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USING READING STRATEGIES AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

TO MOTIVATE DEPENDENT READERS

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"We shouldn't teach great books; we should teach a love of reading."

~ B. F. Skinner

ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study examines the effects of explicitly teaching reading strategies and using young adult literature in a class of dependent, struggling readers. The study was completed in a large urban high school in eastern Pennsylvania with seventeen participants from an Academic English 9 Critical Literacy class. This class was made up of students who were scored basic or below basic on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment examination.

Methods of gathering data included teacher research, surveys, interviews, student work including study guides, projects, and journal entries, and field notes that included transcripts of detailed class discussions. The study suggests that teaching reading strategies explicitly improves students' understanding of texts. The study also suggests that using young adult novels, with their relatable and realistic characters and plot, in a class of struggling readers increases student motivation to read. Overall, increases were found in student understanding and comprehension of both fiction and non-fiction pieces because of the utilization of pre-, during-, and after-reading strategies. In addition, the use of young adult literature increased students' motivation to read as was evident by their effort and achievement on projects and assignments completed in class.

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"You're a teacher? I thought you were a student?!"

As I struggled to push through the crowded hallways during my first days

and weeks teaching at my new high school, this was a refrain I heard from

students many times. I had this question from a janitor who couldn't understand

why I was asking him for a broom. I had to explain this fact to an assistant

principal who wanted to know why I was on a cell phone during school hours. I

even had to confirm this to my own students who immediately upon seeing me

questioned, "You're a teacher?" and guessed my age to be 18. While my answer

to them was the same as always, "Yes, I'm actually 22 and just graduated from

Moravian…", my mind wondered, *Am I really a teacher now…is it possible I'm*

not a student anymore?

The scariness of the reality of my age and position aside, I couldn't help

but notice, as the days passed, how different this school was from my own high

school. The minority population in my home district was only 1% of the total

student body. Here, the minority population reached 35%. While I had many

friends who were very much like me (who all had families much the same as

mine), I lacked experiences with people who could challenge me and my world

view in any real way. My friends all had viewpoints much the same as mine; we

all played two or three sports with one another (we all had to play a variety sports because with only 120 students per class, teams wouldn't exist unless the same athletes played in many seasons); and we all had the same desire and fantastic opportunities to attend great colleges after graduating.

Flashing forward to the class bustling in the room in front of me as a first year teacher, I now looked out at a very different, college preparatory class, one filled with students of mixed races and backgrounds all getting along and talking with one another. Here, students' families quite obviously did not come from the same places. Some would never know a world like the one I came from and were, in many ways, better off because of this.

And then…then came my first ever experience with what my district calls a "Critical Literacy" class. While all other high school classes meet eighty-five minutes a day for one semester, a Critical Literacy English 9 class meets eighty-five minutes a day for the entire school year. Students placed in this class are identified as capable of doing college preparatory work but in need of the extra attention and time a yearlong class provides. These students also uniformly scored in the "Basic" or "Below Basic" range of the PSSA and/or 4Sight Tests. Sure, in student teaching I had a few tough classes, but I always had a security blanket there in the form of my cooperating teacher in case real questions or problems arose. I was on my own now, and all that kept running through my mind was, "How are these largely underprivileged, racially and ethnically diverse

kids ever going to relate to me? And how am I going to relate to them?" I was immediately self-conscious, an emotion that took me right back to my own first days in high school. Should I try to relate to what they're saying, or will they think I'm a white girl trying to act like someone I'm not? Should I try to teach them everything that I've learned, or will they feel talked down to by a more well off white lady?

I wrestled over what to do for a few weeks until I got tired of the fighting and the angst and just started to be myself. I put myself out there and wrote my own stories before I asked students to write theirs. I had them bring in music they enjoyed and showed them how to relate their favorite lyrics to poetry. I listened to them and tried to handle discipline problems in the best ways I knew at the time. Did I get it right that first year with those Critical Literacy students? Heck no. But they taught me more that year, and my Critical Literacy students continue to teach me more every year, than I've ever learned anywhere else. I learned how to pay attention to detail, how to handle real problems, and how to be more patient and understanding than I've ever been before in my life.

After my third year of teaching Critical Literacy English 9 (and after almost four years of teaching), I finally felt like I was hitting my stride with all of my students, not just those like me. I let them tell me stories about themselves because I realized sometimes, no one else is at home to listen to them. I encouraged them to talk about current events, even if all I'd occasionally hear

about was someone who had been jailed unfairly. I worked to create an environment of trust and comfort so that my class is one they can feel safe in and not feel like they are "dumb," as so many of these students have falsely labeled themselves. I got to know students on a more personal level – Kyle has to take care of his sisters when he gets home; Fred and Jose go right to work after school; Sally has practice every day; Donny lives in a house with 11 other people. These students' personal lives are, many times, rocky and unstable, and while I may get upset that they don't do their homework, there often really is an understandable reason if I just take the time to listen.

This is where my study comes in. My students don't always have the support at home (or their parents simply don't have the time to help them) to become better students, and specifically, better readers. I have had many moments of sheer disbelief after hearing a student attempt to read and have that student simply not be able to recognize common words in sentences.   Similarly, many students have immense difficulties comprehending what they've read and, rather than admit their frustrations and ask for help, continue to stay quiet and remained perplexed. I have found that confusion is part of the process though, and sometimes, it's a part of class each day. But inevitably, there are breakthroughs and these successes make the confusions and struggles well worth it.

These experiences have led me to the question I decided to research in more depth – What is impact of teaching reading strategies and using young adult literature in a classroom of dependent, struggling readers? I have decided to focus on making reading accessible and enjoyable for several reasons. First of all, this will vastly help student achievement in English class. But more than that, students need to be able to read and comprehend in all classes. History and science teachers demand that students read non-fiction texts. Students must successfully decode and make meaning of complex texts in order to comprehend the significance of battles or the structure of atoms. Also, I always challenge students to tell me one occupation that doesn't involve reading in some way. I can always find a way to play devil's advocate and win that fight, further proving to students the importance of learning to read well. Last, I want students to want to read both now and in the future. Whether it's a romance novel, a biography, or a newspaper, I want reading to be a chance for them to escape their real lives and think about how they can create a better world for themselves and for all of us.

To better carry out my research, I needed to first examine the various types of struggling readers that exist, and then next, look at the many different reasons that these readers have trouble. After that, I decided I had to look to the experts in the field of reading and clearly lay out what they have deemed to be the best reading strategies to use in a high school classroom. Finally, I examined various types of literature that I believed would motivate students to want to read

more. In all, these three seemingly separate and distinct areas actually come

together to represent the best practices to use in a high school classroom full of

struggling readers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Many students come into our classrooms without the necessary skills required, or the motivation and desire, to be successful readers at the high school level. By this point in their educational careers, struggling readers may lack confidence in their abilities, the knowledge of how and when to employ effective reading strategies, and a wealth of interesting, relevant reading materials to which they can immediately relate (Clarke, 2006). As Clarke (2006) said, "Many students view reading as a forced activity throughout middle school and close the book on reading before they ever enter high school" (p. 67). If teachers can first identify the different types of struggling readers, then choose the most effective before-, during-, and after-reading strategies to reach these readers' specific deficiencies, and finally add interesting literature to their syllabi, then the challenge of making reading more accessible will be easier for both teachers and students.

The Types of Struggling Readers and What They Struggle With

Dependent Readers

To understand what a *dependent* reader is according to Beers (2003), one must first realize what an *independent* reader naturally does. Independent readers know how to, on their own, "make the text make sense" (Beers, 2003, p. 15). These readers can identify what confuses them, and they immediately use context

clues to make sense of unfamiliar words. Independent readers use innate or easily-learned strategies that allow them to quickly realize the author's purpose, notice built-in text structures like captions and bolded words, and make connections between the text and their own lives. Independent learners read with a specific purpose in mind and are constantly setting goals for themselves as they turn each page (Beers, 2003).

On the contrary, a dependent reader does not naturally use these processes discussed above, but instead depends on an "outside-of-themselves source not only to tell them what to do but in many cases, to do it for them" (Beers, 2003, p. 16). When feeling confused, dependent readers often become frustrated, stop reading, and turn to the teacher for help with comprehension, vocabulary, or word recognition problems. Also, a teacher may hear or see a dependent reader speak negatively about reading, calling it "stupid" or "boring" (Beers, 2003). Beers (2003) explains this negative labeling of reading by saying, "They have had so many moments of failure with reading that they not only dislike it but have come to believe that they cannot do it. They are disengaged from the reading process so that whether or not they have the cognitive abilities to read independently does not matter" (p. 17). Dependent readers hide their frustrations by outwardly expressing a dislike and disinterest in reading while the reality is, most likely, that they have become so disgusted with feeling badly about their abilities that it is

easier to appear indifferent rather than frustrated. Finally, Beers is careful to point out that these struggles which dependent readers face should not be dealt with or thought about in isolation. Addressing one problem naturally means tackling others at the same time, and the use of before-, during-, and after-reading strategies help teachers to repeatedly emphasize these crucial reading skills (Beers, 2003, p. 17).

I Can't Readers

Allen (2000) identifies four types of struggling readers in her book *Yellow Brick Roads: Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading 4-12*. The first type is the *I Can't Readers* (Allen, 2000, p. 32). These are the readers who find any way possible to avoid reading – they are sick, they are tired, they need glasses. Often these excuses hide more serious problems – students do not know how to choose an appropriate independent novel, they struggle when trying to decode unfamiliar words, or they don't have the stamina to read lengthier selections (Allen, 2000, p. 32). The challenge with these readers, Allen (2000) points out, is figuring out whether they just don't like to read or whether they actually can't read. She suggests immediately exposing these students to texts that are manageable for them and that will keep students' interests piqued. Emphasizing these students' achievements in reading daily, no matter how big or small, is essential is getting these students to confidently keep reading.

I Don't Know How Readers

A second type of struggling reader Allen (2000) discusses is the *I Don't Know How Readers* (Allen, 2000, p. 33). These readers, Allen (2000) says, believe that "[R]eading is a passive activity. They don't engage, as fluent readers do, in an active reading process: activating background knowledge, predicting, confirming or rejecting predictions, inferring, questioning, monitoring, clarifying, strategizing, rereading, making connections, synthesizing, analyzing, and criticizing" (p. 34). The *I Don't Know How Readers* lack the ability to monitor his/her reading and often become distracted or lost even after only a few pages. In addition, these struggling readers many times only employ one fix-up strategy, and that is rereading the same words in the same way they have previously read them (Allen, 2000). Allen (2000) suggests for these readers more direct instructional time than other reluctant reader types. Going back to the basic reading strategies, and allowing students to chart their successes, are useful tactics to employ with these struggling readers.

I'd Rather Readers

Next Allen (2000) identifies the *I'd Rather Readers* – readers who would "always rather do something else other than reading" (p. 35). She makes the careful distinction that these readers may not struggle as much as the previous two, but they are more reluctant and hesitant to read than others because they are bored with reading and/or school in general. The key for these students lies in

helping them find appropriate, engaging novels that will engross them in reading again (Allen, 2000).

I Don't Care Readers

The final type of struggling readers, and often the most difficult to handle in class, is identified by Allen (2000) as the *I Don't Care Readers* (p. 36). These are the extreme cases, the students whose very body language may reflect their disgust with school. Many of these students, Allen (2000) says, would not even come to school if not for it being compulsory. Allen (2000) describes these readers by saying, "Rather than admitting they didn't know or risking failure, they often just stated they didn't care. They said they didn't care about school or grades, about which classes they got or who taught those classes…They sat in class absolutely refusing to take part in any class activity" (p. 36). Allen's best suggestion for dealing with these difficult students is to give them some control over their own learning. She says, "If they don't have some control over their learning, they cannot be forced into compliance" (Allen, 2000, p. 37). Allowing these students, who do not care, the responsibility of deciding how much they read in one night or week and what kind of project they do forces them to take some responsibility in their own learning and reiterates the necessity of student choice in every classroom (Allen, 2000, p. 37).

Fake Reading

Tovani (2000) identifies yet another type of hesitant and/or struggling

reader – the *fake reader*. She describes these students as ones who come to class, read the only the beginning and the end of the actual book, and in between depend on *Cliffs Notes* to fill them in on what is really important. *Fake readers* will watch movies instead of reading the book; they'll plough through reading regardless of comprehension; they'll daydream while pretending to look at words. Fake readers do not understand how to use strategies to improve their ability and make reading enjoyable because they may not know what strategies to employ. *Fake readers* may graduate high school without every really learning how to read (Tovani, 2000).

Tovani (2000) says, "Struggling readers seldom get to experience how great it feels to finish a book. Or how helpful it is to read and understand a chapter in a textbook…By ninth grade, many students have been defeated by test scores, letters grades, and special groupings. Struggling readers are embarrassed by their labels and often perceive reading as drudgery" (p. 9).

The author says that teachers need to work on "disarming the defenses" (Tovani, 2000, p. 9). Tovani (2000) suggests having students bring in the most important books from their childhood. This gives students a chance to reconnect with a time period when reading was fun, enjoyable, and something they took pride in. She also has students write about their "literacy histories" because she knows that the way students feel about reading now comes from their prior experiences with reading (Tovani, 2000, p. 10). These activities help to equalize

all students in the class – they all have favorite books from their childhood that are special; they all have a history with reading made up of positive and negative experiences that shape their present experiences. Tovani (2000) posits that bringing these positive and negative feelings into the light and discussing them will help all students together move forward with encouraging reading experiences.

The Best Reading Practices to Use in a High School English Classroom

Pre-Reading Strategies

Bishop (2006) discusses the idea of "frontloading" students with skills before beginning a selection (p. 68). This strategy involves using a variety of activities that all have the same goals – "to activate prior knowledge before reading new texts," and to make sure all students equally understand any information implicit in the literary piece they are about to read (Bishop, 2006, p. 68). Allen (2000) also discusses the necessity of activating prior knowledge before reading a new piece. She says that in any subject area, establishing background knowledge serves as scaffolding for students who may be learning about a new concept, reading about a complex event, or simply beginning a new novel (Allen, 2000). Allen (2000) explains the important role teachers play in this activation of knowledge by saying, "Those prereading scaffolding experiences require teachers to ask (and answer) several questions that have teaching implications concerning the most effective steps for helping learners develop

language, factual information, and emotional connections that will carry into the content-related reading, writing, and research" (p. 129).

Beers (2003) similarly discusses the idea of activating prior knowledge in dependent readers who need to start reading each page, chapter, and book with a solid understanding of how this literary work relates to something they are familiar with and, this helps them to see value in pursuing this endeavor. By using strategies that activate prior knowledge, Beers (2003) says that this will help students "interact with portions of the text," "practice sequencing…draw comparisons, make inferences," and "construct meaning," all before they even begin to read (p. 74).

A second pre-reading strategy Beers (2003) recommends for struggling readers is the use of Anticipation Guides. These guides include a "set of generalizations related to the theme of a selection. Students decide whether they agree or disagree with each statement in the guide. These guides activate students' prior knowledge, encourage them to make personal connections to what they will be reading, and give them a chance to become an active participant with the text before they begin reading" (Beers, 2003, p. 74-75). This activation of prior knowledge especially helps dependent, *I Don't Know How Readers*, who may otherwise just immediately open to the first page without ever consulting any of the features a text may have to offer. Also, if teachers use these Anticipation Guides as a way to help students see the real-world relevance in what they are

reading, then the *I'd Rather*, *I Don't Care*, and *I Can't Readers* may begin to see the significance of the selection they are about to begin and form strong opinions about the topics present in the novel (Beers, 2003).

One additional beneficial pre-reading strategy to use with struggling readers is a Probable Passage activity. As Beers (2003) describes, "Dependent readers often struggle because they don't predict what the selection might be about, don't think about what they already know about a topic, and don't form images as they read. These students simply open a book, look at words, and begin turning pages" (p. 87). This strategy involves the teacher choosing a bank of key words from the reading selection and discussing the meanings of these words with students. Once the meanings are understood, students predict which category the words will fall under. Useful category headings that highlight key literary terms are setting, characters, conflicts/problems, and resolutions. Students must activate prior knowledge as they work through this process because they need to use what they know about the structure of stories in order to organize words, and they must think about new vocabulary words in the context of the existing story structures they are familiar with. Also, students must look for causal relationships between words and the categories they fit into, and, in the end, students make predictions about what they believe will happen based on the classifications they have made (Beers, 2003, p. 91). This pre-reading activity is great for dependent readers because, "Probable Passage makes the invisible visible for them" (Beers, 2003, p.

94). Once these struggling readers understand how to use context clues to define unfamiliar words, how to make predictions before reading, and how to look for causal relationships, then reading should become more accessible to them (Beers, 2003).

During-Reading Strategies

Dependent readers not only struggle, at times, in going through the necessary processes before reading a text, they also "fail to see reading as an active process" (Beers, 2003, p. 102). While some students zip through a text effortlessly, perfectly comprehending what has happened, dependent readers are left wondering how these independent readers read so well. Good readers constantly question the text as they read; they frequently stop to summarize what has happened and make predictions about what will happen. In the end, independent readers have a constant "internal dialogue" going on that ensures comprehension and understanding throughout a piece of literature (Beers, 2003, pp. 102-103). Dependent readers do not have these inner conversations necessary to understand more complex pieces of text.

One during-reading strategy teachers can use in order to model out loud what should be going on inside independent readers' minds is a read-aloud. Allen (2000) first suggests a careful selection of a piece to be read aloud by the teacher. The teacher needs to decide his/her purpose for the class that day. Some days, Allen (2000) says, the reading can be for pure enjoyment and will help to keep

students' interests piqued. Another use for a read-aloud is to lead into specific content being studied or to take a closer look at an author, a text structure, or a specific genre. Having dependent readers hear their teacher read also allows students to hear the way a fluent reader sounds (Allen, 2000). A read-aloud can eventually be combined with a think-aloud, which gives students "the chance to hear how a skilled reader uses strategies to comprehend a text" (Beers, 2003, p. 43). The reader's dialogue, which would normally be internal, now becomes visible and external. The teacher will, in the midst of reading, stop and ask a question when something is confusing. He/She will show his/her thought processes in order to give struggling, dependent readers an idea of what should be going on inside of their minds while they are reading. Finally, Beers (2003) suggests giving students a copy of the text so that they can follow along, line-by-line, with the teachers' reading- and thinking-aloud.

A second during-reading strategy that teachers can model during think-alouds, and that students should use while reading, is making inferences and predictions. Tovani (2000) posits, "Good readers anticipate what's coming next. Based on what they've read, readers expect certain new events to occur. When an event doesn't match a prediction, readers rethink and revise their thinking" (p. 52). Making inferences is invaluable to struggling readers, Tovani (2000) says, because it "jolts readers back on track. It keeps them involved so they aren't surprised by incorrect conclusions," (p. 52). While independent readers recognize

their confusions while reading and stop to work through them and then make new predictions, dependent readers continue to press on without using any fix-up strategies. Allen (2000) discusses an experience with a confused reader in her classroom, who wanted to know where she found all that "hidden stuff" in the poems they read together (p. 161). These struggling readers push right through the text, regardless of comprehension, without stopping to make predictions or inferences. They feel that this great information is hidden from them and only visible to smarter kids or better readers. The use of read-alouds, think-alouds, and making predictions are three strategies that struggling readers can use to make the invisible in reading become more visible to them.

After-Reading Strategies

Just because a book is closed or a story is finished does not mean that the learning is complete. Using effective after-reading strategies "help students focus on constructing meaning" (Beers, 2003, p. 139). These post-reading strategies should help all readers, but specifically struggling readers, clarify and then fix what has confused them throughout the text. They also help readers to summarize what they've read, identify characters, conflicts, and resolutions, as well as make connections between the text and their lives (Beers, 2003).

One after-reading strategy that teachers can employ to help dependent readers who struggle with their comprehension and summarization skills is a retelling (Beers, 2003). In order for this method to be effective, the teacher first

needs to model the strategy so the students know what a good retelling will eventually look and sound like. As students progress to retelling stories/articles on their own, a rubric should be given so that they know exactly what areas of the story to cover. Because thinking about characters, plot events, settings, and literary devices together can be overwhelming, teachers should specifically focus each retelling, so students are only worried about certain aspects of the text (Beers, 2003). Additionally, educators should chart how students' retellings progress over time. The same rubric must continually be used to make this an effective strategy, and if used over the course of a semester or year, this is a great way to allow dependent readers to see their successes (Beers, 2003).

A second effective after-reading strategy for dependent readers is called Somebody-Wanted-But-So (Beers, 2003). While the task of summarizing a novel or lengthy short story may seem overwhelming to a struggling reader, this strategy "offers students a framework as they create their summaries" (Beers, 2003, p. 145). The author also notes that this method moves students beyond simple summary writing and more towards a close examination of the text. While using this strategy, students, in the *Somebody* column, pick the main characters in the text they've read. In the *Wanted* column, "they look at events of the plot and immediately talk about main ideas and details" (Beers, 2003, p. 145). An examination of the conflicts in the story happens in the *But* column, while in the *So* column students are looking at the resolutions to the conflicts that have

occurred (Beers, 2003). Beers (2003) lays out many benefits of using this

strategy with dependent readers. First, it takes the daunting task of summarizing

something lengthy and breaks it down into smaller, more manageable chunks.

Next, struggling readers sometimes get confused when a story presents many,

complex characters. This is a great technique to use for examining different points

of views by changing the characters named in the *Somebody* column (Beers,

2003). Finally, this after-reading strategy can be applied to not only fictional

stories, but also non-fiction articles as well. This is very beneficial for dependent

readers to use as many standardized tests use primarily non-fiction articles. Also,

if students can examine non-fiction articles in English class, then they can also

apply this strategy to their other courses where non-fiction articles are the primary

texts used (Beers, 2003).

  A final effective post-reading strategy for teachers to explore with

dependent readers is making connections. Tovani (2000) says, "Connections help

readers call on their background knowledge. When readers make connections to

their reading, they have a richer experience. The more connections a reader

makes to the text, the better his/her comprehension is" (p. 70). Again, it is

important for teachers to model connections that they make prior to asking

students to do this on their own. Teachers should also explain and show that they

can connect the text to themselves personally, to information and facts relevant to

what is happening in the world at that time, and to another text that the reader is

familiar with (Tovani, 2000). Helping students to see that what they are reading does, in fact, connect to their lives and world in some way will help struggling, dependent readers see a relevance and a use for what they are reading.

Motivational Literature

A common complaint of many students is that they do not read books that interest them (Beers, 2003). Teachers can incorporate both current events and young adult literature into their curricula to ensure the inclusion of more motivating, engaging texts. One way for teachers to activate students' prior knowledge while getting students excited about reading is to use current events in the classroom. These articles can easily be tied into and related to the unit being studied or to the topic of the book students are about to delve into. Hirsch and Gabbay (1995) researched the use of current events to teach reading and discuss in their findings how to incorporate before-, during-, and after-strategies in conjunction with the newspaper in the same way teachers use these strategies with short stories or novels. They posit that having students preview an article, and the issues present in that article, through teacher-guided discussions will activate students' prior knowledge and will naturally lead to students making connections between this article and their own lives. Also, students can predict what they believe the article will be about by studying the title, pictures, captions, and headlines (Hirsch & Gabbay, 1995). While reading, students can continuously make connections between the article and their lives or other pieces of literature

that they've read, and in the end, students can examine the motives of the people being written about and can question the biases of the writers. Finally, Hirsch and Gabbay (1995) say that relating current events to a particular theme, unit, or topic being studied in class is a great way for students to connect this article to the academic content.

Segall and Schmidt (2006) have also researched the benefits of using current events as a reading tool in the high school classroom. Some critical reading benefits that current events provide are an increase in vocabulary and comprehension skills, constant exposure to relevant, timely information, and the possibility for the creation of lifelong readers (Segall & Schmidt, 2006). Similar to Hirsch and Gabbay, these authors also note that current events in the classroom foster the development of critical thinking and reading skills if students are asked to examine how various articles fit into their class's curriculum or relate to their own lives. Making connections, activating students' background knowledge, and the development of key critical reading and thinking skills make the use of current events a meaningful reading tool.

A second effective motivational strategy to use with students is allowing students access to multiple texts which Allington (2007) says offer "all students the opportunity to engage in classroom reading, writing, and conversational episodes" (p. 278). Allington explains the benefits of teachers using texts of varied levels. First, more students will be actively engaged in the reading

activities if they are reading a book that interests them and/or that they can relate to. Students will be less likely to be turned off by a book that they have carefully selected for themselves versus a book that the teacher has chosen for them. Second, students tend to be more motivated over sustained periods of time when they remain engrossed in their reading and work (Allington, 2007). He is quick to point out that text selection needs to be something very carefully done by teachers to ensure that all choices offer the same academic benefits to all students.

Struggling readers need access to multiple texts, as was stated above. More importantly, they need access to young adult literature. This type of novel is a great way to interest and motivate the *fake readers*, the dependent readers, and the *I Don't Care* and *I'd Rather Readers*. While the classics, those novels which are recognized as definitive in their genre, are many times irrelevant to dependent readers because of foreign subject matter and/or complex characters and language, young adult literature is "literature for and about adolescents" (Santoli & Wagner, 2004, p. 74). Santoli and Wagner (2004) explain three specific literary benefits that young adult literature provides. First, these novels still employ the same literary elements that English teachers find valuable, and in many cases, are required to teach. Because of a more understandable plot line and less complex characters, these literary elements are easier to identify and comprehend. Also, because these elements are present, themes, characters, settings, and points of view can still be analyzed. Next, adolescent literature uses

a more understandable vocabulary, shorter plots, and fewer characters which gives struggling, dependent, *I Can't Readers* confidence because they can finish, understand, and then analyze whole novels. A third and final positive quality of young adult novels is that more lifelong readers are created with literature that is interesting and relevant to students' lives. Young adult novels engage and speak to students in a way that the classics often do not. These three qualities make young adult literature a necessity for dependent, struggling readers (Santoli & Wagner, 2004).

In order to help struggling readers, teachers must first be able to identify the many ways in which these readers struggle and the typical behaviors these dependent readers exhibit. Next, teachers should use an arsenal of before-, during-, and after-reading strategies to help students continually make sense of the text and connect the text to their own lives and the world around them. Last, teachers can use current events articles and young adult texts as motivational literature to keep dependent readers' interests in reading piqued as their confidence in their reading abilities grow.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Goals

When I began this study, I wanted to move mountains. I wanted to shake these students to their cores. I wanted to fundamentally change the way these ninth graders viewed reading. I wanted everyone to love reading as much as I do. I wanted a lot, and I knew it.

After some careful re-evaluation of these initial goals and a cold, hard dose of reality upon meeting my new students, I created some new, more attainable objectives. I now wanted to focus on arming students with a toolbox full of helpful reading strategies that they could pull out whenever they needed them – in English or history class, on standardized tests, or while simply reading a newspaper. I hoped that students would see that using these strategies unlocks seemingly difficult pieces of literature and makes them wholly understandable. I also, more than anything, wished that students would enjoy reading again. I wished that they'd get back to those elementary school days when reading was a relaxing break and an activity that they looked forward to. I hoped that young adult literature would be a great alternative to reading "the classics." And secretly, I longed to never again hear a fifteen-year-old say, "I hate reading." Mission almost accomplished.

Setting

I teach ninth grade English in an urban high school with approximately 2000 students in grades nine through twelve located in the northeastern United States. This school has a diverse population with about 30% of students being Hispanic in descent. This high school is currently in the Corrective Action II phase of No Child Left Behind, meaning that one or more of the Adequate Yearly Progress goals have not been met for five years in a row. This phase of the plan has required changes in leadership, curriculum, and professional development as well as significant changes in governance. Each block-scheduled class period lasts 85 minutes. My room is structured with desks in pairs. Each pair of desks face the teacher at the front of the room. This makes cooperative learning and grouping easy to incorporate during any block.

Participants

I have seventeen students in my Critical Literacy 9 class. There are eight males and nine females in this class. One student has an Individualized Education Plan because of a learning disability. This class is diverse as seven students are Hispanic, two are African-American, and eight are Caucasian in descent. Approximately three quarters of this Critical Literacy class fall in the lowest socioeconomic group and qualify for free and/or reduced lunch. Twelve of seventeen students are study participants.

This class has been newly titled this year and is made up of students who, last year, would have been in the Extended English and Career Prep English tracks. *All* students in this class are below proficient on their PSSA writing and/or reading tests and have this English class for the entire year, as opposed to the semester-long course which all other students have. The yearlong curriculum is designed to give both the teacher and students the time to focus on learning, developing, and honing critical reading and writing strategies.

Students in these two levels are the lowest-achieving in their grade and have the poorest standardized reading and writing test scores. Looking at school-wide standardized testing scores for this high school in 2007, 90% of all students in the high school were proficient or advanced in writing. Breaking this category down even further to look at the major sub-categories representative of my Critical Literacy class, 82% of economically disadvantaged students scored proficient or advanced on standardized writing tests while eighty-five percent of African-American and Latino/Hispanic students scored proficient or advanced in writing. Though it seems that the school is achieving these writing standards, the same cannot be said for my class. After examining the Performance Tracker data for the fifteen students in my class for which scores exists, ten students scored basic or below basic on their eighth grade PSSA writing tests, while five students were proficient.

Looking at school-wide data for reading in 2007, the results are not as positive with only 62% of students scoring proficient or advanced. The sub-categories get even worse now with only 28% of economically disadvantaged students, 40% of African-American students, and 27% of Latino/Hispanic students scoring proficient or advanced in reading. Upon examining the Performance Tracker data for my class, the reading groups are broken down into specific sections. In the Comprehension and Reading Skills section, thirteen of fifteen students were basic or below basic. In the Interpretation and Analysis Section, ten of fifteen students were basic or below basic.

The varying scores and strengths and weaknesses of all members of this class make differentiating instruction a necessity. In order to help facilitate this, there is an aide in my class two days a week who gives individualized attention to students as well as helps with behavioral or discipline problems.

Data Gathering Methods

Because students were hand-selected for this course based on low standardized test scores, it was logical for me to begin the school year with the explicit teaching of reading strategies. Throughout the course of each themed unit, I included a variety of poetry, short stories, non-fiction pieces, and young adult novels, and this allowed me to teach pre-, during-, and post-reading strategies in conjunction with an assortment of literature. The other major facet of

my study, which I briefly mentioned, was the use of young adult literature to motivate students and get the reticent readers interested in reading again.

In order to answer my research question, teach students reading strategies, get students interested in reading again, and achieve triangulation, I collected data from several sources which included surveys, interviews, student work, and my field log. Hendricks (2006) discusses the three methods of data collection that can be used during research studies – artifacts, observational data, and inquiry data. Artifacts can be "various types of student work and other items created by participants" (p. 73). In addition, Hendricks (2006) says, "There are many forms of observational data, including field notes, checklists, and photographs. Inquiry data are collected to elicit opinions, attitudes, and other types of feedback from participants. Surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups are typically used for collecting inquiry data" (p. 73). The reason I gathered so many forms of data was to achieve triangulation, which shows that the data I have collected are valid and essential to my study.

Surveys

In order to effectively answer my research question, a first method of gathering data I used was surveys. Maclean and Mohr (1999) state that, "A survey or questionnaire gives you a broad base for understanding your students' ideas in regard to your research question…" (p. 41). In the first week of my study, I administered a Reading Interest Survey (Appendix A) to try to grasp,

early on, how students felt about reading, what biases they had regarding reading, and what they believed their strengths and weaknesses concerning reading were. After we finished reading our first young adult novel, I had students complete a second survey (Appendix B) to gauge their enjoyment of this novel and how students were able to relate to the characters and events of the novel. Also, I asked students to tell me whether their initial feelings about reading had changed at all based on the young adult novel they had just read. Responses to these surveys guided my lesson planning for the second young adult novel we read. Maclean and Mohr (1999) echo this by explaining that, "Survey data can show you the scope of your question and tune you in to the general understandings of your students" (p. 42). Finally, I gave students an End of Study Survey (Appendix C) on which I asked them to look back at the two young adult novels they had read and discuss their feelings about these novels. I had students examine reading strategies and techniques they used more now than they had originally, and I asked students for feedback regarding the activities we had completed. I also looked for suggestions about what to do in conjunction with reading in the future, and finally, I looked for honest responses to how students felt about reading now versus how they initially felt at the beginning of the semester. These surveys came at key times during my study, and they allowed me to synthesize how much (or little) students were enjoying these young adult novels, what reading strategies students used as the semester progressed, and what

aspects of these novels students could relate to, thus further motivating students to keep reading.

Interviews

Because this class is quite small, I found it rather easy to conduct a group interview which fostered great discussion between many members of this class. I used a semi-structured interview, as Hendricks (2006) suggests. She describes this type of interview as one that, "involves asking some planned questions and then allowing participants to speak about related issues that are important to them" (p. 91). Hendricks (2006) further explains the benefits by saying, "A semi-structured interview is a good way to make sure that questions important to the researcher are answered while providing participants with an opportunity to add other useful information" (p. 91). Approximately half way through the first young adult novel we read, I asked students to give me their honest opinions and feelings about the book. I was able to get students to really open up and be truthful about what they liked and disliked, and this feedback proved to me that using young adult literature really was a good choice for these students. Giving students the floor to speak and have their voices heard also showed students how important they were and still are to my study and how much I value their opinions. Not following a specific script allowed students to really open up, and our discussion branched off in many different, but interrelated, directions based on student responses, concerns, and questions.

Student Work

One of the most important types of data that I gathered was the students' work. Maclean and Mohr (1999) discuss the use of student work by saying, "Student papers, drafts, portfolios, and projects – the artifacts of the classroom – may be collected over the period of a semester or longer, or may be used as a single example of an assignment you are studying" (p. 47). I collected many different activities that students completed in conjunction with various strategies we used and pieces of literature we read. The work that I collected encompassed a variety of both formative and summative assessments. Hendricks (2006) explains that formative assessments include, "quizzes and other written assignments such as short papers or essays, homework, and worksheets" while summative assessments include, "projects, performances, papers, and teacher-made tests" (p. 74-75). In one respect, their work allowed me to see how well students were using the pre-, during-, and post-reading strategies that they learned. Additionally, students' work showed me how well they were understanding and comprehending the literature they had read, while also giving me insights about how much the class really enjoyed the various types of literature.

Field Log

Finally, I kept a field log that documented my students' work and growth as my study progressed. As Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) state, "The fieldnotes are the written record of the data as shaped through the researcher's

eyes, with all that this implies about the way individuals see the world, how they interpret what they see, both explicitly and implicitly, and why" (p. 17). I penned entries for this log on days we did activities related to my study in class. I observed students as they worked to use the reading strategies we learned in class and commented on which students were progressing well and which students were still struggling. I wrote simple, anecdotal notes first, which informally consisted of a running record of what was said and heard in class. I then went back and typed up a formal version of these notes, and this time added my own personal thoughts and feelings regarding what I had observed. In order to separate the two sections, I bracketed my personal responses as they occurred throughout my log. I also used the field log to document important conversations and discussions students had with me, with one another, and as part of a group. I analyzed what students said and looked for patterns that emerged throughout the dialogue. In addition, I focused on students' reactions to the literature we were reading in class. Lastly, in my field log I carefully analyzed the survey and interview data, as well as student work, to look for commonalities in student responses that appeared. I made sure to analyze the data in a timely manner and, immediately upon finishing the analysis, I typed up a reflective memo, so I would not lose sight of the important information I had just synthesized. This analysis helped to guide my teaching of this class as the semester and year continued. The

students' responses were especially crucial for me since I will be teaching this

class for the entire year.

METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS

As my study progressed, I read and re-read the entries within my field log and began to search for patterns within the data. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) describe the log as, "the written account of what the researcher hears, see, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study" (p. 110-111). As previously mentioned, my field log included student work, surveys, interviews, and observational data as well as reflective memos in which I analyzed the data that I had gathered.

Next, I began the more formal data analysis process which included coding the data, creating bins, analyzing data to look for emerging patterns, and forming theme statements. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) define this process as "systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and other materials that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findings…Analysis involves working with the data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesizing them, and searching for patterns" (p. 147). In order to code the data, I looked for common ideas that were central to and that continuously occurred throughout my study and labeled my data accordingly. I then typed up a formal coding index, which alphabetized all codes, and related each code to other codes that were similar. From there I created bins, which were made up of concepts and ideas central to my study. I

was able to make the bins by examining my coding index and seeing which codes occurred most frequently.

Then, I named each bin based on its contents and fashioned theme statements that were supported by data within the field log. As Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) said, "A theme can be defined as a statement of meaning that (1) runs through all or most of the pertinent data, or (2) one in the minority that carries heavy emotional or factual impact" (p. 206). These theme statements only hold true to my study; it will never be possible to say that what works for me will work for everyone else because no two classes are ever made up of the same students.

Through the use of my field log and the observational and inquiry data that I have collected, I examined classroom discourse by means of searching for other figurative language. As Gee says in his book *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* (1999), "Very often people are unaware of the full significance of these metaphors, which usually have come to be taken for granted" (p. 69). Examining discourse throughout the semester allowed me to see what values, understandings, and assumptions might be hidden in what the students say. I also created a variety of narrative forms to better understand the points of view of the participants in my study. First, I used pastiches to analyze whole class responses to certain questions that were central to my study. Ely (2007) says that a pastiche, "may be composed of various chunks of data, analytical insights, layouts, multiple genres…in various

configurations built to provide a meaningful whole" (p. 586). By looking at the students' different answers to the same questions through the use of a pastiche, I was able to see patterns emerge in the way students felt about reading at the beginning, middle, and end of my study.

Second, I also used dramatizations to analyze what my students said. Ely (2007) says that, "Drama throws purposeful light on a mesh of actions, words, and surroundings of particular events in an effort to communicate their essence" (p. 590). I chose the most meaningful, interesting conversations and discussions that I had with students and dramatized them into a play format. These dramatizations got to the heart of what was being said by the students in a more succinct manner and allowed me to analyze their dialogue more easily.

Finally, in order to analyze the data I collected through different social lenses, I used the works of John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Lisa Delpit and Joanne Kilgour Dowdy. Dewey (1938) discussed the idea of traditional versus progressive education, the latter of which was most important to my study. I looked at my classroom from the Deweyan perspective of making things simpler versus making them easy. Just because these were struggling readers in front of me did not mean that I wanted to make things easy for them. Instead, I wanted to find the best ways to simplify the reading strategies and concepts they found to be difficult in the past and make them more accessible in the present and for the future.

Freire (1970) talked about the banking concept of education in which students simply receive, are filled with, and then store information provided by teachers. I needed to make sure that this was not something I practiced in my classroom. I wanted to help students acquire and apply basic reading strategies but then allow them to take this knowledge and use it independently in their reading practices.

Lastly, by using Delpit and Dowdy (2002), I examined my classroom through the lens of racial and gender biases. Delpit discusses the fact that students are often very frustrated in school because no one ever listens to them. I wanted to listen to my students throughout my study; therefore, I constantly surveyed and interviewed them in order to gauge their feelings about the activities we were undertaking. I also asked for suggestions at the end of our first young adult novel regarding what students would like to do for the second. Having students see that they were integral parts of my study increased their participation in class and their confidence in their abilities.

TRUSTWORTHINESS STATEMENT

Trustworthiness is an issue that I had to tackle before formally beginning my study to ensure that all parties involved were willing participants and that all the information I wanted to include in my study could actually be used in the end. In order to do this, I created consent forms for the principal of my school (Appendix D) and for my students and their parents or guardians (Appendix E). As Hendricks (2006) says, "Although the process of obtaining permissions can be burdensome, it is a necessary and important step of the action research process. Obtaining permissions will protect you, your participants, your school, and your university" (p. 111). I sat down one-on-one with the principal and explained my study to him. Once I had his consent, I moved on to talking with my students and allowed them to ask any questions that they had. I assured students and parents, through the consent letter students took home, that the students' best interests were always central to my study and that no matter whether each student consented to be a part of this study or not, no one would be treated differently. Unlike the character Vivian Bearing in Margaret Edson's Pulitzer-Prize winning drama *W;t*, my students will not be a means to an end – my study, and the activities associated with my study, were natural extensions of what we did in class every day. My goal from day one has been, and will always continue to be, that every student in my class has benefited from the reading strategies and practices we have undertaken in class in some real way.

I reminded students (and parents) that real names would never be used in my study. Pseudonyms, quite unlike students' actual names, were created once all consent forms had been received, and students were henceforth referred to in my study by those names only. The pseudonym key has been kept on my personal computer, and this computer has been for my use only and has been password protected.

Furthermore, I continued to remind students as my study progressed that they were free to withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty. Students had the opportunity to see me personally to withdraw, or parents could have called or emailed me informing me of their wishes, and the student would have been withdrawn immediately without any of his/her information being used. Finally, in order to preserve confidentiality, I explained to students that all data collected would be safeguarded in a locked cabinet in my room at school or in a locked drawer in my home.

Once all of our studies were fully underway, we formed teacher inquiry groups in class. These groups provided each of us with honest feedback about our studies and suggestions for improvements to be made. As Hammerman (1999) explains in his article that explores teacher inquiry groups, "We are developing the inquiry groups to provide a structure in which teachers can experiment with, and build, these supportive relationships…" (p. 188). We supported each other by listening to the purposes and proposed designs we have created for our study. We

asked questions about elements of one another's studies we are confused about, and we gave suggestions for possible improvements that could have been made along the way.

Finally, before I could ever begin my research I needed to identify and think about the biases I had coming into my study. Recognizing that these prejudices existed for me before starting my study allowed me to be a better, and more objective, researcher. The first bias I had was that, because these students were placed in this Critical Literacy class, they would automatically be poor readers and writers. The truth was that some students were more skilled than I had originally anticipated, while many did need the extra help and attention that I had predicted they would. As my study progressed, I needed to be sure to continually differentiate instruction to challenge my stronger students and remediate my struggling students. A second bias I had was that all students would enjoy reading more as a result of our new classroom strategies and activities. I needed to immediately come to terms with reality, and this reality was that if even one student develops and employs better reading strategies and enjoys reading more, then my study has been a success. A final bias I had was that once students learned the reading strategies that I taught them, they would automatically be able to use these throughout the rest of the semester in whatever piece of literature we read. The truth, as we progressed throughout the school year, was that students constantly needed to be reminded to use these tactics as

they read something new. I finally realized that these were brand new strategies to many students and to expect them to learn these tactics and then automatically apply them without thinking twice was completely unrealistic. I soon understood that these were strategies that would need to continually be reinforced throughout the year and with every activity that we did.

"In the case of good books, the point is not how many of them you can get through, but rather how many can get through to you."

~ Mortimer Adler

THIS YEAR'S STORY

"What does the word 'comprehension' mean?"

The First Days of School

I always enter the first days of a yearlong course very carefully. Seeing the same small group of students for 85 minutes a day throughout the entire school year is a challenge, for both teacher and students. How do I, as the teacher, keep things fresh, interesting, and exciting for these students who are disgruntled about having to take English for a whole year? How do these students, the frustrated readers and writers, the mixture of the two lowest tracked levels, continually put forth 100% effort without being a behavioral problem?

As I saw my new students walking through the door, I couldn't help but look at their quiet, fearful, first-day-of-high-school faces and think about how different these students would be in June. I wondered who would be my stars, who would be my button-pushers, and who would move before the year was over.

I immediately discussed a bit about me – my high school and college experiences, a bit about my personal life – but I didn't dwell on this. Instead, I quickly explained to students that I wanted to get to know them. *I need to know you and trust you because we are going to be together for the whole year*, I told them. *You need to trust me too*, I say, *so ask me questions. What are you wondering about?* I got the basic, surface questions, the I'm-nervous-about-high-

school questions, and the too personal questions that I tell them I will never answer. But before long, I turned things around. *We're playing truth and lies!* I announce excitedly. I explain to students that they are to write down three things about themselves – two statements should be truthful and one should be a lie. I quickly scribe my three items on the blackboard so students can see how interesting I wanted this discussion to be. My list reads:

> *1.) I enjoy eating sushi.*
>
> *2.) I love eggs.*
>
> *3.) My thumbs are double-jointed.*

One student immediately says, "Number two! You don't like eggs!" I was really amazed because that was the lie; I despise eggs. I asked the student how he knew. "You just looked double-jointed, and like the type of person who eats sushi. So I picked eggs." I praise him for being so perceptive and demonstrate the lengths of my double-jointed talents. I then listened intently as the rest of the class told us their truths and lies. We all learned a great deal about one another, and the ice was officially broken.

From here, I tried to get students to open up even more. *Without naming specific names or classes, what have you liked and disliked about English classes in the past*, I asked students to ponder. I had their attention now. I listened carefully and jotted down notes as students told me they hated being forced to write so many stories, they hated being forced to read and write about something

assigned to them by the teacher, they loved having choices, and they enjoyed

acting out plays. Mean teachers made them not want to work; nice teachers had

to be careful to not be pushovers and lose control of the class. They wanted to

learn because past teachers hadn't taught them enough. *We are a perfect fit,* I told

them. *I have so much I want to teach you! Plus since you're so willing to give me*

such good feedback, I have something special that I want all of you to be a part

of...

The First Days of My Study

It was a tricky process for me to explain the purpose of this study. Ninth

graders don't necessarily hang on my every word, and they become bored very

quickly. I certainly did not want to accentuate the negative (our school is failing,

this class is made up of struggling readers). So I first tried to relate my

experience to something they were familiar with - school. *We're both going to*

school, I explained to them. *Just like you will need to study a lot, I need to study*

too. And I'm choosing to study reading and you. I reminded students of their

comments to me about their prior experiences with English, and specifically

reading, and told them I wanted to make reading fun again. "I haven't read a

book in years," was the first response I heard. That was quickly followed by,

"You're never gonna be able to do that." I was undeterred.

I handed out consent forms (Appendix E) and talked over the process with

students. They would not be a part of my study unless these forms were retuned

to me signed by a parent or guardian. Names were never going to be included as I would be making up pseudonyms – fake names – and no one would ever be referred to specifically in my thesis. I also threw in the more exciting details – I will be collecting work that could eventually be included in a book in Moravian's library. "Really? Wow. Are you getting paid for this?" they wondered. *No, I'm not actually*, I told them. *I'm doing this because I want to be a better teacher.* They didn't believe me, and I'm not completely surprised by this. It takes time, getting these students to understand and know me. They certainly will not trust me in the first few days and weeks of school. It's a slow process, but we have all year.

Consent forms trickled back to me and after approximately ten days I had received nine of seventeen forms. I decided, at this point, to launch into my study and continue to accept forms if any more were turned in. I ended up getting twelve in all; it is the stories of these twelve students that I share in this document.

The Reading Interest Survey – Part 1

To officially kick off my study in this class, I wanted to survey students to measure their current feelings about reading, so I asked them to truthfully and honestly complete a Reading Interest Survey (Appendix A). I stressed to students that I wanted honest responses and that even if they believed I wouldn't like their answers, I still wanted to hear the truth. The first section on the survey lists various words related to reading – "reading," "books," "comprehension,"

"newspapers," and "current events." I wanted students to undertake a word association activity in this section and asked them to simply jot down the first words or phrases that came to their minds when they heard those terms. When I first uttered the dreaded word "reading" aloud as I was explaining the purpose of this survey, moans and groans immediately followed. *You do know this is English class, right?* I jokingly asked the students. I tried another angle. *How about "comprehension,"* I asked them. *What does this word mean to you?* "What does it mean to me?" Maria laughs. "What does the word 'comprehension' mean at all?" "Yeah Miss," another girl chimes in, "you're using too big words." It's good we have all year.

The second section of this survey asked students to discuss positive and negatives experiences they've had with reading and also what their strengths and weaknesses regarding were at this point in their lives. The reason I included this section was to see if patterns emerged in what students have liked and disliked about reading in the past. This way, I could include certain activities that were positive for students and try to avoid activities that were negative for them. Moreover, I hoped that students' responses to their reading strengths and weaknesses would help to guide the specific strategies I simply reviewed and the ones I would need to explicitly teach. Their responses were quite interesting and very telling, especially in the strengths section. It is definitely good we have all year.

Pastiche: Reading, Comprehension, and Strengths

Because I was so intrigued by the students' answers to the word

association section of the Reading Interest Survey (Appendix A), I created a

pastiche (Figures 1,2, and 3) to analyze the vast differences in thought processes

and interest and ability levels in this ninth grade class. Every line represents a

different student's response.

`What are the first words that come to your mind`

`when you hear "reading?"`

`Boring`

`Boring, tiring`

`Books`

`I read a lot`

`Words`

`Dragging, tiring`

Not this again

No, boring

`A lot of words`

Sometimes reading can be fun. If I'm reading a good book.

I hope it won't be boring

Figure 1. Pastiche of What Reading Means to Students

I was immediately shocked, first of all, at how I asked for complete sentences and after examining all of these responses, I only got two. I wanted students to really explain to me what these words meant to them, but I quickly remembered that these were the students who aren't always fond of reading and writing. So writing (something they don't like) about reading (something they don't like) was a bad combination I now realize. Nonetheless, I wanted to see patterns emerge if nothing else, and I believe that even examining their shorts answers was quite beneficial to my teaching. The second thing I was most struck by was how many students used the word "boring" to describe reading – four out of eleven students specifically used that word. Two other students answered the question with "words," also negative responses, and one student wrote "No" which I believe is a knee-jerk reaction to the word "reading" itself. Overall, the responses were not positive, and oddly enough, I began to feel validated for having chosen this class to motivate through my study.

```
What are the first words that come to your mind
     when you hear the word "comprehension?"
              Doesn't bother me
                Understanding
     I comprehend everything I read.  Except
                 Shakespeare.
```

I don't know what it means.

Don't know

Not shor

To big, don't no what it means.

I understand the whole book.

I don't know what the word comprehension means.

I don't know what it means.

Figure 2. Pastiche of What Comprehension Means to Students

Students' responses to this question were especially alarming for me. Six out of ten students who answered couldn't respond because they could not define the word itself. When I thought longer about this, I realized that they must all have done this process a million times, but they've never associated the word "comprehension" with their reading. Equally as alarming were some of the other responses – "Doesn't bother me" and "I understand the whole book" don't really seem to answer the question asked. Students did not correctly comprehend what was being asked of them further suggesting to me the need for my study.

The last portion of this survey that I found to be especially important was the question which addressed what students believed their reading strengths were (Figure 3). I thought it was crucial to look at what students felt they were already

good at; in addition, I wanted students to feel some confidence in their abilities as they discussed their strengths for me.

"What are your strengths regarding reading? In other words, what are you good at?"

Biking, video games

Reading things with pictures

I am a good reader and I can read anything.

I can figure out what a word is by looking at other words.

Math

I like to read out loud. I'm good at pronouncing words.

Physical stuff

Comprehending and understanding the book.

I am good at whispering when I read because it's easier to understand.

Figure 3. Pastiche of Students' Reading Strengths

The answers "Biking, video games," "Math," and "Physical stuff" immediately made me realize that comprehension was certainly going to be something we were going to need to focus on. The answers "Reading things with pictures," "I like to read out loud," and "I am good at whispering" sound like responses focused more on decoding than meaning making. I knew I had my work cut out for me this year, but these responses again convinced me that this is exactly what and who I should be studying. I am so glad we have all year.

Reading for a Purpose

The first major reading strategy I taught students was the idea of reading for a purpose rather than just arbitrarily picking up a book and reading with no goal in mind other than to get finished. Rather then immediately telling students that this was the activity that we were undertaking, I wanted students to first inductively try to figure it out on their own. I distributed highlighters and the short story "The House" (Appendix F) to each student. Students were instructed to follow along as I read this story aloud and to underline "anything they felt was important." I was purposefully vague in the directions I gave students. I *wanted* them to wonder what they were supposed to underline. I *wanted* them to feel confused. I *wanted* students to eventually be able to identify the source of their frustrations – they had no purpose for what they were capriciously underlining.

Before I even began reading, one very perceptive student, Robert, commented out loud, "Miss, I don't get what we're supposed to do. Like, what is

important…what do you mean? What we think is important about the people in the story or the story itself?" I complimented Robert for asking this question. I told him and everyone else that he was being quite perceptive here, but I wouldn't be able to tell them why just yet. Then, I asked them all to trust me and to just underline anything they felt was important; there were no right or wrong answers at this point.

After I finished the first read, I asked students to share aloud some pieces of the story that they believed to be important and to explain their choices. One student said the boys in the story skipping school was noteworthy while another said the fact that the mom isn't home on Thursdays and the side door was always open were both "weird." I nodded along in agreement. *Yes certainly boys skipping school is bad.…A door should never be left unlocked nowadays…*

Once all responses had been heard, I told students to pick up a highlighter and, this time when I read, they were to highlight any details a *prospective homebuyer* would find important. I immediately noticed more awareness and excitement on the faces of students. I believed that they felt that this was easier than the last task I had asked them to complete. After finishing the second reading of the same story, I asked for responses to my question. Students noted the many different rooms in the house as important, the new paint, a leaky roof, and a finely landscaped yard as just a few items a homebuyer would be interested in. I noticed that responses were given by a wider variety of students this time

and that students were so excited about sharing that they literally yelled out their answers to this question.

Still, we were not finished. I had one more read planned for students to really drive my point about reading for a purpose home. I told students to grab a different colored highlighter. Robert, before I even had a chance to say anything else, yelled out, "Robber!" I said, "Robert, can you please repeat that?" He said, "Oh, I don't know. I just thought it seemed like there's a lot of stuff in there a robber would be interested in." I was amazed. That was exactly my plan for these students. I proudly congratulated him on predicting just what we were going to be working on next. I reiterated that, as I read this short story aloud a third time, students would pretend they were robbers and highlight things a robber would be interested in. I realized here that students were even more excited about this task than the previous one. Plus, after having heard this story twice, they were quite familiar with it. Many markers raced ahead of my reading and began furiously highlighting. I again asked for student responses, and we also discussed what bits of information students had highlighted more than once or twice and why that information was so important. Finally, I told students to answer two questions for me at the bottom of the page. First, I asked students to tell me which reading of the story was easiest for them and why. Second, I asked students to tell me why they thought I had them complete this activity. "What was different about the first reading than the second two?" I questioned them.

Fred, a student in the ninth grade for the second time around, said being a robber made it easiest for him to underline things because, "There was a lot to underline." He also said that the reason we did this activity was to, "Actually understand the story." I am impressed that Fred has stated it in this manner, implying that when he reads actual comprehension or understanding does not always occur. Felicity, an extremely bright and talented young woman (who was eventually moved up to an academic class), thought the purpose of this activity was, "To look for significant things and objects." I was proud of her for at least realizing that having a purpose to read means looking for specific details that fit a precise goal. Annie, on the other hand, said that she thought the purpose of the activity was, "Never tell your friends things like, that your door is open or that you have money in a drawer." This student just moved to the United States from Poland three years ago. Her verbal English is excellent, but she quite understandably has trouble figuring out the more subtle nuances of the language at this point in her academic development. And although no one could specifically tell me that the point of this activity was that they were reading for a purpose, I firmly believe that teaching this strategy in an inductive manner taught them much more than if I would have just explained it orally.

After this activity was completed, I talked to students about the usefulness of reading with and for a purpose. I asked students how many of them had ever started reading something: a history book, an assigned novel, a poem, and

eventually found themselves lost in space. Many students nodded in agreement and vocalized their confusion especially when reading complicated history books. Students described their large history books and the enormous number of pages they are responsible for reading, and because there are no Critical Literacy History classes, many students in my class are in Academic Western Civilizations, which moves at a quick pace. I know that my students, many of whom have trouble reading fiction, undoubtedly have trouble reading complex non-fiction text as well. I have wanted to continually reinforce the transferability of these skills to all classes, and if students understand that they need to open every piece of text that they read with a specific purpose in mind, then this will help to guide their reading and make reading easier for students in all of their classes.

"Initiation"

"So many people were shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up, unfolding quite wonderfully, if only you were interested in them. And really, you didn't have to belong to a club to feel related to other human beings."

I had to be out of school for two days in late September, and I saw this as a perfect opportunity to have my Critical Literacy class use some of the strategies independently which they had mainly used with me thus far. So, I decided to have the class read a somewhat lengthy short story and answer questions based not only on comprehension but also on the application of literary terms we had studied to story events. I knew this would be difficult for some students to

complete independently; however, I decided I would use the assignment as a baseline measure for where my students were at that point in time.

"Initiation" by Sylvia Plath is a nine-page short story in which a high school girl, Milicent, goes through the process of being initiated into a high school sorority. The story details this young woman's trouble with her sorority "sisters," who make her complete demeaning tasks until, one day, she has an epiphany. While being forced to ask complete strangers on a bus what they had for breakfast, Millicent finds one man's answer of "bird's eyebrows" to be hysterical. She realizes that she can be like everyone else, who had and discussed very plain breakfasts, or Milicent could be like the man who dares to be different. In the end, she decides not to be initiated into the sorority. What was tricky for the students was that Plath makes the ending a bit cryptic and never explicitly states Milicent's decision. Instead, the story states that Millicent was now going through her "own private initiation."

I returned to school after spending two days at the district's administrative center and was more than pleasantly surprised by the students' independent responses. The substitute's notes assured me that students did work on their own, and so their answers, for me, were going to be quite telling. I designed the worksheet (Appendix G) to be explicitly broken up into pre-reading, during-reading, and after-reading questions so that this would follow the same format which all of our reading strategies did. The questions students completed

which accompanied the story encompassed various levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.
After students discussed prior knowledge about this topic and answered
comprehension questions related to the story, they then applied literary terms
previously studied in class to events that occurred in "Initiation." Then, students
analyzed and synthesized the incidents in the short story and related Milicent's
experiences to their own. For instance, students were asked to discuss peer
pressures they face today in school and to explain how they have learned to deal
with these pressures. Finally, students discussed internal and external conflicts
that they experienced amidst the pressures they faced.

Together, we talked about the story and students' answers in a whole
group discussion. In order to show the many student responses that happened
throughout our discussion, I have chosen to create a dramatization of our
conversation. All dialogue is taken from a participant observation entry in my
field log.

Dramatization: Discussion of "Initiation" – Part 1

TEACHER *(questions): So, did Milicent go through with the initiation?*

KYLE (states): No, because she wants to have her own friends and freedom.

ROBERT (adds): I think she went through with the initiation because she wanted
to be popular.

SALLY (replies): Yeah, because she has just started her initiation and she is now ready to start the adventure. That's what the story says. She is having a private initiation.

TEACHER (questions again): Ok, so who is right? Did she or didn't she go through with the initiation? What does having a "private" initiation mean?

JOSE (responds): I don't she went through with it because they wanted her to change like everything about herself. She didn't need friends like that.

TEACHER (agrees): That is a very good answer, Jose. I agree with you – they wanted her to change too much in my opinion. I couldn't feel good about myself if I changed that much to be a part of something. Could you?

(Students informally discuss if they would or wouldn't change things about themselves in order to be a part of something. More hands go up to answer the initial question, Did Milicent go through with the initiation?)

GREG (answers): I don't think she did; I think she started her own club where they have meetings once a month and go to each other's houses for entertainment. She didn't go through with the initiation.

FELICITY (clarifies): No she didn't go through with it because these girls wouldn't really like her for who she actually was. Milicent was being someone else throughout the initiation.

ANNIE (adds): Right, she doesn't go through with the initiation, and she knows that she still will be friends with Tracy after all of this. Tracy was the person who was her true friend.

TEACHER (asks): Does anyone else want to add anything? We seem to have come to the consensus that Milicent did not go through with it.

SELENA (says): She definitely didn't go through with it because she knew she was better than all of that getting bossed around and listening to the bosses.

TEACHER (compliments): Great! You are exactly correct. I think Milicent was just fed up like Selena said. I mean, who wants to have to ask random strangers what they had for breakfast? Doesn't this girl have better things to do? One more thing, what is the private initiation Milicent went through then? Is she joining something else?

FELICITY (responds): She's got to tell the girls she's not doing it, and they'll be angry with her probably.

MARIA (adds): Yeah, girls are NASTY!!! They'll probably just ignore her now because they think she sold them out.

TEACHER (questions): But, who will still have her back after all of this?

MANY STUDENTS (yell out): Tracy! She was always her friend! She is nice! She doesn't care about the sorority!

Looking back at this discussion, some students quite obviously understood the subtleties of the end of this story while some looked at it more literally and less figuratively. I had anticipated this since the story was lengthy and students were completing this on their own. I felt that, by the end of our discussion, all students understood what the author's purpose for the last paragraph and Milicent's ultimate decision were.

The other questions elicited an equally spirited discussion, but there was much less controversy and most students generally agreed on the same answers. However, when the more personal questions were brought up near the end of our discussion, students gave some very interesting, meaningful answers. In addition, students were making connections to the text, and this was an important reading strategy I wanted students to use. I have chosen to dramatize the conversation to show the depth of answers students provided. I had the benefit of hearing the students say this orally as well as having their papers, which had the same answers written down.

Dramatization: Discussion of "Initiation" – Part 2

TEACHER (asks): What are some peer pressures and conflicts you've faced in your life?

ANNIE (explains): Once, I had this friend. We were best friends since pre-school. She started to hang out with some other friend, and started to ignore me. She said that if I want to be still best friends, her friend can be part of it too. I

said ok. Now she was kind of a 'leader' and she started to tell me what to do. She said: 'Tomorrow wear a skirt and pink shoes and pink nice t-shirt.' I said no, because I hate to wear skirts, and you know that. She told [me] that if I don't do what she tells me, 'I'm out.' I realized that she wasn't really my best friend. Your best friend is always there when you need her, and she hurt my feelings, because I always thought she was my best friend.

TEACHER (responds): Wow! That certainly does reflect the story you've just read. Was this an internal or external conflict for you?

ANNIE (answers): It was probably both. I was fighting with her because I didn't agree with her. But inside I was also upset and couldn't figure out what to do. So that was internal.

TEACHER (says): Good answer. I would agree that this was both an internal and an external conflict for you. Does anyone else want to share a personal story?

SELENA (shares): I had a boyfriend who I wanted to take it serious with. We're young but I really just wanted to settle down for awhile. He was always telling me he wanted a baby. I always told him no, we have school, we don't have jobs, and we're just too young. Every time I told him that he would get mad. I don't know what it was but I always thought he wanted a baby because all his other friends had babies. Well time went on and it just happened. It was not planned, but I had a baby. Now, I don't regret having her at all but I do wish it didn't

happen so soon. To be honest, I think he feels just the same way. I don't know if that's internal or external.

ROBERT (answers): I think it's both again because you were arguing with your boyfriend about it, but you weren't sure what to do inside either.

TEACHER (responds): Excellent, thank you Selena for sharing and Robert for helping. Selena, that is definitely quite a lot of pressure for a teenager to face. I'm just glad you're happy with your decision now. And Robert, you are right. Selena faced both internal and external conflicts. Anyone else?

GREG (shares): Last year in eighth grade, I had a good friend. He was in my classes and was cool. But one day, he asked me to do something wrong. He asked me to hold a knife for him. I knew the situation was bad. I asked him why, and he explained to me why he needed me to hold it. I do not like when people pressure me to do stuff for them. I'm not a slave or servant. I know I could get in trouble, and that's not fun, even if he was my friend. So I avoided the situation, which was the right thing to do. It was an internal conflict mainly because I struggled with making the right decision, but it was external because he was mad at me and we're not really friends anymore.

TEACHER (says): Thank you. Another really interesting example of the pressures you guys face in school all the time. Plus, Greg's description of the types of conflicts was exactly right. The reason I had you answer those last two questions was so you could relate to the way Milicent was feeling. You made a

connection between the fictional story and your real life. And this is another

reading strategy that you can use to make understanding difficult stories easier.

We will keep practicing this as the semester rolls on.

These dramatizations of our discussions allowed me to see the depth of students' answers, what students were participating more than others, and which students were confused or clearly making connections to the text. I found this whole activity to be very encouraging for me because students all read this lengthy story independently, did their best to answer questions that spanned Bloom's Taxonomy, and some discussed their very personal answers with the whole class. While oral participation in this activity was not 100%, the next major reading lesson I had planned was going to remedy that. I love having this class all year.

Poe Debates

After exploring several reading strategies, including using post-it notes, making connections to text and self, learning to read for a purpose, and using graphic organizers, and employing them in conjunction with fictional stories and poetry, I decided that we had one more bridge to cross before beginning our first young adult novel – non-fiction. First of all, non-fiction pieces often make up half to two-thirds of the eleventh grade PSSA reading tests. Second, English is one of the few classes in which students read fiction. In history and science

classes, students are consistently assigned readings from textbooks that are often quite complex, lengthy, non-fiction pieces. Third, although there is a push for teaching reading across the curriculum, not all content area teachers really teach students how to read the difficult material they assign. So I believe that non-fiction literature is a necessary part of my English curriculum.

That being said, I do not believe that students need to be bored to tears by the non-fiction pieces they read. Determined to make reading enjoyable, I scoured our 1200 page textbook, looking for the most interesting non-fiction articles that I could find. And then I came across four relatively short pieces that argued over the manner in which Edgar Allan Poe died. Before I gave this assignment to students, I needed to introduce and remind students of reading strategies that should be used with non-fiction texts. We first discussed how to approach and read non-fiction texts (find the main idea, identify supporting evidence, compare and contrast, draw conclusions, put it all together), and then together we read the first article entitled "Poe's Final Days." This article supports that fact that Poe died from alcoholism. After we read the article, I asked students to share their opinions of this article and together we found the main idea (Poe died of alcoholism), identified supporting evidence (Poe was found incoherent outside of a bar; Poe's family did not come to his rescue because of previous violent, abusive incidents; he was placed in a ward of the hospital saved for drunks), compared and contrasted (I explained we'd do this once they had read

the other articles), drew conclusions (although everyone was convinced he was an alcoholic after only one article, I told students to wait to make a final decision until all four articles had been read), and put it all together (we reviewed this article and would put it all together once all pieces had been read).

Next, three other articles followed – one more that supported the alcoholism theory while the two others supported Poe dying of rabies. Students were given a packet (Appendix H) to complete which asked questions about each article and more importantly, constantly asked students to synthesize what they had read and to form opinions about Poe's cause of death. Throughout each article, the authors presented symptoms and facts which supported their viewpoint – that Poe either died from alcohol or rabies. Students were asked to chart the various symptoms and facts that were present at the time Poe lived and died, and then they had to make their own decisions.

Many key reading strategies were addressed throughout this activity. Students first needed to carefully *read* the non-fiction articles, three of them completely independently. Then students needed to *comprehend* the information in the articles. Next, students needed to *compare and contrast* the symptoms of alcoholism versus the symptoms of rabies. After, students had to *synthesize* all the information they had read about in order to make a final decision – did Poe die from alcoholism or rabies?

Once students made their final choices, I placed them into groups with students who had chosen the same verdict. In preparation for an in-class debate, the students, in groups, had to state their opinions and then find the supporting evidence in any of the four articles that backed up their decision. Last, students on both sides were going to be given an opportunity to question their opponents, so I told every group that they would have to not only prepare to explain their reasoning, but also be ready to defend their answers. Greg very astutely asked if his group could use evidence that wasn't directly stated but that they could assume based on the facts. I praised him for his *inferencing* and *predicting skills* and said that his group could absolutely use this type of evidence.

The debates were held on the third day of working with these articles and were structured in the following manner. There were four groups total – two believed he died of rabies, two believed he died of alcoholism. I randomly selected the first two groups to debate. Each side was given about two minutes to present its case. After the first group presented its argument, the opposing side was then given one minute to respond and ask questions while the first side answered any and all questions posed with evidence from the articles. Then, this process was reversed and the second group was given the same amount of time to make its presentation. The opposing side also got one minute to respond. The final minute of the debate was a very controlled "free-for-all" in which either side

was allowed to make final statements and points and/or respond to any questions or comments from the other side.

Debate Dramatization

In order to effectively show the spirited, lively, at times chaotic debate that occurred in class as well as the numerous reading strategies in action, I have dramatized the students' dialogue below. (I have a marked an A or R behind each student's name to indicate which side they are on – alcoholism or rabies.)

ROBERT (R) (states**)** - Poe was aggressive, confused, and angry. All symptoms of rabies.

BOY #1 (R) (adds)- And Poe couldn't drink water. People who have rabies can't drink water because it's difficult to swallow.

GLORIA (R) (argues) - It says that Poe avoided alcohol by the time he was 40 too, and that he was so sensitive to alcohol that one glass of wine would make him sick.

ROBERT (R) (emphasizes) - Plus, it can take almost one year for rabies to show up in a person and not all people who have been bitten by an animal even remember being bitten. There were 33 reported cases of human rabies, and only 24% remembered contact with an animal.

BOY #2 (R) (states) - Plus, Poe was found outside of a bar, not in it. And the people who found him at the bar probably were drinking themselves. If Poe

couldn't swallow water, how could he swallow alcohol which is made from water?

At this point, their time had expired and they were running thin on ideas. The case was pretty well presented, and Robert and boy #1 were especially passionate about being right in this debate. The alcoholism group was then given one minute to ask the rabies group any questions they had about their testimony. This is the dramatization that follows.

GIRL #1 (A) (yells) - Poe was found right by a bar! What do you think he was doing?!

MARIA (A) (adds) - Plus when they took him to the hospital, they put him in the drunk ward. Why would they do that? Obviously because they thought he was drunk!

KYLE (A) (asks) - Where was a bite mark or scratch? If Poe was bitten, wouldn't something be there?

ROBERT (R) (yells) – He was found OUTSIDE the bar, not in it!

BOY #1 (R) (says) – And rabies takes a year to show up. Maybe the bite mark was very small and with no good medicine at that time, maybe they just didn't know what they were looking for.

Tempers began to flare at this point, and it became obvious to me that I would need to make sure things stayed under control. Students began to fight needlessly and continued to repeat the same things over and over. In order to keep the debate on track, I told the alcoholism group that they now had two uninterrupted minutes to present their side.

GIRL #1 (A) (explains) - Poe was found drunk outside of a bar and was taken to the drunk ward of a hospital. The doctors there diagnosed him as being drunk.

MARIA (A) (adds) - And Poe's cousin Neilson tried to take Poe's wife and mother-in-law away because he knew how much Poe was drinking. Poe even wrote in letters to his family that he was trying to stop drinking and get better. This proves he was drinking.

GIRL #2 (A) (says) - Poe had no bite or scratch mark, so it wasn't rabies. Plus Poe's cat died of starvation. Wouldn't Poe's cat have had rabies if Poe did? He probably would have gotten it from Caterina the cat.

KYLE (A) (states) - And Poe's relative Henry refused to take Poe in when he was found outside the Bar because he had been 'abusive and ungrateful' before when he was drunk.

Their time was up at this point. They presented a good, solid argument. They brought out many of the points in the two articles that discussed alcoholism as well as touching on some of the information in the rabies articles as well. At this

time, the rabies group was given one minute to respond and ask questions. The dramatization that follows represents this portion of the debate.

ROBERT (R) (says) - Poe was found OUTSIDE a bar, not in one. That don't mean anything that he was outside the bar. Maybe that's where he got tired. Plus how can you believe the guys who found him? They could have been drunk if they were at the bar.

GLORIA (R) (adds) - And it can take up to one year for rabies to show up so he may have been bitten and not know it.

GIRL #1 (R) (discusses) - Plus, there were no tests at that time to see whether cats had rabies or not. So even though they said he died of starvation, no one would know for sure.

Both of these groups had become extremely passionate, to the point of heated, now. Several students began to stand up when they talked to make their presence stronger, I supposed.

Students began to, calmly at first, point out many of the same facts again. After about 30 seconds, I had to begin to calm students down because they were so loud and visibly excited. Maria continued to rattle off facts for about 45 seconds without stopping and seemingly, without taking a breath. I decided that they had exhausted all possible ideas, and it was time to debrief and discuss the debate. Once I had gotten both groups calmed down and back to their seats, I asked the jury (made up of the students not participating in this debate) to write

down which group *presented the better information* and *performed better in the debate*. I made sure to stress to students that they were not to pick friends or the theory that they believed in, but rather the group who appeared most together, logical, informative, and correct in their argument. When tallied, the alcoholism group won by one vote.

I was thrilled with this activity. Students were so excited before the debates began and were equally as excited afterwards. I made sure to point out to students the amazing amount of reading strategies that they were using – they summarized, compared, contrasted, drew conclusions, made inferences, synthesized, formed opinions, and debated. The meshing together of all of these seemingly boring skills into one great activity made it easy to teach them without it becoming monotonous. Most telling to me was the fact that, as soon as the debate was over, two students immediately asked me, "When are we doing this again?"

"I haven't read a book since third grade."

Introduction to Young Adult Literature

After I was confident that students were effectively and independently using the reading strategies they had learned with the short stories we had read, I decided that it was time to move into the second phase of my study – reading young adult literature. Having a better understanding of my students now, I knew

it was not best to just plop a book on their desks and launch right in. I warmed

them up by asking them openly and honestly to discuss with me their prior

reading experiences. Previously, I had them write about this on their Reading

Interest Surveys (Appendix A); however, this time I wanted them to discuss their

prior experiences with one another.

As I sat on my desk in front of my students, I said, *We are going to move

on to something a bit more challenging. You guys have been doing so well with

using your reading strategies with short stories that I think you're ready for a

novel now. Now, this book is one that I am choosing for you, and we're all

reading it together. I have picked this one to be first because I know many, many

students in the past have really enjoyed and related to this novel. But it won't

always be like this – me choosing books for you. I will be letting you choose

something you want to read down the road. Also, this book will be the first of

many that you will read this year.*

I could barely even finish the last sentence before Robert yelled out, "Is

this book gonna take months to read?"

Immediately Jose added, "Do we have to do book reports?"

I automatically thought, *These kids equate reading with long, painful

weeks filled with boredom. No matter how much I have thought they've been

enjoying reading, it still carries a negative stigma for many of them.* I was

disappointed to hear that students were so conditioned to believe that the only

activity that could be completed in conjunction with reading was a book report. I

happily reported back to these inquiring students that, *This book will take us about*

three to four weeks at the most, and there will be NO book reports.

"Really?" Robert asked. "Then what are we gonna do with it? Just

read?"

No, no, I announced. *There are plenty of other things we can do with this*

novel that don't involve author biographies or chapter summaries.

Moving on, I continued to ask students to tell me about their experiences

with novels and other assigned readings in previous years. Jose commented, "I

hated doing chapter summaries. When we read a book last year, we had to

summarize what happened after every chapter or group of chapters."

I asked him why that was boring for him.

He replied, "Doing the same thing is boring. I would rather have done

something different after each chapter rather than the same thing."

I agree with you there Jose, I responded. *The monotony – the same old*

thing – can get to be very boring.

Another student said that she hated when, "Teachers kept stopping during

reading to go over what they read." She said that this, "interrupted her flow while

she was reading."

I told her that I completely understood what she was saying and admitted

that, as a teacher, I struggled with how often I should stop when we're reading

together. *On one hand*, I said, *I want to make sure that everyone in the class understands what we're reading. On the other hand, I don't want to interrupt students who are understanding things. Teaching reading can be tough for me sometimes, just like reading something new and confusing can be tough for you,* I explained. *Since you mentioned flow,* I added, *I need a quiet room to read in. I absolutely cannot read or do work like grading papers with television or music on in the background because they disrupt my flow. What do you guys need to be successful readers?* I asked.

"I love listening to my I-Pod when I do work," Fred said. "I need that rhythm in the background to be able to concentrate."

Many students verbally agreed at this point.

"I can't stand a quiet room when I read. I need to hear the music," Maria said. *Yes, but are you understanding the words you're reading or just listening to the music?* I asked students.

 I got a mixture of yes's and no's.

So, I continued, *some of you don't seem quite as sure that actual comprehension is occurring when you are reading and watching t.v. or listening to music. How many of you have found yourself, at times, at the end of a chapter…and when you stop to think about what that chapter was about, you couldn't explain anything?*

"Oh yeah, Miss!" "All the time!" "Yup, that happens to me A LOT!" students chimed in.

So as we are reading this novel first together and then independently, this is a key reading strategy we are going to focus on – using different devices and strategies to keep your mind focused and always comprehending what you're reading. No more wandering.

As this discussion wrapped up, I handed students a copy of the young adult novel *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*. This novel is about Tish, a fifteen-year-old high school student, who is struggling with the fact that her father has run away from his own family, and her mother is so distraught about this that she can barely get food on the table for Tish and her younger brother Matt. Tish is forced to balance school, a job, and being the mother figure of the house for many months. The novel is set up as a journal in which Tish records firsthand her struggles and fears until, in the end, the journal and what she has meticulously written, save her.

I asked students to predict what the novel may be about by examining the front and back covers. Students noted that the girl on the cover looked like a student because she was carrying books, but that she also looked upset. I then asked where else we could find out what was going to happen and Sarah said, "On the back cover." Together we read the blurb which discussed the fact that the protagonist's life was spinning out of control. Next, I wanted students to predict

what troubles a typical high schooler might face. Students guessed abuse at home, girlfriend/boyfriend problems, and stress from balancing home and school life. I asked students why they guessed these problems. Sally answered, "Because these are the same problems we face. Someone is *always* coming in here complaining about their girlfriend or boyfriend or wanting a girlfriend or boyfriend. High school is all about drama."

Yes, I replied, *you guys certainly deal with drama and you aren't shy about sharing it! But seriously, this is why I chose this novel; it is one you can relate to. It's one you can connect to. It's young adult literature – books that are of interest to people your age.*

Then, I asked students to examine the structure of the novel. Students paged through the book and noted that the book was in journal format and that the journals were each labeled with the date as well as either, "Don't read this" or "Read this." Students were confused as to why this would be written at the top of every journal, but I coaxed students on by saying they'd have to read on to find out. I started off the novel by reading the first journal entry out loud. Hearing a good, fluent reader while they were looking at text on a regular basis was another key reading strategy I wanted students to have.

Based on the fact that the protagonist Tish said she has a job at Burger Boy to support herself and her brother because her mother doesn't give them money, students posited that Tish's mom is lazy and that Tish definitely has a lot

to do with school and a job and supporting her younger brother. When class is almost over, I ask students to think about how they'd handle having to take care of a younger sibling at this point in their lives. I said we'd pick up tomorrow with a discussion of this very point. All eyes were still on me, which told me I had captured their interest for today. So far, so good.

Group Interview

A few days had gone by since I introduced the novel, and students were consistently given time each block to read. Rather than constantly telling students that they had to read one or two chapters a night and then quizzing them on these (or having them do a chapter summary), I broke the book up into thirds and had them read one-third of the novel in about a week. Since the book is only 125 pages, reading about 40 pages a week was not too much to ask of them. In addition, students were encouraged to take the books home to read outside of class.

At this point in time, I decided to conduct a group interview to gauge students' interest in and enjoyment of the novel after completing the first third. By a show of hands, I first had students asked students if they simply liked the novel thus far. All 17 students raised their hand and nodded in agreement. And these students had never been shy with me – had one of them not liked it, I would have heard about it. Then I asked for some honest oral feedback.

Robert said, "I like it because it's not like a book; it's a journal."

Why is that better? I asked.

He said, "It's easier to read because of the journals. They're shorter too. Not long like chapters usually are."

I have realized, in working with these frustrated readers year after year, that chapter books are daunting for many students because of their length. I do believe, though, that these students need to read chapter books too, but my hope was that the next young adult novel we undertake – which does have chapters – would still be interesting to them because of its subject matter. I also think many times it's not that the chapters really are too long, but rather that the content is boring and foreign to them.

Back to the group interview, more hands were raised.

Maria replied, "It's awesome so far. The action is interesting and the problems are actually real."

Describe which problems you mean more closely, I asked her.

She said, "Like fighting with your parents or your parents fighting. And having to get a job and still go to school."

So this story being relatable to you has made this interesting, I said to the class. Heads all nodded in agreement.

Is this different from previous books you've read that you didn't like? I asked. Heads nodded again.

Why? I questioned.

"It's easier to read because the journals are short and if I don't feel like reading a long chapter, it's better. I can get to the end of one journal quickly and be done for the night," Kyle responded.

Another student commented, "I haven't read 50 pages in a few days ever!"

Was this hard or easy to do? I asked him. "Pretty easy because the journals make it interesting," he replied.

One final student quickly pointed out, "I haven't read a book since third grade. This is the first one I'm actually reading."

Really? I responded. *Then how have you done well in school?*

"I just go back and read the parts I need to read to do an assignment or quiz," he said. I stood there amazed. I wanted to ask the rest of the class how many of them had similar experiences, but I feared I already knew the answer. That answer was one that no English teacher ever wanted to hear. But that answer was proof that my study needed to happen, and that these kids needed to be involved in it.

Introduction to Novel Timelines

As I designed my unit for this novel, I wondered how exactly to assess students and keep them on track without losing their attention or boring them. I wanted to be less rigorous than I have been in the past with the reading of the novel. In previous years, I was somewhat obsessed with making sure everyone

read every page, and I wanted to "get" those kids that didn't read by quizzing them. What I've realized is that no matter what I do, many students will read, but some won't. And I can't drive myself crazy with grading just to try to prove something I won't ever be able to. So again I wondered what projects I should assign to support and encourage my students' continued reading. Author biographies and book reports were a definite no. Chapter summaries were boring and monotonous. Quizzes and tests – maybe? But haven't students been quizzed enough? A good group project? That sounded like my best option with this outspoken, highly social class.

Then I had to think about what kind of assignment would be interesting for students, help them with their comprehension of the novel, while also incorporating a variety of students' strengths – planning, organizing, writing, and drawing to name a few. I kept coming back to the problem of students not really remembering what they had read. How could I ensure students always had a running record of what was occurring in the novel without having them do chapter summaries?

And then, the idea of a timeline popped into my head. But not the typical, plain, straight-line-across-a-page timeline. Theirs would be unique and creative. Theirs would be poster-size. Theirs would be something they were invested in.

I decided to hand select groups of four, so I could be assured that students would be working as well as socializing. I asked students to create some kind of

timeline, any kind of timeline. Groups eventually developed timelines made up of footprints on a brick sidewalk, sharpened pencils, a roller coast, and a snake.   All ideas were excellent and original, and students took extreme pride in carefully constructing and designing their work. And they took a lot of time. After allotting almost two blocks to the creation of their masterpieces, I had to cut students off and almost force them to move onto the actual comprehension and written portion of the activity, but I assured them there would be time to go back and put the finishing touches onto their projects.

Next, I assigned students a character (or characters) in the book, and they were to chart, via their timelines, what their character did and how their character changed throughout the novel on a month-by-month basis. Since the novel is written in journal format and labeled with month and day, I asked students to keep a monthly record of what their character experienced. Students needed a total of 15 major points from the beginning of the book until the end, and each point needed to be three to five sentences of explanation. Students were given time each week to continue to update their timelines. I felt that breaking things up in this manner was helpful to them because it was easier for the students to focus on a few months at a time rather than trying to comprehend the entire book at once.

The Next Day…

Students had just barely begun this project the day before, but when they came in to class, three different students immediately asked, "Can we work on those projects now?"

Wow, I said. *It's great to hear you're excited! I've allowed plenty of time for you to work on your timelines today, after reading time though.* I always gave students silent reading time at the beginning of each block in order for them to read more of their young adult novel. Two students, Kyle and Greg, who had already finished the assigned section of the novel for the week, took it upon themselves to walk to the back of the room, take their posters, and begin working on them independently even though they were not asked to do so.

This was so exciting for me because I saw these students really enjoying this project. I believed that they liked the group time, and I also knew they loved being creative. But the addition of the reading skills in this mix showed me that, thus far, this novel and project were a good idea and were motivating students to *really read*.

Journals

One of my main goals in using young adult literature was to have students be able to relate to the characters and make connections between the novel and their own lives. In order to achieve this association, I gave students a journal assignment to complete along with their novel *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*. Over the course of approximately ten class periods, students were

asked to complete a journal activity similar to what Tish, the narrator and

protagonist of the novel, had to complete for her English class. Students could

freewrite about anything that was on their minds at the time – it could be school-

related, home/family-related, socially-related, or related to anything else they

wanted. Students could also write "Do not read" at the top of two of their entries

(they had to complete at least six total entries in two weeks), and I promised I

would not read them. I also warned students before they began writing that I had

a legal responsibility to report anything that they wrote which could be potentially

harmful to them or to someone in their lives. Additionally, I assured students that

not only would I not read their entries marked "Do not read," but I also would not

include any of those journals in my study.

Upon collecting the journals from students, I became engulfed in reading

their entries. Students wrote about things personal to them – familial issues,

girlfriend/boyfriend drama, school problems, and more thoughtful entries like "I

wish I was young again because…" (Figure 4). In this journal, Felicity examines

the struggles she feels in her day-to-day high school life and how much easier things used to be when she

"played" school in her back yard. In one journal, a student actually asked me

questions about his grade and what he could do to improve it. I made sure to

respond with several ways he could ensure his second quarter grade stayed in the

A range.
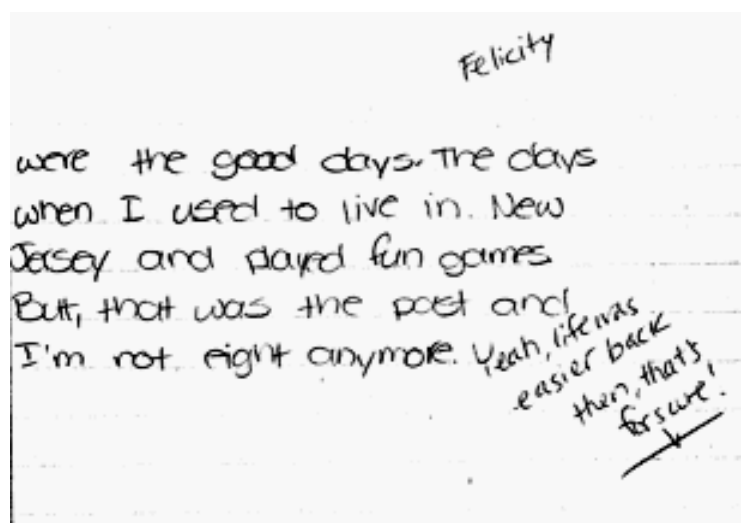
Figure 4. Felicity's Journal
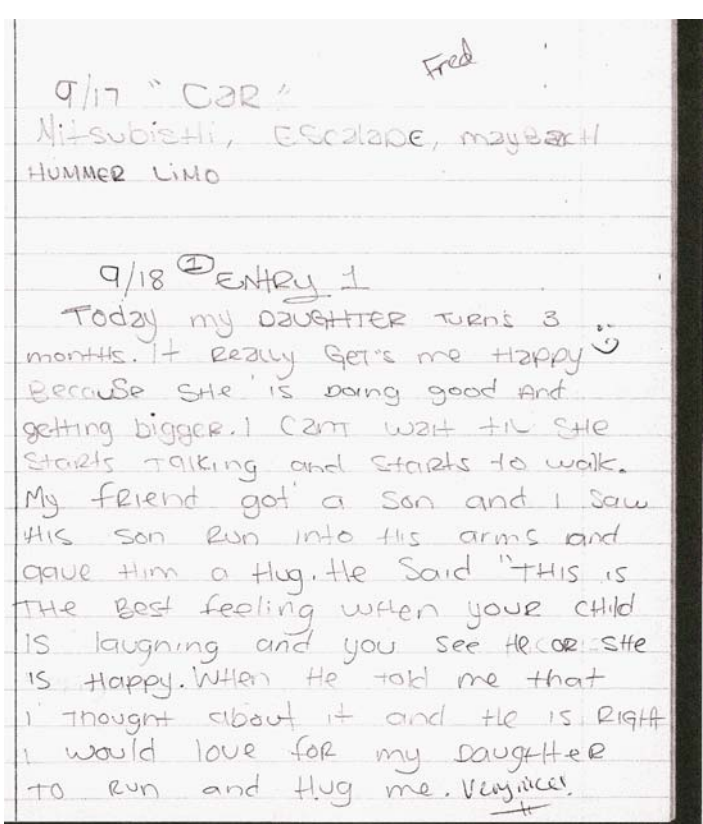
Another student wrote a poem and two students, Fred and Selena, wrote very touching entries about being excited about their own children growing up (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Fred's journal

In addition, two students, Sally and Selena, actually wrote in their journals on the

weekend (Figure 6). I was so extremely happy to see this, and this reaffirmed for

me that these students really needed an outlet to express themselves.
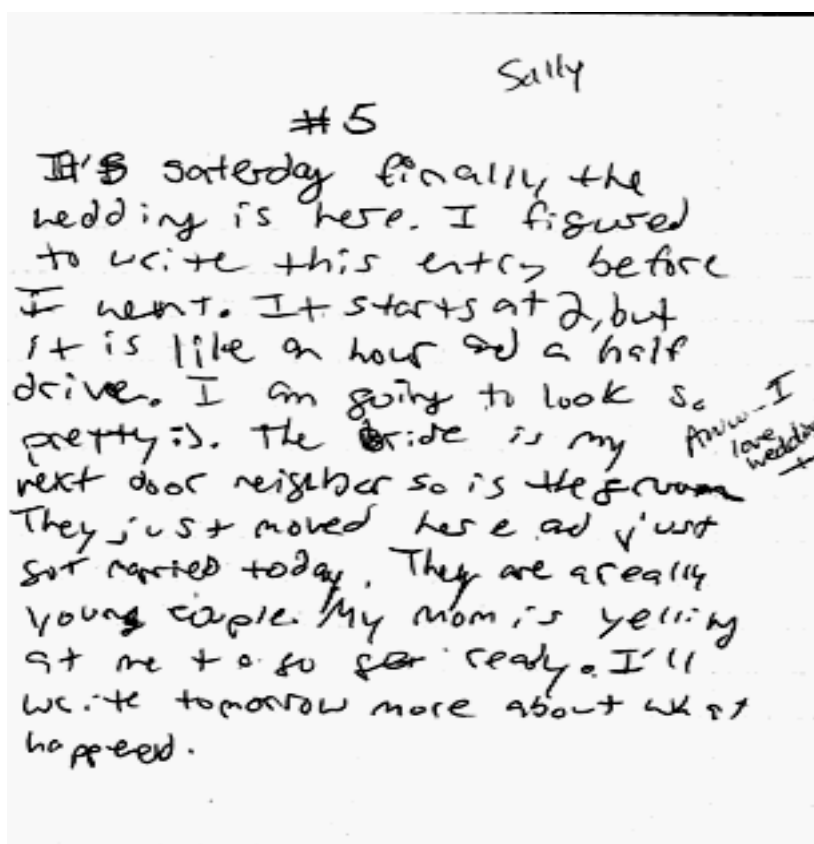
Figure 6. Sally's Journal

As I read through the journals, I made sure to comment on the entries to show students I understood what they were saying, that I could sympathize with their plights, and that I liked and/or agreed with something they had said. Upon giving journals back to students, they quickly flipped through to see what comments I had made. Most impressive to me was Greg, who had written in his journal about the immense struggles he was having in history class. Also, he found that he had a study hall next semester that he did not want. I commented that he should make an appointment with his counselor to talk about his situation. At the conclusion of the block, he asked me, "Which one is my counselor? I am going to stop by at the end of the day to talk to him about things." As students became more active in their reading and more active in their class participation, they became more proactive in managing their school lives.

Conclusion of Novel and Timeline Projects

October 16th was the official due date of the timelines and also the official beginning of project presentations. I had given students a rubric at the start of this

project and used it now to evaluate their work. As students prepared to present, I

noticed that the timelines looked beautiful, and it was obvious the art work was

carefully done. My concern was that students focused too much on the art

because it was easier for some of them to do and not enough on the actual

documentation of information part because that was harder, more time-

consuming, and less interesting to them.

Group 1 included Kyle, Robert, and Selena, and this group worked quite well together mapping out their timeline, even though they got off to a slow start. Selena was extremely quiet and did not put in the same effort for the group project that she did for individual assignments. She never liked speaking in front of others and would always rather remain quiet than share anything with the group that might be perceived as being wrong or different. This was unfortunate for her group because she has been one of the highest performing students in the class. Robert took control of the group and did his best to keep everyone on task. Kyle remained a hard worker and together this group came up with a unique timeline (Figure 7) made up of sharpened pencils and pieces of paper that included a good deal of accurate, well-comprehended information. Because all students in this group clearly read this book from beginning to end and because of

their detailed information and solid effort in teamwork, they received an A for this

project.

Figure 7. Group 1 Timeline

Group 2 included Sally, Annie, and Jose, and their timeline was a winding

roller coaster (Figure 8). Sally and Annie have always performed well and

completed most of the actual written portion of the assignment. Jose did very

little. On a day used to work on the project that I had been absent, the aide in my

classroom reported back to me that Jose blatantly refused to do any work at all. A
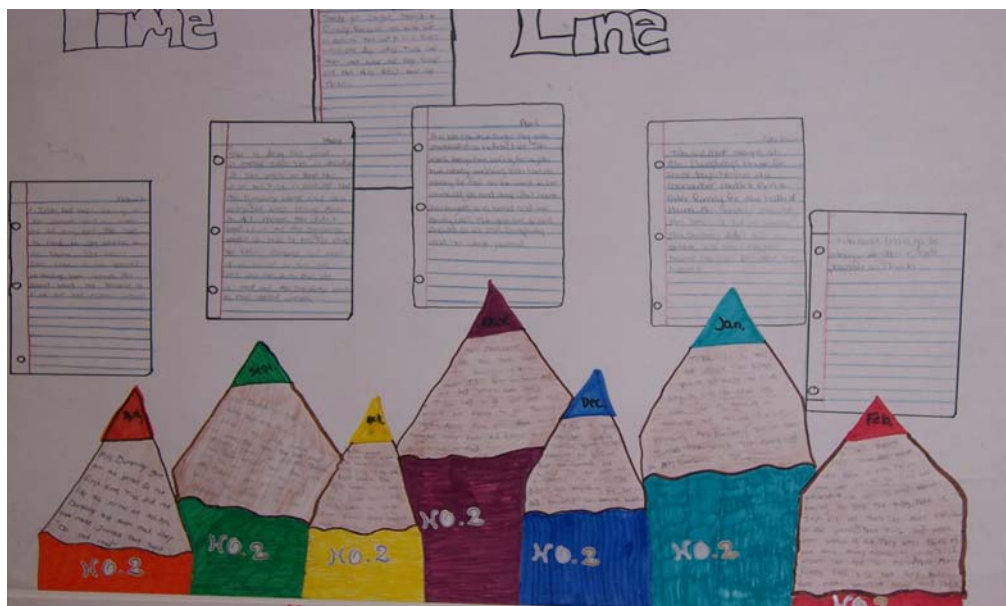
fourth student in the group tackled the art work, but did not contribute to the

written text. When this group presented, neither Jose nor the group's artist could

answer *any* questions regarding the end of the novel, which was a huge part of this presentation, and admitted that they hadn't read the end of the story.

"I didn't know that we had to complete the novel. I was out with my brother doing things for my dad yesterday," the first student explained.

Jose simply said, "I didn't finish."

I was extremely disappointed by this group and was thankful that I had included on the grading rubric a separate section with an individual grade based on each person's own participation. The boys' grades suffered, while the girls, who had quite obviously read the entire novel, scored extremely well.
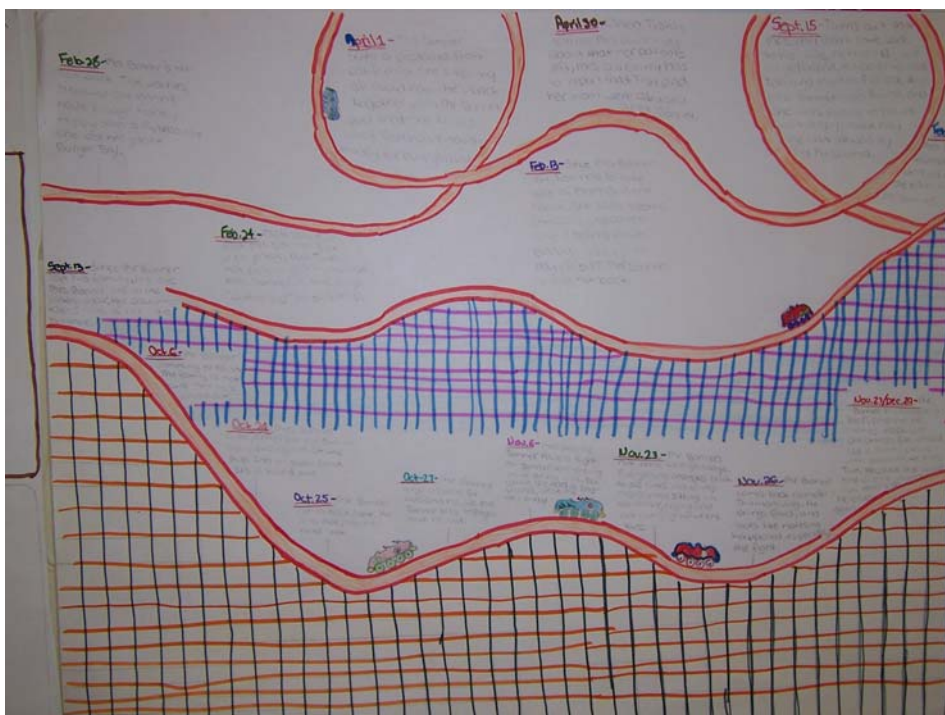
Figure 8. Group 2 Timeline

Group 3 included Maria, Greg, and Sarah, and their timeline spanned the body of a snake (Figure 9). This group, by far, worked the worst together. There were five participants in all – two boys and three girls. In this group, the three girls did essentially nothing, even when I sat with them for whole sections of several blocks. Greg did the large majority of the written portion and even jotted down answers after class for the other group members to write on their poster the next day. The other boy was engulfed in the art work, but refused to work on anything with the other members of his group. Even though the assignment was to complete a timeline through the *end* of the book, this group opted to complete only two-thirds of the project and stopped well short of the end of the novel. The three girls, including Maria and Sarah, were quite social but not inclined to work on the project. Greg could simply not complete an entire timeline on his own in the time span that was allotted.

I was disappointed with this group for several reasons. Noticing their lack of progress, I stressed to them the importance of taking the project home or meeting after school to finish it. The poster sat in the back of my room untouched. No one seemed to care enough to take ownership and get it done. During the class presentation, each group member blamed the others, arguing with one another more than presenting to their classmates. Finally, my main objective was for students to read the book, which, believe it or not, all students in this group actually *did*! I remain frustrated that they opted not to do what they

and I know they were capable of doing. This group got a C on their project with

the exception of Greg who scored higher simply because of his effort.

Figure 9. Group 3 Timeline

Lastly, Group 4 included Fred, Felicity, and Gloria. This group worked

very well together and managed to divide the work equally so as not to have

anyone doing too much or too little. They finished earlier than everyone else

because they spent much less time determining who would be responsible for

doing what and got to work immediately. Their timeline was a set of footprints,

and they were even creative enough to trace each of their own footprints so as to

include everyone on their timeline (Figure 10). Once the written portion was

done, this group had plenty of time to work on the artistic portion. Their

presentation went very smoothly, making it quite evident that everyone had

finished the novel, and this group received an A.

Figure 10. Timeline for Group 4

All in all, what I realized from this first young adult novel and project was that the next novel we read needed to have a stronger individual component. Most frustrating to me was the fact that, even though the assignments were manageable and even though students had time to read in class, some students still did not finish the book. These students who did not finish didn't read at all outside of class, and even though I explained that some of this novel would have to be homework, these few students never took their books home. This brings me back to the whole point of my study in the first place – how do I motivate and help *all* of the struggling readers? I've realized that I had reached a large portion of students in this class, but not all of them yet. Therefore, my inquiry continued.

End-of-Novel Survey Pastiche and Discussion

Once all group presentations had concluded, I decided to survey (Appendix B) students again to learn their feelings about the novel and to see if their thoughts regarding reading had changed since the beginning of the school year. I have created a pastiche below which shows students answers to the first question on the survey.

After finishing the young adult novel *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*, how did you like it?
I liked it because it wasn't like a book. It was like a journal set up.
It was a really good book. I am surprised I actually stuck with the book. I liked it because it does explain how hard it is to live on your own and support a young sibling with no parent.
I really enjoyed the book. It was very interesting and I liked how the book had someone my age.
I really liked it because it caught my attention how she says her life was abuse. I even caught myself reading in class when we were not reading the book.

The book was alright. I liked it because it was interesting and I felt the way she was feeling while she struggled through the book but did not give up. I could see this book as a movie on Lifetime.

It was okay, not my favorite type of book. I usually like adventure and mystery books.

`I liked it because I read it pretty quick and it was in a journal format.`

I liked this book because it showed everyday problems of some people.

`I liked it because the girl was telling stuff that's going on with her and stuff.`

Figure 11. Pastiche of Responses Regarding Young Adult Novel

I found these answers to be very interesting because almost every student responded positively to this novel – boys and girls alike. In addition, I noted that six students commented on some young adult quality of this novel, and two specifically mentioned the journal format as being something they enjoyed. As I looked back at students' first answers to how they felt about reading on the initial Reading Interest Survey (Appendix A), these answers are in stark contrast to those, which suggest that we had definitely made a large amount of progress.

A second question on the survey which I believed would be quite telling, and supported my assertion that students were indeed making progress, was one in which I asked students to tell me if and how their feelings about reading have changed since the beginning of the school year. Once again, I created a pastiche to show a sampling of student responses to this question.

```
Think back to what you first wrote about how much you
    liked (or didn't like) reading.  Have your feelings
  changed at all because of what we're reading in class?
   I didn't like to read but reading stuff about our own
                        age is fun.
   Yes, my thoughts did change.  When we have a novel
        that relates to someone our age I become more
                     interested in them.
```
Nothing changed. I still like to read a lot.
```
  Yes because I like books that have horror going on in
    someone's life.  It makes me realize how good I have
     it.  Also, I know my brother would take care of me.
```
No it did not change, but if we keep reading good books that are different and interesting and books that we could relate to it might.

```
    No, I still don't prefer to read unless it's really

                  good or I have to.

  I like reading.  I always liked reading a little bit.

    I just don't like reading when I am told to read.

  No because I hate looking at words in a book instead

                  of a car book.
```

Figure 12. Pastiche of Students' Feelings about Reading

I found these answers to be incredibly insightful and helpful to me. The students who had liked reading originally continued to like it, while some students had admittedly changed their feelings and now liked reading more, while others were honest enough to say this still isn't their favorite activity and they'd rather read something else, like a "car book." Fred's answer of, "No it did not change, but if we keep reading good books that are different and interesting and books that we could relate to it might" was extremely perceptive and honest. I thanked Fred for this honest response and said I thought this was a reasonable attitude to have, especially for someone who described reading as "boring" in the first survey he completed. This survey helped me to see that progress was indeed being made – even if not as quickly as I would have liked.

"We still have two more minutes – you can read one more page!"

For the final phase of my study, we moved on to a second young adult novel which was much lengthier and more complex than our first. This new novel, *Life in the Fat Lane*, is about a very popular high school girl, Lara, who mysteriously and rapidly begins to gain weight. She loses friends, fights with her family, and eventually finds out she has Axell-Crowne Disease (a fictitious illness) which is described as a metabolic disease that causes people to gain large amounts of weight in short periods of time. In the end, although she does not lose the weight, she does make new friends who really appreciate her, and she has also regained much of her confidence. This novel is in chapter format with every chapter representing her weight rather than a list of ascending numerals; for example, the first chapter is 118.

To begin this novel, I created an Anticipation Guide (Appendix I) that asked students to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with controversial generalizations I listed for them which were, of course, related to the novel. An Anticipation Guide is another great pre-reading strategy to use because students are looking at topics related to the novel they are about to read and are asked to formulate and defend opinions about these statements. When students began reading the novel, they were more familiar with the subject matter. Two related statements I asked students to discuss on their Anticipation Guide were, "Skinny people are happy," and "Overweight people are unhappy."

Annie said, "Just because people are skinny does not mean they are happy. They could have eating problems or something. It also doesn't mean they are unhappy. It could go either way depending on the situation."

Fred agreed, "Yeah I know lots of skinny people who pretend that they're happy but they really aren't. I also know a lot of heavier people who are really confident and proud of themselves."

I agree with you, I added.

I made sure to point out to students that these were purposefully broad generalizations that were designed to make them think and argue.

Let's take a look at another statement on the Anticipation Guide, I said. *How about "Musicians and artists are thought of as weird or different in school."*

Maria quickly pointed out, "It's like gothic people who wear all dark clothes and stuff that are weird. Musicians and artists are cool."

Is it fair to single out people who dress differently? I asked.

A chorus of no's rang out.

Did you ever think, I asked, that gothic people may think you dress weird or different?

"Yeah right Miss!" Sarah exclaimed. "That is not possible."

Oh it is possible Sarah. You are judging others right now, even though you just agreed that that shouldn't be done, I reminded her.

Silence.

Ok, what about the statement, "Popular people are popular because they are attractive"?

Robert said, "Popular people all look differently. Some of them are attractive and some of them aren't."

Sarah responded, "Yeah, there are lots of ugly people who are popular. It's not just like athletes who are popular. There are popular people in every group."

I responded, ugly comment aside*, I am quite interested by the fact that there are many types of popular people depending on what group you're a part of. In my very small high school, there were a very select group of popular people who were attractive, and many times, not liked by others. I am happy to see that at our school there is more of an acceptance of many kinds of people than there was at my high school.*

As this conversation wrapped up, our focus turned to the novel and specifically, the front cover. We examined the picture of the girl ("with a worried face," noted Robert) standing on a scale. Students predicted that this would be someone who struggled with her weight and was very upset by it. Then Fred read the back cover of the novel, and we discussed what metabolism is, as this girl gained weight because of a fictional metabolic disorder. I asked students to think about what would change in their lives if they started to gain large amounts of weight.

Maria said, "Boyfriends because they wouldn't stick by you if you were fat." Felicity stated, "Friends might change if they aren't real friends to begin with."

Robert added, "Clothes because you'd have to get a new wardrobe."

Finally, before we began reading we examined the "resume" page placed just before page one which listed all the accomplishments of Lara, the novel's protagonist and perfect prom queen. I asked students to read over her long list of activities and achievements and make predictions about what she'd be like if she walked into the room and they had a conversation with her.

"Annoying! Conceited because she's done so much!" one student said.

"Fake!" Gloria exclaimed. "She's too perfect."

"I hate her already!" Maria yelled.

Wow, those are pretty strong opinions you've formed based on a few sentences on a piece of paper. Think about how you'd feel if you were judged that strongly by your achievements and accomplishments.

Without allowing any responses, I asked students to look at page one of the novel. Many students immediately noted that the first chapter was Chapter 118, which Kyle recognized was her weight. This sent the class tearing through the novel to find out how much weight Lara gained and lost throughout. At last, I began reading to students the first five or so pages of the novel. This allowed me to stop where I wanted to in order to have students make predictions about

characters' appearances and roles in the story. Making predictions is another key during-reading strategy that I wanted students to use continually.

When Jett, Lara's boyfriend, was introduced I stopped and said, *What does he look like in your mind?*

Maria quickly responded, "Cute white boy. Chad Michael Murray!"

Really, a blond? I pictured him with dark black hair, I responded.

Robert said, "Well, yeah, me too, because Jett you think of black like the fuel or jet-black hair."

Yep that must be what I automatically thought of. Jet-black hair, I agreed.

Ok, well that's about all the time we have for today guys, I explained.

"Ah come on Miss!"

"Keep reading Miss!"

"We still have two more minutes – you can read one more page!" Fred said.

They want to keep reading, I thought. It's a great start to our second novel.

Our reading for the day ended with my voice and the school bell meshing into one….

End of Study Survey

I officially concluded my action research with an End of Study Survey (Appendix C) which asked students again to indicate their interest in reading and

what they liked or disliked regarding reading in this Academic English 9 Critical

Literacy class. Since I have this class for the entire year, this wasn't a final

measure by any means; it was just a way to gauge their feelings thus far.

Although the survey asked several questions regarding reading, there were two

that I was specifically interested in – "What have you liked about the novels

we've been reading?" and "What are some new strategies/techniques that you use

while reading?"

In order to examine patterns that have emerged in the students' responses,

I have created a pastiche to look at answers to the first question.

How do you feel about the young adult novels we've

been reading – what have you liked?

I liked these novels because they have to deal with

teenagers.

I liked <u>Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey</u>

because it was easy to read. It also went fast.

I think they were good books. They actually got my

attention.

The novels are about people our own age, which makes it easier to

look from their point of view. They books are for teenagers like us.

They are really good and interesting. It was really

hard to put the book down.

I liked both of the books that we have read so far.

They are both really good and they kept my attention.

I liked that they've been about young teenagers having

issues and it's interesting to read about things I can

relate to.

I like that they relate to people today.

I like how they are written/how people our age can relate to them.

I enjoyed all of the novels we've read.

I can relate to them. They were interesting to me.

Figure 13. Pastiche of Students' Reactions to Young Adult Literature

I have included here every single participant's response to this survey item. I was most impressed to see that each one of them had something positive to say. Below, I created a bar graph which shows the numerous references to some aspect of young adult literature that were present in the students' comments. This has proven to me that young adult literature really has helped to motivate my class of struggling, dependent readers.

References to Young Adult Literature
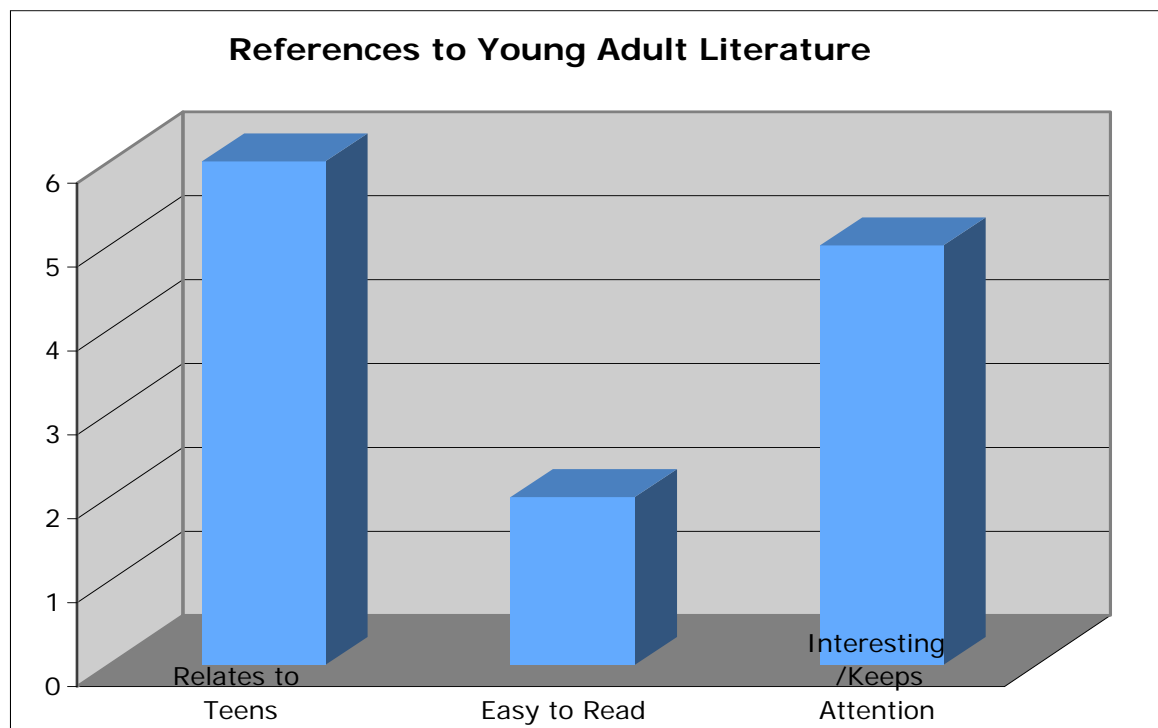
Figure 14. Bar Graph of References to Young Adult Literature in Student

Responses

Finally, the last question I wanted to analyze was what reading strategies

students have gained and learned to use as the semester progressed. I continually

mentioned to students that they need to carry around an imaginary "Reading

Toolkit" in which they can always pull out any tool necessary to get the job done,

meaning get a new piece of literature read and analyzed properly. Below, I have

created our "Toolkit" and in it, I have placed the strategies that students have said

they now use.

```
                    ┌─────────────────┐
                    │   READING       │
                    │   TOOLKIT       │
                    └─────────────────┘
```

If I don't understand some words, I usually go back and reread that
sentence again.

I take notes on what I read.

I like to compare the story with people and events in this school.

I use post-it notes. I also review what has happened every 3-4 chapters.

I do projects.

In *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*, those timelines helped me
to understand what we read.

I reread what I read the day before.

Now that I understand adjectives, it became easy to read faster.

I read it out loud or whisper read.

Figure 15. Reading Toolkit

Students' answers to this question, without any prompting from me, show

that they really have gained a variety of necessary pre-, during-, and after-reading

strategies that they can use with whatever piece of literature they read. The best thing for me in this whole study has been that now students have this array of strategies in their back pockets, so to speak, and they can decide that they need to use post-its in history, while in science they need to reread. In English, the use of projects and taking notes helps them to reach their ultimate goal of comprehending and understanding the literature.

The final figured I've included in this document, Figure 16, is a list of the key theme statements I created based on what I observed, documented, and learned in my Academic English 9 Critical Literacy class throughout this study.

Theme Statements

1.) Employing pre-reading strategies, such as activating prior knowledge, making

predictions, journaling, setting a purpose for reading, and using Anticipation Guides, are necessary to set the stage for students before the reading of a piece of literature even begins.

2.) In order for students to actively read a piece of literature, during-reading strategies such as summarizing, analyzing, and comprehending text, making connections, and using post-it notes must be utilized.

3.) After-reading strategies such as analyzing and synthesizing a piece of literature, forming opinions about the text, and making connections to personal experiences and other texts are necessary to ensure students have fully comprehended and understood a reading selection.

4.) Students who do not possess the necessary skills to read an age-appropriate piece, students who do not complete their work on a regular basis, and students who do not want to read at all are three challenges a teacher faces and must try to work through in order to assure that all students have the opportunity to be successful readers.

5.) The use of young adult literature, with its relatable characters and plot, gets dependent readers interested in and excited about reading.

Figure 16. Theme Statements

FINDINGS

Pre-Reading Strategies

Employing pre-reading strategies, such as activating prior knowledge, making predictions, journaling, setting a purpose for reading, and using Anticipation Guides, are necessary to set the stage for students before the reading of a piece of literature even begins.

Pre-reading strategies were the first area of my study that I tackled with my students, and I found that the use of these tactics to be crucial to true comprehension of a piece of literature. The very first strategy I used with students was making connections between their previous reading experiences and their current feelings about reading. I found through an initial discussion that students had many, many pre-conceived notions about what reading in high school would be like, specifically books reports and boredom. In addition, students were convinced that they were in a "dumb" class, and thus figured less would be expected of them. As Smith (2002) explained, "The stigma of having been assigned to the 'bonehead' sections of my courses created for me, as well as for other children assigned to those sections, a situation whereby we became the object of mockery and gibes from our other schoolmates" (p. 18). I found that immediately laying out my expectations regarding class and reading specifically while also listening to stories of students prior reading experiences helped me to gain their trust from the first day forward.

To get a more in-depth look at students initial likes and dislikes regarding reading, I administered the Reading Interest Survey (Appendix A). I found that this survey did indeed serve its purpose for me, which was to have students' responses guide my teaching. Almost unanimously students had a dislike for reading; almost unanimously students didn't know what comprehension meant; almost unanimously students listed their strengths regarding reading as very simple things like reading aloud or reading books with pictures. From this point on, I knew I had to make reading interesting and fun again. I knew I had to help students learn to help themselves when they were confused and take back control of their learning. As Dewey (1938) said, "The ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control" (p. 64). I knew I had to help students find, within themselves, the confidence to read and comprehend independently.

Next, we tackled the strategy of reading for a purpose. I connected with students by asking them how many times they were reading something and found that their minds were somewhere else by the end of the page or chapter. Students readily admitted to this, and through the use of "The House" passage (Appendix F), they inductively figured out that the activity they were undertaking was reading with a specific purpose in mind. Once this strategy was in place, I found it easier to start reading any piece of literature with my students. I'd give them something specific to look for – symbols, character development, epiphanies – and they were much more focused throughout each activity. I also talked about

the transferability of this skill to all other classes and urged students to figure out a purpose before they read anything – a history book, a science lab, a Spanish poem – and use post-it notes to continually mark their findings throughout the piece.

A final pre-reading strategy I used with students was an Anticipation Guide (Appendix I). Before we began our second young adult novel, *Life in the Fat Lane*, I created a list of generalizations associated with the novel. I asked students to respond, using a Likert scale, to their varying degrees of agreement or disagreement. This was the jumping off point for a very heated discussion about some of the ideas presented. I found this to be an extremely useful pre-reading activity because not only were students familiar with the basic themes of the novel, but they were also quite excited to begin reading.

During-Reading Strategies

In order for students to actively read a piece of literature, during-reading strategies such as summarizing, analyzing, and comprehending text, making connections, and using post-it notes must be utilized.

As Dewey (1938) said, "The principle of continuity of experience means 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). Students needed to learn pre-reading strategies before tackling a piece of literature

and using during-reading strategies. Similarly, students needed to learn these during-reading strategies before using after-reading strategies.

With some initial scaffolding, I found that students utilized during-reading strategies quite effectively. We began slowly, with poetry and short pieces of fiction and eventually worked up to students comprehending and analyzing short stories independently. The short story "Initiation" was the first lengthier piece of literature that students read completely on their own. I designed the accompanying worksheet to have students answer pre-reading questions about what they believed the word initiation meant and had them discuss things they had been initiated into. I then moved on to during-reading questions which encompassed the many levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. I found that this challenge proved to be beneficial for the students, who really comprehended, analyzed, and made connections with and to this text, and for me, who really got to see how capable these students were of completing more challenging tasks.

A second during-reading strategy that I found to be very successful was the use of journals in conjunction with the young adult novel *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey.* Just as Tish, the protagonist of the novel, was asked to write in her journals about day-to-day events, I had students do the same. They were free to write about anything they wanted, and I found this to be an activity they enjoyed because they weren't forced to write about something school-related. In addition, another way I made a connection between the novel and the

students' journals was to allow them to write "Do Not Read" above two of their entries, just as Tish was allowed to do if something was too personal to have the teacher read. Based on what the students wrote in their journals, it was obvious that they did like this activity and looked forward to the comments that I made throughout.

I also simply listened to my students while they were reading. As Freire (1970) stated, "The teacher is no long merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 80). In the form of a group interview, I listened to what students had to say about the novel in the midst of their reading. Students conveyed to me that they enjoyed the relatable characters and plot line and found the journal format to be easy to follow. This interview ensured me that this young adult novel was a good choice for my students.

A final during-reading strategy that I found to be useful were the timelines done along with *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*. Because students were asked to continually update their timelines with events and activities related to their assigned characters and then present their findings to the class, everyone was continually reminded of the content of the novel. Based on the final products of most groups, I also found that students enjoyed this type of project much more than completing worksheets or summaries.

After-Reading Strategies

After-reading strategies such as analyzing and synthesizing a piece of literature, forming opinions about the text, and making connections to personal experiences and other texts are necessary to ensure students have fully comprehended and understood a reading selection.

As Dewey (1938) stated, "The most important attitude that can be formed is that of a desire to go on learning" (p. 48). The use of after-reading strategies was an integral part of my study and helped to create this motivation within students. I found the use of these strategies to be a great way to review and wrap up a piece of literature while allowing students to see connections between the text and their own lives. Also, I saw that upon finishing their first young adult novel, students were quite excited to start their second.

One great example of students using after-reading strategies was after we had finished the short story "Initiation," and I asked students to discuss what peer pressures they've faced and what conflicts they've had to deal with in their lives. Through the dramatization I created with the dialogue we had in class, I was able to see the ways in which students could relate their lives to Milicent's, the protagonist of the short story.

A second time I found after-reading strategies to be quite effective was during the Poe debates students participated in. Students had, first of all, read the non-fiction pieces which showed two sides of an on-going debate. Next, students

had to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize the text and form an opinion about the manner in which they believed Poe really died. Next, in groups, students prepared arguments and prepared to defend their cases. Finally, students debated, very passionately, for their side. They effortlessly and from memory pulled information from several pieces of text and were quickly able to counter other's arguments. The success of this activity was evident in the dramatization I created and in the reactions of the students in class. "When are we doing this again?" was a question I was asked several times that week.

Roadblocks

Students who do not possess the necessary skills to read an age-appropriate piece, students who do not complete their work on a regular basis, and students who do not want to read at all are three challenges a teacher faces and must try to work through in order to assure that all students have the opportunity to be successful readers.

I knew when I began this study with this class that there would be some challenging moments – it's inevitable in any class. But I have never shied away from a challenge, and that's why I chose the class I felt struggled the most with reading and writing at the beginning of the school year. Upon administering and examining students' answers on the first Reading Interest Survey (Appendix A), I knew not all class members were reading at a ninth grade level. Many students did not know or understand the word "comprehension," while many others could

not name the last book they'd read or a book they'd call their favorite. Although this was disheartening to me, it made me realize two things – either students really had not read anything lately or they hadn't read anything good enough to be remembered. Either way, I knew finding age-appropriate, interesting literature was going to be a key goal of mine throughout the study.

As Delpit (2002) said, "The less stress and the more fun connected to the process, the more easily it is accomplished" (p. 40). I thought the timeline project would be fun and interesting for students to complete, and a welcome alternative to the previously complained-about chapter summaries and book reports. However, a major problem I ran into throughout my study was students not completing their work on a regular basis. This became evident in the timeline project done in conjunction with the young adult novel *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*. One pre-assigned heterogeneous group had great difficulty focusing on the task at hand, and although one student tried to step forward as the leader, his soft voice and quiet confidence was quickly overruled by the louder and more social girls in the group. I had to plan time each block to sit specifically with them in order to prod them along as they tried to work on their timelines. Even when I offered extra time and extra help after school, no one in the group took advantage of this. I learned from this group that sometimes, no matter how much I wanted my students to succeed, they weren't always going to succeed at every activity. I found myself to be caring about their project more than they

were, and it was at that moment that I realized I had to let it go and let them receive the grades they had earned.

A final problem I ran into was the students who simply did not read. Because we had read so much together at the beginning of the semester and because I had given students what I believed to be ample time to read their first young adult novel, I was literally astonished when Group 2 presented their timelines and two boys readily admitted that they had simply not finished the novel. I was truly amazed that the students hadn't read but was even more surprised that they had no qualms about loudly pronouncing this to the class. My epiphany was again similar to my previous realization – it was going to be very hard to motivate these struggling readers if they weren't actually reading. I could not force them to read, nor could I control what they did at home. So I found that the best strategy for me was to continue to challenge the entire class – I could not stop assigning reading for homework just because a few students didn't do it. I needed to differentiate instruction for those students who did not read at home because they were indeed those same struggling readers I planned my whole study around.

Young Adult Literature

The use of young adult literature, with its relatable characters and plot, gets dependent readers interested in and excited about reading.

I found that the most enjoyable part of my study for students was the use of young adult literature. Sitting down with students for that initial discussion before even beginning our first novel, I listened to frustrated students who were tired of doing book reports and chapter summaries. As Delpit (2002) said, In almost every school I have visited, private conversations with children will elicit the same response: Almost no one in the school ever listens to them" (pp. 42-43). I heard, loud and clear, what the students were saying. They were tired of the same old thing. And so was I.

Upon conducting a group interview with my students after they had been reading *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey* for a few days, I found that students really were reading and enjoying their novels. By a show of hands, all seventeen students said they liked it at that point. Throughout the interview, students pointed to the journal format, the relatable characters, and interesting storyline packed with conflicts as reasons the novel was engaging to them, and these are all characteristics of young adult literature.

Also, looking at the End of Novel Surveys (Appendix B) students completed, I found their answers to be quite telling as well. Students again said they enjoyed the journal format because it wasn't "like a book." They also pointed out how the book was good because it was about someone their age, it contained everyday problems, and the book kept them reading even when they weren't supposed to be. Had students at this time given me very negative

feedback, I would have changed my plan of action; however, given the positive reactions, I knew that more young adult literature would be welcome in this class.

Additionally, another piece of my study that showed me young adult literature was making a difference in my Critical Literacy class were the students' responses on the End of Novel Survey (Appendix B) to the question which asked if students' feelings about reading had changed at all. Three students boldly wrote that their feelings did change positively about reading, which I found to be excellent after having read only one novel. Two other students mentioned that they liked reading before and still liked reading now. A final student said his mind was not definitively made up yet; however, if we kept reading good literature, he thought he had the potential to be changed for good.

Last, the End of Study Survey (Appendix C) I conducted proved to me once again that young adult literature had made an impression on my students. All students responded positively when asked what they liked about the novels – no one answered by saying they didn't like anything. Also, I charted the number of references students unknowingly made to some aspect of young adult literature – 13 in all – again showing me that this was the right choice for my class.

IT'S NOT REALLY THE END…

Because I have this Critical Literacy class for the entire school year, my study of effective literacy practices never actually stopped. It still hasn't. As the year progressed, we have continued to build upon those initial days and weeks, and the strategies learned throughout that time.

First, my class finished the young adult novel *Life in the Fat Lane*. Students used the during-reading strategy of Somebody-Wanted-But-So to map out the primary actions and events that characters were undertaking. I also had them vote on what they wanted their culminating project to be, and almost everyone voted to do a play or skit. So I went back into the novel and chose what I felt were the most important scenes and assigned these key plot points to the groups. Each group had to turn the narration into dialogue, complete with speaking tags and stage directions, and act out scenes in front of their peers. Students, although a bit nervous at first, were eager to undertake this project because they had chosen it for themselves.

Next, I promised students that they would get to select their own novels to read. All were quite eager to do this, and our librarian makes this sometimes-large task of helping 17 students find the right book a bit easier. She puts a green dot on the spine of any book that is considered ninth grade appropriate. The majority of these are young adult in nature, and the students raced around the library looking for books that they were interested in. Students read their

independent novels for about three to four weeks both in and out of class. The concluding project for this was the students creating a web page for their books. I found this whole activity to be a great culmination of many strategies in use – students read, comprehended, and analyzed a novel independently. They created a web page that included a book summary, a character analysis, and an examination of literary devices used throughout the novel. Finally, students formed opinions and discussed their likes and dislikes of the book they had chosen.

As nice as it would be to continue only reading young adult literature throughout the school year, these students also need exposure to other genres and types of novels. For the remainder of the year, we will be undertaking *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the screenplay version, and *Romeo and Juliet*. These students enjoy dramatizing literature and are certainly not shy as far as acting things out in front of their peers. We will also study the historical context surrounding both of these novels. Last, students enjoy the love stories, the fighting, and the drama and should hopefully become quite invested in these aspects of both plays.

Looking back and thinking about the future at the same time, I have realized that when I conduct action research again, I would like to hone in more on young adult literature most likely to interest young men or young women and examine different genres in greater detail. I want to spend time perusing the new

novels that have been published recently and give students a bigger bank of novels to choose from next year.

I began this study a year and a half ago wanting to tackle what I considered to be a huge problem in our high schools today – students not being able to and not wanting to read. I was unsure where my students and my study would take me, but I have learned many things. First, I now understand that before I can hand students a piece of literature and expect them to read it, I need to lay the groundwork for that reading in the form of a bank of useful strategies. Students need to know that they should be using these strategies before they even begin reading something, while they are reading it, and after they have finished. They also need to know that a constant conversation with the text is always going on within a good reader's head. Second, I realize that young adult literature is a great way to get the majority of students motivated to read and interested in reading again. If the characters are similar to them and if the problems are real, this will help dependent readers develop, or re-develop, a desire to read. I have learned immensely from my students, and they will help me guide my teaching in the future.

As I stated in the title of this section, it's not the end for me. Conducting this action research study has left me with many new questions to ponder while also making me a different teacher than I was when this process first began. I wonder…

Do I focus enough on reading strategies regardless of the level of the class? As I spent hours researching and planning reading strategies to use with my Critical Literacy class, and as I spent days in class teaching, reviewing, and using these techniques with my students, I can't help but wonder…have I been selling my other classes short? Isn't reading important enough that all of my students should be introduced to, or at the very least, have a review of key strategies applicable to any piece of text they read? My honors students, who will in a few short years be going to college, certainly need to have the ability to read, comprehend, and analyze any text assigned to them given the work expected of a college course. Just because honors students are *expected* to come into high school already well versed in these strategies, does this mean they all *are*?

Where can and will I and my ninth grade team at my high school find time to read more young adult novels and map out a new curriculum to include these new selections? Because of the growing amount of young adult literature in our libraries today and the speed with which new young adult novels are being written, I wonder when I will have the time to read all the new novels that I'd like to. Also, I'd like to branch out from my comfort zone and read more literature in different genres that will appeal to both the young men and women in all of my classes. My ninth grade team at school also uses young adult literature, and collectively, we'd like to have to time read various novels and then shape our curriculum around these new choices. However, in order to do this, we need the

time to be allotted to us from our school district. The ninth grade teachers also need common time available during the summer in order to make this happen. In an era of No Child Left Behind, can I realistically think and hope that we will be given time to plan for literature that will not be included on a standardized test?

If I continue to listen to and use students' interests and ideas when creating units and assignments, what will the results be? What if other teachers practiced this as well? After my study officially concluded, my class continued reading *Life in the Fat Lane*. Tired of giving written tests and bored with the ideas in my own mind, I decided to give my students the opportunity to choose what they wanted their final project to be. I gave them no restrictions other than to think about the fact that it was in fact a culminating project and should not be something able to be completed in 20 minutes. They also had to decide whether or not it would be a group project, how groups would be chosen if they indeed wanted a group project, and how many points their efforts would be worth. Students, almost unanimously, wanted to do some kind of dramatization of the novel in a group. Students worked hard during the time they were given and there was much less socializing than during other group projects. The results were excellent as all groups performed well and took their acting roles seriously. This made me wonder what would happen if students were given a voice more often. Would they always take this much interest in what they were doing? Would all assignments be taken this seriously? Once my classes have sufficiently gotten

underway in the future, can I allow students to plan entire units? My students found it very difficult to complain about any portions of their project considering they had designed it. Likewise, they knew the grading criteria ahead of time because they created that as well. And then I thought, What would be the ramifications for students if all of their teachers gave them this same opportunity? Would students, across the board, begin to gain more of a sense of responsibility? Would they then truly begin to take control of their own learning?

Knowing that I'd ultimately like to be a literacy specialist, what is the next step for me? I love being in the classroom with the kids. I know that. The kids were the reason I wanted to teach in the first place, and they still are. But after having taken so many graduate level courses that revolved around reading and literature, and after having undertaken this action research project which focused on motivating dependent readers, I realize that the classroom is not the final stop on my journey. I would like to get my supervisory certificate and specialize in reading instruction so that I can take what I have learned and help more students as well as other teachers. Not everyone has had the benefit of taking such a careful look at one aspect of his/her teaching practices. Because I have been so lucky and have learned so much, I feel that I have much to share with others. After completing a Master's program and attaining a supervisory certificate, I wonder if a doctorate could be another step on my journey…

" We cannot hold a torch to light another's path without brightening
our own."

~ Ben Sweetland

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Appendix A: Reading Interest Survey

Directions: Please answer all questions TRUTHFULLY and give as much detail as you can. Your answers will not be wrong. It will be much more helpful to me to have honest, in depth answers rather than you giving answers that you think an English teacher wants to hear!

1.) What are the first words that come to your mind when you hear:

    a.) Reading –

    b.) Books –

    c.) Comprehension –

    d.) Newspapers –

    e.) Current Events –

2.) a.) If you enjoy reading, why do you enjoy it?

    b.) If you dislike reading, what do you dislike about it?

3.) Discuss a positive experience you've had related to reading.

4.) Discuss a negative experience you've had related to reading (without giving specific names).

5.) If you could choose a book to read, what type of book would it be (fiction, non-fiction, biography)? What would the book be about? Why?

6.) If you could choose something else other than a book to read, what would it be?

7.) a.) What are your strengths regarding reading? In other words, what are you good at?

b.) What are your weaknesses regarding reading? In other words, what do you need help with?

8.) a.) What is the name of your favorite book?

b.) What is the name of the last book you've read? Did you like it?

Appendix B: Reading Interest Survey #2 – *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs.*

Dunphrey

1.) After finishing the young adult novel *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*, how did you like it?

2.) a.) What aspects of the novel did you like? Think about how the novel was set up, the characters, the setting, the plot…

   b.) What aspects of the novel did you dislike? Think about how the novel was set up, the characters, the setting, the plot…

3.) Think back to what you first wrote about how much you liked (or didn't like) reading. Have your feelings about reading changed at all because of what we're reading in class (including current events) and this novel? Why or why not?

4.) What reading strategies did you use to make this novel easy to understand for you?

5.) If you could choose the content for the next book we read in class, what would the book be about? Why?

Appendix C: End of Study Survey

**Directions: Please answer all questions honestly and give as much detail
        as possible.**

1.) How do you feel about the young adult novels we've been reading (*Don't
    You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey* and *Life in the Fat Lane*)?

   a.) What have you liked about the novels?

   b.) What have you disliked?

   c.) What would you like to read more or less of?

2.) What are some new strategies/techniques that you use while reading? In
    other words, what helps you to comprehend, understand, and remember
    what you've read?

3.) Think about the various activities we've done along with reading in this
    class (debating, Somebody-Wanted-But-So, Probable Passage,
    journaling, video clips, group work, etc.).

   a.) What activities did you especially like and why?

   b.) What activities did you not like as much and why not?

4.) Have you liked reading and having access to a newspaper every day?
    Why?

5.) Think about some suggestions you might have for me regarding reading
    and classroom activities for the remainder of the school year.

   a.) What would you like to do more or less of?

   b.) What are some new activities we haven't done that you'd like to try?

Appendix D: Principal Consent Form

<div align="right">September 4, 2007</div>

To Whom It May Concern:,

       I am currently working towards earning a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. The courses that I am taking help me to stay current with the most effective teaching methods in order to provide the best learning experience for my students.

       This fall, Moravian's program requires that I study one major component of my classroom and teaching practices. I have decided to focus on different aspects of reading in my Academic English 9 Critical Literacy classroom next school year. First, I will target effective reading strategies that students can use when reading any text. Next, young adult literature will be an integral part of each thematic unit we study. Finally, students will learn to effectively use and read the newspaper in class. This will allow for the integration of current events in this class as well.

       I will survey and interview students initially regarding their interest in reading and their knowledge of current events happening locally and nationally. After this, the main focus will be on using effective reading strategies that can be applied to any type of literature. We will then start the first themed unit of the year and one major part of this unit, and each unit thereafter, will be the young adult novel. Students will be introduced to a new novel during each unit, and there will be a focus on students understanding, comprehending, and synthesizing the novel. The last step to implementing my study will be the introduction of the newspaper and the use of current events in the English classroom. Students will be expected to bring in current events and present their findings to the class. Each current event they bring in will need to be directly related to the thematic unit being studied at the time, and students will have to show the correlation between the two. At the midway point of my study, I will interview students again to see if their understanding and enjoyment of reading have increased at all. Lastly, students will be interviewed at the conclusion of my study in December. This will allow me to see how students' feelings and attitudes have changed about reading after the implementation and use of effective reading strategies, young adult literature, and current events in the English classroom.

       Every student in my classroom will be working with me to improve reading skills; however, participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not affect any student's grade in any way. Students who participate in the study also have the option to withdraw from the study at any time, in which case none of his/her information will be used in my study. All names used in the study –

including students, faculty members, and the school – will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms in the final report. Only my name will appear in the study. All research materials will be secured in a protected location.

If you have further questions about this study, please contact me so we can discuss this in a timely manner. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Laurie Rentschler-Sage

I attest that I am the principal of the high school where the above-named researcher is employed and will allow her to conduct this study in her ninth grade English classroom.

Please check one.

_____ Yes   _____ No

Principal's Signature
_____

Date _____

Appendix E: Student Consent Form

September 1, 2007

Dear Parents/Guardians,

I am currently working towards earning a Master's Degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Moravian College. The courses that I am taking help me to stay current with the most effective teaching methods in order to provide the best learning experience for your child.

This fall, Moravian's program requires that I study one major component of my classroom and teaching practices. I have decided to focus on different aspects of reading in this Academic English 9 Critical Literacy classroom. First, I will target effective reading strategies that students can use when reading any text. Next, young adult literature will be an integral part of each thematic unit we study. Finally, students will learn to effectively use and read the newspaper in class. This will allow for the integration of current events in this class as well.

Every student in my classroom will be working with me to improve his/her reading skills; however, participation in this study is entirely voluntary and will not affect your child's grade in any way. Students who participate in the study also have the option to withdraw from the study at any time, in which case none of your child's information will be used in my study. All names used in the study – including students' and the school – will be kept confidential by using pseudonyms in the final report. Only my name will appear in the study. All research materials will be secured in a protected location. To ensure students have support services available at their disposal, should a question or problem arise, they can feel free to contact the principal, Roger Washburn, at 610-867-5843 x0. In addition, the ninth grade guidance counselors names and phone numbers are as follows: Mrs. O' Connor (students with last names A – G) 610-867-5843 x53923, Mr. Longacre (students with last names H – P) 610-867-5843 x53924, and Mr. Snyder (students with last names Q – Z) 610-867-5843 x53925.

If you have any specific questions about this research study please contact me by phone or email at 610-867-5843 x53186 or lrentschler@bethsd.org. In addition, our principal has approved my study. Please sign and return the consent form below. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Laurie Rentschler-Sage
9th grade English teacher

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 _____

Appendix F: "The House"

The House

The two boys ran until they came to the driveway. "See, I told you today was good for skipping school," said Mark. "Mom is never home on Thursday," he added. Tall hedges hid the house from the road so the pair strolled across the finely landscaped yard. "I never knew your place was so big," said Pete. "Yeah, but it's nicer now than it used to be since Dad had the new stone siding put on and added the fireplace."

There were front and back doors and a side door which led to the garage which was empty except for three parked 10-speed bikes. They went in the side door, Mark explaining that it was always open in case his younger sisters got home earlier than their mother.

Pete wanted to see the house so Mark started with the living room. It, like the rest of the downstairs, was newly painted. Mark turned on the stereo, the noise of which worried Pete. "Don't worry, the nearest house is a quarter miler away," Mark shouted. Pete felt more comfortable observing that no houses could be seen in any direction beyond the huge yard.

The dining room, which all the china, silver, and cut glass, was no place to play so the boys moved into the kitchen where they made sandwiches. Mark said they wouldn't go to the basement because it had been damp and musty ever since the new plumbing had been installed.

"This is where my Dad keeps his famous paintings and his coin collection," Mark said as they peered into the den. Mark bragged that he could get spending money whenever he needed it since he'd discovered that his Dad kept a lot in the desk drawer.

There were three upstairs bedrooms. Mark showed Pete his mother's closest which was filled with furs and the locked box which held her jewels. His sisters' room was uninteresting except for the color TV which Mark carried to his room. Mark bragged that the bathroom in the hall was his since one has been added to his sisters' room for their use. The big highlight in his room, though, was a leak in the ceiling where the old roof had finally rotted.

Appendix G: "Initiation" Questions

Name _____

"Initiation" by Sylvia Plath

Before Reading:

1.) Jot down what comes to mind when you hear the word "initiation."

2.) Make a specific prediction regarding what you believe this short story will be about.

During Reading:

3.) Who is the *protagonist* in the story?

4.) Who is an *antagonist* in the story?

5.) Jot down any questions you have while reading that you want to be answered later.

After Reading:

6.) What do you believe Millicent did at the very end of the story? Did she go through with the initiation? Why or why not?

7.) After finishing the story, if you could tell the main character, Millicent, anything, what would you say? Why?

8.) What is the *theme* or life lesson that should be taken from "Initiation"?

9.) Which character has an *epiphany*? What does he/she realize?

Extension Activity:

A. What are peer pressures that high school students today face? How have
    you learned to deal with these pressures?

B. Choose one pressure you have personally faced and:
        a.) discuss the situation or pressure in a paragraph of about 10
          sentences
        b.) state whether the conflict was internal or external

An Examination of the Causes of Edgar Allan Poe's Death

1.) In the space below, jot down anything you already know about Edgar Allan Poe.

2.) Together, we will read "Meet the Writer" on page 218. Write down any information you deem useful from this short biography.

3.) Examine the "Informational Text" section on page 221. List below the steps for reading non-fiction text:

    a.)

    b.)

    c.)

    d.)

    e.)

4.) Read the "Connecting to the Literature" box on page 221.

5.) Read the article "Poe's Final Days" on pages 222-224. The article is a biography written by Kenneth Silverman.

    a.) Discuss what Poe looked like when he was found in Gunner's Hall. Use specific quotations from the text in your answer.

b.) How does Henry Herring's refusal to help Poe support the assertion that Poe had a history of alcohol abuse?

c.) Describe what Poe was like while in the hospital under the care of Dr. Moran.

d.) Discuss two reasons for the poor relationship between Edgar Allan and his cousin Nielson.

1.)

2.)

e.) Describe how, near the very end of his life, Poe's condition quickly changed.

f.) This author believes that the two causes of Poe's death were_____ and _____.

*What is your immediate response to this article? What do you believe or question?

6.) The next article on page 226 is a newspaper response to an article written by Dr. R.Michael Benitez who suggested Poe was not killed by alcohol, but was instead killed by rabies. Read this article.

7.) What symptoms did Poe exhibit that show he had a classic case of rabies, according to Dr. Benitez?

8.) How does the fact that Poe had a difficult time drinking water support the

doctor's theory?

9.) Why does Mr. Jerome say Poe "almost surely did not die of alcohol poisoning or withdrawal" ?

***At this point, which theory do you believe – death by alcoholism or death by rabies?

10.) The third letter is a response to Dr. Benitez's piece.

11.) Read the letter "If Only Poe Had Succeeded When He Said Nevermore to Drink" on page 227. List five reasons that the author of this letter disagrees with the rabies theory and sides with the theory of death by alcoholism.

    a.)

    b.)

    c.)

    d.)

    e.)

12.) The final letter is written by Dr. Benitez again – this time in response to the editorial letter that bashed his theory. Read the final letter and then list three reasons that Dr. Benitez again supports his theory of Poe dying from rabies.

    a.)

b.)

c.)

13.) Which theory do you believe to be true? In a paragraph:
      a.) state the theory which you believe is correct.
      b.) explain five reasons citing specific details from any of the four articles
        (be sure to list the article or author you are citing from).
      c.) point out reasons as to why the "other" theory is incorrect in your
        mind.

Appendix I: *Life in the Fat Lane* Anticipation Guide

ANTICIPATION GUIDE FOR
LIFE IN THE FAT LANE

Please write the number that corresponds with your agreement or disagreement next to each statement.

5 = Strongly Agree
4 = Agree
3 = Neither Agree Nor Disagree
2 = Disagree
1 = Strongly Disagree

1.) _____ Leaving your old school and going to another one would be easy.

2.) _____ Skinny people are happy.

3.) _____ Popular people are popular because they are attractive.

4.) _____ People who are overweight are not happy.

5.) _____ Your friends stick by you no matter what happens.

6.) _____ Parents/guardians only want what's best for their kids.

7.) _____ Appearances are different from reality.

8.) _____ Kids are cruel to other kids.

9.) _____ Musicians and artists are thought of as "weird" at school.

10.) _____ People should always be given a second chance.