things for students to stir up the routine. Vygotsky may have disagreed, but I was seeing them as scaffolding devices that could help students find flow...perhaps. Below is a list poem that I created that led to new understandings about the role novelty may play in leading to flow. My ideas alternate with students’ voices presented in italics, followed by please because they were very polite. They also wanted to have fun. I wanted to be careful not to over simplify Mihayli Csikszentmihayli’s definition of flow with “fun” so I called the poem, ‘It May Not Be Flow, But It’s Fun!!!’

**It May Not Be Flow, But It's Fun!!**

Post-it notes and cotton balls

*Toss me the koosh ball please*

Spooky words and monster books

*Pass the Jolly Ranchers please*

Think pads and sculpey clay

*Let's make a sphinx please*

Piggie Pie and reader's theatre

*Have a Chinese auction please*

First grade buddies and poetry

*Play a spelling game please*

Tic Tack Toe journals and 4 squares

*Eat lunch in the classroom please*

Magazine collages on paper plates

*Let's write on the overhead please*

ABC lists and reading tickets

*Now let's go outside please!!!!!!*

Novelty devices were fun and could enhance learning activities and motivate students, but these were exterior means. Flow theory was more than fun. People who experience flow often acquire the intrinsic desire to repeat the activity. I wanted students to experience the intrinsic rewards of learning, just like

I had. I asked students a while back to write a paragraph describing a recent experience that they enjoyed. I was planning to have them analyze for flow factors. But I decided to set them aside because I wanted them to understand that flow was much more than fun, that flow was feeling that one got when doing something they chose, but according to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi it had to meet certain criteria. It sounded so complicated for sixth graders, but I thought I could make it more concrete by using an activity rating scale adapted from Whalen and Csikszentmihalyi (1991) used in the Flow Room study. Below is the Activity Rating Scale students used.

<b>ACTIVITY RATING</b>				
<b>PLEASE CIRCLE ONE:</b>				
<b>IN SCHOOL</b>				
<b>OUT OF SCHOOL</b>				
<b>FLOW MEASURE</b>	<b>ALMOST ALWAYS</b>	<b>OFTEN</b>	<b>SOMETIMES</b>	<b>ALMOST NEVER</b>
<b>FEEL SAD</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>FEEL HAPPY</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>WISH NOT TO STOP</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>TIME DRAGS</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>INTERESTED</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>WORRIED</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>DOING WELL</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>IN CONTROL</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>CLEAR GOALS SET</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>FEEL BORED</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>CHALLENGING</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>DON'T CARE</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>FEEL POSITIVE</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>FEEL NEGATIVE</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>WANT TO DO AGAIN</b>	4	3	2	1
<b>TIME FLIES</b>	4	3	2	1

Figure 11. Activity Rating Scale

### **Defining Flow Theory using an Activity Rating Scale**

“It’s time for a little research on flow. We’re going to fill out an activity rating scale,” I announced after the spelling test.

Mary joyfully yelled from her seat in the back, “Yeah, we are guinea pigs!”

“No, you are not guinea pigs; you are co-researchers. I need your help. But first I want you to understand flow a little bit better.”

Jim said, “That’s cool, we’re co-researchers.”

I passed out the activity rating sheets I had adapted from one of the studies I read over the summer. I directed, “Fill in your name and the name of the activity we will be rating today, which is Viking Voyage Spelling Test. Today’s date is 10/8/04. We are going to rate this activity on a scale of always, often, sometimes, never or 4, 3, 2, 1 according to something called ‘flow measures.’

Let’s choral read the first column where it says flow measure.”

Except for Sam, Kerrie, and Todd, the class read, “Feel sad, feel happy, wish not to stop, time drags, interested, worried, doing well, in control, clear goals set, feel bored, challenging, don’t care, feel positive, feel negative, want to do again, time flies.”

Students were quiet as I directed further, “Now think about how you felt during the spelling test, and if you got a 100 on the pretest, think about how you felt during the pretest or about spelling in general. Now read “feel sad” and think

about if you always, often, sometimes, or almost never feel sad during a spelling test. Check the box that matches.” I walked around and answered questions as needed for about ten minutes. After seeing that this was going smoothly so far, in the moment I decided to have the students compare spelling to an activity that they enjoyed. I was hoping that the contrast in feelings and actual ratings would help them understand flow better. “Now put those aside for now.” Students smiled as I passed out another copy of the rating sheet. “Now I would like you to think of an activity that you really enjoy. Like if I gave you an hour of free time right now, what would you do?”

Todd asked, “Can I say biking? Does it have to be in school?”

I clarified, “Chose what you like. Just circle up top whether it is in school or out of school. Just think about how you feel during the time you do that activity. Now fill out the scale.”

The class replied, “Ohhhh!!!!”

I looked over to Karina who was smiling and holding up her paper, which read, “Singing!” I smiled, and she went right back to work. It seemed everyone chose an activity outside of school.

“Now that you are finished I’m going to make some predictions about how you filled out the second rating sheet. I predict that most of you filled out either a three or four on the following: feel happy, wish not to stop, interested, doing well, in control, clear goals, challenged, feel positive, want to do again, and time flies.



Now raise your hand as I read each one again if this is true.” Most students raised their hands.

Mary announced, “You are amazing Mrs. Bell!”

“Now think about the feelings you have about your favorite activity and that is called flow. You see flow is a special feeling measured by those characteristics that you rated high on your rating scales.” Students nodded their heads, smiled and giggled. “How many of you feel that you have felt flow before?” Again students raised their hands. “Now look at two rating sheets side by side. Do you see a difference in how you felt during the two activities? Raise your hand if you see a difference.” All hands raised again.

I then instructed students to write on the back of their papers whether or not they experienced flow during spelling and why. “Out of school you have choices of activities and of course flow would be more likely. But in school you’re here to learn. Sometimes it is hard, sometimes easy, sometimes you have no choice.” The important thing is for you to reflect like we do in writing class and think about what you need.” I wanted them to be reflective and then instructed them to make a suggestion on how flow would happen in spelling for them.

In the big picture spelling was not an area I would spend my time planning for flow. But I applied what I knew about a lack of balance in skills and challenges and no-flow to develop the meaning of flow. To me students’ grades

showed that they were either bored or frustrated, because lists and tests were too easy or too hard. As a whole they did not experience flow in spelling. Of course on one hand this is sad, but it was useful to help use understand and reflect about no-flow.

I felt students now begin to understand flow, which was fun, but also much more than just fun. The dialogue opened that day for students to speak about flow and what they needed to make school flow for them. According to Csikszentmihalyi along with paying attention, reflection on an experience is necessary in order to know if flow occurred.

This research activity gave students on all levels a voice to state a need related to learning based on reflection. To me this was significant, especially for students like Sam, Todd, Sharon, Karina, and Gavin who usually wrote one word answers or left self-reflections partially blank in English class. Maybe flow mattered to students. I remembered Freire (1970) saying the oppressed “almost never...realize that they, too, ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men” (p. 63). Through our study students were reflecting upon quality of experience and expressing their needs. Flow factors for the individual students varied according to what students said in reflection. I categorized student reflections according to the missing flow factor as indicated in the bold printed title for each section. Within each section is the

student statement as to whether or not they felt flow. Followed in italicized print is their personal suggestion to improve the activity for flow.

**Lack of skills**

I did not experience flow because I'm not good at spelling. If I was good, I'd like it.

*Give us interesting words that I know what they mean about bikes. **Todd***

I didn't experience flow because I did not know how to spell the words.

*If we got an "A" everytime would make it flow. **Ricky***

I did not experience flow. I just do not have flow in those type of things.

*If I made straight "A"s and knew everything very good. **Tarisha***

No, because I didn't get too much of everything.

*Do it outside. **Sam***

**Not a challenge**

I don't think I did because I think that the spelling test is pretty easy and I just want to get it over with and do another activity.

*Between like six words people could do commercials because we could act, sing, and dance. **Sally***

It was easy. It was regularly your everyday thing....*Make it more challenging words. **Will***

I did not experience flow because if I know the words it kind of bores me. Also it's not something I get excited about, but I don't hate it.

*A spelling test can be a flow experience if we could use more bonus words, maybe go to a different place to take it (outside). I just think we should change it and switch it up a bit. Make it interesting! **Brenda***

I don't think I experience flow because spelling tests are so easy and they go right by.

*We need harder words. **Jim***

**Not enjoyable**

I did not experience flow because I hate school work, but I do it any way.

*Do it one on one with a teacher so then I can concentrate and go on my own speed. **Sharon***

I don't think of a test as fun. Just o.k.

*It might be a flow experience if we could take it outside in the shade (with food) because it's not so tense it's more relaxing. **Natalie***

I didn't experience flow in the spelling test because spelling isn't one of my favorite subjects.

*I think spelling words about gymnastics would make it a flow experience because I know a lot of words about gymnastics. **Linda***

I don't think I experienced flow during the spelling test because I didn't have as much fun doing it as shopping.

*I think we could have crossword puzzles and if we spell the words write we get all the points just like on a spelling test. This would be fun because I enjoy doing puzzles. **Helen***

I don't think I experienced flow in the spelling test because it's not something I enjoy to do. Sometimes during spelling tests I feel that sometimes time drags.

*To make a spelling test be a flow experience for me is playing a game or go outside and play spud by calling out a spelling word and spell it and if you spell it right you pick another word that someone says and spell it out with hops. **Diane***

I would not be the flow because it's not really fun at all because it has to be graded. **Bruce**

#### **Feedback: Getting a bad grade**

In the spelling I didn't experience flow because it is a grade, and you need to write it correctly, and if not, you will get a bad grade.

*If you had a game for the spelling test instead of writing it down or we could do it on the chalkboard because it is fun to write on or you could work in groups on the blackboard. **Mark***

I got a bad grade.

*I think for things that make flow is that we get good grades. **Karina***

#### **Reported flow:**

I think I experienced flow because I know that I am good at spelling and it's very easy that's why time flies.

*I think that a spelling test would be an example of flow if we would go outside because we are not cramped into the classroom outside. **John***

I experienced flow. I found out that spelling is fun and that I like it.  
*If we go outside and do it. Because you would have more concentration on your work than other stuff. Paul*

Most students were either lacking skills or feeling bored by spelling.

However, John and Paul reflected that they felt flow in spelling because they liked it and were good at it, but they still had a suggestion to make it more fun. The students who had a lack of skills seemed to equate flow with the end result, the grade, rather than the experience. The students who had good skills and did well on tests wanted something more in the experience itself. They wanted words that matched their interest or more action by going outside or playing a game.

Thinking about the spelling test in terms of flow factors provided the students with an opportunity to reflect and to define for themselves quality of experience.

### **Sequencing and Connecting 40 minutes a day**

In the flow study I began to view and examine the quality of that 40 minutes a day more than ever. In planning for flow I became more concerned about providing opportunities for kids to write authentically. I had curricular standards to meet, but I also wanted to be efficient, student interest-based, and effective with the time that we had. As a result I referred to resources like the English grammar textbook and the PSSA guidebook, rather than deliver lessons from them. Isolated skills “lessons” did not seem to provide the quality of experience that I wanted for my students. Over the years I moved away from these resources available to me and developed my own sequence of authentic

experiences for writing. John Dewey spoke about “continuity of experience” and quality of experience {insert quotes}. These things sounded a lot like flow to me.

In English I had more flexibility with the curriculum. I had more *control*. Then I realized that the “Standards Movement” had done a good thing for the sixth grade English curriculum. The state academic standards for reading, writing, speaking and listening contained the *goals* for language arts students. English teachers were “forced” to teach the writing process and assess according to the PSSA rubric. Teachers were *challenged* to decide the best way to do this however. There was a lot of flow in this for me if and when I could meet the challenge.

While teaching reading and spelling separately to my section, I was responsible to teach narrative, informational, and persuasive writing to all three sections. In the beginning we used the English textbook to review “the sentence.” I used the book as a resource to teach the “vocabulary of the English language” as I called it. Terms like subject, predicate, declarative, interrogative, fragment etc. I also gave students their first writing prompt, which I developed to connect “Reading class” and “English class”: “You are a spectator at a sporting event of your choice. Write a paragraph about what happened. Criteria: Use the four kinds of sentences, capitalize and punctuate properly.” Students wrote paragraphs using the four types of sentences, and had fun using their brand new highlighters to color code sentences. My *goal* was to continue building positive experiences in

our writing community. Students read out loud, they listened for the four kinds of sentences and offered feedback according to the criteria on which they would be graded. I was happy with student response and completion of assignments.

Meanwhile students prepared for the upcoming discussion on good writing by collecting examples of all kinds of writing for homework in a folder. Students worked in groups to make “What is good writing lists” as they read and discussed their samples. Our class list can be viewed below.

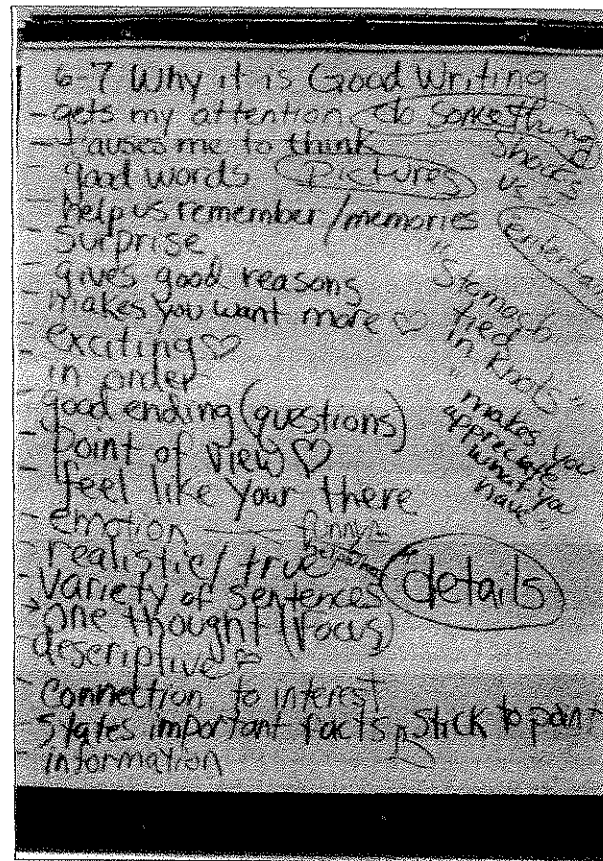
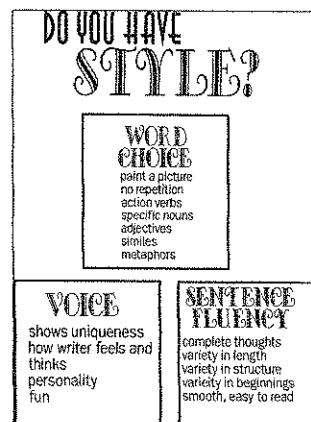
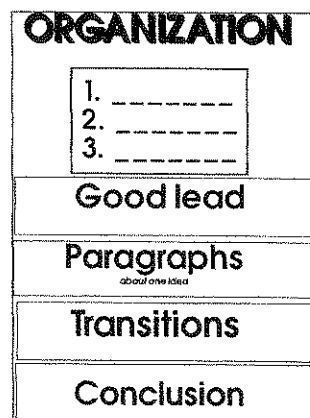
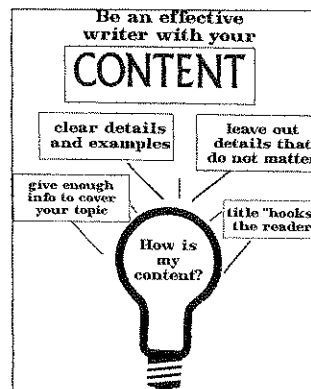
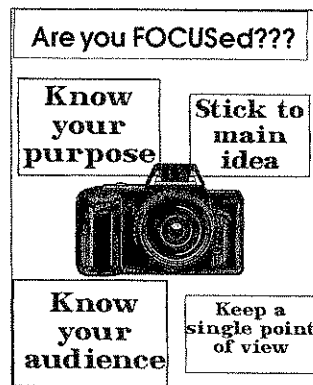


Figure 12. “Good Writing” Wall Chart

I then helped the students connect what they already knew about good writing to the PSSA rubric. We then categorized the list to discover where the traits from the PSSA rubric came from. Focus meant, “One thought, stick to the point, important facts.” Content meant, “Descriptive, cause me to think, connection to interest.” Organization meant, “In order.” Style meant, “Good words, surprise, descriptive, emotion.” After that we were ready to learn about each trait and how it applies to writing. I developed kid friendly handouts to go along with the rubric. Each student prepared a packet of color coded handouts for their notebooks. Below are the contents of the packets.





PENNSYLVANIA WRITING ASSESSMENT DOMAIN SCORING GUIDE				
FOCUS	CONTENT	ORGANIZATION	STYLE	CONVENTIONS
The single controlling point and writer's awareness of task (write) about a specific topic.	The presence of ideas developed through facts, examples, anecdotes, facts, opinions, statistics, reasons and/or explanations.	The writer develops and sustains writing and across paragraphs using transitional devices including introduction and conclusions.	The choice, use and arrangement of words and sentence structures that create tone and voice.	The use of grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage and sentence formation.
4 Sharp, distinct controlling point made about a single topic with evident awareness of task (write).	Substantial, specific and/or illustrative content demonstrating strong development and logical flow of ideas.	Sophisticated arrangements of content with evident and/or subtle transitions.	Precise, illustrative use of a variety of words and sentence structures to create equivalent writer's voice and tone appropriate to audience.	Evident control of grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage and sentence formation.
3 Apparent point made about a single topic with sufficient awareness of task (write).	Sufficiently developed content with adequate elaboration or explanation.	Functional arrangement of content that remains a logical order with some evidence of transitions.	Correct use of a variety of words and sentence structures that may or may not create writer's voice and tone appropriate to audience.	Sufficient control of grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage and sentence formation.
2 No apparent point but evidence of a specific topic.	Limited content with inadequate elaboration or explanation.	Confused or inconsistent arrangement of content with or without examples or transitions.	Limited word choice and control of sentence structures that inhibit voice and tone.	Limited control of grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage and sentence formation.
1 Minimal evidence of a topic.	Superficial and/or minimal content.	Minimal control of content arrangement.	Minimal variety in word choice and minimal control of sentence structures.	Minimal control of grammar, mechanics, spelling, usage and sentence formation.
0		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It illegible, i.e., includes so many indecipherable words that no sense can be made of the response.</li> <li>It incoherent, i.e., words are legible but syntax is so garbled that response makes no sense.</li> <li>It insufficient, i.e., does not include enough to assess domains adequately.</li> </ul>		
0		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is a blank page.</li> </ul>		

*Are you using good*

## CONVENTIONS?

- New idea = New paragraph
- Indent paragraphs
- Spelling
- Capitalization
- Punctuation
- Grammar

Figure 13. Contents of Handout Packet

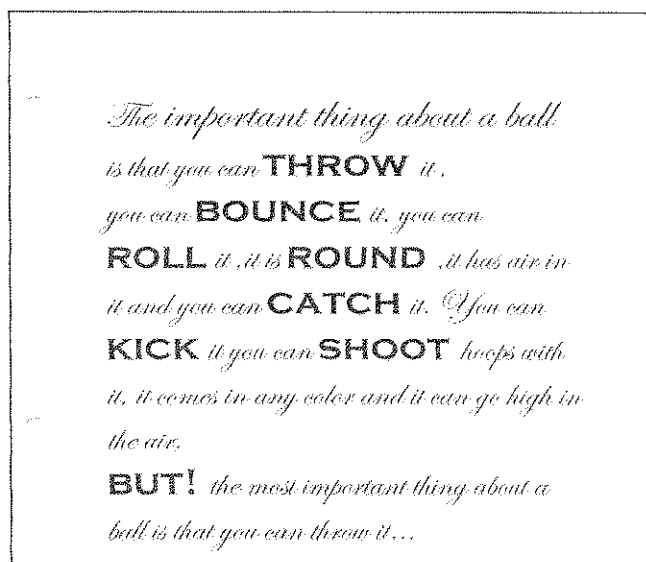
Over the next few weeks students learned about the writing traits through poetry exercises modeled after children's literature. I agreed with Georgia Heard that poetry was an effective tool in getting kids to experiment with language. Poetry was a means to practice with voice and play with words and ideas in a short fun way. Curriculumwise it was also necessary to teach effective writing traits so I combined the two goals using *The Important Book* and *If I Were in Charge of the World*.

### *Important Poems*

First I used Margaret Wise Brown's *Important Book* to connect abstract terms like focus, content, and organization to something simple and real. While I read the book, the class joined in after discovering the repetition of the first and last lines. Each page contained a simple poem describing one noun like a daisy, or an apple where the first and last lines were repeated. Students used the writing process and wrote focused poems about the topic of their *choice*. Also the details

about the one thing were known as “Content.” We discussed organization in terms of paragraphs where the first line is like a topic sentence and the last line like the closing. Students shared poems and even typed them in fancy fonts. They shared.

Students enjoyed discovering new ways to express themselves. Will, who was very quiet and soft spoken, couldn’t wait to read his poem about a ball. He even accented the verbs after we discussed the excitement action verbs can express. Every time I read his poem I could hear his voice and see his smile.



**Figure 14. Will’s Important Poem**

Diane who loved swimming asked if she could write another poem about soccer. John was the first one finished, and was good at spelling so I challenged him to be a peer editor and help with spelling. Sharon said earlier that she didn’t like writing because it was too hard to concentrate and think of a topic. After some extra time and listening to other poems, she wrote about basketball because

she likes it. She said that doing so was fun. Karina, who was having a hard time, socially and academically in school didn't give up this time and wrote about good health. Gavin was upset and said, "No fair, I wasn't doing anything," when I reprimanded him and made him return to his seat during peer revising for swinging scissors around. He had fun on his computer at home making his final copy on the important thing about soccer.

*If I Were in Charge of the World...*

Students were attentive, eyes were on me, and students smiled ear to ear as I maintained eye contact while reading Judith Voirst's poem "If I Were in Charge of the World." Students recognized it was the voice of a first grader because of details like "nightlight" and "G rated movie." We compared sixth grade samples from last year and noticed how they followed the structure of Voirst's poem, yet sounded more like sixth graders. In analyzing the structure we also connected content and organization.

Mary shouted, "Can we start?"

Jim, Todd and Sam didn't look so sure.

Others said, "Yeah!"

Students brainstormed details for their poem on the "world organizer." This time I expected more content, and noticed idea generation was a challenge for some students, especially the inclusion students. I scaffolded content development by reading samples, asking questions, and encouraging more

confident writers to share out loud. Mary, Diane, John, Linda, and Sally led the way this time. The students listened and responded to each other's ideas and drafts. At their own pace, with help from Mrs. Jones, peers, or me students filled their graphic organizers, categorized ideas, drafted into stanzas, revised for word choice, and for homework typed final copies. They learned about content, organization, and two parts of style-word choice and voice. They also enjoyed expressing their feelings and sharing their sometimes serious voice or sometimes silly voice.

Mary liked to write, read, and perform. She was strong with content, vocabulary, and voice. She was a clever, creative, confident writer. She helped peers like Linda and Beth find their voices by sharing hers. She said she was in the flow.

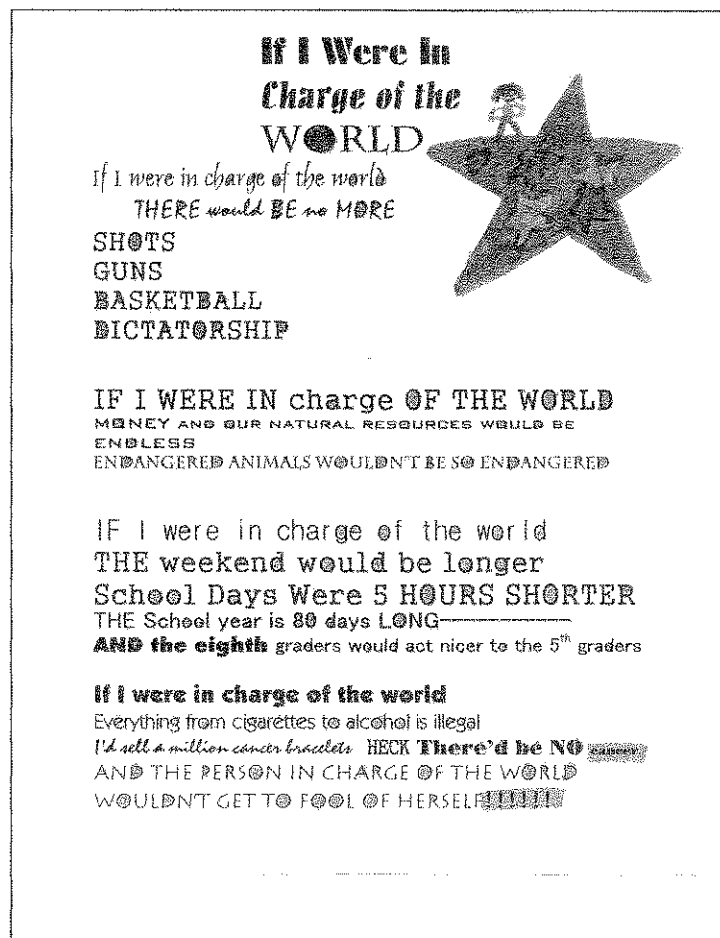


Figure 15. Mary's If I Were In Charge...

In both poetry activities students practiced the writing process while learning about traits of effective writing. They were having fun with language. They were learning the “vocabulary of writing” in English class. I needed them to know what I meant when I gave feedback by commenting, “Work on content” or “Good focus.” Pre-writing was for brainstorming, drafting was organizing ideas, revising was improving for content or organization, and editing was checking

conventions. Students were relying more on one another for advice. We were growing as a community of writers sharing, laughing, and experimenting with language, fonts, finding our voices all within a structure...40 minutes a day.

I even felt my own passion for teaching writing grow as I witnessed students who were willing to grow along with me. Students asked, "What's next?" Students were not saying, "Just tell me what to write" or "I don't know what to write." Maybe certain oppression was relieved as students were realizing that they too "knew things" like Freire said. The positive feedback from seeing students participate and share in the writing experiences motivated me to continue on the flow path. We were real people writing, reading, listening, speaking and learning that effective communication is a way to share experiences and learn about ourselves as well as meet curricular standards.

### **Flow and Writing a Personal Narrative**

After our poetry activities I knew for sure that the most important thing about writing for my students was the opportunity to express themselves; a perfect lead into writing a personal narrative. I wanted to guide them on how to find the best words and best way to share an enjoyable memory. I offered a lot of support in the beginning. I guided their thinking in order to help them choose a topic that focused on a snapshot in time. I shared an impromptu, typical summer vacation story beginning with waking up, riding in the car, checking in to the hotel, eating supper, and going to the beach. Then I asked, "Would something like this sound

more interesting? The wave crashed against my body and I was swept into the undercurrent, luckily I grabbed my brother's arm!" Students agreed that it would be more interesting for the reader if we focused on a moment in time.

I shared the introduction and first few lines of my memory about the first time I rode my bike. "Special times and special people are often the ingredients to what makes a memory so crystal clear. Like it only happened yesterday... The summer sun was beating down on the blacktop circle named Downing Court. It was the day my dad took the training wheels off of my shinny, royal-blue Schwinn." I explained that my topic was a memory that when I closed my eyes I could still see it and feel it, even after all those years.

Diane shared, "I guess I better not tell about all of the rides I went on at Dorney Park then."

I said, "Close your eyes, what do you see?"

Diane closed her eyes and said, "Steel Force!"

Brenda said, "I can't decide about the boardwalk or the dolphins we saw in Ocean City."

"You'll figure it out," I responded.

John said, "Should I write about the first time I went on the Laser at Dorney Park? I still feel it."

“Yes, John. Sounds like you guys have the right idea. Make sure you pick the best topic from your top ten list to share tomorrow, and then we’ll get started with a prewriting activity called a four room brain house.”

As they were lining up for the next class, several students clustered with Paul who asked, “Come on, what’s a brain house?”

I smiled and said, “You’ll see...tomorrow.”

“Ohhh!!!” they whined as they walked out the door.

I was excited to try the idea I had adapted from a writing conference I attended where Georgia Heard guided us on a memory tour in a six room house graphic organizer for poetry writing. I suspected that my students would be “drawn in” to the prewriting activity designed to recapture their special memory, just as I had been, when Georgia Heard guided our group.

As the students folded their white drawing paper into four squares I explained that I would be guiding them on a tour of their brain house.

“Cool,” giggled Jim.

“I’m ready!” shouted Diane.

Standing at my desk in the front I scanned the smiling faces telling me they were ready to go with the flow. All pencils in position, heads bowed, ready, go. We began in the first room on the top floor. I reminded them to relax and think back to that special time and place and write anything specific that they saw, heard, smelled, or touched. We walked across the hall into the next room, here we



drew the memory and labeled it. Downstairs we went to the room on the left to write feelings and any other special words to describe the memory. In the last room we put it all together in phrases and retold the memory. Smiling students turned in their seats to glance at each other's papers. The activity engaged all students and by the end of the class they had raw material for their narratives.

At the end of class Diane showed me her brain house of her first roller coaster ride. She said, "I loved that activity, it really helped me remember."

I glanced over her paper and replied, "I like your details, 'hair going everywhere' and how you 'felt safe with your sister.' "

She asked, "Do you think I could start my rough draft tonight?"

I was not surprised that she wanted to keep going. She loved to write. I had both of her older sisters in class who were excellent students and knew she was from an *autotelic family* who nurtured her interests in swimming, soccer and especially school. She had told me that she didn't like English before this year because they never gave her a choice about what to write. It seemed like this was her year for flow. In writing class she was always the first to open her notebook and position her pencil on the top line ready to write. She was also the first to raise her hand to share her work with the class. She was also one willing to accept revision suggestions that I offered "out loud" to volunteers who were willing to allow the rest of the class to learn from their example. The following figure is Diane's brain house that she took home that night to write her rough draft.

<p>My subject</p> <p>First time going on a roller coaster</p> <p>the summer after first grade</p> <p>Steel Force</p> <p>Screaming</p> <p>hair going everywhere</p> <p>When I went down I felt like I was flying huge hill</p> <p>Saw the whole park down below</p> <p>Sister went w/ me</p> <p>Sunny day</p> <p>took picture</p> <p>in picture I was screaming</p>	<p>② Drawing</p>
<p>feelings</p> <p>nervous</p> <p>butterflies in stomach</p> <p>excited</p> <p>lean back. I said to myself</p> <p>grow up</p> <p>felt safe with my sister their</p> <p>kind of scared</p> <p>at your hands up! "I exclaimed</p> <p>at I was so scared to family waving.</p>	<p>③ Over All</p> <p>The summer after 1st grade was a summer of change. We went to Dorney Park for the first time. We rode the rides but then we came to Steel Force. Oh Boy! I promised myself and to my family that I would go on. I did. I was so nervous. Butterflies in my stomach. I was kind of excited. I told myself, I can do it!</p> <p>↳ We started to go up. I felt safe with my sister sitting next to me. I was kind of scared when we started going down the hill &amp; I was scared. My sister screamed "Put your hands up!" But I was too afraid. Down below I saw my family waving. I looked down and then we went it felt so</p>

Figure 16. Diane's Brainhouse

Todd was not self-directed like Diane, but I suspected with the right support and feedback he could experience flow in writing a personal narrative as well. Todd was a student who needed support. Mrs. Jones or I gently nudged him in the beginning of every class to get his notebook and pencil out. He never had his homework done. He said, "I left it at home" or "I just forgot." But, he liked being part of the social scene. He listened to Diane and others share and joined in on the clapping for his classmates. He often raised his hand to share journal responses even if he hadn't written the three sentence minimum. When I called on him, he squinted and he struggled to read his own handwriting and often improvised. Verbalizing his ideas came easier than writing them, although he said he had trouble thinking. I always thanked him for sharing. Todd had trouble thinking of an enjoyable memory to write about, his list was short. After I steered him away from writing about an auto accident, he settled on the time he and his brother and made a ramp for their wagon. I was happy to see Todd had kept up with the class during the brain house activity. He said, "It was kinda fun." He even wrote his plot in the last room. See Todd's brainhouse on the following page.

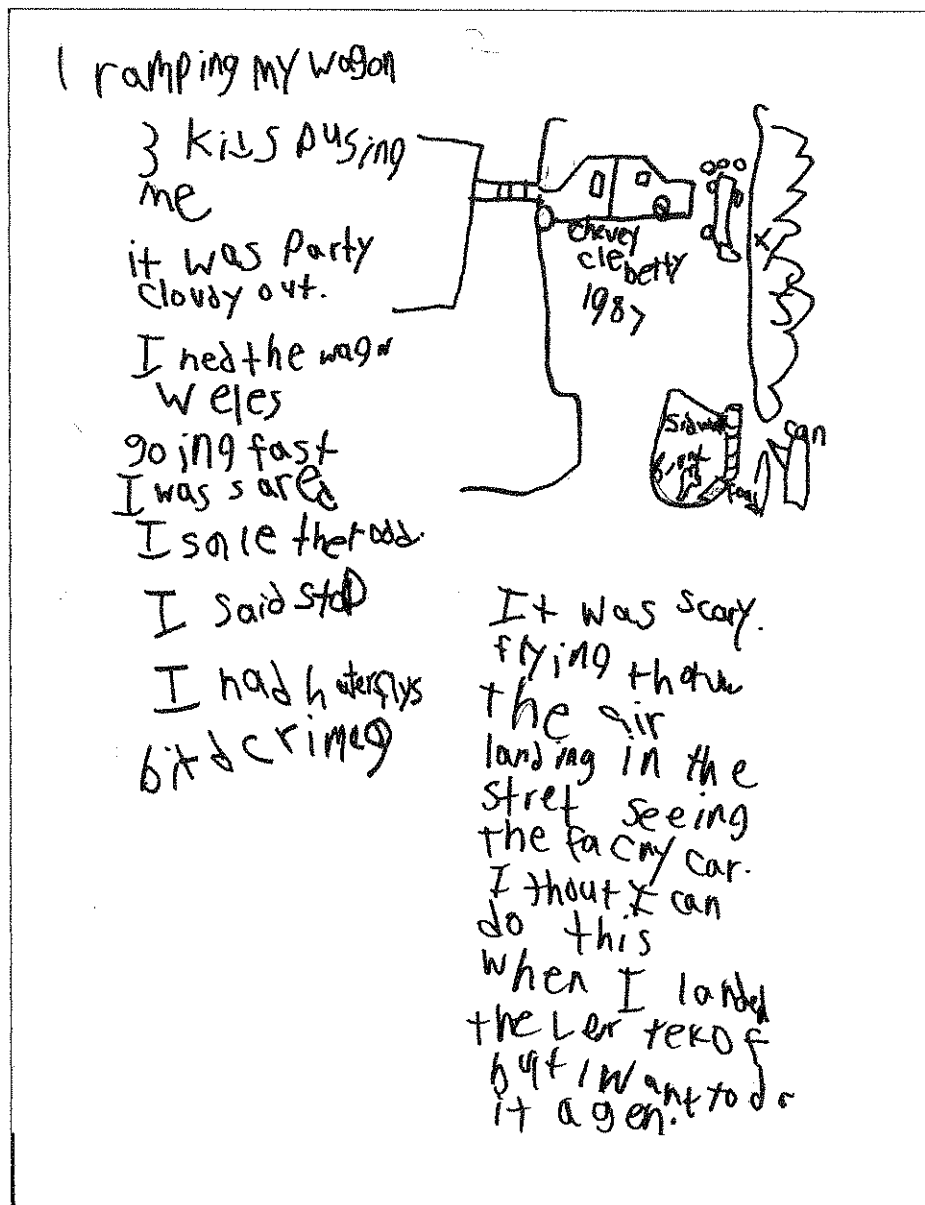


Figure 17. Todd's Brainhouse

During the drafting and revising stages I began class with mini lessons on introductions, action verbs, or conclusions. We also discussed how writers use language to make us feel. That's why we revise, to find our voice, to make our message clear.

"It's your paper, your work. Think of revising as reading it out loud to a friend. See how the words sound and how they make you feel. Try it."

Diane raised her hand and asked, "May I share my draft?"

I knew it would be good for the class to hear her passion for writing. I invited her up to the writer's stool. She read her rough draft. When she heard herself read, "I saw me screaming and my sister had her hands up," she stopped, looked up and said, "I think I'll fix that part."

"That's exactly what writers do," I assured her.

She read on to the end and finished by saying, "I looked down and saw a lake. Uh oh here we go again!" The class clapped to thank her for sharing.

I pointed out how she ended with something to make us think, "Something else good writers do."

Linda, Natalie and Beth, who also had roller coaster stories, called Diane over to join their revising group. With papers and pens in hand, they read, nodded their heads, discussed, smiled, questioned, and made notes on their papers. Diane made two rough drafts, one handwritten, the other typed which can be seen on the following pages. Reading Diane's notes and revisions reminded me of how

engaged students became in writing class especially when they wanted to share or “make it better.” The flow in writing seems to be more about thinking and creating ideas rather than the conventions.

	but then my nerves took over as we
	reached the car. I told myself I could
	do it! We started to go up. I felt safe
	with my older sister sitting next to
	me. I looked down and saw my family
	waving frantically. Then we slowed down
	and started going over the hill. "Put your
	hands up!" my sister screamed, but I was
	too afraid. I looked down and there we
	went. It was a steep hill like I was
	flying. <del>It</del> turned out that it was <del>really</del>
	<del>scary</del> . I felt a jerk, so the ride must've
	been over. In my picture I saw me screaming and
I laughed.	my sister had her hands up from that day on
My dad	
bought	
it.	I was never afraid to go on a roller
	coaster again. <sup>the first time</sup> Years later I went <del>on</del>

Figure 18. Diane's rough draft I

# BIGGER THAN BRAVE

"Time to grow up!" I said to myself. The summer after first grade was the summer of change, so I thought. <sup>new Paragraph</sup> We went to Dorney Park for the first time in my young life. It was a beautiful sunny summer day. We rode the rides but then we came to Steel Force. <sup>Oh boy!</sup> I promised to myself and to my family that I would go on, but to me I was a tiny speck of dust compared to the tall, red, rushing roller coaster. I walked up those stairs anyway, I was going to do this. I was kind of excited until my nerves took over as the car pulled up. I told myself ~~that~~ <sup>that there</sup> was nothing to be afraid of. We started to go up. I felt safe with my sister sitting next to <sup>me</sup> be. I looked down and saw my parents waving <sup>frantically</sup> as we kept going up. Then we slowed down and started going over the hill. "Put your hands up!" my sister screamed, but I was too afraid to. I looked down and there we went. It was a steep hill <sup>like</sup> I was flying. <sup>It turned out that Steel Force was an extraordinary ride. I felt a jerk so the ride must've been over. I saw my picture and it was not a pretty sight. I was screaming and my sister had her hands up. I laughed, my dad bought it. From that day on I was never afraid to go on a roller coaster again. Years later I went on the second highest roller coaster in the northeast, Millenium Force at Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio. We were on our way up when I looked down and saw a lake, "uh, oh, here we go again!"</sup>

don't center it use left key

skip lines between the paragraphs

ally

Figure 19. Diane's rough draft II

I knew that some students didn't always have support at home. But I had to keep the others moving along. Homework that night was to finish the rough draft. That day Todd, Sam, and Sharon worked with Mrs. Jones to complete their drafts in school. They needed help to formulate sentences and sequence them properly. They were not quite ready to revise for introductions, or word choice for now. But they enjoyed listening to everyone's stories. In reading and writing class they needed support in a small group with a teacher to keep them on task. This time Todd told Mrs. Jones that he could do it by himself; so she let him. At the end of class he showed me his rough draft pictured below. I said, "Good job, you got your ideas into sentences. We'll check for spelling tomorrow." He smiled as he put his draft in his writing folder. I told him that we would teach him how to use an Alpha-smart to type his final copy. He nodded his head and said, "That will be cool."



one day MY brother tried to  
 scarm but it did not work  
 MY brother and the tow niger  
 and piked me in my wagon  
 going down the driv way  
 I waste the 1987 chevy cleber  
 I hit the rope lanced army  
 but the well fell off  
 I trted to fike but the  
 well fell back off

**Figure 20. Todd's rough draft**

Today was our final check. Final copies were due tomorrow. Mrs. Smith called Todd over to her room to teach him how to use the Alpha-smart. Sam and Sharon wanted Mrs. Jones's help again, so they went next door too. Before class Sally had asked if she could read me her story. Then Karina and Tarisha asked also. I sensed there would be others so I announced, "I'm conferencing today at my desk. Sign up on the clipboard if you want a final conference." As I listened to Sally's story about her dance recital, I got an idea. "Hey, what if we act out our stories? You can check for sequence and action verbs!"

Sally responded, "You told us writing was about expressing ourselves!"

I continued, "Have someone read their story and you try to act it out."

I walked to back to my desk to finished editing with Tarisha and Karina and sent them on their way to write their final copies. They didn't want to act that day.

Diane, Linda, and Natalie joined Sally in the back of the room. They arranged chairs into a "rollercoaster." Each girl took a turn reading her story while the rest sat in the chairs, feet up in the air, arms up, mouths open, some were even holding on to the chairs. More were laughing than screaming. As the boys watched Will, Mark, Jim, Gavin and Paul organized themselves into a hide and go seek game as Paul read his story about encountering a skunk. Jim was the skunk. Will and Mark were hiding under desks. I had to reprimand Gavin for pushing Mark and made him go back to his seat. He said it was no fair and watched. Then it was Jim's turn to read his story about catching frogs in the creek. Paul was the frog. Will and Mark laughed as Jim fell in the creek reaching for the frog. John came over to play the part of Jim's dad, who said, "I never had fun like that."

I never thought a personal narrative would turn into such action. The next day we celebrated by sharing our experiences in final form and with Jolly Ranchers. I shared, "Writing is truly a miracle. Your ideas travel from your brain down through your arm, to your fingers, into the pencil, onto the paper. Isn't that amazing?" They all cheered. It seemed that the writing process was a flow experience in one way or another for the class. Both Todd and Diane shared their

final copies that day, filled out a reflection, and turned in their writing folders.

Diane's "Bigger Than Brave" is followed by Todd's final draft.

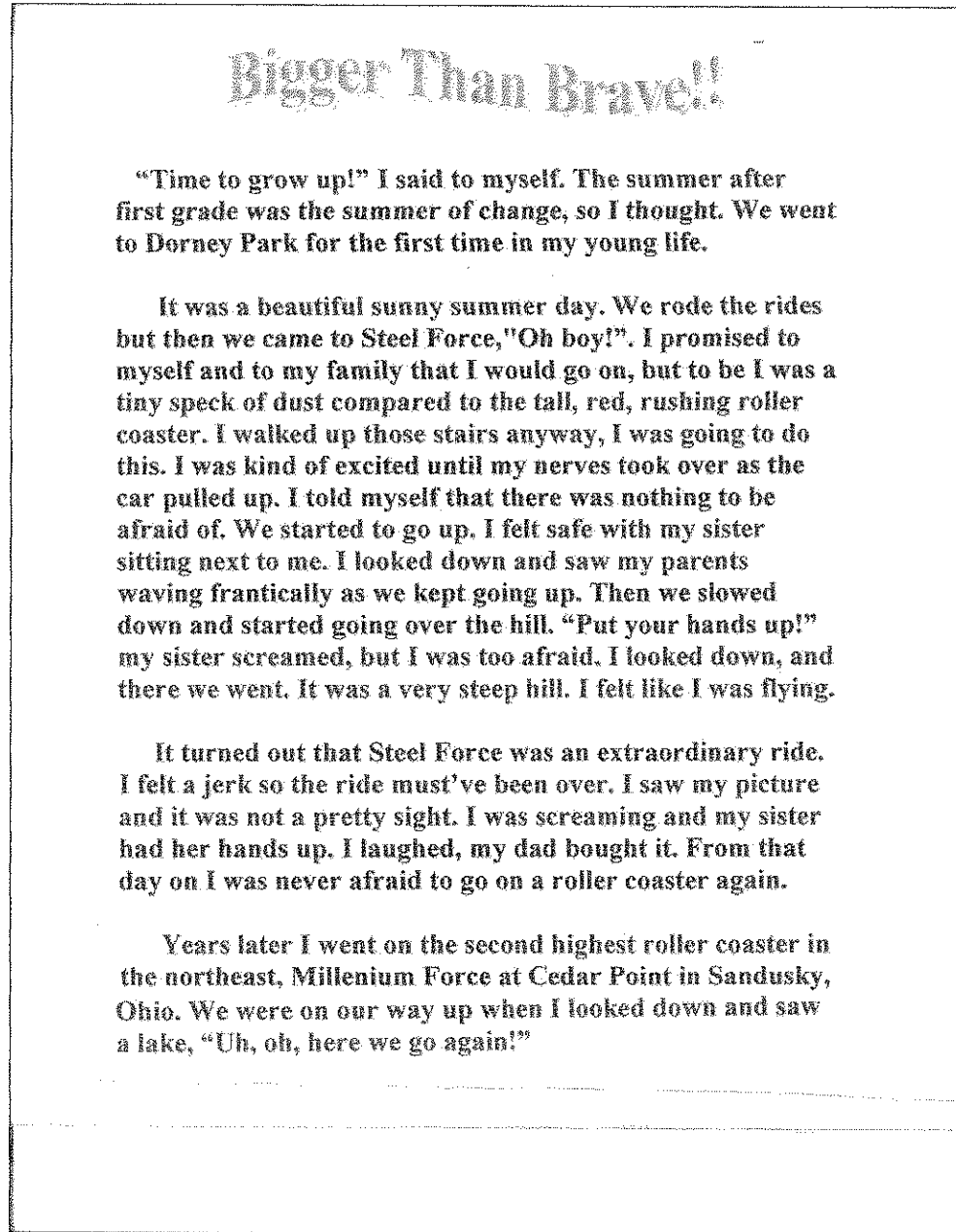
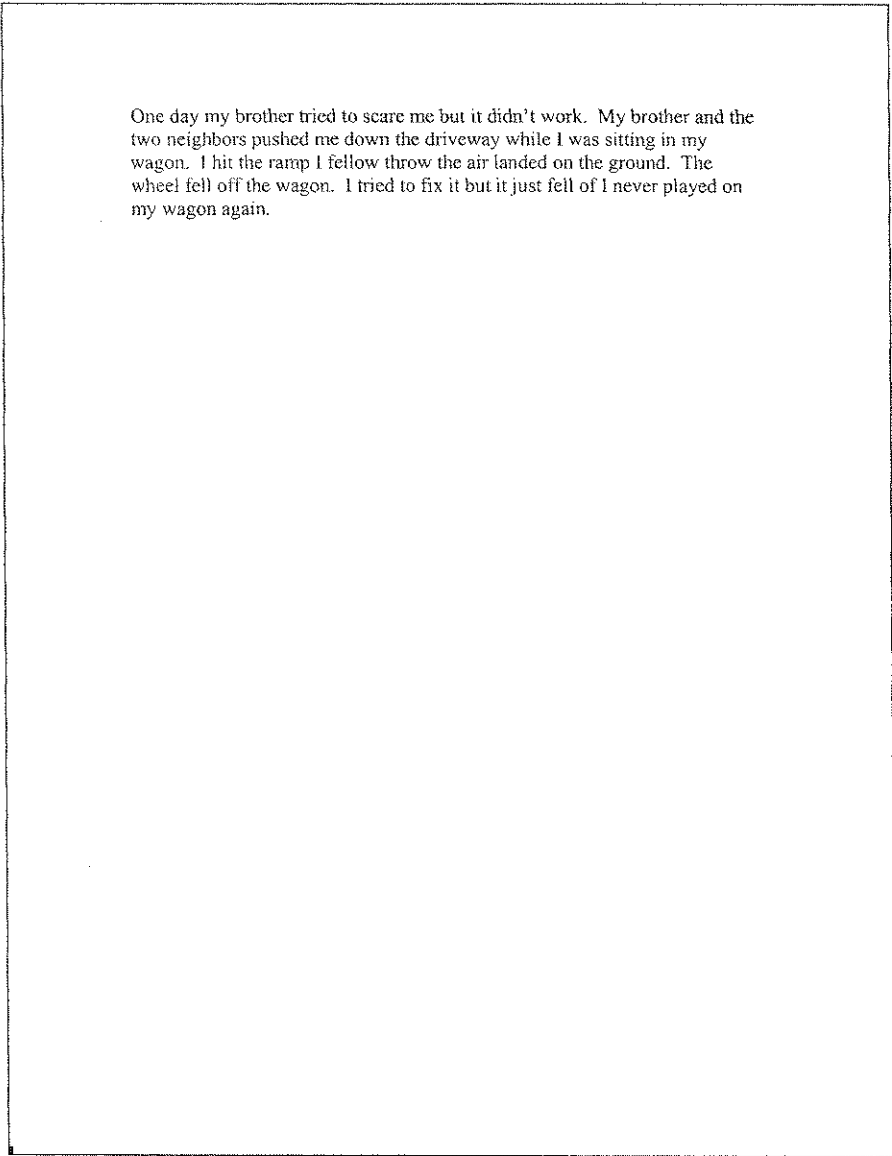


Figure 21. Diane's final copy



One day my brother tried to scare me but it didn't work. My brother and the two neighbors pushed me down the driveway while I was sitting in my wagon. I hit the ramp I fellow throw the air landed on the ground. The wheel fell off the wagon. I tried to fix it but it just fell of I never played on my wagon again.

**Figure 22. Todd's final copy**

Two very different students had found flow on their own terms. Diane immersed herself in the entire process from the beginning. She chose a meaningful topic and engaged herself in learning new writing skills in order to

meet the criteria of the assignment. She engaged herself in the writing community by exchanging feedback with her peers. Her life experience and academic experience equipped her with skills in which to build upon. Diane received the highest score possible for meeting PSSA narrative essay criteria including a title, paragraphs, an interesting introduction, followed by the sequence of active events, and a reflective conclusion. She also received the highest score for following the writing process, and keeping an organized writing folder. Diane displayed the skills of a self-directed learner or autotelic personality. Diane's writing skills were slightly challenged and she grew as a writer through the process. She would most likely succeed on a PSSA writing assessment.

On the other hand, it was not realistic to expect all students in sixth grade to have the background knowledge or skills to meet the criteria for PSSA narrative writing. Some students, like Todd, had learning disabilities or less life experiences which hinder performance on traditional assessments. These students need support and positive feedback or they will resist writing anything at all. In my classroom I wanted students to find success on their own level. Structuring for flow provided a quality experience for Todd who perhaps would never be successful on a PSSA writing test. We focused on the process of organizing ideas and materials, staying on task, keyboarding skills, and tools like spell-check. He participated as part of the writing community during whole group sharing, but he was not ready to peer revise or edit in writing groups. I chose to put the PSSA

rubric aside when evaluating Todd's final draft. Todd had less life experience, and was not as self directed, but with support he successfully completed the process and received positive feedback for his efforts. He used to resist writing, lose his papers, and forget his homework. He had never learned keyboarding skills and painstakingly typed each letter one by one, and then he had to fix the misspellings. Now he knew he could take some control in writing class. He was proud of his final draft, even though it was not as lengthy as the others. Later he reflected on an in school experience that was fun and wrote, "My favorite thing we did in school was in English doing our personal narrative. When I did it I was happy. I flew through the air when it happened. I liked telling what I did." He had a positive attitude and I thought with more experience and support he would grow as a writer. Although his writing skills may never reach PSSA standards, in a flow activity, he can experience quality on his own level.

### **Flow in Writing Graphic Organizer**

I wanted to analyze how flow fit into the context of the series of activities that I designed. I organized my data on my teaching and student reaction to writing in my classroom into a graphic organizer. It was then that I could see flow could be inherent to writing authentically.

The organizer begins with "the heart of the matter" or flow. The rectangular boxes contain the flow factors that contribute to the central flow factor or goal. In this case the goal set by the curriculum is to write an effective personal

narrative. At the top, student *interest* determines the topic. Top ten lists were narrowed down in class as we discussed effective topics that would be more focused like “My First Roller Coaster Ride” versus “Our Family Trip Cross Country.” We discussed topics that may not give up the content we wanted because we couldn’t really remember everything about them like, “The First Time I Walked” because we were too young. We also decided to keep the memories positive because we wanted to enjoy listening. The top ten list helped students choose a topic that was set up for success. *Interest* got them started and would keep them excited about their topic. The setting provided students the *control* factor in which they took ownership of the process by practicing self-direction, time management skills, social skills, questioning, and keeping organized by using a writing folder. I provided skills and challenges necessary to be successful by breaking down the goal into steps based on the writing process, and teaching mini lessons aligned with the “Helpful Hints” on their assignment sheet. I also modeled my own writing processes. Students were especially fond of seeing my brain house of the first time I rode my bike, and messy rough drafts. Based on what students showing skill-wise, I offered appropriate feedback. Hence, in my graphic organizer I show the two way arrow between skills and challenges and feedback factors. I was often challenged to provide the necessary *feedback*. Class often ended before I checked off all of the names on the conference sign up sheet. I found students needed *feedback* to be challenged, corrected, or complimented. I

allowed several days with no mini lesson, only for conferencing opportunities to groups, individuals or peers.

Finally, the elongated rectangle at the bottom shows how reflection on the experience is needed in order to determine if and what flow factors were present for the individual. According to student reflections most students enjoyed expressing feelings and drawing the brain house. Others enjoyed adding details, and thinking about past experiences. Yet others were happy that they finished so they could type. Some liked best reading it to the class. I was pleased with student engagement even though at times I was frustrated by the behaviors of select students. It seemed that the process had something for everyone, even me.



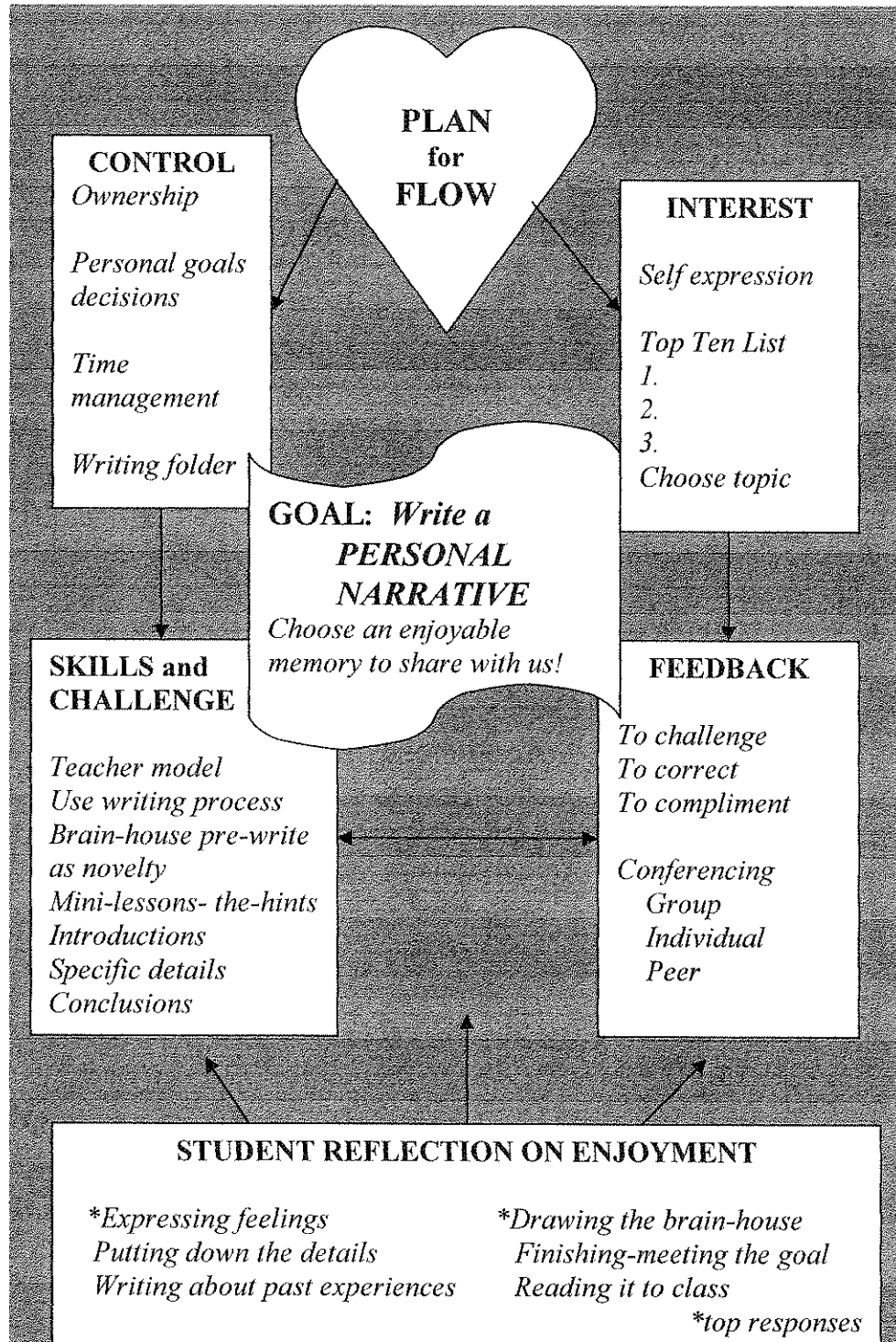


Figure 23. Plan for Flow

### Students Experience Flow as Co-researchers

We began our informational writing unit with a review of paragraph writing, topic sentences, detail sentences, and conclusions. Then I tied in our research on flow with the following journal prompt: *Think back over the past two weeks. What was something you did that was enjoyable? Tell us about it.*

As I coded the journal responses for my field log, I realized that I could involve students in the research process by having them analyze the entries for flow factors as well. The act of coding would allow students authentic means to practice reading comprehension skills like summarizing, drawing conclusions, and forming generalizations. This was much more interesting than worksheet practice. Within the narrative, student code suggestions are *italicized*. The compilation of their codes developed into student-found flow factors, amazingly similar to my codes, as well as Csikszentmihalyi's.

I explained that we would read our journal entries to draw conclusions about what makes experiences enjoyable. "We can do the same thing researchers do called coding. It's like summarizing and then drawing conclusions." I passed out copies of the field log pages. I then instructed students to join a reading partner. Students eagerly scrambled to find a partner and sat back down next to each other.

"This is so cool seeing everyone's journal entries all together!" exclaimed Mary. The rest nodded and smiled while sitting quite still.

“This took me a long time to type. I don’t know if we’ll ever do this again!” I replied jokingly. As I turned on the overhead projector, students viewed the screen, while I pointed to first entry on the transparency and continued, “Ok, start with the first one. Read it with your partner. Discuss what made it enjoyable. Think to yourselves, what did this have to do with?” Pointing to the margin I said, “Whatever word or phrase you think of, write it in the margin next to the entry. This is called a code. Read the next entry and repeat the process. If the reason for enjoyment is the same, write the same code again in the margin.” I paused to check for understanding. I grinned at a sea of serious, somewhat studious faces nodding back. “If it is not, think of a new word or phrase and write it in the margin, this is a new code. You may find more or you may find less, but I found about five codes that describe what made the experiences enjoyable.”

Sally asked, “Are you going to show your professor what we find?”

“Yes, because he wants to know about what makes something fun too. And by the way, none of these enjoyable experiences occurred in school.” Sally tilted her head and opened her mouth in disbelief. I continued, “So coding will help us find out *what* made them enjoyable. That *what* may be something we could add to school activities to make them more fun. What do guys you think?” They responded silently by bowing their heads to begin. I suspected that meant that they wanted to find out the *what*. The room buzzed as students read to one another. They were clearly excited to see their entries in print.

Karina shouted, "I found mine!"

"Mine's first!" replied Sharon.

Then I heard several others cheer when they found theirs. I had not included the student pseudonyms on these versions. I noticed how the activity was drawing them in to some purposeful reading and thinking. The air was almost "tense with engagement" as the "researchers" tried to make sense of what they were reading. They were very interested in reading about what their classmates found enjoyable. I heard excited voices that day taking on the role of researchers.

Paul inquired, "What are all the numbers for?"

I replied, "They are called line numbers. It makes it easier for a researcher to find information on a page." As students read, I circulated the room holding my clipboard.

Mark said to his partner Will, "It's fun to read everyone's all together!"

After taking turns reading the first page to Mark, Will remarked, "Hey, they all *went somewhere*."

Mark walked over and asked, "Can we use a highlighter to highlight what they have in common?"

I answered, "Great idea! You are clever Mark." He smiled and returned to Will who was pulling highlighters out of his desk. When they had finished the first of two pages they had "away from home," "is fun," and "always activities" written in the margin. They explained that they highlighted the names of events or

places to show away from home, the words like “happy,” “excited,” or loved to show the fun, and the verbs to show the active part.

Jim overheard and shouted, “That sounds fun. Ricky, John, let’s get highlighters.” The word was out, and all of a sudden everyone managed to get up, dig out highlighters without much of a ruckus, and get back to reading and talking to each other about what they were finding.

I then heard Ricky say, “Jim, let’s make our code for *away from home* blue.”

Jim replied, “O.k., how about the pink for *family*.”

Ricky and Jim concluded that *family* was common to many of these events. I saw they had three *family* codes and three *away from home* codes so far written in the margin. I noticed that once I got things rolling, students took ownership of the task. They were so “busy,” it seemed like after a while they didn’t even know I was there. I think Csikszentmihalyi would have called it “loss of self.” My response was limited to a smile, nod of the head, and an occasional, “Really?” or “Good job” or “Keep going!” Otherwise I let it be their activity; I listened and watched. There was no need to reprimand or re-direct. They took control of the process.

John affirmed what others were saying, “Hey you guys, some have *friends*, most are *away from home*.” John added the code, *friends*, to his margins.

Gavin, who was working by himself, approached and announced, “They all have *food!*” He had highlighted words like, “picnic”, “ice-cream,” and “candy.”

Later Diane verified, “Can we write how they felt, like happy or excited?”

I wanted her to think deeper and nodded my head, smiling, “Sure, but *why* did they feel happy or excited?...Why do *you* enjoy swimming?”

She thought a minute and replied, “Because I’m good at it. I want to swim...oh, *they wanted to do it.*”

I replied, “Abhhh!” She turned and ran back to share with the group of girls that now formed at her desk.

When Mary found something they all had in common she shouted and made a suggestion, “They are all *active*. School should be more active.”

Upon hearing Mary’s comment Brenda suggested to me, “Maybe we should make lists for you on our ideas.”

“Good idea, I will show it to my professor!” I replied. Brenda handed me a list of her “Activity Ideas.” Her ideas were first for interest group: fashion design, writing a newspaper, and knitting; next were for class: putting on a play, and more projects, then a reward suggestion: lunch in classroom. I thanked her and replied, “I’ll do my best.” Other students handed me their lists of codes which I compiled later in my field log. They said in one way or another things like, “*all had fun*”,

“10/15 had food”, “want to do it”, “got away from home” and “were with family and friends.” They confirmed that, “None took place in school!”

I was pleased to see similarities with what I had found earlier. We were all so focused that we would have worked right through lunch. I noticed the clock, and we were ten minutes late. No one packed up early, which sometimes happened before lunch period. “I can’t believe it’s lunchtime already!” I was almost certain that this activity was a flow experience for us. The *time had flown*, the students were *engaged*, and they were *interested*.

Mark whined, “Lunch already, oh man...Do we have to go to lunch?”

Linda asked, “Can we come back after lunch and do some more?” The students *wanted to keep going*, another sign of flow. They accepted the *challenge* and took *control* to develop their own codes and draw their own conclusions and generalizations. They also had “fun with a purpose,” as co-researchers.

Diane added, “This activity was so awesome.”

I answered, “I know we are disrupting the flow, but we have to eat!”

*Comparison of Flow Factors according to MC, Teacher, Student*

Later I compiled Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi flow factors, teacher flow factors, and student flow factors into chart seen on the following page, entitled “Comparing Flow Factors in Enjoyable Experiences.” I felt I was getting closer to defining flow in our classroom. Other researchers had their own definitions, and I

wanted to see how my own would work. Perhaps flow factors could be defined contextually according to the group you are with.

Students and I noticed that all of the experiences took place with family or friends. I now considered the social aspect a flow factor in our classroom. This supports my notion of collaborative activities in the classroom. Earlier flow studies did not include the social aspect as a flow factor. However, one study found that students only reported school as enjoyable because of friends or sports.

Csikszentmihalyi and I called the next flow factor *challenge balanced with skills*. Students called it an activity they “wanted to do because it was a favorite activity.” Perhaps they enjoyed the challenge and knew they had the skills to meet it. When we chose an activity or hobby, it’s because we have the skills to engage and experience the fun. We are capable to meet the challenges presented.

While Csikszentmihalyi did not include what I called “novelty” as a flow factor I learned that students noticed that their enjoyable experiences were something “you did not do everyday” and “were away from home.” I had noticed that all of the activities involved going to special places, and were a break in the routine. Perhaps this is why students reacted positively to “breaks in routine” like going outside, ball tosses, and special art projects.

I noticed that if they were actively viewing the activity it was engaging as Csikszentmihalyi would point out. It was engaging either because of interaction when cheering for their football team, or getting candy from a parade. Also it was



engaging because the student was really interested watching bald eagles, or mosquitoes hatching or Scottish dancing. Perhaps these students were learning something as well. They were not just watching and listening; there seemed to be a two way exchange. Students named this factor when they said, “The experience attracted people’s attention.”

Flow studies showed that flow was least likely when the teacher lectured and the students listened. In school there was a difference between asking students to listen and promoting active listening by using strategies like “the think pad” where students jot down what they think before sharing.

The activities were engaging in another way because of active participation like swimming, dancing, biking, or roller skating. Students mentioned that the activities “used a lot of verbs” and “showed a lot of action.” Csikszentmihalyi’s studies concur that flow activities are usually active rather than passive.

The final thing students noticed was that most activities involved food. I saw this as a novelty, but they emphasized this as a separate flow factor, perhaps because they were hungry!

## Comparing Flow Factors in Enjoyable Experiences

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi	Teacher	Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Challenge is balanced with skill</b></li> <li>• <b>Goals are clear</b></li> <li>• <b>Feedback is immediate</b></li> <li>• <b>A sense that times flies</b></li> <li>• <b>Sense of control</b></li> <li>• <b>Loss of concern for self</b></li> <li>• <b>Desire to repeat activity</b></li> <li>• <b>Complete engagement</b></li> </ul> <p>His in school studies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School experience rarely show flow experience in adolescents</li> <li>• Sports and socializing</li> </ul>	<p><b>Social-Family and friends</b> All entries</p> <p><b>Challenge</b> “I did back walkovers for 50 minutes. It may sound harsh but very enjoyable.” “We did a lot of funny jokes on my cousins while cha-cha sliding when roller skating.” “The first day we did many laps, but I kept going.”</p> <p><b>Going to special events/Places</b> <b>Novelty, non-routine</b> Celtic Classic, parades, dance studio, Lincoln Financial Field, Phila. Zoo, wedding</p> <p><b>Active viewing/interesting/interactivity</b> Saw people dancing, joined in Got candy from parade Watch movie, and hang out Saw Bald eagle, river otters Saw mosquitoes hatching</p> <p><b>Active-Participating</b> Ate dinner at Celtic Classic Danced Rode bike Swam Roller skating Told stories Sang on stage In a wedding</p> <p><b>Out of school</b></p>	<p><b>Family or friends</b></p> <p><b>It was a favorite activity</b></p> <p><b>Away from home</b></p> <p><b>Not what you do everyday</b></p> <p><b>The experience attracted people’s attention</b></p> <p><b>They wanted to do it</b></p> <p><b>Used a lot of verbs</b> <b>Showed a lot of action</b></p> <p><b>Most involved food</b></p> <p><b>Showed feeling</b></p> <p><b>No talk about school</b></p>

Figure 24. Comparing Flow Factors

### **An Essay Writing Test Can Be Fun???...Flow???**

Informational writing was a *challenge* for sixth graders, according to last year's PSSA results. This year Diane, who loved writing to express feelings and creativity, mentioned in her writing survey that writing "non-fiction" was hard for her. I attributed the difficulty to students' lack of background knowledge when it came to writing about topics other than themselves. I wanted them to understand that informational writing served a different purpose than the narrative writing we had done. In our narrative writing we "shared experiences" and "we used our imaginations" *to entertain* our reader. I explained that writing *to inform* required using enough details and examples in a very organized way "to teach the reader" about a topic. Students seemed to understand the analogy that I shared several times, about *teaching a lesson* and *essay structure*. "Before I present a lesson, I must plan it first. The *introduction* tells you what I plan to teach you, then in the *body* of the lesson I use details, and examples to help you understand, and then in the *conclusion* I tell you again what I just taught you." I also admitted that the hard part was that I had to know a lot about the topic. If I didn't know something, I may have to research, read to find out, or ask someone.

Content and organization had been poor in the past, which is why I focused on using graphic organizers to help students plan and organize their writing beforehand. I felt I could empower students by teaching a strategy applicable to future writing prompt assessments. I was realistic with students, and

they agreed that not all writing in school was fun and meaningful. Sometimes they would have to write about a topic that is not their choice, like on a social studies essay test, or PSSA. My goal was to have all students become independent writers of the five paragraph essay required for the PSSA.

On the board the agenda said, “Have you ever heard of a four square? Write a five paragraph essay the easy way!” I told the class, “I have a secret that will help you write the PSSA essay and almost make it fun.” They were willing to try. I used Gould and Gould’s model of a Four Square Organizer to teach students to write a five paragraph essay. I began using this method several years ago upon finding the book entitled, *Four Square Writing Method for Grades 4-6: A Unique Approach to Teaching Basic Writing Skills*, by Judith S. Gould and Evan Jay Gould.

As in past years, I modeled this organizer step by step. My topic was, “My favorite food” which became the topic sentence in the middle of the organizer in box number one. The supporting reasons went in boxes 2, 3, and 4. The conclusion incorporating all of the reasons went in box number 5. Each was developed into a paragraph. The organizer helped students expand content, as well as remain organized, and allowed for addition of transitions. Once the organizer is complete, it becomes a matter of making the topic and detail sentences from the information in each box, and then writing the paragraphs in the correct order.

To learn how to use the organizer students worked in heterogeneous groups to answer a group prompt. Each group completed the pre-write on a transparency and, explained the process to the class. Sally, Will, Sharon, and Todd wrote about their favorite holiday. First they brainstormed three different reasons. Sally wrote for the group, “We get presents” in the first square, “Family gets together” in the second square, and “We have a feast,” in the third square. Then they wrote their conclusion combining all of the above. Next they went back to each box and made three *bullets* to “force” out examples and specific details. Todd’s role that day was to share their transparency as seen below at the overhead. He usually enjoyed sharing, as I had let him know that one of his strengths was speaking in front of the class. I had hoped that when students like Todd explain like this, that it would reinforce how to use it.

Group: WILL, SALLY, SHARON, TODD

we get presents • we feel thankful • it's always a surprise • it's fun to play with the presents	family gets together • we know they care about us • play games • we are happy
<b>Our favorite holiday is Christmas.</b>	
we have a feast • eating good food • we cook together • feed the dog scraps	Our favorite holiday is Christmas because we get presents, our family gets together and we have a feast.

Figure 25. Group Four Square Transparency

I wanted to expose students to different prompts, have them practice the four square method, and have a choice. Students made “Tic Tack Toe Journals” containing the writing prompt sheet that looked like a tic tack toe game. The three by three grid contained nine PSSA informational writing prompts. The goal was to do “three in a row.” For independent practice, I assigned a “four square” a night for three nights. Students said it was “cool” because they could choose the prompts they wanted.

We created a rubric together to grade our four square pre-writes. I wanted them to see the importance of this step in the writing process, and sometimes

assigning a grade does that. The pre-writes for the prompts were graded by the students according to the rubric. I was amazed at how they picked up on the purpose for the prewrite. The criteria they developed were: To set the focus, to think about 3 details, to use good words specific to the topic, to plan the beginning, middle and end, and also to be neat so they could read it later! I let them give themselves a zero if they did not do the homework. Sam, Todd, Kerrie, Tarisha and Gavin gave themselves zeros and needed extra support. My spot checks proved most students to be accurate in their self grading. I asked them to justify their grade in the discussion as I recorded their points after calling their name.

During this time Mrs. Jones assisted Sam and Todd. Kerrie, Tarisha and Gavin were independent and just needed the time to complete the work. The others were free to make improvements on theirs or listen to the discussion. This occurred as I told students to chose a prompt and think about it for the upcoming essay test. The test was for them to develop a five paragraph essay from one of their Tic Tack Toe prompts. The following is an excerpt from my participant observation during the test.

During the testing period, *flow was in the air*. Mrs. Jones mentioned that she had never seen a group so “into” a test. I felt calm and in control during the testing because I could limit my responses to questions and “force them to try their hardest.” During class I sometimes felt pressured to help everyone! Sally and

Linda were stressed out, because they felt the time crunch, but smiling because they had a lot to say. Sharon used a dictionary. I was happy to see her take the initiative. I asked her later how it worked for her. She said she found two out of four words. I had never seen Sam so focused. Sam got up out of his seat to show me his draft. He was writing more than I had ever seen in a single setting. I gave him a “thumbs up”! Paul kept erasing, ripped his paper, and started over three times. It appeared that he really wanted to do a good job. I even gave acupuncture to Mary’s hand when she got a cramp. She yelled out, “My hand is cramped up. I’m beginning to realize I know a lot about softball!”

When Todd finished his four square and draft he came up and said, “I think this is the best writing I ever did.” He smiled and handed me his 2 pages, skipped lines, one side only draft. I read it and responded, “I think you are right!” I thought about Sam and Todd and how independent they were becoming. Usually they asked for assistance or needed to be prodded by Mrs. Jones or me. Perhaps they had built the right skills to meet this challenge.

Later I asked, “How many people are actually having fun?” Everyone looked up and raised their hands except Linda and Sally who shrugged their shoulders and smiled. They were writing about their favorite hobbies and had a lot to say. Jim said, “I love to write. I’m on a roll.” Soon Kerrie finished. She turned in her paper and I asked her if she had fun. She said, “Yes.” I asked why; she giggled, smiled, and shrugged. She said, “I changed some words,” pointing to her



paper. She had changed “yarn” to “string.” I adjusted the schedule to allow a few extra minutes for students to finish. I instructed students who were finished to read a book.

Then Todd asked to type his final copy on the Alpha-smart. I allowed him to go next door and ask Mrs. Smith to get him started. Mrs. Smith, the special ed teacher, later reported to me that she was trying to help him and he wouldn't let her because he “knew what he needed to do.” He needed five paragraphs. She was amazed that he referred to the rough draft which was in paragraphs to help him format the Alpha-Smart version.

Gavin handed his packet in, and proudly asked, “May I do another one for myself?” I said, “Of course!” Mark asked “Can't I type mine?” Knowing that time was short, I replied, “This time I'd like you to write it; you have nice handwriting.” Sam was so proud of his final “book” he stapled it like a book alongside the left margin! I noticed that he even added how he felt about the times in the snow after asking me, “How can I make it better?” Even though it was a “test” I wanted to encourage such questions from Sam. I was very pleased and complimented him. His spelling was even perfect. He was the kid in the beginning of the year who never took a book out of his desk without reminders. Karina was very proud of her essay too. She showed me her paragraphs of neat work before she turned it in. I smiled sincerely and said, “It's beautiful. I can't wait to read it!”

At the end of the day I asked, "*How was it fun when you took the writing test today?*" I recognized attributes of flow in what they said. Later I added my commentary to student responses, as seen in *italicized* print.

Sam said, "I never wrote like that before. It was fun."

"I was writing fast and I made my writing neater," shared Todd.

Sam said again, "The 'funnest' test ever."

*Sam and Todd were first to raise their hands to speak. This was unusual in a group discussion, so I called on them first for positive reinforcement. They usually sat back. I had seen them struggle to keep up in the past. They usually needed adult support to accomplish goals; this time they didn't. They used the tools and were motivated to complete the task. I suspected that they were feeling proud and "flowful."*

"For me it went really fast," said Diane. I asked the rest of the class if time went really fast. They all raised their hands. I shared that this was a flow factor.

*Diane sparked me to ask the entire class if time went fast. I shared with them about flow. This had happened before when we coded the journal entries.*

"It was fun because we got to write down our ideas," added Karina.

"We got to write about things we like," said Will.

*Will and Karina liked having a choice. They reminded me to think more about alternative assessments for students. Although this conflicts with traditional*

*testing like PSSA. Some students would never experience flow in traditional testing forms.*

“We got to do it alone. I liked doing it alone without any help,” John.

*Perhaps John felt his skills balancing with the challenge.*

“It was fun but stressful. I like to write when we have choices. It was hard making it make sense,” said Linda.

I felt stressed and got sloppy, but I did good,” said Sally.

“It makes you feel accomplished when you finish, I was a little stressed though,” said Bruce. “In a way the time limit keeps you going and you want to finish-it gets you going. I like to write,” added Diane.

*Linda, Sally, Bruce, and Diane felt a certain stress. It seemed they were challenged on their level. The stress could have caused them to give up, but they didn't. They were equipped with skills to accomplish a challenging task which can lead to flow. I connected this idea to what Vygotsky's zone of proximal development suggests about a certain tension associated with learning.*

As I examined the students' work I determined that each student had used the graphic organizer as a pre-writing tool. Each student successfully wrote a rough draft and final copy. The organizer was the scaffolding tool needed to help all students meet the challenge of writing five paragraphs. We turned the test into the *challenge* in which to apply *skills*. The students who had needed the most support in writing found their autonomy that day. I think the test environment

“forced” them to depend on themselves, although Mrs. Jones and I were walking the aisles to nod and say, “Good job” and “Keep going” as subtle feedback to affirm their efforts. The experience provided each student to opportunity to complete the task on their own level and feel proud in the end. I stood back and offered subtle feedback to affirm their efforts. I believed that teaching the four square strategy, along with exposure to a variety of prompts could reduce future PSSA essay test anxiety. I also planned to have students apply this method to persuasive writing next quarter.

The essay test “flow experience” was a surprise to me. All students seemed to have found a new sense of confidence that day, like they really were part of the flow, especially for Sam, Todd, Karina, Sharon, Kerrie, and Gavin who often had difficulties meeting traditional testing standards. In reading class these same students had difficulty completing the story response questions, while other students said they were boring. I think we all knew that the reading curriculum was another place that needed flow. In the following anecdote students and I can certainly “go with the flow” when it comes to allowing natural creativity and talents to emerge. By this time students knew I was a teacher who expected engagement in learning, cooperation, and respect, but I also wanted it to be fun. I stepped back that day and allowed the “natural curiosity of the child” to take over.

### **It's Flowtime! Caveman Idol**

As an alternative to the reading response questions and to practice summarizing and sequencing skills for “Painters of the Caves,” I recognized an opportunity to connect and adapt the reading curriculum to support students’ experiences elsewhere. In art class they had made cave paintings which were rolled up in the planning room waiting for display. In science they had created home made instruments which were rather primitive looking, but clever, and it seemed a shame that they had to take them home without having the opportunity to play them. It just seemed fitting to offer the students a choice this week. “Do the story questions from the reading book,” I explained, “or write a rap song, performance optional, containing the information and vocabulary words you learned from the story.” Students transformed the next two days of reading class, a total of four forty minute class periods, into what I called ‘flowtime.’”

All students were engaged at one time or another either writing, reading, listening, discussing, researching, shaking, drumming, chanting, drawing, cutting, singing, dancing, smiling or laughing. The redirection I gave to stay on task was minimal. In other words things did not disrupt “my flow.” In addition, because they were all working on something that mattered to them, I felt they were all finding their flow...together working producing a video that would showcase what they understood about the story. And to me it was much more than reading. It seemed like the only thing they needed me for was to approve the content of

their songs, to supply construction paper, tape and markers for prop making, and to videotape the performance. Mary and Karina were co-hosts. I couldn't help noticing how Karina had a chance to feel accepted and show that she could cooperate with her peers. I also noticed how Mary shared the spotlight, something that she was not used to. I enjoyed my time behind the camera as I viewed a classroom full of students creating their own flow.

That Friday before the usual spelling test, the students engaged me in a reflective discussion on the flow they were having in class.

Mary asked, "Do you think we could have copies of our Caveman Idol video?"

Linda chimed in, "Yeah, that was so fun."

The students' heads were nodding. They were smiling saying, "Yeah!"

Sally had another idea, "I think, for the future we should make a CD of our songs or other projects like our commercials. Then we could make a CD cover to remember 6<sup>th</sup> grade."

Jim cheered, "That would be awesome, like a time capsule or something."

I heard their voices getting stronger as they gave me feedback about our experience together. All of a sudden Mary interjected, "You're not a normal teacher!"

Raising my eyebrows, I asked, "What do you mean?"

Diane chimed in, “The best part was you. You let us do things a normal teacher wouldn’t.”

Their comments continued, and I wrote down what they said about me and also what they had learned. I knew that the activity was a fun way to meet broad curricular standards like reading, writing, speaking and listening. A future possibility was to view the video and critique our presentation skills. I also knew that students could never have enough practice learning how to work together. The following pastiche is made from the different voices of my students in the italicized print combined with reflective comments about why I was “not a normal teacher” in regular print, and in bold print, what they learned from the Caveman Idol activity. Borrowed from Mary’s bold words I gave it the title, “A Normal Teacher Wouldn’t.”

### **A Normal Teacher Wouldn’t**

*“We are looking forward to English and reading.”*

*“I hated English until now.”*

“You make every lesson fun.”

*“Reading questions are boring every week.”*

“We got to choose.”

**“If we can write a song about it, it shows we understand it.”**

“You let us do our own thing.”

“I think you took it from a kid’s point of view.”

**“When we memorized the song we learned because it was everything about the caveman.”**

*“It was easy to do this.”*

*“It was a good change.”*

“No one does songs.”

**“We learned how hard it was for them living back then.”**

*“We love doing commercials.”*

**“You let us participate even if we had last minute ideas, we learned everyone was accepted.”**

*“It went along smooth, people were working and listening at the same time.”*

**We got to learn what other people’s talents were.**

“When I wake up in the morning I don’t want to go to school, but if we are doing something fun, I can’t wait for reading class.”

“We want surprises.”

**“We were summarizing what we learned, putting it in our own words.”**

“We got to express ourselves.”

“We got to feel important.”

**“We should write songs to learn other things, because over and over practicing makes you learn it.”**

“We used to have recess, but in middle school we don’t. In here it’s sorta like recess sometimes, only we are learning something.”

**“You’ll see, everyone will get “A’s” on the test.”**

*“We should do it again, it was so fun.”*

I was getting the idea that the teacher had quite a bit to do with flow in the classroom. “Not being normal” was a compliment. Students noticed when things ran smoothly. A lot of this had to do with how I anticipated student need and monitored flow breaks, like off task behavior, or someone who was not part of a group. Students had learned that I listened to them and understood their point of view. They knew that I understood their need for choice, their need for novelty, their need for a break in the routine, and “recess.” They noticed an atmosphere where everyone was accepted and when they were working and listening to one another. In school my students were thriving in the *autotelic family environment* like Csikszentmihalyi described where children are challenged with interesting things and take ownership in the process. Perhaps they would continue to



cooperate with one another and engage themselves in learning because they wanted fun and flow. It seemed a “normal teacher” wouldn’t have listened to them, or surprised them, or allowed them to develop their own activity, or express themselves, or feel important, so they could look forward to school. It seemed that flow had everything to do with teacher attitude, environment, and recognizing student need. And that’s what the joy of teaching and learning is all about. I’m glad I wasn’t a “normal teacher” to my students.

### **What Students Said Flow Was**

I asked my students what flow meant to them. According to them, flow in school does occur, and it goes deeper than fun. I now realized that we began discussing fun, and through our experiences together, we discovered flow, especially in writing. Their positive responses to the activities that I planned made me want to keep going. They helped me to experience the flow of teaching, the intrinsic reward that has nothing to do with a paycheck. Over half of the students said that flow in school was a desire to keep going. This affirmed for me that planning for flow in school can help students experience the intrinsic rewards of learning. Of course flow is an individual experience as well. To me, the voice of my students is what really mattered. I coded student voices according to flow criteria, categorized, and sequenced them to create the following piece called: “What Students Say Flow Is.” The bold printed, underlined item is the flow factor. Under that is my commentary about what I learned. Next in italicized print

are the student voices explaining what flow is in school. This combination provides a way to see the whole picture of how flow played out in study.

### **“What Students Say Flow Is”**

#### **Interest, Choice, and Control**

Flow began with student interest. I started off with something that they liked, and gave them a choice. Students found self expression very meaningful. Students felt in control with the freedom to express themselves and choices they made.

*“Picking our own topics in writing is flow.” Diane*

*“It is fun when we can write about what we want.” Sally*

*“Flow is having the freedom of expressing your personality. Being able to do something you love and never stop.” Beth*

*“Flow is the freedom and expression of doing something you like or love.*

*Flow in school is the self expression you can express. I really love writing.” Mary*

*“Flow is the way you control things. Flow is a dove it’s free like the wind. Flow is fun, fun, fun, fun. Something you can’t control. Sometimes you can.”*

**Kerrie**

#### **Engagement**

The interest, control, and choice leads to engagement. Once interested the flow begins with a “pumped up” feeling of excitement leading to engagement. Students express engagement as “an endless flow of thoughts,” “concentration” and a desire to keep going. “Your ideas burst out on paper,” or “Your mind flies.” The engagement leads to ideas building and a growing understanding.

*“Flow is something that I feel I always get more and more. I get pumped up as I get ready for an activity. I have had flow in school when I do a writing assignment. I love writing about an informative piece of writing.” Bruce*

*“Flow is just hearing something and getting completely pumped up. I had flow everywhere especially in English class when we write essays.” Jim*

*“Flow in school is to me is when things go right along like when I’m writing. Like when I have something to say and I can’t put my pen down. Writing to me is an endless flow of thoughts.” Natalie*

*“Flow is the urge to continue with what I am doing till I’m done.” Mark*

*“Flow is when you want to keep on going on something you really enjoy. It’s also when a discussion leads on to the next thing that didn’t have much to do with the thing you started with.” John*

*“Flow is when my mind flies. Idea after idea. It just comes to me, especially when I write poetry. It’s my passion for some reason exploring the world in my head with a visual.” Diane*

*“Flow is where you get ideas and just burst them out on paper! Mrs. Bell lets students write comics and stories. You give us good time (like you give us like 4 or more days to write a good story). You Mrs. Bell taught students to be as flowed as we can. In Vermont last year we couldn’t write.”* **Gavin**

*“I think flow theory is really good because it makes kids want to read more. I think flow helped me write the informative essay because it made me get more ideas.”* **Ricky**

*“I think flow in school is being able to escape yourself and understand what you are doing.”* **Sharon**

*“Flow is something you slowly understand and do. Like during the book reports. I felt like I would get it sooner or later.”* **Will**

*Sometimes at home I just sing and sing about everything-school, friends etc. Sixth grade definitely helped me find what I was looking for in writing and in everything. Flow is great.”* **Diane**

*“I think flow theory is really good because it makes kids want to read more. I think flow helped me write the informative essay because it made me get more ideas.”* **Ricky**

#### **Immediate Feedback**

Students self-monitored their experience. They knew they were doing it right and could make adjustments as needed. Or in Sam’s case, self-correction helped him to learn what it would take for the next attempt.

*“Flow is...Doing what you enjoy and knowing you’re doing it right.”*

**Brenda**

*“Flow is also going from sentence to sentence knowing what you are doing right.”* **Sally**

*“Flow is when you are just doing good.”* **Todd**

*“Flow is when you forget to study for a test and you start to panic and when you get your test back you really didn’t get a good grade but at least you passed the test and that’s what counts but remember to study next time!”* **Sam**

#### **Social**

Linda reminds us that in school the social aspect of learning is important. Students like working with their friends.

*“Flow is when we work in groups. We like that because we get to socialize with other kids our age. Plus we get to express our self with kids our age.”* **Linda**

#### **Novelty**

And finally Paul knows that flow is about time flying, but he wants the day to pass with the fun of parties. He is the only one who did not relate to a “learning aspect” associated with flow.

*“Flow is something that can make the day go by faster and make it more fun. Like when we have those parties.”* **Paul**

Overall students discovered the language arts as an opportunity to experience flow. Finally Sally's definition expressed *it all* for me. Sally and Diane summed up flow for them as follows:

*"Flow in writing is when Mrs. Bell allows us to write with some limits. She also allows us to flow. It is fun when we can write about what we want. Flow is almost like dancing. The time just flies by...Flow is also going from sentence to sentence knowing what you are doing right. I had flow this year. My color poem really made me have flow. It is like lyrical (in dance) when you really have emotions about the music you have more ideas. Flow is when I think quietly with no noise. Writing has become easier throughout this school year. With flow it helps. The time just goes by. English has become one of my favorite subjects."*

Diane added, *"Everyone found their passion this year. I never knew that I had a passion for poetry, but this year I found out. I love poetry now because of Mrs. Bell. Everyone has a passion this year because of Mrs. Bell and English in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Sixth grade definitely helped me find what I was looking for in writing and in everything."*

I wondered if students found flow in sixth grade language arts, how that would transfer to next year, and the year after. Would the experience of flow in writing for Diane this year transfer to a life long passion? I hoped so.

## DATA ANALYSIS

According to Arhar, Holly, and Kasten, (2001), “The analysis of action research is an ongoing process that begins as soon as we decide to study our own practice” (p. 186). Throughout the study I wrote analytic memos, or notes to myself (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001) about what was emerging in my data collection to come to new understandings about what was happening in my classroom in relation to what I observed, what I thought and felt, and how students were achieving. Planning lessons was based on these new understandings about flow in the classroom along with curricular learning goals. The ongoing process guided my inquiry in order to benefit students and make modifications as necessary.

I also wrote analytic memos to view my study through lenses of educational theorists like Dewey, Vygotsky and Freire. Their philosophies substantiated my findings of flow factors in the school setting. Analytic memos also helped me gain further insight into student behavior or what I thought flow was, or to discuss my preconceived biases, notions and what I thought I would find.

I wrote analytic memos as a form of participant checking after interviews which became natural discussions before, during and after activities in order to understand and gain further insight of student perspectives. Students and I performed our own analysis of what may lead to flow in the school setting

confirming my analysis of additional flow factors to consider in the school setting.

I analyzed figurative language which often revealed strong emotions and frustrations which could reveal flow and no flow also leading to new understandings to guide the study (Lakeoff and Johnson, 1999). I also looked at the questions and comments that of my students as well as mine. Dialogue with my students revealed participant thinking patterns and gave direction to the study.

I wrote narrative forms which according to Ely (1991), “have purpose and provide the techniques through which writers describe, shape and emphasize their meanings” (p. 59). Narrative devices like I stories, and other types of vignettes helped me understand the viewpoint of my participants. Engaging in narrative techniques added another layer of analysis. Ely (1991) says, “There are many ways to come to know something and even then such knowing is partial” ( p. 60). Most importantly narrative forms helped me come to new understandings about the work I was so closely engaged in.

I evaluated student work according to criteria set for the assignment, or the PSSA rubric. I examined the process and final products produced by students to confirm my theme statements about student need and flow factors.

Throughout the study I reread portions of my field log to create codes, or labels for the data according to a one or two work description of the content. (Ely,

Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). For instance if several lines or paragraphs were about a disruption in student engagement, I wrote FLOWBREAK in the margin.

Near the end of my study, when patterns emerged I organized the codes into bins, or categories (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). I created a chart to organize the codes in each bin and wrote a commentary about each to come to a deeper understanding of each one. From there I made a graphic organizer using post it notes to further understand the relationships in the data. From there I developed a graphic organizer to understand the relationships between bins. As I noticed the patterns I wrote theme statements which emerged as findings in my study (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997).

I also used quantitative methods (Popham, 2000) to determine if flow was present during an activity from the student perspective. Students rated three activities according to flow factors using a Likert scale ranging from 4 as always, 3 as almost always, 2 as sometimes, and 1 as never. I tallied and averaged the rating for each category. I defined a flow factor as present if the value was 3 or higher. Lower than three I considered flow factor not present. I made a line graph to compare the ratings of the three activities in order to confirm or dispute what I found in the qualitative findings of my study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

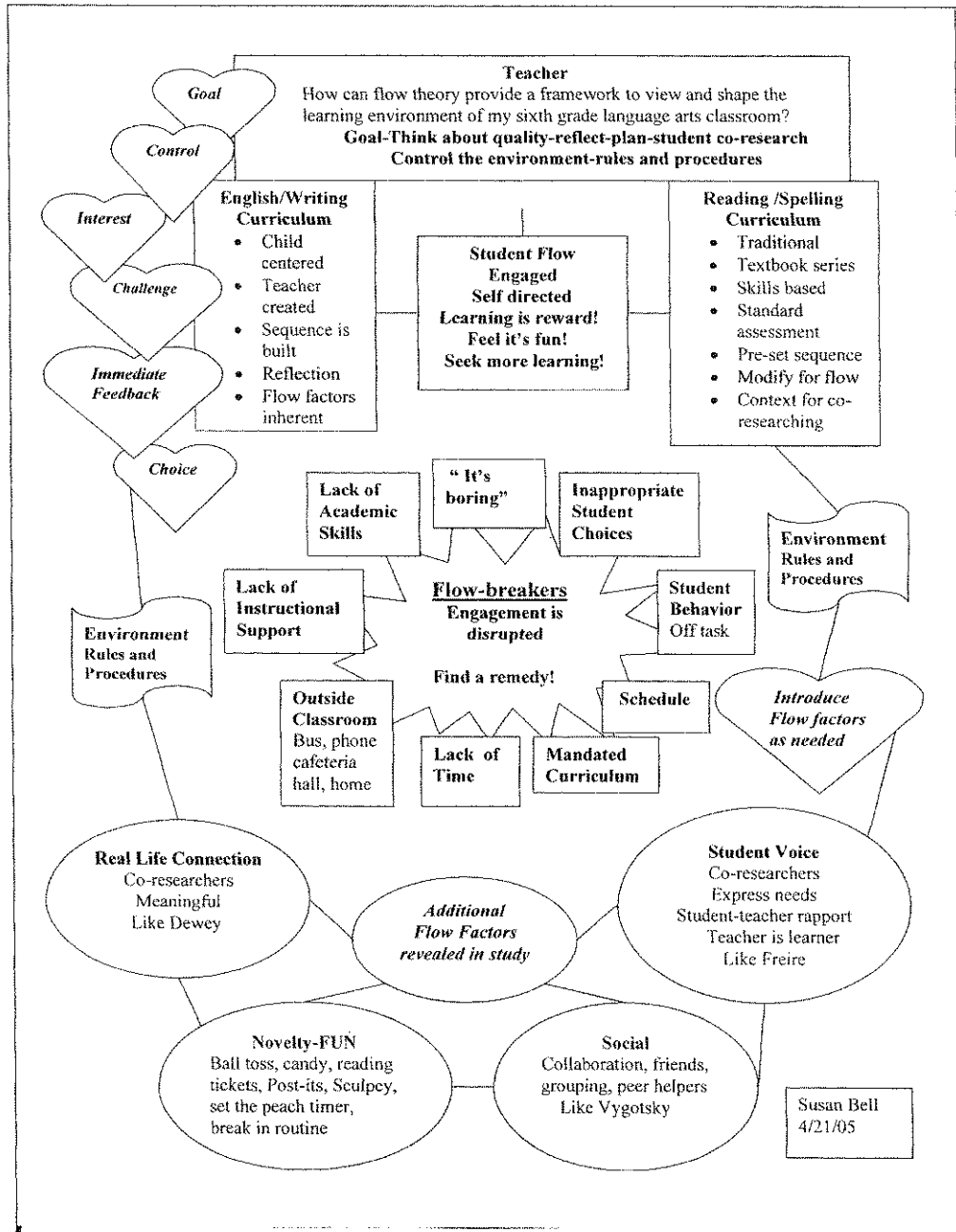


Figure 26. Findings Graphic Organizer



I designed a graphic organizer to depict the relationship between teacher, curriculum, flow factors, student, and flow breaks within an environment. I will present my findings in alignment with the above graphic organizer.

I learned that the teacher is an important factor in the flow framework. I understood from my reading about flow about the importance of setting up an autonomous environment. I set up rules and procedures to provide a structured environment in which to operate as a community. I modeled appropriate social behaviors as well as academic behaviors. At first learning activities were set up to teach students expectations about proper learning behaviors like cooperation, raising hands, completing assignments, and listening. Student altercations rarely occurred in the classroom. With this structure in place, I empowered students as co-researchers to promote a two way exchange of ideas. The classroom needed a structure in place before I was ready to open that discussion.

Viewing my classroom through a flow lens combined with the action research process proved to be a positive experience for both students and me. I found that our study of flow fit into a language arts curriculum-writing, reading, speaking and listening. I struggled at times with teaching a separate English curriculum to three sections and a separate reading/spelling curriculum to only my section. Writing about this struggle led me to discover that I could view curriculum as either “Flow based” or “Non-Flow based.” I agreed with Wolcott (2001) that “writing is thinking” (p. 22).

My English or writing curriculum had been transforming for several years from being grammar based to writing based because I think students learn how to write through writing. Lucky for me, the district had not mandated any specific resources or material for sixth grade English teachers. I referred to the PA standards in order to set learning goals. This year through engaging in action research I finally figured out how to better sequence, connect and pace writing lessons. Fortunately the PSSA writing test was cancelled for sixth grade this year and I didn't have to rush or push students to write persuasively when they may not have been ready to do so. I had control and ownership over the curriculum and could make decisions based on student need instead of what a textbook said. Finding flow in school is about the merging of quality experience with the learning. John Dewey's *principle of continuity of experience*, meaning "that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after"(p. 35), certainly supports building a language arts curriculum based on flow. Providing meaningful experiences in reading and writing in the present could create a natural desire to seek future experiences. Teaching writing has become my passion. I enjoy learning about student interests and creating activities structured for success by offering choice, control or ownership, skills, and feedback. I have witnessed "the transformation" in students of all levels when they discover that learning to write poetry or prose is challenging and fun. Students liked expressing themselves for

authentic purposes and sharing their writing with an audience. Students maintained writing folders in order to show and reflect on the process. Students were active, producing, and processing just as Dewey recommended for his child centered curriculum.

At the end of the study I became more of a facilitator as students were well on their way to becoming self-directed when it came to writing. I never heard students say, "English or writing is boring." I often heard, "Can you give us more time to write?" I now consider this a "Flow-based" curriculum because when students and I were engaged in authentic writing together we experienced flow.

Observing and reflecting on my practice empowered me to make responsible curricular decisions based on student need in writing. At the same time I struggled to do so in reading/spelling. I attributed this to the difference in control I had over the two curriculums. The district-mandated, traditional reading curriculum was based on a textbook series containing skills and standard assessments in a pre-set sequence. I called this a "Non-flow Based" curriculum. It is here that I discovered breaks in flow. These were times when engagement for either teacher or student was disrupted. In the beginning reading class I learned that curriculum can be a flow breaker. I heard many students say, "Reading is boring" or "Spelling is easy" or "I failed the test because I forgot to study." Unit tests, spelling tests, and AR points seemed to emphasize the differences in student interest or ability in reading and spelling. Homework assignments, worksheets,

independent reading and written reading responses often frustrated many students, especially the inclusion students. The reality of the system did not allow me to drop the assessments, but with students as co-flow researchers I was able to modify certain lessons for fun and sometimes flow. Adding flow factors to the lesson can improve the chances for flow or student engagement.

We added four new flow factors to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's list: The Novelty-FUN Factor, the Real Life Connections Factor, the Social factor, and the Student Voice Factor. The Novelty-FUN factor is an extrinsic motivator that makes an experience enjoyable for students like a ball toss, art project, or Jolly Rancher candy to help them to finish an assignment, or "get through a story." Although flow is an intrinsic reward associated with self-direction, and engagement I realized that not all students are ready for self-direction, and many needed help staying engaged, especially the inclusion students. I thought of the Novelty-FUN factor as a scaffolding device to help students be more successful. Building on the successes may someday lead to the discovery of the intrinsic rewards of flow. This would definitely merit further research. I used the reading ticket program I had developed in my pilot study again this year and viewed it as Novelty-FUN factor to help motivate busy students to sit and read independently. Students on all levels reported that getting tickets helped them make the time to read and once they started reading it was enjoyable. They enjoyed getting tickets,

reported being less nervous about AR tests, and loved the Chinese auction at the end of the quarter.

The next flow factor is the Student Voice Factor. Students enjoyed being empowered as co-researchers. I used their ideas and interests when it was appropriate for the learning goals set by the curriculum. I changed my initial research design and decided that allowing students to plan activities on their own according to flow factors was inappropriate at the time. I found that I had to set a “leadership tone” and make it clear to students that learning was the goal. The teacher is the one with the big picture and students learn to see the big picture along the way with proper sequencing and connections. I also found that the study itself became the vehicle for students to experience flow as co-researchers. We engaged in our own coding process which resulted in moans and groans about going to lunch. Student teacher rapport was strong and I enjoyed learning from students what they needed and wanted to make learning more enjoyable. I enjoyed students like Mary, Diane, Linda, Beth, Sally, Brenda, John and Paul who were eager to teach me about what was enjoyable for them in life and learning. I considered these students “flow seekers,” students who were more self-directed, displaying characteristics of “autotelic personalities” as noted by Csikszentmihalyi’s research. They enjoyed school. The less vocal students eventually found their voices in more one-on-one situations. I also learned from all of my students that the teacher is a learner too, as Freire(1970) said,

“Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so both are simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 72).

The next is the Real Life Connection Factor, which was a way to modify the reading curriculum to make it more meaningful. The co-research was meaningful to students and very real to me so most of our co-research activity occurred in the morning during part of a reading or spelling test. Students like Mary knew I was open to suggestions as long as I could match a reading skill to the suggestion. She often sparked spontaneous discussions about current events like Hurricane Ivan, the presidential election resulting in a mock election, first grade buddies, or Chinese customs. I usually came up with one of the skills from the unit to tie into the discussion. I often used current events and real life experiences to build background knowledge for the story.

Finally, the Social Factor was a flow promoter very important to the sixth graders with whom I researched. Collaboration with peers was an enjoyable experience out of school and in school as well. In reading and writing class I grouped students heterogeneously most of the time to promote scaffolding among different levels of learners. This concurs with Vygotsky’s (1978) belief that, “An essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal development processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in

cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child's independent development achievement" (p. 90). I found that student discourse benefited most learners if the group especially if they had one goal to achieve, like brainstorming a list. But if it was peer revising I noticed that inclusion students like Todd and Sam benefited more from one-on-one assistance from an adult, another area for further inquiry.

I found that writing about my beliefs and reflective memos were a way to come to new understandings about flow, work out frustrations, and solve problems. My desire for flow in the classroom made me a keen observer of classroom events, and I became very sensitive to breaks in flow. Eventually I focused on the disruptions which became known as flow-breakers. In order to promote flow I could not ignore breaks in flow. Some were self inflicted breaks like being tired, running out of time, hunger, moodiness. Some were due to the system itself like band lessons, testing, scheduling, fire drills, and phone calls. Then there were student behaviors that broke the flow. I learned that the breaks provided the necessary contrast to jolt me into changing something or recognizing a student need. I found it was important to find ways to anticipate, to fix or even prevent these breaks in flow inevitable in a real classroom. My list of quick remedies included "status of the class," peer assistance, shortening assignments, grouping of students, changing the schedule, the Alpha-Smart, individual

conferencing, constructive feedback, and introducing novelty, as well as maintaining a positive, friendly, yet firm attitude.

I learned to observe students like Kerrie, Gavin, Sam, Todd, Karina, Tarisha, and Sharon who were more likely to become disengaged with learning. I became more empathetic to these students' needs. I could now view these needs as flow factors. They needed to be challenged on their skill level. They needed extra time, and they needed frequent positive feedback. They needed help making the right choices in writing topics and books they could read on their own. They needed tools like the Alpha-smart to help solve handwriting problems. They needed the opportunity to reflect on their needs. They needed Novelty-FUN motivators. They needed to feel like part of the group and find acceptance with their peers. Eventually with understanding and support these individuals found flow in their own ways. For some students breaks in flow occurred before they ever entered the class like a fight on the bus or a bump in the hallway, or not enough sleep the night before. Students displaying breaks in flow taught me that they needed extra support, and extra patience. But, they needed to find their own flow. The best I could do was listen, observe and set up opportunities in the classroom and invite all to participate.

Although this was time consuming, I learned that activities could be qualitatively measured and compared according to how students perceived flow factors. Students rated how they felt about each activity in accordance with flow



factors, depicted on the “x” axis, on a scale ranging from 4 (always), 3 (almost always), 2 (sometimes) and 1 (never), depicted on the “y” axis. I averaged the ratings for each factor for all 22 students. Using data collected from three ratings, I plotted the data on a line graph for all three activities. On the following page is an Activity Rating Summary showing the comparison of the three tasks according to flow factors. I considered a 3 or higher as “flow” for the individual factors. The enjoyable activity shows 4’s in both “happy” and “do again” and contains all ratings above 3. Results indicate students experienced flow. This is reasonable because of the choice factor. For all three activities students perceived flow in that they were “doing well” suggesting that internal or external feedback was sufficient. However for the two in school activities there was no flow in relation to “wish not to stop” and “wanting to do again.” But, when comparing the two in school activities, the personal narrative rated higher than a spelling test.

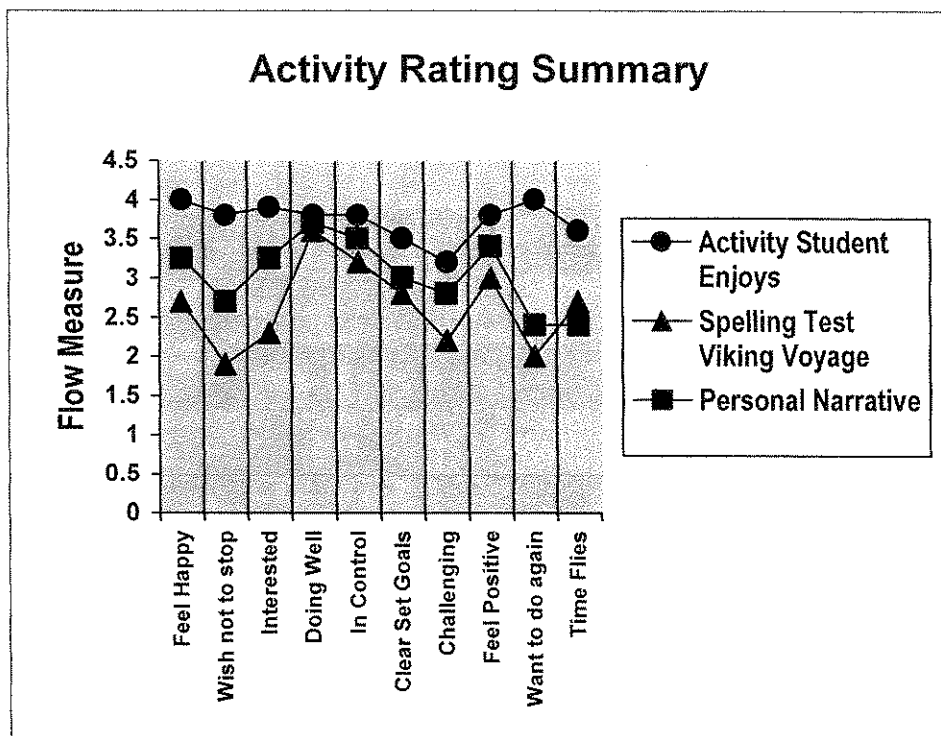


Figure 26. Activity Rating Summary

### THE NEXT ACTION RESEARCH CYCLE

Now I have a good idea of what flow looks and feels like in a classroom with learning as the focus. In further studies I would gather data on the effect of flow based curriculum for a longer period of time in order to determine a pattern of growth in attitude and achievement. This could also lead to finding a possible correlation between the two. Also it would be interesting to see if flow carries over to other classes, subjects or grade levels. I would also like to dialogue more with parents about student flow both in and out of school and how to merge the

two. I would continue to involve my students in the discussion of quality of experience and finding flow in school.

In a quantitative study, a rating scale containing flow factors could be used to measure the quality of experience from a multiple of perspectives. Electronic surveys for students, teachers, parents, and administrators would make it possible to evaluate the quality of experience provided in school. Then educators may see more of a need to question current reform efforts based on traditional methods. I recommend the use of technology survey programs to gather, analyze and present larger quantities of data. Maybe public schools would like to know their flow rating! If teachers realized they were not in the flow, perhaps they would see flow as a way to improve the quality of their own, as well as their students' experience in the classroom.

Next, I would recommend the development of a teacher training course for flow planning. Studies in flow could someday lead to developing a way to train teachers to incorporate flow factors as way to plan and create curriculum. This may empower teachers to experience the true flow of teaching. Flow occurred when I had the skills and knowledge after six years of teaching writing to create and sequence lesson properly. It also required me to set up rules and procedures to allow students to work in a structured environment. I learned the importance of this the hard way in my first year of teaching when I let students have free reign.

Neither traditional or teacher created curriculum can survive lack of discipline policy and clear expectations.

As excited as I am about continuing and sharing my study I am realistic that many of my colleagues are satisfied with traditional methods and see what I did as a lot of extra work. This may be true, but the flow was worth it for my students and me. I will continue to incorporate viewing my practice through a flow lens and invite next year's students to do the same. My future challenge is to help other teachers discover flow in teaching and learning their classroom.

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**APPENDIXES****Appendix A  
HSIRB Approval Letter****MORAVIAN COLLEGE**

September 21, 2004

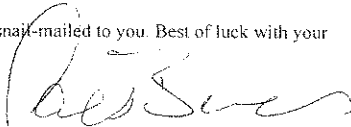
Susan K. Bell

Dear Susan Bell,

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board approved your proposal: Applying flow theory to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade language arts classroom. Given the materials submitted, your proposal received an expedited review. A copy of your proposal will remain with the HSIRB Chair.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation.

This letter will be e-mailed and snail-mailed to you. Best of luck with your research.



James Barnes  
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board  
Moravian College  
610-861-1672 (voice)  
610-861-1657 (FAX)  
barnesj@moravian.edu

## Appendix B Principal Consent Letter

September 7, 2004

To whom it may concern,

I give my consent for Susan Bell to conduct a research study in her classroom. It is my understanding that the research is supported by the educational literature and is a requirement for the completion of her Master's Degree program through Moravian College. Further, I understand that consent for the study will be obtained from all participants and that participants have a right to withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms will be used in discussion of the data collected to protect students' identities. The data from this research study will be held in the strictest confidence, kept in a secure location, and destroyed by shredding upon completion of the study.

Students in Mrs. Bell's language arts class will engage in the required curriculum during the course of the study. Study participants' experiences will be documented by surveys, observation log, interviews, and writing activities. The data collected from non-participants will not be included in the final report.

Finally, I am aware that questions regarding this research should be directed to Mrs. Bell at [redacted] or her advisor, Dr. Joseph Shosh at Moravian College

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Principal,

## Appendix C

### Participant Consent Letter

September 7, 2004

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am currently working toward earning a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. The courses that I am taking allow me to stay current with the most effective teaching methods in order to provide the best learning experience for your child. In order to earn my degree this spring I am required to conduct a systematic study of my own teaching practices.

This semester (September 7-Dec. 23) I plan to study the joy associated with learning as defined by Flow Theory and the eight factors that contribute to optimal experience, or flow. This theory of intrinsic motivation has come from the research of psychologist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He studied what people feel when they are doing something they enjoy. The idea is that if people enjoy an activity they will want to repeat it. Too many students say, "School is boring." I'd like to examine if together with students as co-researchers we could purposefully create conditions for flow and make learning as fun as possible. People who love learning go on to learn more! The study will be conducted in accordance with the learning goals set by the language arts curriculum.

For the study, I will be collecting data from student writing, observed behaviors, and interviews. I am asking your permission to use data gathered pertaining to your child's involvement in classroom activities. Participation is entirely voluntary and will not affect your child's grade in any way. Students may withdraw from the study at any time. All student names, faculty members, and the school name will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms in the published report. All research materials will be secured in a protected location and later destroyed by shredding.

If you have any questions about my research please contact me by note, phone or email me at . In addition, our principal has approved my study. My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh who can be contacted at Moravian College (601) 861-1482 or by email at [jshosh@moravian.edu](mailto:jshosh@moravian.edu). Please sign and return the consent form below. Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Susan K. Bell  
6<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher,  
Please detach and return to Mrs. Bell

I attest that I am the child's legal guardian and that I have received a copy, read, and understand this consent form.

I am willing to have my child participate in this action research study. Please check one.

\_\_\_\_\_ yes                      \_\_\_\_\_ no

Parent/guardian signature \_\_\_\_\_

Child's Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_