Li.ers: A study of at-risk adolescent readers

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LIFERS:
A STUDY OF AT-RISK ADOLESCENT READERS

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Reading and Writing Instruction

May, 2000
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

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DEDICATION

To Alexis, Kayla, Mick,
and their peers in the Reading Workshop I classes
at Daniel Webster Regional High School,
and

to all the Brians, Marias, and Joes I have been fortunate to know over the years,
whose words can tell us what we need to hear.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation grew out of my desire to learn from a group of students I've always been drawn to, the at-risk readers who populate our high schools in increasing numbers. In working with me, they have taught me more than I can ever expect to teach them. I am grateful for all the time and energy these adolescents spent trying to make sense of their reading histories for me and for themselves. I can only hope that once heard their voices will make a difference for the lifers who are following in their footsteps.

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My dissertation is the culmination of a carefully crafted Ph.D. program which encourages experienced educators to build upon their strengths while challenging them to delve into uncharted territories. My thanks to all I learned from: to John Carney, who guided me through the initial years of my studies; to Grant Cioffi, Ann Diller, Jane Hansen, Paula Salvio, Tom Schram, and Bill Wansart, whose rigorous courses laid a firm foundation for my research; and to Tom Newkirk, whose skillful and thoughtful mentoring brought my work to...
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ABSTRACT

LIFERS:
A STUDY OF AT-RISK ADOLESCENT READERS

by

Pamela N. Mueller
University of New Hampshire, May, 2000

In this study I put a face and voice to the at-risk adolescent reader. No strangers to failure, these are students who by and large have struggled with reading their entire educational lives but who for whatever reason have been unable to escape the cycle of frustration in which they find themselves caught. These are students who have a great deal to say but who until now have had no forum in which to say it. These are students who deserve to be heard.

For my primary source of data, I utilized Seidman's phenomenological approach to interviewing, conducting a series of in-depth interviews with twenty-two at-risk ninth grade readers over the course of a semester. Concurrent with my interviews I enhanced my context and understanding of these adolescents by observing and interacting with them as they took part in their daily high school routine. Then too, I examined their permanent school records, using this descriptive data to augment the students' words and actions.

All twenty-two of these adolescents can be seen as lifers, students who have done battle with reading from the very start of their academic careers.
Contrary to what we as teachers may want to believe, they have been doomed to failure not by their family histories but rather by educational practices which have been unsuccessful at understanding and meeting their individual needs. In their struggles to become readers, these students have somehow lost the very point of reading as words have taken precedence over meaning. And in losing the point of reading, they have lost not only the desire to read but also the ability and opportunity to keep up with their peers.

It is clear that if we want to eradicate the category of lifers from our schools, we need to revisit and rethink the way we approach readers and reading instruction from the very first day of kindergarten. Learning to read is a complicated process, but we educators must do our fair share to give each and every child the opportunity to achieve success as a reader and student.
The last time I read aloud was in second grade. I brought in *Green Eggs and Ham* and asked my teacher if I could read it to the class. I sat in a big chair with all my classmates around me, and I felt so proud as I turned each page. When I had finished my teacher said to me: “You didn’t read that, Joe. You memorized it.” I never read aloud again.

*Joe, grade 10*

I’ve always known I had a problem with understanding. The words are there but they don’t say anything to me. They never have, even when I was little. I can’t read and I know it, but people keep asking me to do it anyway.

*Theresa, grade 11*

In seventh grade I couldn’t keep up with the work. They thought I was slacking off. They told me to get glasses. I had to cry in front of the class before the teacher figured out I needed help.

*Greg, grade 12*

I remember doing these little reading groups in third grade. I was a bad reader and I kept getting moved down. Finally they sent me to art class. I didn’t have to read there.

*Alan, grade 12*

“It’s stupid. Pointless. I don’t see what Reading Workshop does. I don’t know why they even have it in the school. All we do is read. We just grab a book and start reading it. You are quiet. You have to read all of these words. It’s boring and it takes up my time.” Banished from his Reading Workshop class because of his refusal to participate in the required half hour of silent reading, Paul sits slumped across from me in my office, trying to make sense of his uncooperative behavior. As this angry ninth grader takes a breath the reading consultant in me launches into an all-too-familiar party line. “But Paul, reading is
an important. . .” Before I can finish my sentence though, the frustrated adolescent interrupts me with his continuing diatribe. “I don’t like reading at all. I never have. They never teach me anything. I’ve been trying it for nine years now - it feels like all my life - and it still seems pointless.”

Pointless indeed. As I listen to the angry words of this at-risk reader, this lifer who has waged a nonstop battle with reading, I think of all the other students who have shared the same thoughts with me over the years, of adolescents who have appeared angry, sullen, cocky, or depressed as they have sat in my office trying to explain their never-ending frustrations with reading. But this time something is different. Perhaps I’ve heard the story once too often. Perhaps it’s the fact that I’ve chosen a dissertation topic which requires me to listen carefully to the voice behind the words. But this time I hear Paul’s words as if for the first time. And this time they have meaning. What he’s saying to me is really quite simple: If I can’t do it after nine years what’s the point of doing it at all? If after all this time I still can’t unlock words, if I still can’t understand and remember what I’ve read, if I still can’t keep up with my peers, if I still can’t be successful in school, if nobody can ever help me to do it better, if I’m going nowhere yet will have to keep doing this all my life, then what is the point? After nineteen years of listening to at-risk readers talk about reading, I believe that I am finally hearing what Paul and his peers are saying. And I want to share their words with you, in the hopes that by giving voice to this group of students we can do better by them in the future. Like those of us who love reading these lifers deserve to know the point.

**The Question**

For the past eighteen years I have worked as a high school reading consultant, charged with the task of developing and implementing a schoolwide
literacy curriculum to meet the needs of a wide range of adolescents. During this time I have come to know all sorts of students, from National Honor Society scholars to potential dropouts. I have proofread well-developed college essays written by hopeful Ivy League applicants; I have huddled with frustrated eleventh graders hoping to make sense of April Morning in order to eke out a passing mark in junior English. For whatever reason, I have been drawn more and more to those students for whom literacy is a never-ending struggle, lifers whose reading deficiencies have burdened them for most if not all of their educational lives. Indeed, since returning to U.N.H. as a doctoral student in 1996, I have focused much of my study on this needy population.

And with good reason, for these are students whose population is growing at Daniel Webster Regional High School, as year after year we come face to face with more and more incoming freshmen who are unprepared for the literacy demands of the high school curriculum. It's not that educators know nothing of these students; to be sure information about them is there in abundance. Written by researchers, literacy specialists, Special Education experts and classroom teachers, a myriad of books and articles deals with the subject of the at-risk adolescent reader. The questions they address are many: Who are these students anyway? What characteristics do they share? What are their social and academic backgrounds? What are the causes of their literacy struggle? What are the consequences? What can we do and what are we doing to help them? How successful are our interventions?

It is true that the literature is there, but over the past three years I have begun to believe that our understanding of the at-risk adolescent reader is not complete. For as I have come to know these teenagers, whether together in their classrooms or one-on-one in the privacy of my office, I have discovered a
virtually untapped source of knowing, the voices of the students themselves. That they have stories to tell and knowledge to share is obvious to me; I can hear hints of their understandings in the informal comments of Joe and Theresa, of Alan and Greg. That their voices have been largely ignored up until now is equally clear; in my literature review covering thirty years of research I have thus far found only three studies (Johnston, Kos, and Rosenthal) whose sources of information are the readers themselves. It is true that in the past few years teacher researchers such as Allen and Krogness have introduced us to their real life at-risk pupils. However, even in these shared stories the teacher’s voice and perceptions remain center stage, with the students’ words and understandings cast in supporting roles.

It’s not that others have not argued for the importance of the personal stories people share as a source of understanding. G. Wells sees story telling as a meaning-making experience, and Graves points out the importance of children becoming our informants as we actively listen to what they have to say.

Unless children speak about what they know, we lose out on what they know and how they know it. Through our eyes and ears we learn from them: their stories, how they solve problems, what their wishes and dreams are, what works and doesn’t work, their vision of a better classroom, and what they need to learn to succeed. . . We transform what we learn from them into an effective learning history. (16)

Up until now, though, the at-risk population has remained quiet; and as a teacher and researcher I eagerly look forward to listening to and learning from them. By giving voice to a new perspective on reading failure, I hope to let educators know first hand what it’s really like to be a lifer, academically washed up at the age of sixteen. Then too, by making sense of each student’s way of knowing, I hope to present a more intimate look into the “hows” and “whys” of
reading failure. If through these adolescents' stories we gain new insight into their world of frustration, then perhaps we will begin to rethink what's gone wrong in our schools for them and others like them. Perhaps then we will begin to take steps to eradicate the category of lifers from our schools.

Dissertation Overview

In order to assure anonymity to my study, the names of the students, teachers, schools, and communities are pseudonyms. Indeed, the Reading Workshop students who participated in my research were delighted to have the rare opportunity to reinvent themselves, if only in name alone. The main text of this dissertation is divided into three sections. Part I establishes the theoretical context for my study, presenting an overview of what key researchers have to say about the subject of at-risk readers and their struggle with the written word. My task, of course, is to use this conceptual framework as a lens by which to understand what the students themselves have to say about their reading histories. Are our present assumptions about these adolescents accurate? Or will their words shed new light on a subject that, according to Vacca, has for too long been neglected and misunderstood? It then goes on to describe the specifics of my methodology, detailing in particular the in-depth phenomenological interviewing process which I used with the students.

Part II presents the three main themes arising from my study, through profiles of individual adolescents whose stories best capture the concepts in concert with the words of Reading Workshop peers which reinforce the profiled student's thoughts. Chapter Three presents Alexis, a sullen lifer whose reading history personifies the experiences of a frustrated and disillusioned student who has had to struggle with reading from the start of her educational career. Chapter Four tells of Kayla, a fragile student whose initial love of reading is painfully
extinguished as she locks horns with ineffective educational practices. Chapter Five focuses on Mick, a thoughtful adolescent whose jaded and misinformed view of reading as decoding has recently been shaken by a mindful yet mysterious journey into understanding.

While this study is a story of twenty-two particular at-risk adolescents from specific educational backgrounds, the feelings and experiences they have shared with me may well exemplify the reading histories of other struggling students. Believing that there is something to be learned from their stories, I use Part III to draw general conclusions which readers of this study can choose to connect to students and classrooms they know and have known. As a reading consultant I have never let go of the belief that all children can become readers; and so I conclude my work with vignettes describing the successes I have seen at Daniel Webster over the past five years, examples of what can happen when lifers, supported by dedicated, talented, and caring teachers, work to throw off the mantle of failure they have worn for so long. There is a point to all of this, Paul. I want you to know that.
PART I

GETTING STARTED:
THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION
CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL ORIENTATION:
WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW ABOUT AT-RISK READERS

For years I had been appalled not only by the lack of success, in terms of interest and skills, of the ninth-grade students who were assigned to remedial reading, but also by their lack of progress out of remedial reading. Once labeled and placed in remedial programs, most students stayed there for their entire high school career...

Janet Allen
It's Never Too Late, 1995, p. 19

Who Are They?

Just who are these at-risk adolescent readers I am drawn to as a teacher and researcher? When researchers use the term “at-risk,” they are employing an insurance metaphor to describe those students who are at a high probability of “loss,” not in terms of money but in terms of school success and achievement. These are adolescents who hover on the precipice of academic failure, who have difficulty fulfilling their academic learning potential (Vacca and Padak). Lacking the literacy and learning skills to succeed in the traditional secondary classroom (Ruben; Friedel and Boers), they generally get poor grades, have negative relationships with teachers, and feel alienated from a place which they see as unfair and a “boring waste of time.” Acting out a particular role in the culture of failure in which they find themselves cast, these student “performers” do all in their power to live up to the low expectations that others have for them - and that they have for themselves (Goffman). More often than not they come from low socio-economic backgrounds, hold minority group status, and live in large single
parent families. Saddled with low self-esteem and limited expectations of receiving good schooling, they feel as though they have lost control of their future (Wehlage, Rutter and Turnbaugh). Because their responsibilities toward work and family often take precedence over a high school diploma, the idea of dropping out of school is never far from their minds (Tidwell). These are students whose perilous status is well known to high school teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators, whose academic and social behavior is the focus of many a parent-school conference.

What are They Like as Readers?

Studies which describe at-risk adolescent readers (Honig, Kos) tell of students who despite “a mighty dose of reading skill-builders during their school careers” (Kroghness), have poor decoding and spelling skills, a weak vocabulary and the inability to read strategically and actively. Lacking motivation, their goal in reading is more often than not to “get through” the text rather than make sense of it. Bristow describes them as passive readers, much less likely than their successful peers to monitor their comprehension or tackle their comprehension difficulties actively. Like Bristow, Johnston and Winograd sketch a portrait of passive readers who exhibit deficits in three areas: cognitive, motivational, and affective. Butkowsky and Willows talk of students who have lower initial expectations of success, who give up more quickly in the face of difficulty, and who attribute failures to more internal and static causes while attributing success to external causes. Vacca and Padak point out that at-risk readers display a sense of learned helplessness as they wage a continual struggle with reading, lacking control over a reading process about which they understand so little and in which they feel so incompetent. How do they view themselves? When Rosenthal interviewed poor readers, they described their
reading histories with terms like frustration, lack of focus, stress, fear of failure, embarrassment and discomfort, wasting of time, and low self-esteem.

**What Are the Roots of the At-Risk Reader?**

It's not that others haven't taken notice of these students, for they have been identified as at-risk long before high school. In fact, several studies have shown that poor readers can be recognized as early as kindergarten or first grade (Weller, Schnittjer, and Tuten; Kos; Gullo, Clements and Robertson) and that poor readers in elementary school continue to be poor readers throughout their educational careers (Muehl and Forell; Barrington and Hendricks; Hahn; Ruben; Mueller and Strauch). Indeed, Rist points out that a young reader's journey through school is essentially preordained by day eight of kindergarten. According to his study, children relegated to the "slow learner" reading group during the first week of kindergarten are destined to remain there throughout their school careers. Based on family history, physical appearance, and classroom behavior rather than academic potential or performance, the kindergarten teacher's initial expectations accurately forecast the future academic career of a child. Once duly sorted, the students in the low group are caught in a frustrating cycle of failure as they attempt to learn to read and write along with their peers.

Who's most likely to end up in this six and under risk pool? In describing this youthful population Allington and Cunningham list four basic factors that early on put an elementary student at risk of academic failure, factors over which a child has no control: family poverty, parental educational attainment, gender, and perceived immaturity.

Being a boy increases the risk faced in the elementary school. Being a "young" boy, or a boy considered "immature" because he acts on his boy preferences for activity, also increases the risk faced in our schools today. Being a "young" poor minority boy from a single-parent family places a child at enormous risk. . . (7)
It is almost as if our schools are set up on a "caste" system (Rist 427), where lower class students who come to school lacking the social, linguistic, and intellectual resources deemed necessary for academic success in our democratic middle-class schoolrooms become mired in an unescapable cistern of failure. Too often teachers do not offer explicit instruction to those students who come to school with a limited literacy history, and this omission condemns these youngsters to a life of reading and academic struggle. It's not as though these children are just plain incompetent. Indeed, many of them exhibit cognitive and linguistic competence in the everyday world outside of school, yet they appear inept and slow to learn in the school setting (Au and Mason 117).

It's important to note that primary teachers and early classroom experiences need not shoulder the entire burden of precipitating this insidious cycle of failure. Indeed, with the best of intentions a wide range of well-meaning people involved with constructing "School" in America - school personnel, parents, philosophers, curriculum designers, textbook publishers, testers, and educational researchers - have fabricated a "culture of failure" which early on consigns many of our children to the at-risk category (McDermott and Varenne 331). And it's not just in reading that a child is labeled; for if school is seen as a person's first "crack" at society, then failure in school may well lead to a lifetime of more of the same.

What Kind of Help Do At-Risk Readers Get in School?

The "at-risk" label, as objectionable as it seems to some, carries the implication that all is not lost for these struggling readers. Lacking the inevitability of failure that the "slow learner" label carries, the term "at-risk" implies that "some sort of intervention may be necessary to reduce or eliminate whatever one is at risk of experiencing" (Allington and Cunningham, 1). And so,
in an attempt to help children escape the at-risk category, well meaning reading and special educators give them large doses of extra reading help. Employing a medical metaphor which looks at reading disability as a learning disease, they examine the symptoms, diagnose a deficit, then prescribe a remediation. Removing the young patient from his healthy classmates, they offer treatment by a specialist in a clinic. Once admitted, the student is not discharged until he or she is well (Kohl). For adolescent at-risk readers, though, the hoped-for cure is elusive. By high school, they have been in and out of all sorts of special intervention programs. Remedial reading groups, resource rooms, retention, low track classes - you name it, they've experienced it.

Unfortunately for these students, the cure rate of most intervention programs is limited at best. Looking back at the history of reading remediation over the past thirty years it is clear that “[s]pecial programs are not special enough” (Allington and Cunningham). According to Johnston and Allington, there is little evidence that participation in any of these programs helps students to become better readers. Indeed, Allington and Cunningham call our at-risk high school readers “lifers,” students who despite extra help continue to qualify for reading intervention year after year because of continued low achievement (18).

Why Is There No Escape for These Lifers?

In searching for the reasons for such instructional ineffectiveness, Allington and Walmsley cite six faulty assumptions on which current instructional practice is based. For all six, research can be cited which underscores the false wisdom of such beliefs.

Conventional Wisdom #1: Not All Children Can Become Literate with Their Peers

Teachers who do not believe that all students can become literate, who do
not individualize their instruction to meet the needs of a broad range of students, consign struggling readers to the at-risk category for life. By viewing individual differences as evidence of how much or how little a child is capable of learning rather than as indicators of the amount of instruction needed, educators give the not-so-subtle message that some young children simply cannot and will not learn to read on schedule. In adopting this stance, teachers fail to adopt instructional programs which demonstrate the fallibility of this assumption. (Alm; Kohl; Johnston and Winograd; Bristow; Rist)

Conventional Wisdom #2: We Can Measure Children’s Literacy Aptitude

When we pass judgment on a child’s innate literacy aptitude rather than offering the intensive instruction needed by those who come to school with a limited literacy history, we automatically exclude these students from membership in Smith’s “Literacy Club.” It seems that what we are really measuring is the effectiveness of the teaching offered to them, for we have clear evidence that children who score low on readiness assessments can learn to read along with their peers if given large doses of intensive and purposeful instruction. (Clay; Krogness; Purves and Jennings)

Conventional Wisdom #3: Children Learn Best in Homogeneous Groups

As generally practiced in our schools, grouping low children together more often than not leads to a literacy dead end. Expectations change, instructional approaches and pace differ, motivation drops, intellectual interaction decreases, passivity sets in, and a mentality of failure and incompetence pervades “low group” reading instruction. Although a seemingly logical premise, homogeneous grouping inflicts such negative
effects on children's learning that the whole concept of ability grouping can be discounted as both unwise and untenable. (Au and Mason; Krogness; Kos; Rist; Johnston and Winograd; Spear-Swerling and Sternberg; Stanovich)

Conventional Wisdom #4: Reading is a Hierarchy of Increasingly Complex Skills

When arbitrary skills sequences drive instruction, more often than not the reading is left out of reading lessons (Allington and Walmsley). Students have few opportunities to participate in authentic literacy activities: to curl up with a self-selected book, to hear a skilled reader read, to share in the interactive meaning making process that is at the heart of effective reading instruction. In the skill and drill approach so common to remedial reading instruction decoding becomes the primary emphasis (Leinhart et al). We fail to see struggling readers as comprehenders; instead we judge them as word attackers, and not very good ones at that. This focus on a hierarchy of skills whose very existence has yet to be verified by researchers is often enough to discourage and turn off even the most motivated at-risk reader.

Conventional Wisdom #5: Some Children Need Slowed-Down and More Concrete Instruction

Allington and Walmsley conclude that “[s]lowing down the pace of instruction ensures that children will always remain behind other children whose instruction proceeds at a normal pace” (8). Stanovich points to reading volume as the key to reading success. A “slow-it-down” curriculum triggers the Matthew Effect in reading instruction, named after the Gospel of Matthew passage about the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.
the very children who are reading well and have good vocabularies read more, learn more and hence read even better. Children with inadequate vocabularies - who read slowly and without enjoyment - read less, and as a result have slower development of vocabulary knowledge, which inhibits further growth in reading ability. (381)

Clay points out an alternative to slowed-down instruction; she suggests offering struggling readers larger amounts of more intense teaching in order to enhance their lagging literacy development.

Conventional Wisdom #6: We Should Use Special Teachers to Meet the Needs of Some Children

The use of special teachers leads to fragmented educational experiences for those who are least able to deal with this disruption. Regular class instruction time is interrupted and lost; and in many cases struggling readers are instructed by minimally trained paraprofessionals, a situation which is unlikely to accelerate learning. Studies show little evidence of success in these not-so-special programs; indeed, research points out that the addition of such initiatives has not improved the educational experiences of low-achieving students. Rather, findings highlight the perpetuation of exclusionary practices which mask the failure of schools to educate all children (Walmsley and Allington, Allington).

Reading Failure: A Complex Problem

Can we blame reading failure on ineffective instructional practices alone? By addressing Allington and Walmsley’s six faulty assumptions, can we expect to restructure the field of literacy instruction so that all children can become readers? Unfortunately, most educators would readily admit that the solution is not that easy. In study after study researchers point out that reading failure is an extraordinarily complex problem, with no simple cause and no simple solution. Indeed, anyone who has spent time in a classroom realizes that no two children...
are exactly alike; it is logical then that all students possess unique histories as readers. While many current explanations of reading difficulty focus on the "minutiae of mental operations," Johnston suggests that we move beyond "the level of operations, devoid of context, goals, motive or history" (175). We need to blend psychological and social determinants into our understanding of reading failure. Integrating research in metacognition, attribution theory, learned helplessness, and achievement motivation, Johnston and Winograd look to the roles that the learner, the teacher, and the school environment play in this complex research problem. In her multiple case study of four reading disabled middle school students, Kos gives credence to the complexity of the issue when she determines four factors which prevent students from progressing: the student's inability to use reading strategies effectively, the reader's perception of reading instruction, stress related to reading, and individual educational histories. Her work suggests that social, affective, psychological, educational, and environmental factors all play a role in these adolescent readers' struggles.

In his study of resistant high school readers Bintz reviews a wide range of studies in the field, voicing concern that much of the literature sees reading failure as a permanent condition, an uncontrollable trait rather than a remediable state. Spear-Swerling and Sternberg identify this intrinsic perspective as the traditional position of the Learning Disabilities field, a perspective which in my experience has permeated much of our remedial reading instruction, particularly at the high school level. By the time I meet these students, they have become lifers. Most if not all have raised the white flag in their battle against reading disability; beaten by the odds stacked against them, they are no longer willing to wage another skirmish against the written page. Seen as incurable by self, family, and school, these terminally ill readers are relegated to the "back ward" of
reading clinics, a place in the Special Ed. office reserved for those who aren't expected to read and write on their own. Or, fulfilling the destiny foretold so many years ago by their kindergarten teachers, they drop out of school, upholding the validity of the educational actuarial tables. After almost a decade of failure, these at-risk readers lose their long struggle for school success and achievement. Their loss is ours as well, and as an educator who believes in the inherent worth of every student I can't help but believe that they deserve better from us.

**Listening to the Students: What We Haven't Been Able to Hear**

Because I believe that we can do better by these at-risk adolescent readers, I have set out to share their voices with you, voices which are compelling in the simple and poignant truths that they have to share with us. In Part II, you will be introduced to Alexis, Kayla, and Mick, a trio of ninth grade readers who in the course of a semester talking with me paint a telling portrait of a lifetime of literacy failure and hurt. Joined by a chorus of their peers, these students accomplish something that the most knowledgeable educational researchers over the years have failed to do; they breathe life into the very label of lifer. To be sure the likeness the Reading Workshop students create is not particularly new or earthshaking nor is the palette of experiences from which their brushstrokes are drawn. Indeed, their words often echo what we have been told all along about this needy population of students. It is their perspective that is unique, a perspective which I believe has the power to prompt us to listen to what we have been unable to hear in the past. And if we choose to listen carefully, how can we not choose to act upon what we hear? As competent and caring educators how can we not pledge to take that first step in dealing with the complex dilemma of reading failure and the lifers caught in its throes?
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY: MY WAY OF KNOWING

It occurred to me that we had not been listening much to children in these recent years of “summit” conferences in education . . . This seems especially unfortunate because the children often are more interesting and perceptive than the grown-ups are about the day-to-day realities of life in school. For this reason, I decided . . . to attempt to listen very carefully to children and, whenever possible, to let their voices and their judgments and their longings find a place within [my] book - and maybe too, within the nation’s dialogue about their destinies.

Jonathan Kozol
Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools, 1991, p. 6

Finding the Students

It’s not that I found the students for this study; it’s more like they found me. They found me each March as I journeyed to our two sending middle schools to administer the Nelson Reading Skills Test to their eighth graders, the incoming freshman class of Daniel Webster Regional High School. They found me each April as I corrected those reading tests and compiled a long list of students who had been unable to perform at grade level, students who experience had taught me would need intensive educational assistance in order to succeed at the high school level. They found me each June as I scheduled each of these struggling students into our required Reading Workshop I classes, the first level of corrective literacy instruction and academic support for Daniel Webster’s at-risk readers. And they found me each September, as I put names and test results to faces of students who arrived for their first year of high school.
angry or accepting, uncommunicative or disruptive, arrogant or self-effacing - but most of all afraid of what lay ahead for them.

During the first week of school during the 1998 - 99 academic year, I sought out the forty-eight Reading Workshop I students who represented the newest batch of at-risk readers to enter Daniel Webster. All had been placed in the course due to their low reading test scores and shaky academic histories. As I set out to explain my research proposal to this captive audience, I saw the usual mixed bag of adolescents: coded and regular ed., button-downed and t-shirted, soccer players and skateboarders. I had chosen to interview freshmen because I wanted to hear of their reading histories before they were introduced to the learner-centered culture of Daniel Webster, an award-winning school of excellence where teachers strive to recognize and meet the needs of all students, a school which stands out in its work with at-risk high school readers. M. C. Wells (1996) tells of the adaptation that occurs in pupils who move from a progressive middle school to a traditional high school; since these were students who were moving in the opposite direction, from conventional to innovative, I wanted to hear their voices before they were influenced by and adapted to the new school culture. In addition, I had chosen this time of year to conduct my interviews because I knew that at the commencement of a new school year most students, even those who were most apt to be turned off to reading and academics, tended to be open and willing to volunteer to participate in such a study. Once the newness of the setting had worn off, I knew from experience, my pool of accessible and amenable adolescents would likely have diminished.

I was delighted when twenty-five Reading Workshop students agreed to participate in my study; and of those twenty-five students, twenty-two of them followed the study to its completion. In this group there were thirteen boys and
nine girls. All but Sergio came from an English speaking home; he grew up with Portugese as his second language. At the time of my research seven of the pupils were currently getting support from Special Ed., although most of the others had been tested for learning disabilities at some point in their educational careers. Half of the students had grown up in this school system; the others had moved from place to place during their academic careers. Since New Hampshire has no required public kindergarten, the students’ preschool experiences were varied, ranging from those who started school in a day care center at the age of three to those whose introduction to formal education was the first grade classroom. Included in the participants were a fair share of readiness graduates and repeaters. It is interesting to note that among these twenty-two students, pupils who are considered to be at the very bottom rung of the academic achievement ladder, only Kayla’s socioeconomic status qualified her for free or reduced lunch. Parents’ occupations ran the gamut, from heavy equipment operator and secretary to English teacher and building contractor.

It is true that in my study I did not have the luxury of picking and choosing from a large and diverse student body; indeed, I included in my research whoever offered to share his or her thoughts with me. Yet the twenty-two adolescents who went through this research process with me offered a broad range of views about literacy and reading instruction. In interview after interview they worked hard to share their perceptions of what had happened to them over the years in the name of reading education. They recounted their learning experiences from the at-risk reader’s perspective, and in doing so they conceptualized a world of frustration and failure into which few teachers have gained entry. It’s a world that goes far beyond the boundaries of Daniel Webster, Eastville, and Newsom; it’s a world that supercedes any classroom, school, or
town in our country. Can we as educators learn anything from the world these adolescents have fabricated for us? Can we generalize from the voices and memories of these twenty-two individuals? Peacock talks of "revealing the general through the particular, the abstract through the concrete." He leaves it up to the reader to "decode the description in order to grasp the underlying values, then juxtapose these implicitly abstracted patterns to illuminate their own experience." (83) My fervent hope is that educators who read the stories of these twenty-two Reading Workshop students will do just that.

**Coming to Know**

When Wolcott speaks of the basic data-gathering techniques used in qualitative inquiry, he points to three useful ways of coming to know your subjects: interviewing/enquiring, observing/experiencing, and archival research/examining (Posturing in Qualitative Inquiry 19). In trying to cast the widest net possible in my study, I chose to employ all three research methods.

**Interviewing the Students: Listening to Their Words**

**The Interviews.** In Interviewing as Qualitative Research Seidman writes:

> I interview because I am interested in other people's stories... When people tell stories, they select details of their experience from their stream of consciousness... It is this process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience. (1)

In my quest to develop a subjective understanding of the at-risk adolescent reader, I used Seidman's in-depth phenomenological interviewing as my primary research method. According to him, looking at phenomena in the context of a person's life leads to the construction of meaning. In my study, then, I set out to make sense of the phenomenon of the at-risk adolescent's own
experience of failure, understanding that the meaning these students would make of their past reading experiences would affect the way they were dealing with reading now. My purpose was “not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to ‘evaluate’ as the term is normally used. . . At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman 3).

In search of the emic perspective in my interviews, I set out to transform the traditional teacher-student dynamic into Buber’s and Shultz’s “I-Thou” relationship (qtd. in Seidman 72), looking at each adolescent not as another struggling reader sitting in the office of an all-knowing reading consultant but rather as a unique and knowledgeable human being with a story to tell. In order to do this I had to learn to keep enough distance to allow the student to craft his responses as independently as possible (Seidman 73). During the first series of interviews this proved difficult; for at the start most students, undoubtedly conscious of our power differential, had little to say to the teacher sitting across from them. “Tell me about your earliest memories of learning how to read,” I asked each of them at the start of our initial interview. More often than not this request was met with silence, at which point I nervously jumped in with “Let me show you my first grade report card from Miss Peek. My mother has kept it for almost fifty years!” In time though, as the students began to feel more at ease with the setting, the dialogue began to flow; and once it did, I had to remind myself that this was meant to be an interview rather than a conversation. That meant listening more and talking less, a challenge for any teacher who finds the normal thirty second wait time between classroom question and answer to be interminable.

But listen I did, using open-ended questions posed in a series of three
separate hour long interviews with each participant spaced over a two to three month period. (see figure 1) The three-interview model was key to my research, since it is through this in-depth interviewing format that the context of my students' lives became meaningful and understandable. Mishler points out that interviewers who set out to explore their topic through the one-shot meeting approach with interviewees they have never met "tread on thin contractual ice" (qtd. in Seidman 10); and I wanted to be sure to avoid that pitfall of qualitative research.

During the first interview I set out to establish the context of each student's experiences by asking them to explore and share their reading histories. Scheduled in groups of two or three to ease their initial discomfort in the research setting, students were invited to bring a reading artifact with them to my office, something which held particular significance for each of them. The reasoning behind this simple request was solid; I hoped that talking about such articles would set the scene for comfortable sharing. However, the one thing I had forgotten to figure into this request was the inherent dislike most Reading Workshop students hold towards reading. How many of them would voluntarily spend the time to find and show such an artifact considering the negative impact such a subject had had on their lives? The answer, quite simply, was none. Only Sierra admitted that her mother had saved a poem her first grade daughter had written years ago, and it wasn't until our second interview that she dared to share it with me. Instead we used my report card, a propitious last minute addition to my school bag the morning of the first interviews, as an impetus for talk during that first set of interviews. And once the floodgates were opened, the hurtful reading memories began to flow. Piggybacking on one another's comments (Goetz and LeCompte 130), the students began to regale me with
Figure 1: Interview Questions

**Interview One: Focused Life History**

What has reading and writing been like for you from the first time you remember until the present?
- how did you learn to read and write?
- your earliest literacy memories, before you began school
- literacy memories in elementary and middle school
- place of literacy in your family
- what/who has helped? what/who has hindered?
- good and bad literacy events that stand out for you

**Interview Two: The Details of Experience**

What is reading and writing like for you right now?
- a typical day
- literacy inside and outside of school
- what's easy? what's not?
- what/who helps? what/who hinders?
- use of reading and writing in your life

**Interview Three: Reflection on the Meaning**

1. *(show a reading continuum from hate to love).* Where did you stand on this continuum before you went to school? Where do you stand now? What has precipitated the movement (if any)?

2. *(boring/interesting continuum)* People use the word “boring” a lot when they talk about reading. When is reading boring? When is it interesting?
3. Think about a book you have really liked. What was there about that book that grabbed you? What was going on as you read that fostered that reader/text connection?

4. People look at reading as either an active or passive experience. How do you see it? What goes on in your head when you read? Do you ever:

- think of your prior experience, what you already know, before you begin to read a new book?
- figure out the most important ideas as you read?
- ask questions as you read?
- make a picture in your mind as you read?
- read between the lines or infer? Use what you already know and what you are reading to come up with a prediction, a conclusion, or a new idea about what you are reading?
- go over in your mind what you have read in order to make sense of it?
- fix up your comprehension when you know you're not understanding what you are reading?

5. (if appropriate) How does doing this help you?

6. Thinking back on your reading history, are you realizing anything through these interviews about reading and its effect on you? How has your experience with reading been? How do you understand that?

   OR

7. Taking your reading history into account, how has it impacted you?

8. What things are important to you in your life? How do you see reading fitting into your future?
long-forgotten stories of words they could not unlock and books they were unable to read, of teachers who didn't seem to care and peers who were always ten pages ahead of them in class. The context through which I would come to explore and understand the meaning of these struggling readers' experiences began to emerge, as through my questions I attempted to understand what reading had been like for these students from early childhood to the present.

The second interview gave students the opportunity to delve into their present experiences as they reconstructed what reading and writing is like for them now. Because they had met in groups for the first meeting, I decided to spend the first part of this hour going back to fill in the gaps of their early reading histories. Carol, for instance, had had little opportunity to share her thoughts with me during her first interview; each time she had begun to speak, either Mick or Bob was sure to interrupt their more reticent classmate with exuberant thoughts of their own. Then too, shy students like Sierra had hung back during our first meeting as if patiently waiting for a sort of interviewing rapport to emerge. Revisiting some of her sparse comments during our second interview helped to enrich the context Sierra was building with her words. As I moved to the subject of this interview, the concrete details of the Reading Workshop students' current literacy experiences, I had to be sure to respect the structure of my three-interview series, maintaining "a delicate balance between providing enough openness for the participants to tell their stories and enough focus to allow the interview structure to work" (Seidman 13). It would have been easy to just sit back and listen as garrulous Cody returned to a long and convoluted story of his preschool library trips with his mother; indeed, with this sort of friendly adolescent I needed to constantly remind myself to gently steer him back on target. Having a focus in mind was the easy part for this researcher;
remaining true to it as I conducted the interviews seemed to become more doable with experience.

During the third interview I wanted the students to reflect on the meaning their literacy experience held for them. In order for these fifteen and sixteen year olds to tackle a question of such magnitude, I realized that I would first have to "prime the pump." Selecting phrases I had heard them use over and over again as they spoke of their reading experiences, I set the stage for the final question by asking them to weigh in on dicotomous words such as "hate and love" and "boring and interesting" as they pertained to reading. I also asked them to delve more deeply into their own reading processes. What is there about *The Outsiders* that grabbed you? What is going on for you when you read? It was only then, with their consciousness about reading in the forefront of their minds, that I asked them to make sense of their reading histories and its impact on their lives now and in the future. That the reading experiences of at-risk students such as these are dismal may be a foregone conclusion; it's just what many researchers have been saying all along. But hearing the students themselves create and make sense of the context of failure in which they have found themselves inextricably caught, a context with severe implications for their futures, has been a powerful learning event for me. The impact of such sense-making is one that we as educators need to take notice of.

**Recording and Taking Notes.** In order to retain all that I heard during the interviews I used a small unobtrusive tape recorder equipped with an external microphone to tape what was said during the sessions. Rather than detract from the talk as I had feared, this tool became an ice breaker since almost every Reading Workshop student expressed interest in hearing the sound of his or her voice as it was captured on tape. The tapes were then transcribed into a double-
entry journal, allowing each word spoken by the student to reflect his or her consciousness (Vygotsky 1978). By avoiding the use of paraphrasing, I made sure that the consciousness I was planning to interpret was the participant's rather than my own (Seidman 87). Because I knew that my thoughts and reactions needed to be a part of the process as well, the double-entry journal gave me a place to add my comments, impressions, and insights as I reread the transcription. The words and phrases that I began to hear over and over, the categories that began to arise, the questions that developed and which I wanted to bring up with the students - all found a place in this journal. Not only was I able to keep track of what I heard during the interviews, this method also gave me the opportunity to be on the lookout for what I did not hear. I learned to listen for words that validated my assumptions as well as for those which went against what I thought I might find.

I also used an interviewer's journal, setting aside a section for each session in which I jotted notes as the student and I talked. At the conclusion of the interview I would review my notes and in red pen add anything which seemed pertinent to the dialogue just concluded - an impression, a reaction, or a thought on where I should go next with the student. Then too, the journal gave me another place to keep track of "emerging themes, interpretations, hunches, and striking gestures and nonverbal expressions essential to understanding the meaning of a person's words" (Taylor and Bogdan 104). In it I also kept an informal list of topics which had been discussed in each interview. Since I could quickly review an interview which had taken place weeks ago before moving on to another session with the same student, the journal was particularly helpful in reminding me what had been said previously as well as holding me to the structure of the three-interview format. It was also a good place to record
informal conversations held with participants outside of the interview sessions or random thoughts that struck me in the course of my research. On more than one occasion, this journal saved the essence of an interview as the sometimes temperamental tape recorder failed to do its job, usually due to the incompetence of the researcher rather than a flaw of the machine.

Observing the Students: Experiencing Their World

Observation. Although the bulk of my research was done through in-depth interviewing, I augmented my data by observing the ninth grade Reading Workshop students as they became enculturated into their new high school environment. My primary observation site was to be a Reading Workshop classroom, where I planned to spend one ninety minute block a week from September through January. Since all of the adolescents in my study were required to enroll in such a class at Daniel Webster, doing this would give me the opportunity to meet and connect with some of them on a regular basis in a typical classroom setting. When originally setting up my research schedule, I had cast myself as a participant observer, present in the class to participate, observe, and interview as an “insider.” Then too, I planned to “join” the class during the first week of school, simultaneous with my recruitment of students willing to participate in my research. In doing so I anticipated getting a head-start on constructing my context and understanding of the students being interviewed. However, that old saying about “the best laid plans” held true for me as I began my research. Not only were the Reading Workshop classes in flux for the first month of school, lacking a classroom and in some cases a roster of students, but also the person hired in late August to teach the class was clearly uneasy about my presence. Although I explained to her in detail my research design and objectives, this untrained aide-turned-teacher was obviously threatened with the
prospect of the reading consultant camping out in her room for a block a week. It was only after developing rapport with her as we talked over lunch for a month that I felt comfortable arriving in her classroom at 11:00 each Wednesday morning. I planned to act as a participant observer in this E block class for three and a half months.

And what a classroom it was! As the developer and facilitator of this particular literacy program, I naively expected the Reading Workshop curriculum that I had thoughtfully outlined and patiently explained to Mrs. Thomas to be incorporated into her classroom. As an unintrusive member of the Reading Workshop community I planned to read and journal, participate in mini-lessons, and join in on formal and informal discussions within this caring community of learners. As a participant observer, I expected a first hand sharing of the environment as I observed students within their natural school setting. The sharing was there alright and the setting may well have been natural; but the environment into which I stepped was a literacy nightmare, as this totally unprepared teacher struggled to keep control of a restless group of turned-off readers. Chairs tipped, paperclips flew, books dropped, and little or no reading was done. After two weeks of mayhem I excused myself from class. Even as a dedicated researcher in search of doctoral data, I was unwilling to either participate or observe in this setting. Then with help from myself and the administration, Mrs. Thomas regrouped. Once she felt that the class was under control, she invited me to return. In mid-October, I was back in the classroom - not as an insider but as a nonparticipant observer, acknowledged by the students but not involved in their class activities. For me it was a far more comfortable role.

In thinking back over those disastrous classes I have realized that my
presence in the room must surely have had an effect on the class’s behavior. All of the seven adolescents in the group had chosen to participate in my study, so all were aware of why I was there. Perhaps they were simply taking this time to “stick it” to me and my research. As the year went on and I came to know these students better though, it became clear that their disreputable behavior was no act put on for my benefit; indeed, it was part and parcel of their reading personae. And in this sort of a setting, a class with reading as its focus, the very worst in them came out as these frustrated adolescents railed in the only way they knew how against the literacy histories which had landed them in the class in the first place.

Having conducted interviews concurrently with spending time in the E block Reading Workshop classroom, I had begun to notice particular students who through their words and actions seemed best able to construct a picture of the world of failure in which the at-risk adolescent reader lived and studied. Then too, in my on-going analysis of the students’ words and actions certain themes had begun to emerge from the piles of transcripts and notes, recurrent concepts which drew my attention. So to nurture my growing understanding of the at-risk reader’s view of reality (Agar 11), I spent the month of January observing several Reading Workshop students as they traveled through a typical school day. With their consent, I shadowed Alexis, Mick, Kayla, Cody, Sergio, Paul, Kim, and Carol as these key informants moved from subject to subject; and I noted similarities and differences in the roles they played in a range of classes. Such observations gave me a broader perspective of their in-school lives, particularly in the area of literacy. Such observations helped me to develop rich pupil profiles in which I attempted to capture the heart and soul of the at-risk student’s reading experience.
Field Notes. Knowing that the tape recorder which had proven so useful during my interviewing would have been a burden as I observed students in their classes, I kept longhand field notes of all of my observations in a spiral notebook which traveled inconspicuously with me from class to class. After the first week, when Paul kept saying to me, “So what have you written about me now?”, the Reading Workshop students soon got used to me and my scribbles. Occasionally they would ask if I had written about what seemed to them to be a particularly irregular event (“Hey Mrs. Mueller, did you see that Kim and Carol were talking during silent reading time?”). I always invited them to look over my shoulder, but one look at my illegible handwriting usually dampened their enthusiasm for firsthand knowledge of my work. Sketches earned glances; written notes did not. More often than not I simply sat at the center table observing and writing my notes undisturbed. When the bell rang, I was usually granted a “see ya” from departing students; but in time I came to be just another “furnishing” of the Reading Workshop classroom.

Things were a little different when I shadowed the Reading Workshop students through the building, though not as much as you might expect. After checking in with the teacher, who had earlier given me permission to visit his or her classroom, I usually chose to sit toward the back of the room at an empty desk. Since visitors at Daniel Webster were always popping into classrooms unannounced, the general student population had become immune to such interlopers. To most students I was just another person checking out their award-winning school. If someone asked the teacher who I was, more often than not the Reading Workshop student would proudly own up to my mission. “She’s shadowing me today, seeing what I do in all my classes.” It was easy then to write down whatever I chose. What did I include in my observational field
notes? Specific facts, sensory impressions, my personal responses to and reflections on the act of recording field notes, conversations and language specific to the students, questions that arose about people or behaviors - all were included as I looked for emerging patterns of behavior (Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein). With every note, with every observation I came closer to filling in a map of the at-risk reader territory, another step in giving meaning to my observations (Agar 105). I concluded my observations in mid-January, not only because the semester was over but also because when I looked I was not seeing and hearing anything new. Saturated with information (Seidman 45) I knew that it was time for this researcher to move from gathering data to using it (Wolcott, Transforming Qualitative Data 1).

**Researching the Students' Records: Examining Their Academic Files**

In order to develop a clear picture of the twenty-two at-risk readers' academic and literacy histories, I spent several afternoons reviewing each student's school records, kept as part of the permanent files in the high school guidance office. In addition I discovered that all Special Education students had a separate file, a much thicker one, kept separately under lock and key in the Special Education office. To collect the pertinent data I had made a form which listed the following categories: school performance from kindergarten through grade 8 as reflected in report card grades, general teacher comments for each grade level, behavioral patterns noted by educators or parents (usually included as part of a report card or conference form), standardized test results, Special Ed. referrals and testing, psychological testing, school attendance and transfers, and family information (family make-up, parents' occupation, and Socio-Economic Status as noted through participation in free or reduced lunch programs). When I discovered that a student had a Special Ed. history, I researched the information...
included in that file as well. It was in these files particularly - files which can hold inches of repetitious records of yearly IEP’s, teacher-parent meetings and school-home communications that have occurred relevant to the student - that I was able to gain insight into the behavior and feelings of parents toward their child’s on-going struggle with reading. The archival information that I gathered through this aspect of my research served to triangulate the data I had collected via interviews and observations. In some instances, I used the information that I gained, eg. a mother’s death or a series of family moves, either to clarify information the student had given me or to initiate conversation on a new tangent.

Analyzing and Sharing What I Know

Once the three interview sessions had been transcribed and my observational and archival field notes had been gathered together, I set about trying to make sense of my imposing pile of data. Although informal analysis had been ongoing throughout the entire research process, taking place each time I read through the transcriptions or reread my field notes, I followed Wolcott’s suggestion to “expand and extend beyond a purely descriptive account with an analysis that proceeds in some careful systematic way to identify key factors and relationships among them” (Transforming Qualitative Data 10). As my data mounted, where I first saw only discrete pieces of information, words and phrases began to stand out and categories started to emerge. I was struck for instance with how many times the word “boring” was used as these at-risk readers talked about reading. Everything about reading, it seemed, was “boring” for these students. Not only did I hear the word “boring” spoken over and over again, but once I started noticing the word it began to take on subtle nuances of meaning. Mick’s use of “boring” was not the same as Frank’s. “What’s the point?” was another phrase
that kept bubbling to the top as these adolescents delved into their reading histories. As this phrase kept reappearing I began to ask myself, "Just what do these students mean when they label reading as pointless?" I also began to look for what was not being said. Why was it that students never talked about understanding what they read? Was the remembering that teachers asked them to do, a reading activity they all seemed to struggle with, synonymous with what the reading consultant in me called comprehension? Was that the only kind of understanding these readers knew? During this phase of my research I highlighted whatever struck me as interesting and important, not necessarily what I had expected the Reading Workshop students to say. In this way I was able to keep my preconceived notions of what I had thought I would hear apart from the words they had spoken.

In analyzing the data my ultimate goal was to reduce my information into a format that could be shared with other educators. After all, if I felt that my findings were worth sharing, I had to present them in a way that would invite other teachers to read and reflect upon them. Since my goal had always been to highlight the voices of the at-risk reader, I decided that representative profiles would be an effective model. As Seidman points out,

> We interview in order to come to know the experience of the participants through their stories. We learn from hearing and studying what the participants say. Although the interviewer can never be absent from the process, by crafting a profile in the participant's own words the interviewer allows those words to reflect the person's consciousness. (91)

For each of the major themes that emerged as I worked with my data I chose to profile a student whose words best captured that concept. In crafting each profile I followed a sequential process. During the preliminary reading of each transcript I had marked and labeled passages which "jumped out at me."
Keeping the original transcript so that I would be able to use it as a reference for placing excerpted words in context, I then made two extra copies, one to be used in the thematic development of materials and one to be utilized to create the profile itself. In developing the profile, I cut out all of the marked passages and taped them together into a single transcript. Rereading this copy, which was about one third the length of the original three-interview transcripts, I culled it for words that best constructed the theme this student's words would stand for. In Alexis's case for example, I looked for comments which best traced her profile's depiction of a lifer. In doing so I had to force myself to give up interview material which was compelling but which would not have added to the power of the particular narrative I had in mind.

Once the material had been selected, I then set about crafting the student's story, determined to use the participant's words rather than a third person transformation of that voice. Since part of the strength of these readers' narratives lies in the chronological depiction of their academic lives, with one literacy experience inexorably building upon another, I thought that it would be simple to build the narrative just as the words had been spoken, with little or no rearrangement necessary on my part. After all, the very format of the three-interview series had led the students from past to present to future as they recounted their stories. But I was wrong. For one thing, the very nature of the first group interview led me to return to a subject during the next interview as I asked students to clarify comments they had made. Kayla, for example, had briefly mentioned her struggle with reading "harder words" during her first interview; I needed her to expand on that thought when I met with her again. Then too, I soon found that a particularly potent memory would often recur in the conversation of these adolescents, despite the focus of the session. Again and
again Mick revisited his “what’s the point” stance as he wrestled with his feelings about reading; indeed, this phrase became an integral part of all three interviews. The biggest challenge for me, then, was fitting the speaker’s words together without changing the context in which they had been said and thus distorting the meaning of the student’s remarks. I did this by referring again and again to the broader context in which the words had been spoken, making sure that the decisions I was making as I crafted the profile were fair to the interview as a whole (Seidman 93).

Knowing how important it was to remain faithful to the student’s own words, I was careful to note those few times when the words included in the narrative belonged to me. Occasionally, for instance, I needed to change a verb tense or add a word in order to ease a transition or clarify a passage; I included these in brackets. In addition I decided to delete an overabundance of repetitious teenage terms such as “like” and “you know,” leaving just enough of these in the narratives to authenticate the adolescent voice without driving the reader to distraction. Nowhere in the profiles will you read more than a word or two of mine; instead, you will find the students’ words, far more compelling than mine could ever have been, woven into powerful first-person narratives. To augment the representative profile I assembled comments spoken by peers which connected with and enriched the theme the profile embodied, words which in their haunting repetitiveness had in fact enabled me to construct this truth in the first place. For instance, if Alexis’s angry yet poignant words best captured the plight of these at-risk readers, these lifers for whom reading had always been a struggle, what did her classmates have to say which echoed a common understanding? I needed their words to flesh out hers.

Once I had crafted my profiles and had also completed the body of my
work I wanted to make sure that I had “gotten it right.” So I returned to Daniel Webster and invited the three profiled students to sit with me in the guidance office and go over what I had written. Although I planned to share my work with all twenty-two students the following week, I wanted these three to act as my primary critics. “Have I misinterpreted your words?” Or “Is this what you meant when you said these phrases?” I asked them as they crowded around a table with me. All three were excited to see my finished product; “I thought you had just disappeared” admitted Kayla. Both Kayla and Mick got right down to work, turning pages and chuckling as they saw the words they had shared with me over a year ago come to life in my writing. Mick’s comments as he finished reading were brief and to the point. “That’s it alright,” he said as he pulled back from the table. “You got me exactly.” “Hey, are we gonna make any money off of this?” were his last words to me as he hurried off to break and his friends. A quieter and more serious Kayla was equally affirming. “That’s exactly what I said,” this gentle reader murmured to me. Then as if to underscore her acceptance of my work, “I’m glad you put the part in about my mother.”

Alexis, on the other hand, was not nearly as enthusiastic. “You expect me to read all this?” this ever-disaffected adolescent muttered as she picked up the five page long interview. “Would you like me to read it to you?” I quietly inquired of this reticent reader. “Just read it with me,” she suggested. And so we began reading together, silently but in tandem nonetheless. All went well until Alexis noted the word “stupid” used for the first time. “Did I say that about myself? I really didn’t mean it. I don’t want it in there,” she barked in no uncertain terms. “My mother won’t like to read that. She’ll kill me when she sees it.” Remembering my advisor’s wise comments about negotiating rather than arguing with an interviewee who decides to renege on her words, I took a deep
breath and suggested to this always volatile student that she pick another way to describe herself. "How about saying that I just didn’t feel so good about myself?" she said almost underneath her breath. And so it went, as Alexis, in revisiting herself, met a student she would just as soon not have known. Her reaction, every bit as much as Mick’s and Kayla’s, told me that my analysis was indeed on track. In presenting insights that disturb those who read them, I hope to move people to think about what has brought us to this place.

Although I have been warned by one of my professors that all qualitative research does not lend itself to interpretation, I believe that my work addresses Wolcott’s question: “What is to be made of it all?” Indeed, as I draw conclusions from my research I want to move beyond the “conservative, careful and systematic” work of analysis to a place where I can transcend factual data and cautious analyses and perhaps present some “fresh insight or a long-awaited breakthrough” (Transforming Qualitative Data 12). In coming to know these twenty-two Reading Workshop students, I believe that I have begun to understand them and their world of frustration and failure as no researcher has before. I want other educators to come to know Alexis, Kayla, Mick, and their peers as I do. In sharing what I know, I hope to initiate a discussion of how we might better meet the needs of the at-risk adolescent reader, a population of learners that deserves far more from the educational establishment than we have thus far been able to offer them.
PART II

AT-RISK ADOLESCENT READERS SPEAK OUT:
ALEXIS, KAYLA, MICK, AND FRIENDS
CHAPTER THREE

LIFERS: WHEN READERS STRUGGLE FROM THE START

No matter how well a child in the lower reading groups might have read, he was destined to remain in the same reading group. This is, in a sense, another manifestation of the self-fulfilling prophecy in that a 'slow learner' had no option but to continue to be a slow learner, regardless of potential or performance.

Ray Rist

The twenty-two Reading Workshop students in this study are not new to the world of reading intervention. Indeed, all of them can be seen as lifers, doomed to struggle from the start in schools which despite the best of intentions have fabricated a "culture of failure" for many of its members (McDermott and Varenne 331). Year after year they have qualified for special remedial programs because of continued low achievement (Allington and Cunningham 18). And year after year they have met with continuous and mounting frustration as their peers have succeeded in school while they have been powerlessly mired in inescapable failure. They are students who came to school excited about reading but whose love for books has been quickly extinguished by the excruciating process of learning to read. They are students who have been let down by the very system which has been set up to help them. They are students who without some effective intervention are at risk of dropping out of school, the first step towards failing at life as well.

Alexis is among these students, a slender sad-faced teenager whose sullen 41
and silent demeanor doesn’t invite conversation, either with teachers or peers. In
the privacy of my office, however, her voice came alive as she gave a quietly
impassioned account of a lifer whose early love for books is still intact, despite
years of struggle with the reading process.

ALEXIS’S PROFILE

I’ve always really liked to read. I just don’t. I’m not very good at it, at least not
the out loud kind of reading. When I was little I read books that were in my room. My
mom would read to me. She would read them to me so many times that I would have the
books memorized so when I saw the words in other books I knew what they were. I liked
that. It was good when you learned to read at an earlier age. But when I went to
preschool and kindergarten that didn’t work. I liked the idea that someone read to me. I
didn’t like the idea of having to do it myself. I just stopped liking it because I was bad at
it. And I wasn’t doing well in school.

I went to preschool and kindergarten in one year. I was only four when I started.
I went to private school because they - the teachers - said I needed help. There was a
public kindergarten and there was us, and I guess in my mind I thought I wasn’t smart
enough to go to public school. So I went to this one. It ended up being nice. I liked my
teacher. It was in her house and there were only eight people in my class. We had to draw
and color and write. She taught you letters, she taught you how to add and subtract. It
was like regular school time. We had math and science and geography. They took us in
little groups and they made us learn to read and stuff. They had classes with all easy
books and they made us read back to them. We had lots of hard work and it was just too
much work and I got tired of it. I didn’t want to do it any more. It was like third grade.

I went to private kindergarten because my mom thought my teacher would help
me out more. But it didn’t work because I didn’t feel good about myself when I went to
first grade. I could have gone to readiness but they said I was smart enough to go to first
grade. When I got there I didn’t feel that way. I didn’t know some things. Sometimes I
didn’t participate in class. When I colored, yeh I colored and when we took tests I took
tests; but when she told us to read something out loud I didn’t do it. I still liked my
teacher, I just didn’t want to do anything. I didn’t understand what was going on
sometimes. The teacher would be going too fast for me or something. I didn’t like it. Then
I would shut down and not do anything. I failed first grade.

It wasn’t very hard learning to read; it was just the reading part. Because there
were words I didn’t know and I got frustrated. I’d like to know how do you teach
somebody how to read who’s frustrated? I don’t know how my teacher thought she was
going to do this. She would like make us read words out loud. Stuff like that. We’d have
spelling tests and stuff. I though it was all a waste of time because it wasn’t helping me at
all. People don’t teach kids to read. They don’t. Kids teach themselves. They have to.

I’ve never been able to read out loud. Oh, I used to be able to and then kids started
showing me up. I wasn’t able to read as well as everybody else so I stopped reading. We
had to pick a book and read to the class. I didn’t like getting up in front of my class
anyway so I didn’t do it. I tried but I just wasn’t comfortable. I tried but I kept not doing
the words right and my teacher was like “I don’t know, she just…” Well then my mom
would ask me to read and I’d go “O.K.” and I’d read a word and she’d say “Alexis, when
you read it all sounds the same. You never change your voice.” And I was like “Be quiet.
Leave me alone.” I thought my teacher felt the same way so I never read out loud. This
was going on in first grade; it’s going on all my life.

The second year of first grade was better I guess. It was the best year I ever had. I
liked it. I had fun. I had a different teacher. I did my work most of the time. But
sometimes I got sent into the hallway and stuff like that. I yelled at my teacher. I wasn’t a
happy child at school. The whole thing with reading made me sick to my stomach. I didn’t
even like to hear that word “read.” I just couldn’t do it if somebody told me to. If I read by myself, maybe I could do it. But once someone told me to do it I felt sick to my stomach. I stopped liking it because I was just bad at it. My feeling sick just graduated. Eventually in fourth grade I wouldn’t read. I wouldn’t read anything because I didn’t like to read out loud.

My cousin used to make fun of me. He told me that I was a moron because I couldn’t read out loud. Once in a while I’ve had a teacher tell me that, not that I’m a moron but that I’m stupid, that I can’t read, that I should know how to do stuff more. They just got me down. No wonder I don’t want to read any more. Not being able to do it very well is hard for me. Once my mom got frustrated and she said to me, “What is wrong with you, Alexis? Why are you like this?” The teachers kept saying, “What is wrong with you? We keep trying to figure out what is wrong with you but we can’t figure it out. Why are you like this? Why can’t you spell? Why can’t you do this? You have a learning disability. You are ADD. Why can’t you be like other kids?”

From second grade up to eighth I got extra help. I was always being taken out of my normal classrooms. I hated it because my class would be doing something, our teacher would be reading us a book or something. It was an interesting book but I would have to be taken out. It was the resource room but we called it the retard room. We went to do our homework and get extra help. We had to do this. We had to do that. Nothing went on there. We talked, we fooled around, we were yelling at teachers, stuff like that. We got in trouble. It was fun, but there was nothing to learn. When it was reading time, I went and hung out with another kid. We had to type and play that Mario game and stuff like that. Not much reading. Lots of typing. But I still don’t know how to type. In seventh grade my social studies teacher told me I wasn’t going to go any place in this world if I didn’t know how to type.

Unless I ask for help I don’t want anybody to help me. The teachers in the
resource room always did the homework for me so I refused to go because I wasn’t learning anything. But I had to go anyway. In fifth grade I was slacking off because everybody was doing the work for me. I finally got to the point where I didn’t want to go because I thought I was such a retard and I thought they thought I couldn’t do my own work. I refused to let anyone help me unless I absolutely needed it. Even today I don’t let anyone help me. Unless I ask for it. Like if I am having problems with something then I would ask for that help. All they have to do is outline what the work is supposed to be like. Explain it to me and then don’t do all of my problems. If they explain it to me then I can do it myself.

I used to avoid everything that had to do with reading. I don’t want to be a teacher because it involves reading. Out loud. In English, if the teacher asks me to read a part I’ll pass. I won’t do it. Because I have never been able to read out loud and even if some people are reading worse than me I won’t do it. I can’t read English off the paper, you know what I mean? I need to remember the word. Like I can’t read every word. I can’t sound out every word because it doesn’t always come together. In English class the teacher asked us to read something off our paper. But that’s O.K. because I was reading words that I was writing down. If I write something I can read it. I know what the words look like so I can read it. It is when somebody else writes something I can’t. I have very high standards for myself. I have to be good. If I don’t do good then I shut down and I don’t do it.

I’m in Reading Workshop this year, and I’m the only one in my class who likes to read. I don’t really like to read, I just like the book I am reading. It’s not like I read a lot. But I get myself into a book. If I can pick out a book that I like I sit down and read it. It is basically just turning pages but your mind is in the book. Like with The Outsiders, I was in the book because of the way the author explained it. The first page grabbed me. I felt like I was there. If I like a book I remember everything about it. I don’t do anything extra.
Nothing. I just read it. It sticks in my head. We have a sign in Reading Workshop that good readers are supposed to do this or that but you can’t do all that as a reader at the same time. It’s impossible. Unless you might be doing that without knowing it. You can’t read and ask yourself questions and do all this stuff and then read. If you do that you’re out of the book. I used to try to do that when I was a little kid because that was what I was told to do. It got me so mixed up. That is why it made me sick to read. Like I wanted to do that with The Little Mermaid book and I would sit down at night and read it. But I never ended up finishing it. I started and I got to the third page and I couldn’t read any more. I was looking at the pictures and the words and going over in my mind what was happening. I just couldn’t do it.

     I dislike reading when I have to read stupid books like Deathwatch. My English teacher picked it out and it doesn’t make any sense at all. She thinks I am almost done but I haven’t read very much of it. I probably won’t finish it because I am not interested in it. I have been trying. I sit down and I actually know I have to read it. I have to finish the work. Then I keep on going and I get so bored I am ready to cry. I read it in school during Reading Workshop and study hall. I am not wasting my time out of school reading that worthless book. I don’t like text books either. They are evil. Our science teacher makes us read the book when he doesn’t want to deal with us, at least that’s what I think. He gives us time to read to ourselves in class. All I ever do is look at the pictures. I don’t want to read about something like the distillation of wood. But it’s not that bad in Geo. Studies. The teacher has us read answers from the textbook. It’s only like twelve words. It’s not that hard to read out loud when there are no big words. For me a good reader is someone who can read out loud fluently. I can do it a little bit now. Except when I can’t pronounce certain words.

     I’ve never liked school. I would rather be home sleeping. I went because it was a thing I had to do. I had no choice and I had to go to it. But I don’t mind it as much now
that I have started having classes that I like with my friends in them and stuff. As for reading I just read. I guess some parts were a pain, but I never really thought about it. I have never pictured it as fun. Soccer is fun. It is not bad; it is probably good. I haven’t figured it out as part of my life. It is like walking; it’s just something that you do. So far I just did it. It has never really dawned on me that I am a reader. I need to think about that for a while. And I need to think about how reading is going to fit into my life. I just don’t know.

Alexis’s View of Reading

Before Alexis went to school, she loved lap reading, the first reading experience for many preschoolers. Like most of the students in this study, she delighted in listening to her mother read aloud her favorite picture books, hearing them over and over as parent and child sat together in the comfort of family and home. As they shared this special time together, Alexis began to see reading as an enjoyable social activity, one which fueled her imagination and connected with her feelings page after page and story after story. Mermaids came to life, handsome princes fell in love with beautiful princesses, lost bunnies found new homes. Wanting to imitate her mother, Alexis would reread the books herself; and the repeated words became so familiar to her that she prided herself on the fact that she too could “read.” Reading for this preschool child, then, was a pleasurable process, one which she looked forward to learning more about as her formal schooling began.

But Alexis’s view of reading was dramatically altered as her kindergarten year unfolded. Extracted from “the context of illustrations, friendly voices, physical contact, movement, and leisure for imagination” (Atwell-Vasey 118), reading was no longer about stories; it was about unlocking words. It was about memorizing twenty-six letters in the alphabet and all the sounds that went with
them. It was about reading aloud words that made her stumble, words that she hadn’t been able to memorize as she did in her reading at home. It was about going faster and faster and feeling totally out of control. It was about feeling stupid. No longer could Alexis think about a princess being saved by a handsome prince; instead she had to concentrate on combining $b$ with $a$ and $t$ to make $bat$. And she couldn’t do this very well. If this is what reading was all about she didn’t like it. Indeed, there was no point to doing it at all. And she didn’t.

Alexis’s changing view of reading as a young child reflects those of her Reading Workshop classmates. Of the twenty-two students interviewed, twenty of them had been read to at home as preschoolers. All twenty of these children had come to school loving books and excited at the prospect of learning how to read for themselves. But all were caught off guard by the harsh reality of doing it. Paul’s words echo Alexis’s as he looks back on his early reading experiences.

When I was little my mom read me books and stuff. I like it. It is easier to do it yourself and it is funner too. You actually feel like you are in the book. But when I went into the first grade room, we sort of had to read so I was totally “Oh man, I don’t want to do this at all.” We had to pronounce letters and words like $cat$. I just saw what I had to read and I was like “I hate this.” My head hurt when I read. I just didn’t want to do it.

Learning to read was harder than any of these students had imagined, as the focus shifted from a rewarding process of shared discovery to a frustrating procedure of isolated drill. In the ensuing struggle to read, then, their love for reading diminished.

Only three of the Reading Workshop students had not been read to as children: Jasmine, whose family of five was in crisis when her mother died while Jasmine was in preschool; Sergio, who grew up in a family of first generation Portugese immigrants; and Mick, whose parents focused their
attention on an older sister who suffered from severe mental and physical handicaps. It is interesting to note that in the absence of this early literacy experience none of these students had a positive feeling about reading when going to school for the first time. Lacking the pleasurable memories of lap reading they plunged into the skill and drill environment and were immediately turned off by it. Jasmine speaks of hating reading from the start: “It was boring in first grade, just sitting there in class and having to sit there and listen . . . The teacher was helping us sound out the word and everybody would say it at the same time. It was frustrating, having to be there and listen to it and not feeling like doing it.” When Sergio talks of hating his early reading experience, he uses the adjective “boring” to describe it as well: “It is no fun to just sit there and read for a long time. . . You would read, then stop. First grade they would teach you to read. You are starting to learn how to sound out the words. You really wouldn’t read.” Mick’s view of reading as a first grader is clear and concise; to him it was “another one of those cases where it is pointless to me.” And why not? If most of what a beginning reader experiences is the decoding side of the reading process, if meaning becomes subservient to word identification in the classroom, then what would the point be to a six year old child?

Alexis’s View of Herself

It doesn’t take long to find out how Alexis feels about herself as a reader and a student. In our very first interview she laid it on the line for me: she is “not very good at reading” and sometimes she doesn’t “feel good about [her]self in school.” It takes even less time to extrapolate from her comments how Alexis feels about herself as a person; she is a failure. It shouldn’t be surprising to us that Alexis feels that way. After all, she has struggled at reading - and school - from kindergarten on; at the age of six she failed first grade. In our schools
success in reading is a prerequisite for success in school; students who can’t read can’t succeed. Only recently in public schools have we begun to look at and value other ways of knowing, but in Alexis’s case it seems that little has come along that she can excel in as a person. She points out that even her lack of typing ability, a subject studied no doubt to make learning easier for her, is looked at by some as a deficiency which will hold her back in life.

Since her second year of first grade Alexis has been pulled from her “normal” classroom and sent to the “retard” room where “nothing really goes on,” except perhaps troublemaking, for Alexis and her “unnormal” friends. It’s as though this hand-picked group of children is incapable of learning. Peers have made fun of her, even teachers have occasionally let it slip that she simply isn’t of the same intellectual level as most of the other children in school. Singled out by virtue of her academic struggles, Alexis has had aides assigned just to her to be sure she gets her work done, aides who have “followed me everywhere, out to recess, to the bathroom, everywhere.” Her refusal to go to the resource room or to accept help underlines her anger at how she is perceived by the school as a reader and a student; in her mind only people who are stupid need to have their work done by somebody else.

That Alexis is anything but stupid can be seen in a psychological evaluation done at the end of second grade. The evaluator points out the fact that Alexis scores solidly average or above average on the WISC III and that her frustration with reading may stem from a specific learning disability. Both as a young child and an adolescent, though, it is clear that Alexis, like most of her struggling peers, believes that her problem with reading is a problem with her intellect. She sees herself as a failure, and much of what has happened over the past ten years in school has only served to buttress that belief.
Very few of the Reading Workshop students would be classified as of below average intelligence, yet in every instance these students see themselves as somehow inferior to their classmates. Some have been coded for Special Ed., some are Title I students, some have been given no formal label at all during their years in school. However, simply being - and being seen as - a struggling reader is all the label each of them needs; that alone is enough to frustrate these adolescents as they view themselves as failures. Like Alexis, Carol sees herself as stupid, just because "things never click in my head. I have gotten low grades forever." When asked to describe his reading history, Mark describes himself as "not real smart." "How do you know that?" I ask him. "I know I'm not smart because I couldn't do a lot of stuff in school. I always had trouble. I just didn't understand it." Eric's view of himself, though, transcends even Alexis's and Carol's "stupid" and Mark's "not real smart." "In the classroom I feel like a ghost," says Eric when I ask him to share with me how he feels about school. "I don't know most of the stuff they are throwing at me, like the words. I feel invisible." Four months after this interview, Eric, a ninth grader who had been waging a battle with reading since first grade, gave up the fight. He dropped out of school. He had just turned sixteen years old.

The Beginnings of the Struggle

For most children the struggle with reading begins when they take their first tentative steps through the doors of the first grade classroom. In Alexis's case it started much earlier when her mother, sensing that her preschool child would need extra help in learning, sent her to a private preschool and kindergarten. Though well-intentioned, the message was painfully clear to this thoughtful four year old; there was something about Alexis that made her mother think she was going to have trouble in school. "I went to the private
school because my mom went to the public kindergarten and they couldn't help me out like I needed because from kindergarten to fourth grade they were packed." So Alexis started her formal education in a school whose low teacher-student ratio would afford her the individual attention she seemed to warrant. But even that was not enough.

I went to a private kindergarten and we did more and my friends went to a public kindergarten and they did less but they were still smarter than me. They could read better than me, they could write better than me, they could speak better than me. The teacher listened to me because she was interested in what I was going to say but I couldn't get my words out.

At the age of four, then, Alexis viewed herself in a new light; the struggle with reading had begun. The child who had seen herself as a reader was no longer quite so sure. She discovered early on that she couldn't read out loud like the teacher expected her to; she quickly tired of the work. Kindergarten was "too hard;" to her it felt like third grade. She was in over her head and she knew it. In her frustration she chose to turn herself off to reading and school. Where once she had felt self-assured and competent she now felt only a lack of confidence and failure.

Alexis's early reading experiences mirror those of her Reading Workshop peers. Once the downward spiral begins for these young readers there seems to be nothing to stop it. A bad start spells nothing but disaster. Once a struggling reader always a struggling reader. Indeed, Rist points out that a child's journey through school is preordained by day eight of kindergarten. Once the kindergarten teacher places in a child in the low reading group he is doomed to stay there forever, regardless of what he does. Once the label has been given, a child begins to look at herself in a different light. And so too does the school. Instruction changes, behavior changes, relationships among peers change, and
treatment by adults changes. As Kristy remembers it, "I had a tough, rough beginning in reading. It seemed like I was out a week, the week that they started reading or something. When I came back it seemed like everyone else knew how to read really good. But I didn’t. And I didn’t know what to do."

**Problems Encountered in the Struggle**

**Big Words.** What kinds of roadblocks do these struggling readers encounter in their painful years of schooling? Alexis points out the initial one, "words that don’t always come together." Although single syllable words do not seem to pose a problem for most of these students, it is when the text moves to "bigger ones" that decoding becomes a dilemma. Sounding out a three letter word may be doable for these emergent readers, but once the letters multiply the task becomes overwhelming. Students who can unlock cat are stuck when they are faced with elephant. It's not the meaning that gets them down; after all, most first graders can recognize an elephant as well as a cat. Rather it's getting to the point where meaning can be assigned that stymies these students. Indeed, the inability to recognize and pronounce multi-syllabic words is a problem that surfaces early in their reading careers and never seems to go away. For whatever reason, these students are unable to break the reading code; thus the tyranny of the "big word" is a common chord sounded as they detail their early and present struggles. Listen to their chorus:

Kristin: I don’t remember first grade too good but I always had trouble sounding out big words and pronouncing them. I am still not very good at it.

Keith: I know I will always stumble on words. I always have. It happens all the time. It has happened pretty much the whole time I have been reading.

Kayla: I come to a big word. I want to ask but I sit there and try to sound it out. Sometimes I will just sit there for hours
trying to figure out what the word is instead of asking. I think I am embarrassed to say I don’t know.

The problem with big words of course is that as a student progresses through the grades, more and more are included in the texts the children are required to read. Because these readers lack the automaticity and fluency to decode quickly and efficiently, big words become an obstacle impossible to overcome.

**Big Books.** As the big words multiply, it’s harder and harder for these students to keep up with their work. The tension increases, and so too does their frustration as big words lead to big books, the logical next stumbling block for struggling readers.

Paul: We went from little *Cat in the Hat* books to *Matilda* books and stuff like that. The words got bigger and longer. And we had a lot more reading to do. Instead of five words on a page, it came to twenty words on a page. It was like a chapter book. Wow! See all the words. I have to read all this? I only read slow. It would take me ten years to do a book.

If a student is struggling with big words already, imagine how it must feel to face longer and thicker books. Like Paul, Cody and Bob see this challenge as overwhelming and downright scary.

Cody: Reading a lot of words is hard. It is like I am sitting down here and I have to climb Mt. Washington. It is a big mountain. If it is a little hill, like Pat’s Peak, then I can do it. Not a mountain, just a little hill. Or even better, like walking from the cafeteria to the soccer field. Then I can do it.

Bob: The thing that is bad is scary big books. I tried one. I got through a couple of pages and it took five days. They take longer. I have to keep going through it because I am not sure of what I read because there is so much on one page. So much information and I can’t keep up with it.
Big books for these students are like a nightmare that won’t go away. It used to be that Matilda made Paul and his classmates nervous; now it is the reading demands of a ninth grade curriculum. Old hands at this kind of frustration, though, more often than not these adolescents are resigned to the fact that they can’t possibly succeed. Kim has fashioned a handy response to this recurring dilemma; she simply doesn’t do it. “If I get a big book I just have the attitude that I can’t do it. And I don’t.”

Reading Aloud. If first big words and then big books present obstacles for these young readers, imagine having to go public and putting this struggle on exhibit for your more successful classmates. This is just what happens each time a floundering reader is asked to read aloud in the classroom setting. Alexis vividly remembers the embarrassment of stumbling over words as her fellow first and second graders sat front row center to her shame. So too do Patti and Kristin.

Patti: In the earlier grades when I had a hard time with the words, the teachers would make you read out loud. I didn’t like that at all. If I didn’t know a word, I would stumble over it. And you know when you stumble over a word, everybody is staring at you. Then a kid might try to help you and the teacher would tell them to be quiet.

Kristin: I can’t read out loud. Because I get all nervous and everything. When I am reading out loud to the class, I always mess up and stutter. I hate standing in front of a group of people and then messing up on reading. I read it all wrong.

Extremely conscious of her trouble pronouncing words, even now Alexis refuses to place herself in this demeaning situation. It is only when she is confident that the words to be read will flow easily that she agrees to read aloud in class.

Over the years, though, some of the other Reading Workshop students have found ways to deal with this painful dilemma. Carol taught herself to read
one paragraph ahead, so that when the teacher called on her she would be ready. “I will read the first paragraph as she is talking. And then while somebody is reading the first paragraph, I will read the next one.” By seventh grade Cody had this sort of preparation strategy down to a science. “Here’s what I’m doing. I count out how many kids are in there and figure out what paragraph it is and I would read it over and over and over until I could read it.” When I asked students what they thought the teacher’s purpose was for asking them to read aloud, none of them really seemed to be very sure. Kristin thought that maybe it was a way for teachers to get students to pay attention. “Or maybe they thought kids would get more out of it.” Patti ventured a guess that it was a way to help students who were having a hard time with words. “But if that was it,” she confided in me, “it wasn’t good at all.”

**Accelerating Expectations.** The fourth problem that seems to be a common thread in the stories these Reading Workshop students tell is the change in expectations that occurs when moving from one level of instruction to another. For Alexis the imminence of a big change came early, between her first and second grade years. Her teacher warned her of what was to come, and she knew enough to be worried. “Every year your teacher says it is so much different going to the next grade, so much more work. So I was afraid to go to the next grade. I had been in first grade for so long, but I still didn’t want to go to second grade.”

As she had feared, her work load increased when she reached second grade; and so too did her frustration. By the end of that year she had been referred, evaluated, and coded Learning Disabled.

Depending on the student, such a leap may show up at different points in the curriculum; but their reaction is inevitably the same, as the students’ abilities fail to keep pace with classroom demands and their discomfiture builds.
Sergio: The biggest jump I remember was going from second grade to third grade. The books got bigger. The length. Even books for physical science. Humungus. And hard.

Cody: In fourth grade we had pillows to sit on. It was fun. Nice and comfortable. We would just sit there and read. Then in fifth grade you are just sitting there [at your desk] reading a chapter or you read your book, chapter 16, by Monday. You are taking notes down. You are taking tests. It is not as fun.

Bob: In fifth grade they expected a lot more. They expected you to read a lot. They would tell you to bring home the text every day. So much you had to read. I just couldn’t keep up with everything. All the subjects. I would bring it home and have to read the social studies book, science, reading. I was just getting things confused more and more.

That these students feel confused should be no surprise to us; after all, each step up the educational ladder leaves them farther and farther behind. And yet they keep stumbling on. Sergio lays some of the blame on the part of teachers who fail to prepare students for what lies ahead.

This year is tough. I think in eighth grade they should have prepared us for what it was going to be like in ninth grade. What the reading is going to be like. In eighth grade there were 100 page books. Now they give us bigger books, stuff to read on your own. They should have tried to help you out.

But by this time in the educational careers of these struggling readers there seems to be no way for classroom teachers to truly “help out” these students. They have fallen so far behind in their reading abilities that the intensive reading instruction they so desperately need is rarely offered. Instead, well-meaning educators assist the students in completing assigned work. They never catch up but they do move on.
Trying to Get Help at School

Alexis has decided never to accept help unless she asks for it herself. She has found the help offered to her in the past to be either worthless, demeaning, or both. Her Reading Workshop peers may have ventured down alternative avenues of assistance, but the results of this intervention are in essence no different from hers. Time after time, like Alexis, these students have simply found themselves at the same dead end of learning. They continue to struggle with reading; they continue to see themselves as failures. What kind of assistance has been offered in school over the years? Each student has his own tale to tell of help gone awry.

Classroom Teacher Help. It would seem logical that the first place for a child to go for help is the classroom teacher. After all, she is the one who should know the needs of her students best. And indeed, there are many teachers who offer that kind of support. Mick remembers Mrs. Love, who would come and sit beside him if he didn’t understand something.

While the rest of the class was doing something she would explain it, the words I didn’t understand. First she would explain what certain things were and then she would ask me if I understood and then she would show me different ways of understanding things. Sometimes I would get it and sometimes I would still be in blur. But then I basically told her I understood so we could move on to something else.

In his desire to keep up with his classmates, Mick would negate the help offered by pretending it had solved his problem. “I wouldn’t stick with it and learn it. Getting the subject done and over with was fine with me.”

Eric, on the other hand, had a first grade teacher who was anything but helpful, one whose memory has been indelibly stamped on his fragile psyche. When he didn’t participate in class because he didn’t understand what to do, her
reaction was frightening to this struggling reader. “Every time you didn’t read, she would get on your case. She would yell at you, ‘Why didn’t you read?’ in a mean voice. So we would make up an excuse or something.” Kayla had a similar experience with one of her first teachers. In her mind the teacher didn’t care when Kayla struggled with reading. “When I was little I don’t think my teachers cared. I would ask for help and they never helped me only a little and then they would just leave. They needed to get on with the books, do what they had to do with the other kids.” Instead of asking for help, Kayla decided to pretend to do her work. As a result of course, she never did learn what was being taught.

Like Eric and Kayla, Bob decided to play it safe when it came to asking for reading help. “I have learned not to raise my hand a lot in school. I am afraid to get something bad and make fun of myself.” It seems that in his early reading experience if you made a mistake you were sent to the corner. “If you couldn’t like say the word they were trying to help you with, they would send you in the corner for a couple of minutes. Then you would come back and see if you could do it again.” When I inquired how he thought that being in the corner would help him learn the troublesome word, he frowned as he replied, “I don’t know. I just know I hated it. I used to be in the corner all the time.”

Classroom Aides. Many of the Reading Workshop students had had experience with teacher aides. Usually untrained paraprofessionals, these helpers were an integral part of many classrooms these struggling readers had known. Aaron shared Alexis’s negative feeling about aides when he described them as ladies who

just sit there. They get paid for it. They are supposed to come around and make sure you get what you are learning and that you have no problems, but they are really just sitting in the back of the room. Some of them are good and some of them aren’t, but they all sit around.
Jasmine knew the purpose of having aides in the classroom, but she questioned their effectiveness.

They were there to help students whenever they needed it. But if you raised your hand for help, the aide wouldn’t really get up and help you at all. She would just sit in the corner filling out paperwork or something. Or they were running errands for the teachers and stuff.

Mick, on the other hand, held his favorite aide in highest regard. “She was great. The Mom of Newsom, we used to call her. She basically helped out anybody. And to be sure I know her well; I have had extra help my entire life.” Knowing Eric’s negative experience with his first grade teacher, it is a relief when I hear that he too remembers aides in a positive light.

I needed help. So they started adding aides and stuff in the room. Most of the kids were slow readers. Not terrible bad but they couldn’t read. It was a lot easier then because there were more aides and more teachers to help you. When you raised your hand and asked what the word was, they would come over and help you read. They would actually slow down. They would actually sound out the word for me.

Well-meaning aides could sound out the word for Eric; but they weren’t trained to help him sound it out for himself, a fact which must have weighed in heavily as this angry and frustrated adolescent made the heartrending choice to throw in the towel on reading, school, and himself.

Pull-out Help. When classroom intervention proved insufficient to meet Alexis’s needs, she was introduced to the world of pull-out help, first as an uncoded student and ultimately as a Learning Disabled student assigned to the resource room. Not surprisingly her Reading Workshop classmates are veterans of all sorts of pull-out intervention as well. They tell story after story of teachers who gave them work sheets, who read books to them, who helped them with
words they didn't know. They talk about day after day and year after year of special help. All too often, though, they talk of kind teachers who watered down the work for them in order for them to meet success as readers.

Cody: She took me in her class to give me a different kind of worksheet. Some kids got one worksheet and I got a different one, a little easier. The vocabulary words for me were on the page, and the vocabulary words for them were in the book. I think that was kind of stupid because they had to read for it and we just had to find it on our paper. We didn't have to read at all. All we had to do was look it up.

Mick: After first grade I started going to her every day. And she helped me out. She would give me work I would understand. If one of our normal teachers gave us work and we didn't understand it, we could go to Mrs. Allman and she would give us something easier that we understood. Although it was basically the same thing we covered it the easier way because then we would actually understand it.

Unlike Alexis, few of these students resent and reject the assistance offered them. Some, like Cody, are sharp enough to privately question the simplified work given to them; but rarely does a child turn down a proven way to ease the growing burden of her reading life. Instead many struggling readers react like Mick does, slipping effortlessly into a learned helplessness mode as they begin to believe that they are incapable of doing the work assigned to their peers. In most cases it's not that these students are mentally incapable of completing the regular work with the appropriate support. It just gets to seem that way as well-meaning special educators, through their words and actions, send the inescapable message that these handicapped readers can't make it on their own. Struggling students like Kayla, whose only problem is that they are behind their classmates in their reading achievement, are labeled learning disabled. And in due time most of them learn to be just that.

Special Ed., Title I, 504 - by whatever the name the aim of this special help
is ostensibly the same: to help these students improve as readers. Yet none of these struggling readers talk of “graduating” from the program, of catching up with their peers, of tackling and succeeding at “normal” classroom activities. Indeed, for these struggling readers it turns out that there is nothing very special about this special help at all. Once a struggling reader always a struggling reader. Little wonder, then, that they have become the latest class of Reading Workshop students at Daniel Webster, the newest crop of lifers.

Parents Step In

With no schoolroom cure in sight for their chronic reading disease, it is no wonder that these suffering students turn to their own homegrown remedies. The first place that many of them turn to is their family. Parents and grandparents, aunts and cousins— all are so concerned with the child’s lack of progress that they do what they can to offer help. A variety of supportive adults take on the role of surrogate teacher, all well-intentioned but often with little or no expertise in the teaching of reading. Kayla, Eric, Christian, and Jasmine all talk of adults who read to them, helped with extra worksheets, and sounded out words they were stuck on. Cody’s mother went so far as to purchase “a Hooked on Phonics type thing, with a record player and a little activity book to follow along with.” When this didn’t work, though, she tried another tactic. “She started to read with me at home. She was forcing me to. She locked me in my room with her in there and she made me sit down and read to her and she read half and I read half.” But clearly for both mother and son the frustration was mounting. “A lot of times I tried to push her out of the way. A bunch of times I threatened to leave and she said ‘O.K., I will help you pack.’”

When Cody’s mother realized that her assistance was ineffective, she contacted the school, just as Alexis’s mother had. Her rationale was sound; she
knew that if the school would label him learning disabled then Cody would be eligible for the reading support he needed and deserved. The process was long and tedious; "it took them a year to get someone in there. The questions where I had difficulty were in the reading part. My weak point was reading." The testing confirmed what Cody, his mother, and his classroom teachers already knew; so Cody started getting special support in reading.

What Cody and his mother didn’t know, however, was that this help would not be the desired panacea for his reading struggle, no more than the year of readiness that Mick, Kayla, Eric, and Christian participated in or the repeated grades that Alexis, Paul, and Frank endured. In a series of letters to the elementary-middle school teachers and principal, written during Frank’s upper elementary years, his father may well be speaking for all the parents of these struggling readers when he poignantly voices his concern over his son’s lack of improvement in reading. Frank had been receiving special services since preschool, but it was clear to everybody that he had made little progress.

2/94 I am writing to express my concern with the level of education that my son Frank is getting. Frank cannot read. The single most important thing Frank needs out of school is the ability to read. . . Whatever approach to teaching reading Frank is getting now, it is not working, and we need to try something different.

12/95 This is not a game we are playing. This is for my son’s life, and his future, we are talking about. I see no need to bring him for the rest of his life with this sort of coding. If I had to do it all over again I would not of even had him coded to begin with.

Avoiding Reading

When all of the well-meaning help, both at school and at home, fails to alleviate their reading woes, these struggling readers turn to their own devices to
ease their pain. Just as Alexis refused to read, other have come up with their own coping strategies. All are performed in order to avoid reading, an activity Reading Workshop students shy away from at all costs because they are not able to do it well. Beyond watching the movie or asking a friend, old favorites of many readers both good and bad, the most popular avoidance strategy used by these students is pretending. Students sit quietly at their desks and pretend to read when an assignment is given. Kristy knows that the key to having this ruse work is to look the part. “We would have reading time and everybody else would be reading, but I would just be sitting around trying to look busy. I would get my folder out and then I would pretend I was reading the book but then I would just wait until it was over.” One of the most important components of this strategy is to appear to keep up with the class; that way the teacher has no reason to think that you are struggling. “Be sure to have your book open,” suggests Cody. And “just keep moving on, just pretending that you know,” adds Kayla.

Patti has learned to be a good listener during class discussions. The more you listen, the less you have to read. “We have conversations in class. When we have a conversation, it talks about everything in the story that’s going on. So if you listen to that, most of the time you get what’s going on in the book and you don’t have to read it.” If you are asked to participate in the discussion, Mark has a word of advice. “I would just make up stuff and go along because I don’t want to read it. Just guess nice. I get away with it.”

Many students choose to complete a small part of the reading, having figured out exactly what they need to read to get by. Cody, for instance, knows that textbook questions generally follow the order of the text. “I found out that trick about it. They would always go in sequence. The first question is in the first three pages. That’s where you have to look. Don’t read the whole chapter.”
When reading a novel, both Mark and Sergio know the importance of reading the back of the book. If you do that, they say, you already know what is going to happen. In addition, Sergio may “read the first and last chapter and middle chapter and I will be all right. I know tricks like that now.” “Does this always work?” I ask him. He chuckles. “Sometimes I would get away with it but not all the time. I did the summary word by word. The teacher would look at the back of the book. She said, ‘That is pretty good. Where did you get it?’ I said I made it up. She said, ‘I don’t think so.’”

Even when the reading assignment is over, there is more avoiding to do. What if the teacher decides to give a quiz? Kim knows what to do at the culmination of a reading assignment as well.

The teacher says that if kids want to talk about it, then we don’t have to take a quiz. So I just make up stuff and tell her. Instead she lets us do a project on it, but that is easy. I pick the easiest one. All you have to do is get a shoebox and make it look like the book. Anybody can do that.

The sadness of this, of course, is that if we believe that children become better readers by reading, then these Reading Workshop students, who will do anything to get out of doing just that, don’t have a prayer. With few or no reading experiences they have little or no opportunity to improve. The less they improve the farther behind they fall. It’s not that they don’t want to succeed as readers; in my twenty years of working with at-risk adolescents I have yet to meet one who said to me, “Mrs. Mueller, I like not being able to read. I like being unsuccessful in school.” But I have had many say to me, “What is the point of all this anyway? I have been trying and trying for years and years, but still nothing good happens with my reading.” Mired in a quagmire of failure over which they have little or no control, there seems to be no way out. Lifers they are.
CHAPTER FOUR

FROM LOVE TO HATE: EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES WHICH TURN KIDS OFF TO READING

Each year a very small proportion of children reaching compulsory attendance school age comprise a population requiring special clinical help. These are the children burdened with neurological and emotional disabilities that precipitate reading failure if and when early diagnosis does not lead to appropriate adjustment of instructional practices and learning expectancies. However, by far the larger number of children who become reading failures with varying degrees of disability are the result of pedagogical shortcomings. These children are indeed the unfortunate victims of a society that knows better.

R. Stauffer, J. Abrams, and J. Pikulski
Diagnosis, Correction, and Prevention of Reading Disabilities, 1978, p. ix

Last fall, in the midst of my research, I was working in my office with Theresa, a junior who had struggled with reading all through school. I told her of my on-going interviews with the ninth grade Reading Workshop students, of the reading histories they were sharing with me. “Oh, I wish you would interview me,” she said. “I would have so much to tell. Like the time in first grade when I was going out to recess. I was putting on my jacket. The teachers were talking. I heard one of them say, ‘It’s too bad that Theresa is having so much trouble with reading. If only her mother would take her to the library and read with her at home.’ When I heard that it made me so mad. You see, Mrs. Mueller, my mother always took me to the library. She read with me every night. That wasn’t my problem. School was.”
Too often in education today, when talking about reading failure, we point an accusing finger at the home environment, as if a family setting devoid of print is the primary culprit in every student’s reading struggle. And for some students this indeed may be true. In the case of these Reading Workshop students, however, it is clear that it is not in the home where their reading problems begin. Most come to school excited about reading; indeed, like Alexis many see themselves as readers already. Rather, it is what happens when they arrive at school that precipitates and escalates their struggle. Love for the written word turns to frustration and in many cases to hate as these young children are introduced to formal reading instruction. A shy and vulnerable adolescent, Kayla is nevertheless able to pinpoint the roadblocks she faced while learning to read as she shares her reading journey with me. It’s a literacy path which meanders from like to hate to love, with Kayla managing to rise above her school experiences to become an enthusiastic “reborn” reader. Although interspersed with “I guess” and “I don’t have a clue,” her hesitant words tell us that she comprehends far more about her struggle with reading than she is willing to admit.

**KAYLA’S PROFILE**

I was frustrated with reading for a long, long, long time. I hated it. But not always. Before first grade I sort of liked reading. I had a stack of books when I was little. I loved to look at the pictures. My mom would sit down and read the stories to me. She helped me learn little words. In preschool and kindergarten I was doing great. They only gave me words with two letters in them and I knew them. It was really easy until I got to first grade. Then in first grade something happened. They gave harder words and I couldn’t do them. I didn’t do a very good job in reading. School just kept going and I just went along with it. It got worse and worse.
I don't have a clue how they taught us to read. I just know I couldn't do it. I couldn't read the words. There was no one telling me what the words were, teaching me the words and how to spell them and stuff. The teachers wrote words up on the board and then they asked who would know them and if you didn't they would help you. They made us sound them out first. Then they would sound them out the way they should be but they didn't tell us the word. Like they would do el-e-phant. We would have to say what it was. That was the help. But that didn't work. I don't know why, it just wasn't enough for me. I needed to know what the word was in order to sound it out.

It got even harder when I moved all over the place. Maybe they had already passed the stuff that I was just getting to. I was at a school that gave easy words and then I was at a different school where I never had seen the words before. Anyway, I am slow and it seemed like everybody else in the class kind of knew the words and stuff and the teachers just thought I knew them. Well, I think they had an idea I was in trouble, but I don't think they really cared. I would ask for help so they would help me only a little and then they would just leave. They wanted to do their work I guess, just get on with the books, do what they have to do. I was little and I just went on. I kept moving ahead, just pretending I knew. But now it hurts to think about it.

When I was learning to read I wasn't put in a special class like I am now. I was with the whole class. We all did the same thing together. Like we all had to read this book and then we had to tell what the whole story was about. I just couldn't do it. I didn't comprehend what the book was saying. It was hard. I would ask and the teacher would say, "Don't worry about it. I will tell you later." And she never ended up telling me later. So I would just pretend I could do it and try to do the work she gave me. Nobody even noticed. We had questions to answer and most of the time I just guessed because I didn't know the answer. Sometimes I was lucky though. The teacher would happen to pick out the pages I read. But not very often.
By fifth or sixth grade I really hated reading. We had to read like 300 plus pages in like five weeks. I just can't read that fast. In this big fat book I would be on the third page and everybody else would be on chapter seven. They started asking us to read out loud and I just skipped over the words. I couldn't deal with the big words or anything. I don't know what I did after three pages; I don't even know how I took a test. I had no clue of what was going on. I kept on pretending I guess; I didn't think anybody would help. No one else had helped me so far, and I was just used to doing it myself.

When I went to seventh grade we took a test to see where we were and I was in a third grade reading level. They put me in a class with five other people that had the same problem. We were in there one period every day. They taught me how to sound out the words better. They would cover up like half of the word and say it to me and then do the same with the ending. I still have hard times with some words now. I sound them out and most of them I get, but there's a lot of big words that I still don't even know. Sometimes I will just sit there for hours trying to figure out what the word is instead of asking. I don't ask all day. I don't know why, I am embarrassed I think.

After I got better at words I started reading outside of school. My brother was in fifth grade and reading a sixth grade book. He read better than me. I wanted to learn how to read, but I didn't like being made to read in school. After school I didn't have much to do. I got on the bus and read. I read when I got home. I don't know why; I just know that I started picking up books and reading them. I think it was because I had a lot of time to read. I didn't have to. I wasn't made to read. I picked out books that I wanted to read, not books that some teacher assigned to me. I found that I liked reading, that I could read by myself. I basically was learning how to read myself. And I was still listening to my mom. She was still reading to me. My mom would read to me and then my brother. Then we would take turns reading aloud. I liked that because I knew that no one would make fun of me. My mom would correct me on the words that I got wrong and I was not as
If you ask me when I really learned how to read, I will say ninth grade. I like how we read a half hour every day. That helps me. I have read almost five books in two months. Since I've been reading I just know I can read better. Since I have been able to read the words, I just know I can read better. The hard part is that there are still words that I get stuck on, words that scare me. The easy part is that I can read by myself. I know how to read. If I have a really good book, one that I just fit right into, I can read for a long time. Like in Animal Farm, the animals came alive for me. I could understand them talking and stuff. I could imagine what was going on. Some of the books I just fit right into the story. Instead of another person, I put my name in that book and I could fit myself into it. Now that I am in high school reading is like the best thing I could ever do.

If I were giving advice to teachers I would tell them to take more time and make sure the little kids understand the big words. I would tell them to be sure to ask if anybody needs help and to help the little kids that need it. They didn't do that for me. They just moved on. If I have kids some day, I will read to them like my mom did to me. She helped me to learn. She helped me to read. She showed me not to be afraid to ask about the big words. Maybe a teacher can be like a mother. But only if you're lucky.

Although Kayla is telling her own story, time and again her words are echoed by her peers as they talk about classroom reading roadblocks they have faced over the years. These are roadblocks which are not peculiar to this group of twenty-two students; rather they are dubious educational practices which are common denominators in many classrooms in our country, practices which despite valid research findings refuting their worth have nevertheless remained mainstays of our educational system. Many, indeed most students, manage to rise above such roadblocks, but not the at-risk population. Fragile learners who need the best the educational establishment has to offer, these children are the
unknowing victims of a system which remains unresponsive to their needs. As the Reading Workshop students shared their stories, it became clear that no one classroom or teacher shouldered the blame for their dilemma; rather it was the composite of their experiences which slowly and inexorably shepherded these readers from love to hate as each of them took on the inescapable label of lifer.

Lack of Effective Instruction

**Methods That Don't Work.** When Kayla arrived in first grade, she was anxious to learn how to read. She “was doing great” on easy “little words,” high frequency single syllable words which she was able to memorize and recognize by sight; now she was ready for something more. Somehow, though, she got short-changed by the method of instruction she was exposed to. Her teacher’s approach to beginning reading emphasized synthetic phonics training; in lesson after lesson students were expected to match isolated letters to sounds in order to read them. If m says m, a says a, and n says n, then m - a - n must say man. But not for Kayla. In all likelihood she lacked the linguistic awareness researchers see as a prerequisite to success in such an instructional approach. As Adams points out, in order to decode words beginning readers need to be aware of the phonemes that make up a spoken word; then too, they need to exhibit mastery of letter-to-sound correspondences (70). For whatever reason Kayla was without this crucial knowledge, a fact her teacher failed to comprehend. Burdened by such a deficit this young reader was unable to make sense of this method of instruction right from the start; she simply didn’t understand what was going on. She didn’t do “a very good job in reading;” things got “worse and worse.” To exacerbate the problem her teacher didn’t seem to notice the depth of Kayla’s struggle. Or if the teacher did, she didn’t know what else to do. She just kept on teaching Kayla to sound out words, thinking no doubt that with enough drill her
problem student would one day “get it.” Then when Kayla finally got up the
courage to ask for extra help, even that assistance didn’t work; it was simply
more of the same. The instructional method had let Kayla down. She was lost.

Kayla was not alone. Frustration held court in my office as these Reading
Workshop students poured out their negative experiences with trying to learning
how to read by sounding out words, a method of reading instruction which had
never met their needs but one which they had been subjected to ad nauseum in
classroom after classroom by teacher after teacher. Just as Alexis talked of her
battle with words that “didn’t come together,” every one of these adolescents
recalled their early phonics skirmishes. Jasmine remembered her first grade
teacher spending a great deal of instructional time “writing words on the board
and sounding them out with us.” She “started off easy with the little words and
then we worked our way up to bigger and harder words.” Paul’s teacher would
do likewise; “she would write on the board the letters -at and ask ‘what does it
sound like?’ We would go ‘a - t’, at.” Then we would write it down on a piece of
paper. So when we say ‘cat’ we would look at the c, the a, the t and go ‘c - a - t
cat.’” A bemused Mick spoke of the phonetic rules he was expected to memorize,
incomprehensible rules which meant nothing to him, rules which only served to
cement his growing dislike of reading. “Reading has always been so frustrating
for me. Everything was so confusing to me. You were learning how to say words
and all of those r controlled words like er, ur, and ir. I didn’t really understand a
lot about it.”

Patti’s teacher took this method of reading instruction a little bit farther.
Moving beyond letter - sound matches and the rules which ostensibly governed
this puzzling activity, this teacher taught her young students how to break
unknown words into syllables. Students who had yet to grasp the sound-symbol
relationship necessary to divide a simple word into its component phonemes were being asked to analyze the sound structure of multi-syllabic words. When I asked Patti how long this approach to reading instruction went on, she replied with a groan “forever.” Bob, who struggled with decoding in school, was rewarded by being told to practice at home. As he remembers it, “They gave you little sections of cards and stuff, like a pack of cards. They would tell you to bring them home and sound them out with your mom and stuff.” “Did this help?” I asked him. “Oh, I never really did it. I didn’t like it any better at home.”

All of these students point to decoding as the primary focus of their early reading instruction; in fact for many of them phonics became synonymous with reading. Yet for most it was an extremely ineffective method of learning. Indeed, for all the time spent, it appears as though there was very little learning going on. Although a 1967 federal government study had found that a “combination approach” to beginning reading worked better than any single approach (Bond and Dykstra), more than twenty years later these children were struggling to learn to read in classrooms where only one way, the phonics way, held sway. And if they didn’t “get it” the first time around, their dubious reward was a lot more of the same. It’s not that some children can’t benefit from this instructional approach; there are many proficient readers who can point to this sort of synthetic decoding instruction as a useful part of their reading histories. It’s just that for this group of young readers it wasn’t a good match. Indeed, Adams points out that for at-risk children especially

[p]honological awareness, letter recognition facility, familiarity with spelling patterns, spelling-sound relationships, and individual words must be developed in concert with real reading and writing and with deliberate reflection on the forms, functions, and meanings of texts.

(422)
Unaware of what research could have told them, teachers using this method and this method alone precipitated nothing but failure for these disillusioned readers. Too often, it seems, teachers fail to notice that an instructional method simply doesn't work with some of their students. Even when a child's call for help points out the ineffectiveness of the process, some teachers simply don't “get” the message. They don’t learn from what their pupils have to say. Not only do they fail to know the research then, but they fail to know their students - and themselves - as well. Moreover, many of these educators lack the expertise or the professional support to help them figure out what else to do when a teaching method isn't successful with some of their children. Following a one-size-fits-all approach, they forge ahead in their teaching, with the curriculum rather than the child driving the instruction. And if a student falls behind, more often than not the help offered is another dose of what didn’t work in the first place. Keith was rightfully frustrated when, in asking a teacher for help with words he didn’t know, the reply was always “just sound it out the best you can.” The fact that his plea for help stemmed from his inability to do just that didn’t seem to enter his teacher’s mind.

Instruction That Doesn’t Teach. If the method of instruction chosen by a teacher is ineffective, so too can be the instruction itself. Indeed, as I heard Kayla and her peers describe their classroom experiences over the years it was not only the learning that was missing; it was often the teaching as well. Duffy and Roehler talk of classrooms where there is little evidence of instruction of any kind, where teachers tell students what to do, monitor students to be sure they are on task, and direct recitation lessons and provide corrective feedback when necessary (qtd. in Tharp and Gallimore 16). I was reminded of that description as I listened to the Reading Workshop students recall classrooms where the
instructional emphasis was on telling rather than teaching. Many of them echoed Kayla’s memories of endless recitations and corrective feedback sessions. Bob describes his early reading instruction this way: “She wanted us to sound out words. She would hold up a card to make like ‘oo’ or something. She would say it and then she would tell us to repeat it.”

Eric’s memory goes beyond the discomfort of rote recitation when he poignantly describes his experiences with a first grade teacher who didn’t teach.

> The teacher told us to read, but she didn’t really want to explain how to do it. She didn’t teach us really. We had these little books. They had like two or three words on each page. She would tell you to take out your book for reading time and go sit anywhere you want in the room. So I am sitting there by myself. What am I supposed to do? She never showed us what to do; she just said “read.” “Try to understand most of the words that are in there.” Most of us didn’t know how to read them so we just looked at the pictures and stuff.

> “And where was your teacher during all this?” I asked him. His response was unsettling though not unexpected. “Sitting at her desk. Sometimes she would walk about and see what you were doing. See how far you were in the book.”

Of course not every teacher fell into this category, and when students were lucky enough to have effective instruction they remembered such teachers fondly. Both Cody and Mick told of a teacher whose instruction gave them the support they needed as they worked to improve their reading. Her teaching style was participatory as she modeled what she wanted her students to do, discussed how to do it, gave them support as they tried to do it themselves, then carefully removed that support as they learned to work independently.

> Mick: What we would do is she would show us how to do it. She did it herself on the board. We would talk about it for a little bit, but we wouldn’t cover too much. When I didn’t understand the teacher would come over to me.
While the rest of the class was doing something she would explain it again, the things I didn't understand. First she would explain what certain things were and then she would ask me if I understood. Then if I needed it she would show me different ways of understanding. I would read a paragraph and then she would start asking questions to be sure I understood. We just moved from there.

It is clear that this teacher was engaged in Bruner’s handover method of instruction, when an adult intervenes and gradually provides less assistance to a learner. Neither “hands-off” nor “handout,” this method of instruction demands active engagement on the part of both teacher and learner. As Atwell describes it in the second edition of *In the Middle*, “[The student] watches me, I watch her, I do it for her, she tries it, we talk, I lend a hand when I see she needs help. We get our hands dirty together until she gets it and doesn’t need me to intervene anymore” (20). If this is what constitutes effective instruction, then it is clear that there was little of this going on as the Reading Workshop students struggled through the years with what in retrospect was teaching that didn’t teach.

Although the memories these Reading Workshop students shared with me were mainly of ineffective instruction, Sierra knew what she was missing. Listen as she capably describes what she considers a good teacher to be:

A good teacher teaches you something and doesn’t keep on going if you don’t understand it. He doesn’t just go by it and say, “Forget about it, learn it on your own” or “Here is a worksheet, go do it.” A good teacher explains it to you and helps you when you are wrong and lets you know why you are going to need to know this in the future. He makes sure you know how to do it.

More often than not, though, the students remembered teachers who “just told you how to sound out the words and then expected you to read. All they were doing was telling you to read and do questions.”(Cody) The tragedy of course is that although Sierra and her peers knew good teaching when they saw it, they
were powerless to avoid those who couldn’t or wouldn’t teach.

"One-Size-Fits-All" Instruction and Practice

Unlike Alexis, who suffered from the effects of the pull-out method of instruction for slow learners, Kayla spent most of her reading instruction time in a regular classroom setting, where all students participated in the same lessons at the same time. Whether drilling on the sound of short $a$ or picking out the main idea in a story, Kayla’s individual needs were virtually ignored as her teachers employed a “one-size-fits-all" approach to reading instruction. Such an educational model had been adopted by schools in reaction to the mechanistic “sorting machine" mentality which peaked in the 1970’s and ‘80’s, a time when beginning readers were grouped by fixed “ability” levels in order to master a reading curriculum centered on a complex hierarchy of specific skills. As a direct result of this model of instruction, low level students fell farther and farther behind as “slow it down and make it more concrete” teaching assured that they would never catch up (Allington and Walmsley 4). Even those, like Alexis, who were placed in pull-out programs never seemed to catch up, in part because of the assumption that “low ability” was a fixed and permanent condition. After large scale evaluations produced data suggesting that these special programs were not so special after all (Allington and Walmsley 23 - 24), many schools began to dismantle reading groups and pull-out programs, offering instead classroom models which touted uniform instruction, uniform materials, and uniform expectations (Roller 9). In doing so, however, they ignored the natural variability that exists among learners; and struggling readers like Kayla, their educational needs once more not met by the conventional curriculum, were no better off than before. Just as Alexis was penalized by a model of instruction that didn’t work for her, so too was Kayla.
As a result of this generic instruction, Kayla usually found herself behind, rarely understanding what was going on as more advanced readers basked in the limelight of successful learning experiences. Sometimes she was brave enough to ask for help, but she soon discovered that good help was rarely forthcoming. She began to wonder if her teachers even cared about her struggle. Not wanting to appear slower than her classmates, she began to pretend that she understood what was going on, a coping strategy which only caused her to fall farther and farther behind. The farther behind she got, the more she came to dislike the root of her pain and suffering. She “really hated reading.” By seventh grade, when she took a test which indicated that she was reading on the third grade level, Kayla, tired of living a lie, was almost relieved to be singled out for small group remedial instruction.

Like Kayla, Eric remembers struggling to make sense of group learning activities. Even during a kindergarten read-aloud he began to feel the frustration of being left behind. Used to a mother who engaged him in conversation as they turned the pages of a picture book together, Eric found that sharing a story read by the teacher with his kindergarten classmates wasn’t nearly as rewarding. “She would read the book really fast and not let you ask any questions. If you didn’t get something you would raise your hand and she would say, ‘Wait a minute.’ Then she would usually forget. Or I would.” Lacking the interaction and comfortable pacing he was used to with his mother, he felt lost in this unfamiliar storytelling experience. “I didn’t really understand what she was reading. The other kids were somehow paying attention, so they must be getting it, right? But not me. All the stuff that was going on in most of these books happened so fast that I couldn’t remember it.”

The same thing happened when as a class they read a “little five word
book together.

The teacher would always be ahead. She was always ahead of me. And she wouldn’t sound anything out for us. If you don’t know something raise your hand. That’s how you learn. But she didn’t call on me. The other kids understood what they were reading. But not me. So then I just sat back and listened. I listened to what they were saying so I knew what they were doing. But I still didn’t really understand. Finally I started to block out the stuff they were saying because it got really boring.

No doubt the boredom - and frustration - that Eric felt as a six year old grew as little books he couldn’t read evolved into chapter books, novels, and ninth grade history textbooks. Perhaps it was this very boredom that drove Eric to give up on all reading - and himself - ten years later.

We have already heard how the one-size-fits-all instructional practice of reading aloud in front of classmates is seen as a big problem for these struggling readers. Indeed, it’s a traditional whole class activity which stokes up unhappy memories in the minds of proficient readers as well. Although defined by Harris and Hodges as the “outmoded practice of calling on students to read orally one after the other” (222), Opitz and Rasinski note that round robin reading is a classroom strategy which has managed to thrive despite its negative label. Whether it has persisted because of tradition, classroom management, reading assessment, to save time, or not knowing what else to do (Opitz and Rasinski 84), it’s a detrimental reading practice which has dogged these at-risk readers from grade school to the high school classroom. Not only did I see the pain of round robin reading in action as I shadowed Reading Workshop students through a typical day of freshman classes, but I heard about it over and over as one student after another described the kind of oral reading that goes on at Daniel Webster. As Jasmine describes it, “In history class Mr. Collins would start off reading the
first paragraph and then he would call on someone. Then after they read a couple of paragraphs he would call on someone else. We’d go around the room.”

When looked at in the context of generic instruction, round robin reading can probably be considered one of the most harmful components of group learning. By providing students with a misguided sense of reading as a word-perfect activity, by causing unnecessary subvocalization, by hampering listening comprehension, and by instigating inattentive behaviors which can lead to discipline problems, it poses many problems for all students caught up in the circle of stop and go recitation (Opitz and Rasinski 6-7). The damage to struggling readers is more far reaching. Not only does it require these children to perform far above their individual reading levels, it can’t help but hasten the swing of the pendulum toward hatred of reading as word by stumbling word it humiliates them in front of their peers. Although used by well-meaning teachers to assess students while giving them what they consider to be valuable practice in oral reading, asking these struggling adolescents to read sections of text “cold” in front of the entire class only serves to underline their deficiencies.

So too did the seatwork they were often expected to complete independently as a follow-up to a group lesson they had failed to understand. Even as the work was assigned these students had the sinking feeling that here was something else that they couldn’t do. Their more competent classmates would do well perhaps, but not them. Paul remembers how getting this sort of an assignment felt:

The teacher would write these things on the board. It would be like “Read this and do these questions.” I would go back to my seat and there I was, all by myself and I didn’t know what to do. So I would just sit there and wait and everyone else would be finished and I would still have to read the whole thing for homework.
Kayla admits that she just pretended to do the work, knowing all the time that without having understood the reading she was destined to fail unless luck intervened. Teacher comments on her report card often point to a “problem with poor or inconsistent effort.” Is it plausible to think that the results of her pretending may have been misconstrued by teachers whose generic instruction didn’t meet her needs? It is surely plausible to accept that this uniform approach to instruction, touted as a solution to problems which arose from segregating readers by ability and achievement, has instead spawned new problems for Kayla and her Reading Workshop peers.

**Little Choice in Reading**

In *Variability not Disability* Roller talks of the importance of choice in effective reading instruction, particularly with struggling readers. If we believe as Roller does that meeting children’s individual needs in the context of a regular classroom setting is the key to developing successful readers, then choice is a mechanism which allows for such accommodation. Just as early language learning is highly successful because children pursue their own topics a majority of the time (G. Wells), choice in the reading classroom gives a diverse range of students the opportunity to rub shoulders with materials they can learn from. They want to read. They read. They become better readers by reading. This simple concept is not a new one. Almost twenty-five years ago *Becoming a Nation of Readers* pointed out that independent choice reading positively affects fluency. Then too, books by Atwell, Krogness, Rief, and Allen, to mention just a few, all point to the importance of giving students an opportunity to read on a level where they can meet success - and improve - as a reader. Yet none of Kayla’s teachers seem to have taken heed of this message. Instead they gave assignments for total class consumption, books which Kayla was incapable of reading on her
own. Indeed, it wasn't until her ninth grade Reading Workshop class that she remembers being given any kind of choice of reading materials in school; on the contrary she recalls being expected to march lock-step through texts which were invariably written well above her reading ability. Mired in classes where uniform instruction was the norm, she was required to read whatever was assigned, regardless of her ability to do so.

When Allington and Walmsley point out that "[a]ll children are entitled to the same literacy experiences, materials and expectations" (28), they surely do not mean to suggest that all children, regardless of ability, must be reading on the same page at the same time. Yet for Kayla that is exactly what happened. As the years passed and the difficulty level of the class texts increased, her frustration grew. How different her reading history might have been if her teachers had been familiar with the large body of research done by Clay and others which tells us that readers will show little or no improvement by reading materials written above their instructional level. How different it might have been for this at-risk reader if she had been given the opportunity to choose her own books at her own level. It is little wonder then that Kayla failed to grow as a reader. Little wonder that her positive feelings for reading diminished as day after day and year after year she faced words she could not unlock, pages she could not understand.

**Assigned Reading.** Many of the Reading Workshop students talk about the burden of assigned reading and of their changing opinion of reading itself. Starting in first grade, these students remember having to suffer through books that they could neither read nor understand, either individually or as members of the group. They talk of being forced to read, of plodding slowly through the book, trying without success to keep up with those around them. Children who previously saw reading as an enjoyable activity now talk of it with growing
disdain, perhaps surprised to discover that it is something they cannot do. "Well, I really hate reading now," says a rather vehement Kim. "But when I was little I liked it. I liked it because I knew how to do it." David talks of struggling with "just plain dull books," books the teacher made students read as a group. Mick, Carol, Patti, and Jasmine all speak of having to get through "boring book" after "boring book." Kim's words are particularly biting as she describes her feelings about assigned reading. "They didn't let us pick our own books. They gave us like stupid books to read. When they said 'read', I wouldn't read. I would just open the dumb book and look around and do nothing. Real dumb and stupid, that's what it was." As she sputters out her words she glares at me, as if daring this reading specialist to defend her turf. I don't, but hearing her use words like "real dumb" and "stupid" I wonder if it is the book or the reader herself that she is describing in such a negative way.

Not getting a rise out of me she continues: "And then they would say, 'You've got to go home tonight and read these pages now and read those pages tomorrow and then we will have a test on it.'" It's more than the reading itself that turns these students off to reading; it's the difficult and time-consuming work that goes with it, work that takes away any lingering joy there might have been in reading while emphasizing a struggling reader's deficiencies. Cody sees the fun of preschool reading gradually slipping away as teachers ask him to do more and more with his reading.

I used to love reading. My mom would bring me to the library. We would pick out a few books. I would be sitting there reading... As the years went by you had to read. They told you what to read. It started getting on the line of not being fun anymore because we had to read in order to get this and in order to get that. You have to read in order to get questions done on a chapter or take a test. It wasn't fun.
For Reading Workshop students the pressure to read frustration level text is exacerbated by the equally frustrating work that follows. Actually, the work that Cody describes can detract from the enjoyment of choice reading as well. Then too, there’s hardly an adolescent alive who, if given the opportunity, won’t complain about long and boring homework assignments and the reading that precedes it. The difference here, though, is that these struggling readers, over their heads in assigned reading, have something valid to complain about. If they can’t read the book, or if it takes forever to read and make sense of the assignment, then any follow-up activity will simply magnify their discomfort. And it does.

**Choice Reading**

On her own Kayla has wandered into the arena of choice - and with remarkable results. She is reading, she is understanding, and for the first time in many years she is seeing herself as a reader. Spurred on by instruction that finally helped her come to terms with “scary words” and anxious to keep pace with the literacy progress of her younger brother, she took her first tentative steps into choice reading. While sitting alone on the school bus she had time to read and she did. Then as a Reading Workshop student she was encouraged to do her choice reading in the high school setting, and in two short months she has “learned how to read.” She has become a reader, for once she sees herself as a reader she is one.

Unlike Kayla, who discovered the power of choice on her own, Frank and David have needed the Reading Workshop experience to unearth the importance of this educational practice. Among the weakest students in the group, both boys have suffered through years of reading materials written way over their heads. Using disdainful phrases like “boring,” “not interesting,” and a “waste of time”
to describe their previous experiences, nevertheless they cannot disguise their frustration at being asked to do something they simply are not capable of doing. Choice, however, has given each boy a new outlook on reading as they have been encouraged to select books they want to read and can read without the pressure of keeping up with their peers. In their words we can hear the despair of their reading histories slowly giving way to a glimmer of hope for the future.

David: I never got to choose my own books. By eighth grade I hated reading. I didn’t like the books that I got because they weren’t interesting. They were boring. Now I am starting to like reading. But sometimes I fall back to hate when I don’t get it. Easy books make me love it; real hard challenging ones make me hate it.

Frank: Choosing books is helping me with my reading. Because now I read the book. That’s new. It’s not boring. It’s interesting. We get to read a half hour by ourselves. I like that because we don’t get told what to do. If you are slower than the rest of the group you don’t get told you have to read this many pages. I read the pages pretty fast. I don’t know why. It is just easy. I know how to read better.

When he thinks about reading Sergio isn’t at the same place as either Kayla or David and Frank, but like his classmates he knows the difference that can come with choice reading. Comparing assigned reading to choice reading he says:

Reading is boring when you are told to read certain things. You don’t really want to read. If your teacher says to pick your own book, something you want to read, I think it is more interesting because you find something that you are going to be interested in. Not what the teacher thinks might be interesting. She already knows what the book is about, so we have to read it and know all the stuff she wants us to know. But if we read something we really like and we really want to know about it, it is more interesting. And then you don’t mind reading it. And you do.
Perhaps Sergio wants to be sure the reading consultant sitting across from him really understands the difference choice can make for a reader when he continues:

I don't hate all reading now. I hate reading when I'm being told to read. I hate it and I won't do it. Well, I might do it but I will read it and forget it. I won't care about it. If it is a "pick your own book" and you make sure you like it, I will probably read it. And I will probably like it too.

When given the opportunity to select his own book, when choosing wisely, Sergio feels and acts very differently about reading. Not only will he read the book but he will enjoy it and get something out of it. Listen as he reminisces about the first book he ever read on his own. He was in fourth grade. As he remembers it the teacher had said, "This month I am going to give you a free take - pick anything you want." Looking at all the "stuff" on the shelf, Sergio chose Charlotte's Web.

I loved that book. I don't know why. I think that it was the first book I picked out myself. I thought it wasn't stupid and I actually sat there and read it and took my time. I know I loved that book, but it was more than that. I knew I could read if I wanted to. Nobody said, "Sergio, come in and read. Come inside and read your book and do your project." I think I read one hundred pages in an hour and a half. Pretty cool. I felt like I had a responsibility, like I could do it myself. I didn't need people telling me what to do. That book really meant something.

Although some students confess to getting interested in an assigned book on occasion ("I had to read it and then I got interested in it," admits Alexis about Lyddie, a novel assigned by her fifth grade teacher), more often than not it is in and through a self-selected book that a struggling student becomes a reader. Choice can mean the difference between participation and avoidance as boredom gives way to interest and students read because they want to. Reading an
interesting book written at an appropriate level - and read at a self-directed pace - leads to engagement and understanding. It also leads to a sense of accomplishment as children begin to see themselves in a different light, as accomplished self-directed students rather than practiced failures.

Choice, though, isn’t something that happens naturally for these struggling readers. As Roller points out many of them choose books that they either do not want to read, cannot read, or both (43). Mick admits as much when he states, “I am not really good at choosing books. I don’t know why. A lot of the time I choose a book with not many pages in it and then I start reading it. But I won’t get through the first chapter and I think ‘This book is junk.’ So I put it away.”

Like Mick, Keith knows he isn’t good at picking out books either. With little experience under his belt, he is required to choose books in his Reading Workshop class, more often than not with poor results. “We have to choose our own books. Mrs. T. makes sure I pick one out. So I look at the cover and the back. Then if I don’t like it after about a week I pick out a different one. I do this all the time.” Both boys know that judging a book by its length and cover doesn’t usually work, but they seem unable to use any other strategies. Keith, however, has found a workable way out of the choice dilemma. He is currently reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, a book he admits to having read three or four times in past years. And why not? By now he sees the book as an old friend (“I like pretty much everything - the characters, the setting, the situations”), on the shelf to rescue him from the discomfort of yet another bad choice.

Jasmine understands the problems many of her classmates are having with choosing books they can and will read from start to finish. In her mind,

They don’t know where to start. They don’t know to read the back of the book, read a couple of pages, stick with the
book until you get hooked, until you get to a part where it connects with you. Not just read a page or two and find it boring and put it back on the shelf and not read it.

She used to be like Mick and Keith, picking and then abandoning book after "boring" book. Then over the years, by practicing the techniques a reading teacher had showed her, she has learned to choose books wisely. "When I was younger I wasn't too good at it. But as time went on and I got to pick my own books and I became interested in something that I actually liked, then that has made me better about wanting to read." The ability to choose books she wants to read has clearly affected her desire to read, an important step on the road to reading competence.

"Assigned Choice". When I asked the Reading Workshop students to tell me about the times they had been given the opportunity to choose their own reading materials, most, like Kayla, said that they had never been given the chance to pick out their own books. And for some that may have been true. Because choice reading is something that has had no formal place in our sending schools, it is legitimate to believe that a particular student's reading career might have been totally devoid of self-selection. But I also knew of classes and years in which choice had been a component of the curriculum, albeit a minor one. All Newsom students, for instance, had taken a one semester Reading Workshop class in seventh grade; then too, in the same school I recalled that Mrs. O'Brien, a beloved teacher whom some of the Reading Workshop students had been lucky enough to have, had always included a unit of choice reading as part of her fourth grade curriculum. In addition, I knew that both sending towns had at one time or another instituted a Sustained Silent Reading period. Such a reading activity may not have been consistent from year to year; but nonetheless on occasion Drop Everything and Read, or something like it, had surfaced during
most of these adolescents' tenures in elementary and middle school.

At first I was tempted to believe that this omission was simply an oversight on the part of these readers; their experiences with choice had no doubt been so few that such memories had been overshadowed by all the assigned reading they had struggled with. But I knew that when a researcher analyzes interview data what has been omitted in an interview session can sometimes become as important as what has been included. So I pondered what I had not heard. And I thought about what I knew of these readers and of choice reading in general. I thought back on Gonzalez’s description of her classroom SSR as a “battle zone” (Allen and Gonzalez), then reflected on how this young teacher’s experience related to what I had seen of Daniel Webster’s weekly half hour Reading Break. A time set aside for pleasure reading, Reading Break was more often than not a time when students like these did everything in their power to get out of this “assigned choice.” They might go to the nurse, take a suddenly very important trip to guidance, wander the halls on their way to the bathroom on the far side of the building. Or they might pull out a book that had been stowed in their backpack for the past six weeks, slam it to their desk and then fall asleep on the unturned pages. I thought of Mrs. T.’s Reading Workshop class, where after three months of being given the opportunity to choose a book for independent reading students like Mick and Keith continued to resist that task. I thought of the discomfort I felt when sitting in on a Reading Workshop silent reading session with these adolescents, trying my best to enjoy *Animal Dreams* as Paul squeaked his sneaker in wide circles on the floor and Kim shifted noisily from one end of the couch to the other.

Then it dawned on me. For many of these struggling readers, choice is no choice at all. Indeed, it is no better than an assignment. The very act of reading is
so abhorrent to them that "assigned choice" is the only choice they will make. And they won't do it willingly. Not until these struggling readers move beyond their histories of reading failure, not until they free themselves as Kayla has done, will choice be a valid and unencumbered option for them. For some, however, it is painfully clear that this day may never come.

**A View of Reading Which Emphasizes Decoding Over Understanding**

Kayla's frustration with reading began when she got to first grade. Previous to that reading was an enjoyable social process she participated in with her mother, as together they looked at pictures and shared stories. It was Atwell-Vasey's "act of communion, grounded in love and relation" (x). As a part of this reading experience Kayla remembered learning little words, and she felt "great" about her progress. But in first grade something changed. Learning to read was very different from what her preschool experiences had taught her about reading. Words rather than meaning became the focus of reading instruction as she struggled without success to sound out and spell harder and harder words. Reading was something she was expected to do on her own, not something she shared with others. Understanding, once the emphasis of her reading experiences, became subservient to decoding and was ultimately lost as she fell farther and farther behind her classmates in the skill and drill atmosphere in which she found herself. For Kayla, reading had been transformed into a process of unlocking words rather than making sense of stories, a common thread woven through the reading histories of each and every student I interviewed.

It's a thread which appears again and again as researchers look at what has gone wrong with reading instruction for at-risk readers in our country. Cunningham and Allington, in describing failed classrooms, talk of reading programs where the reading and understanding of real books takes a back seat to
the skill and drill focus that is part and parcel of phonics and/or basal instruction. They note that children in these programs are expected to read - and construct meaning - only when they have finished their seat work or when they are at home (14). A year later Allington joins with Walmsley in calling for the rethinking of literacy programs in America. Both researchers see a preponderance of schools where arbitrary skills sequences, rather than reading and writing, drive instruction, schools where poor readers experience a curriculum short in understanding and long in word recognition (8, 28).

Dionisio, a middle school remedial reading teacher, touches close to home when she describes middle school readers who, like Kayla and the rest of the Daniel Webster Reading Workshop students, have relied so long on drilled strategies that they have lost the notion of reading as meaning making (9). At-risk readers it seems are expected to struggle through the nonsense of meaningless worksheets, the surest way, in Smith’s mind, to make learning to read impossible, the surest way to develop and sustain a group of “lifers” (vii). Small wonder that our Reading Workshop classes are bursting at the seams.

Too Much Emphasis on Decoding. That reading is all about unlocking words can be seen in the responses Reading Workshop students have given over the years to my request to “tell me about a good reader that you know.” “Mrs. T.,” “my mother,” “the girl who sits next to me in English class” - their answers vary but the portraits are one and the same when they describe these competent readers. “A good reader is somebody who reads huge books and does it every day” (Ted). “They can sound out words and split them into different syllables” (John). “They never have to ask for help” (Theresa). “A good reader is able to read out loud fluently” (Alexis). Nowhere in these descriptions is any mention made of understanding; nowhere is a good reader seen as one who gets meaning
from print. This fact shouldn't surprise us; after all, when telling about their first years of reading instruction these students recall class time spent on identifying words rather than on comprehending text.

Like many Reading Workshop students, Sierra was introduced to formal reading instruction when she went to kindergarten. Her mother had read to her as a preschooler after dinner each night, but it was in kindergarten where she began to really learn how to read. For her this meant learning "the facts of reading," that is "sounding out words and putting words together." In Sierra's mind, learning to read is quite straightforward. "At first you learn the alphabet and learn what the sounds are. Then you put sounds together to make words. Then you can read word after word." Unlike Sierra, Jasmine had little preschool reading experience, but her memories of learning to read are strikingly similar, even though one child lived in New Hampshire and the other in first Mississippi and then Florida. For Jasmine learning how to read was about "pronouncing all the words." Starting in kindergarten,

teachers put a couple of words on the board and helped us sound them out. They would sound them out with us. That is how I remember learning to read, by sounding them out. Oh, and by learning the letters of the alphabet. Then as time went on they would give you the little tiny books and you were reading out loud in the classroom. That is pretty much how I started reading. We did this from kindergarten to first and second grade.

Eric, Mick, and Christian all attended kindergarten too; but due to "short attention span" (Mick and Christian), "attention getting behavior" (Mick), and "low language skills" (Eric), each was assigned to a year in readiness, a gift of time meant to support them in their slower than anticipated academic development. Remembering little about their kindergarten experiences, each boy instead points to his year in readiness class as his introduction to formal reading..
instruction. As Eric recalls, he went to readiness specifically to work on his reading. "Readiness was to help you with your reading. They boosted your reading grade up by saying out different parts of speech and words and stuff."

Mick remembers the emphasis on word attack as well:

Well, we used to sit at the table and every month they would give us this packet and it was about this tiger, this bear, this parrot, and this rhino, and they were best friends and everything. There were pictures and there were words, and there was something showing us how to pronounce them. Like there would be a word and then in parentheses like in a dictionary it would tell you how to pronounce it.

Although Christian thinks that he learned to read in first grade, he sees readiness as a head start. "Well, that was probably my starting point. They basically taught you on your nouns and how to spell words." Along with this, he remembers being given books and being told to "read this. They would sit with you and they would point to a word and tell you to read the sentence and sound it out if you didn't know what it was." Rather than an extra boost, the boys' readiness experiences may have simply prepared them for more of the same in the first grade classroom, the place where Kayla had come face to face with her word attack nemesis for the first time.

Although all the students interviewed experienced decoding instruction as an introduction to reading, some wondered if this was really what reading was all about. After telling me about all the time spent pronouncing letters and words in first and second grade, Paul, almost as an afterthought, added: "Oh, by third grade we could read normally." "Normal reading" began, it seemed to him, only after this sort of reading was over and done with. Like Paul, Sergio is not sure if reading was what he was doing when he thinks back on his early reading instruction. "First grade they would try to teach you to read. You are starting to
learn to sound out the words. If we needed help with the words, the teacher would help us. You would read, then stop. You really wouldn’t read.” Cody is more definitive in giving his opinions of his kindergarten and first grade reading lessons, times when “you go around to all these different places where there are tape recorders and listen to sounds for T.” For him this reading instruction wasn’t reading at all. “In kindergarten and first grade we were just learning the words. We never really read. They just taught us the sounds of the letters and we were supposed to put them in sentences.” When I asked him how this type of instruction worked for him, this ebullient teenager seemed at a sudden loss of words. Then he said with a sigh: “Not very good. Before, when my older sister was in first grade, she was trying to teach me how to read because she was having so much fun with it. She had a different teacher in first grade and she learned how to read. I didn’t.” Although he wasn’t sure what the difference was between his sister’s first grade instruction and his, he did know one important thing. “She liked it. But for me it wasn’t fun. She learned to read in first grade, but I didn’t learn until second grade when we finally picked up on how to read. In second grade is when we started to really do reading.”

Unlike Cody’s sister, who was learning how to read in first grade, these Reading Workshop students were learning how to unlock words. Seen as a prerequisite to reading, decoding skills needed to be worked on and mastered before “real reading” could begin. Although Paul, Sergio, and Cody showed some understanding that there was more to reading than sounding out words, their inability to master the code precluded them from getting to the real thing. Skill lesson followed skill lesson, worksheet followed worksheet, and still they struggled. “By fifth or sixth grade I really hated reading,” says Kayla. No wonder. And she was not alone.
Too Little Emphasis on Comprehension. With all the emphasis on decoding in reading programs, it comes as no surprise that comprehension instruction is given too little time in many elementary and middle school classrooms, particularly with our at-risk readers. As Allington and Cunningham note, children who are placed in high reading groups have more opportunities to read; and their instruction is often more comprehension focused. While children in lower achievement groups are mired in the basics of isolated skill and drill and oral round robin reading, their more competent peers participate in higher level reading activities which facilitate the development of independent comprehending readers. The achieving student focuses on understanding; the struggling reader works on oral reading accuracy (17). In a class like Kayla’s, where group instruction is the norm, struggling readers have all they can do to recognize the unknown words in the text assigned to them; comprehension is usually the farthest thing from their minds. When understanding is called for, more often than not it is a process that is “caught rather than taught” (Pearson and Johnston). That comprehension was not a high priority for these students became clear in the course of my interviewing. As the twenty-two Reading Workshop students shared their reading histories with me, I heard very little mention of comprehension. In fact only once during my first round of interviews did I hear a student allude to understanding as an integral part of the reading process. As Jasmine had told of learning to read with tiny books, she had also touched upon a comprehension task she was expected to perform. After having students read the books aloud in class, “the teachers would have questions on them about what happened in the book.” My reading consultant curiosity finally got the better of me, so during the eighth taping session, with only four students left to meet for the first time, I finally asked. First Mark and then Sergio had
shared the now familiar story of how teachers had instructed them to read by
telling them how to sound out words. “Did they ever talk to you about
understanding what you read?” I queried, my voice no doubt tinged with a trace
of dismay at what I had not been hearing. “I don’t really know,” replied Sergio.
“They would give us three questions and you would have to try and figure it
out. You would have to go back and understand what we were reading.”

Like Galda, Cullinan, and Strickland (qtd. in Harris and Hodges 207), I
define reading as “transacting with a text to create meaning. . . bringing
meaning to a text in order to create meaning from it.” For me, then, meaning
making - or comprehension - is the primary focus of the reading process, the very
heart of reading. It is clear that both Jasmine and Sergio - and their teachers - are
looking at comprehension in a very different light from me, as simply
remembering what is read rather than truly making sense of text. Nevertheless,
even this limited view of comprehension, and the teaching that goes along with
it, is one that gets shortchanged when these adolescents talk about their
experiences with learning to read. Understanding, it seems, is expected from
them rather than taught to them; in truth, more often than not comprehension is
used as an assessment tool to measure a strategy that most students have to pick
up on their own. As Christian recalled, even in the early grades testing was the
primary function of comprehension.

They would read the book out loud and they would say
questions out loud and you would have to write them on a
piece of paper. They wouldn’t give you a paper with the
questions on it. All you would have to write was the answer.

For Reading Workshop students, of course, their inability to do this is yet
another roadblock in their perilous reading journeys. And it’s not that these
readers don’t know when they don’t understand or remember; like Kayla, who
just couldn’t “tell what the whole story was about,” they are all too aware of this deficiency but feel powerless to do anything about it. As Cody explains it, “I have trouble comprehending what I am reading. Like if I read a bunch of pages, I can’t really remember all that much about it. I just don’t get it. I don’t understand it.” When I asked how he knew he wasn’t understanding, he had a ready reply.

Because at the end of the chapter we have questions. Between chapter one and two we have questions. I can’t answer them. I have to go back and read the whole thing over and over. And then we have open notebook tests. I fail every single one of them.

Sergio too admits that comprehension is a struggle for him, that he “can read a whole book and the only thing that I can remember is the end. Unless I read the whole book in less than an hour, then I will forget it. I am not very good at remembering.”

During the second round of interviews I asked the students if anybody had ever actually taught them how to understand what they were reading. Bob recalled learning about comprehension as a first grader.

Well, there were worksheets on the book you picked, a different worksheet for each book. The books were small. After you read it the worksheet would be like two or three questions, questions about what happened to the ball or something. You would write down what happened so you would understand the book.

Sierra didn’t remember getting comprehension instruction until her eighth grade study skills class. Even then it would be a stretch to label her teacher’s lessons as instruction. “He taught us about remembering what you read and being able to understand it. He would show us movies and have quizzes after. Or tell us stories and have quizzes on that after. Then a big quiz or test at the end.” Christian’s brush with comprehension instruction was even more revealing:
“Teach us about understanding what we read? Oh, yeh, they would tell me if I didn’t understand it. Then I would read it over and over until I got it in my head.”

If there was one way that teachers taught these students to comprehend, as Christian suggested it was to tell them to “read it over and over again. Read it until you understand it.” In most cases, however, this strategy proved about as effective for these struggling readers as the teacher’s admonition to “just sound it out” when they came upon an unknown word. Reading and rereading text written on a student’s frustration level usually leads to just one thing for the reader, more frustration. Sergio remembers having to go back every time he was asked to answer a comprehension question. “I would read it but I could never remember it. Then the teacher would help me read it over again or whatever.”

“Did this help you?” I asked him. “Not really. But I just studied at home and after a while I started remembering.” Sergio and Cody also tell of learning to write things down, of taking down what Cody describes as “the important stuff.”

“Like now,” says Sergio, “when I read a book I like to write little notes down. I am a little bit better about remembering when I read a book. But still not that good.”

Sometimes it was the teacher herself rather than the method of instruction that worked to help these students improve their comprehension skills. After a shaky start in first grade, Kristy had a second grade teacher who in her words “really helped me a lot with understanding.” As she remembers it,

I was slower than everyone else and always behind and I couldn’t comprehend the book. She told me not to rush myself. I would get kind of nervous because I was behind and I would try to read the book faster. But actually I was going slow because I had to go back and read the book over. So she told me to slow down, to go at my own pace and not care that anybody was ahead of me. And just try and under-
"So the comprehension part, did that improve?" I asked her. "Yeh, it did a little bit," she responded. And then she added in a quieter voice, "But not really."

"Did your teacher have any other suggestions?" I continued. "Not that I can remember."

Looking at the learning experiences of these Reading Workshop students, it's no wonder that for many of them comprehension remains some mystical process that can't be taught. In Kristin's opinion, "I don't think someone could really teach you that." Kayla echoes this thought when she says, "It's something I have learned to do by myself. When I was little my mom used to ask me questions about the book. Then maybe I began to ask questions myself. I developed into it." And Cody, when reflecting on his lackluster comprehension instruction, doesn't seem to put much faith in the efforts of his teachers either. "I think you get it as you grow up."

**Ineffectual Teacher - Student Connections**

In Kayla's school experiences, nobody has lived up to her mother's expertise as a teacher. She hasn't been "lucky" enough to have a classroom teacher who has shown her mother's attributes of sensitive caring, patient supporting, unflagging encouragement, and quiet understanding. Nor has any classroom matched the comfort and safety of her living room, a place where to this day Kayla feels valued, involved, and empowered as a reader and learner. Although we know that all children can benefit from being an integral part of a responsive community of learners, it seems that at-risk students are impacted the most when they miss out on such a positive teacher - student relationship. Palmer points out that "good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connection among themselves, their subjects,
and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves” (11). In most of the classrooms they’ve been a part of, frustrated Reading Workshop students have felt a sense of alienation as teachers, often without knowing it, have failed to develop that classroom connectedness which empowers all students to learn and grow.

Disconnectedness. A drop-out on his sixteenth birthday, Eric is the first of these students to live up to the future the at-risk label foreshadows; likewise he was one of the first to sense the disconnectedness between himself, his teachers, and the classroom curriculum. As early as readiness he remembers “bad experiences” with learning, times when “the teachers didn’t really want to explain how to read.” His first grade teacher, a “weird lady with white hair . . . was always ahead of us. She wouldn’t sound anything out for us.” There seems to have been no sensitivity to or understanding of Eric’s language needs, no effective support or encouragement as this “ghost” of a reader, all but invisible in the classroom, slipped farther and farther into his nightmare of failure. And things didn’t get any better. Estranged year after year from teachers who “go way ahead even when you raise your hand and ask them to slow down,” teachers who “go to the next chapter when you are still writing things down,” Eric never was able to feel that sense of connection so vital to successful learning. He was never able to experience success in classrooms whose curricula precluded any meaningful involvement on his part.

It is interesting that nine years later Eric had finally met teachers who seemed more in touch with him and his needs. Only two months into his freshman year he tells of a teacher who has encouraged him to read his text out loud, having realized that for Eric “out loud is better than in your head because in your head you lose whatever you are reading.” And for the first time he is
working with a teacher who “goes slow. He doesn’t jump ahead like some teachers, like going to the next chapter so quick.” Unlike his earlier teachers, here at last were two who understood his needs and who reached out to support and encourage him in his struggle to learn. By then, however, it was too late.

When students think of teachers they haven’t been able to connect with, more often than not they remember teachers who, like most of Kayla and Eric’s teachers, failed to give them help when it was needed. David recalls one teacher who “never really helped. Like she wanted me to do a math problem. I told her I didn’t get it and she said ‘Do the math problem.’ I kept on telling her ‘I don’t get it,’ but she kept on saying ‘Do it.’ That made me mad.” Kristin describes a particularly annoying teacher who told her to “‘do that by yourself. You know how to do that.’ We had to do everything on our own. If we had questions we had to ask somebody else in the class. He never gave us any help. He was weird.” Christian tells of the meanest teacher he’s ever had, one who “yelled too much, was really old (like 70) and was always in a bad mood. And she never was there to help us.” Kristy also recalls a teacher who would not help, but in addition her memory brings into focus other aspects of the disconnection that can occur between a powerful teacher and a vulnerable child. She is telling me about a first grade teacher who “never really liked me.” “Why didn’t she like you?” I asked.

I don’t think she liked me because she never really helped me out. Every time I would ask her something on any subject she always had a negative attitude towards me. She would use a really mean voice and sound like she didn’t care. And that year a kid kept on bugging me. She just told him to say sorry to me, but she never really stopped it.

A teacher’s voice and demeanor, her daily moods, the way she addresses a young child’s simple request and responds to a plea for help - all have a subtle
but lasting impact on the development of a meaningful teacher - student relationship.

**Connectedness.** It is somehow comforting that Kristy, a student who was so impacted by a teacher who failed to forge a connection with her as a shy and quiet first grader, was also blessed to know one who did quite the opposite. Kristy’s vivid description of Mrs. Ruman inspires me to hope that every struggling reader has the opportunity to learn from this kind of teacher.

> She was my second grade teacher. She’d sit me aside from the others. She helped me a lot on understanding and she’d help me personally too. Sometimes we’d sit at her desk - I can still remember that her hands always smelled like grapefruit. She’d have that for snack. Sometimes I’d see her peel it. Or we’d be sitting at a table and she would ask every student if they had trouble, if they understood what they were reading. At that time, I wasn’t shy and I told her that I was having trouble and I needed help. Sometimes it was the reading. Sometimes she’d tell me I needed spaces in my writing.

Sergio is also fortunate to have memories of this sort of teacher. Looking back on his third grade year he paints a vivid portrait of Mrs. Lassiter, his favorite teacher:

> She was a good teacher. If I needed any help, if I needed anything she would give me a hand. If I got in trouble or something she would be like a good friend. If I needed to talk to her about anything, I could talk to her. She gave me confidence. She told me I could do it and not to worry. “You are just having trouble with the word; I know you can do it.” There were three reading groups. I was in number three, the worst. She said not to worry about it. “First and second doesn’t mean anything. Just because you are younger and slower doesn’t mean anything.” She motivated me. She gave me confidence in myself. “Just give yourself a little while and you will be doing better than anyone else.”

Mick points out the importance of teachers who are fair in their dealings with
students. These kind of teachers understand kids. They know it. Like Mrs. Wilson, she is like the Mom of Newsom. Everybody knows her. Everybody loves her because she understands what we say. A lot of the teachers always say “That is not true.” But not her. She always listens to both sides of the story and then she will listen to reason.

Kindness, fairness, offering help, giving encouragement - these are teacher attributes that Reading Workshop students point to as valued in interview after interview.

Alexis: She was nice. She didn’t yell at me.

Bob: She encouraged me. “You can do this. It is not that hard. I will help you with the first couple of questions. Then I know you can do it yourself.”

Kristin: She was nice to everyone and she was fair. Some teacher are wicked unfair and favor certain kids. I don’t like that. She liked us all.

David: She helped me out whenever I needed help and stuff. I would read a book and I would ask for help and she would help me with the word. She did this with everybody.

Paul also appreciated teachers who let students see their human side, who connected with their students on a personal level.

I like teachers who don’t really fool around but once in a while they make you laugh and joke around and help you with your work. I don’t like teachers that just say “Do your homework; it is due tomorrow. Now get to work.” In some classes teachers talk to you. They ask “What did you do this weekend?” They still get the work done. They do the exact same thing as the teachers that tell you to get your homework done but they make it more fun. Not really talking loud but letting us whisper to our friends who are sitting right next to us.

When thinking of teachers they had found success with as learners, Sierra and
Kim both pointed to individuals who, like Paul's teacher, were able to make learning fun. Sierra told of playing games to learn, hands-on activities where "you are actually doing something with what you need to learn. Then you may remember the game that taught you how to do it." She also saw the importance of projects as a follow-up to reading; "it's fun and they will help you understand the book more." As Kim recalled, one of her favorite teachers used to love Indians. So on fun days we always had this Festival out back and people dressed up like Indians and stuff. I remember for Christmas she gave everyone four pencils with our names on it in this little pouch. She was so nice. She helped us all.

Along with seeing an effective teacher as a kind and caring person to connect with, Cody's memories of his favorite teacher include the comfortable reading environment she set up for her students.

We would always get pillows to sit on and put our heads on. My friends and I would make a humungous couch. For the four of us. These things were like four or five feet long, about five inches up from the floor. She brought those in for us to have a comfortable place to read. She thought that would make us all read better because we would be comfortable. If you are not comfortable you are squirming and you are not concentrating on the book, like shifting around. Then you can't get into your book. You can't read it.

"Did this work for you?" I asked. "Yeh. It was like a bed. It was nice and comfortable." Cody paused for a moment, then returned to the reality of most middle and high school classrooms. "But now we are just sitting at desks reading a chapter and taking notes down. It is just not as fun."

These descriptions, so unlike the picture of Kristy's unfeeling first grade teacher, can't help but bring to mind Kayla's mother, sitting in the warmth and comfort of a safe place and giving her child the caring, personalized support.
every learner deserves and needs. These descriptions tell of teachers who can make a crucial difference in the lives of children, children who through no fault of their own seem destined to wage a never-ending battle with reading, a battle which some of them, like Eric, are bound to lose. These descriptions tell of teachers who, for this group of "unlucky" Reading Workshop students, have been too few and far between.
CHAPTER FIVE

MIND JOURNEYS: GOING NOWHERE IN YOUR READING

I spent many hours observing and scrutinizing the work of elementary students identified for Chapter One services. The profiles of many of these children - thirty percent or more - troubled us. These were children who successfully read words from word lists on comprehension inventories. They were able to decode words accurately with acceptable pronunciation. Some even read fluently. Yet after they read, many were unable to tell us what the passages meant. These children didn't know when they were comprehending. They didn't know when they were not comprehending. Many didn't know what they were supposed to comprehend when they read. Others didn't seem to know that text is supposed to mean something . . . Increasingly we became aware of a growing group of students who could decode words, but couldn't really understand what they read.

Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmerman, Mosaic of Thought, 1997, pp. 18-19

I am observing a fifth grade reading class. In order to help students visualize what's going on in Gary Paulsen's Hatchet, Irene has suggested to her twenty-three students that each of them sketch a picture of what they see in their minds as she reads this adventure story aloud to them. She has handed out large manila paper and colored pencils to each child. As she begins to read, the students first listen intently, then pick up their pencils and begin to draw. Quickly their papers are filled with lean tos, trees, birds, a young boy sitting alone on a large rock, a crashed plane burrowed into the field next to him. Colorful images blossom on desks around the room as Irene continues to pull her students into Paulsen's fictitious world. Over in the corner, I notice a sullen boy sitting motionless and silent, staring into space. He has yet to pick up a pencil. As his classmates continue to embellish their pictures, I venture towards his
desk. "Where is this story taking you?" I ask him in a discreet whisper. "Nowhere," he grumbles to me. "Nowhere at all."

One of the biggest problems we face in working with struggling adolescent readers is their total disengagement from text. Like the children in Keene's study, many have learned to successfully unlock unknown words. Some are capable of flying through a page of text fluently. Yet by and large these students read passively, believing it seems that understanding is something that simply happens in the course of reading, though usually not for them. Unaware of the mind journeys on which reading can take them (Keene and Zimmerman, 28), of the reader's world there for the taking, they more often than not see reading as a dead end street, a pointless process that goes nowhere. Mick, a tall, lanky, ADD adolescent with a sharp tongue and a quick wit, has struggled with the mechanics of reading all his life; and it is only recently that he has begun to realize that there may be more to reading than unlocking words and filling in the blanks. Daring to venture away from his long held "What's the point?" stance, his words paint a portrait of a young man wrestling with the ambivalence he feels about reading.

**MICK'S PROFILE**

You'll probably find that talking to students about reading is confusing. The answers you get depend on who you talk to, the type of kid. I am the type of kid who hates reading. I don't like it because it is boring to me. I feel there is no point to it, but I know it is going to be with me for the rest of my life so I am dealing with it. When I was little, back then before I went to school, I didn't read. Oh, there was the occasional time with Pop walking in, reading a book and then leaving. But I never really sat down and read with anybody else, unless you count the one time my dad read me a book. I only remember that one time. He read me *Abby YoYo* or something; I can't remember the
exact title. It was this book about this big giant guy that comes in. He was a giant and all these people were afraid of him. Then this kids starts singing this song about Abby Yo Yo, and Abby Yo Yo and the kid become friends. I liked that book. I thought it was cool because I was a giant back then too. I wasn’t really, but in my mind I was.

I don’t remember much about reading in kindergarten. The only time the teachers would read to us then would be during nap time. Story time during nap time. Why are people reading stories when you are supposed to be sleeping? I just sat there and looked at the pictures. Or the other kids and I would fall asleep. Of course I needed that time to nap. It was called nap time. It was one of those cases where reading seemed pointless to me.

Then came readiness. I was getting ready to go to school and first grade, and two weeks before first grade I got this phone call. The “two week phone call” we called it. The school called and said, “Oh, your son’s not capable of going to first grade. He needs to go to readiness because we feel he is not prepared.” My parents weren’t too happy, but I didn’t know anything about it. I was just in school. Readiness was awesome I thought, at least until we started doing work. At first all we did was fingerpaint. Then it started getting confusing, when we were basically starting to read. Doing all the vowels and everything was easy. It was hard when you started getting into bigger words. It never made sense to me.

I didn’t really like first grade that much. In first grade we had to stick with the same vowel and letter stuff until everybody understood it. It was just more of the same. That’s when reading really started to get boring. It just wasn’t as interesting as everybody had made it out to be to me. Kids would get going, get these books and they’d be reading and saying how much they liked these books and everything. I would get this book and I’d read the first couple of pages of it. I’d figure it was pretty boring because I really couldn’t see anything in my head like I could see on the TV screen. I figured why
read when you can just go home and watch everything on TV. I guess I thought to myself that it is better to see a picture in front of my eyes rather than just words. People made reading out to be something you are going to need in life. But back then I figured I wasn’t going to need it in life. What was the point? I could watch TV instead.

By second grade my reading was pretty bad. I just didn’t care for it. I didn’t like the idea of actually taking up time to do it. Most kids would be on the second grade reading level, and I would probably still be under the first grade reading level and all that. I’d hear about how some of my friends would even be on the fifth grade reading level, and here I would still be shuffling through picture books. Everybody else would like be on these thick stories with over 100 pages in them, and I figured 100 pages was way too much for me to read. I figured if I couldn’t do it, why do it at all? I felt I had better things to do. I remember liking the field trips though, like the Rocky Shore trip. We went to the ocean and we got to dig around in the rocks. We got to make our own T-shirts with sponge paints. It was awesome. Just the idea of going some place during school hours and seeing something new. That is different from sitting in school and reading words. I don’t think that trip had anything to do with reading and writing. I think it had something to do with getting away from it.

I have had extra help in reading my entire life. I was basically one of those kids that always needed help. I guess you could say that I was lazy a lot, and I just didn’t understand anything. The problem I had was every time I read, I would be thinking of something totally different. My head would be full of something I had done before. I would still be reading the words but the words wouldn’t be processing. I would be concentrating so much on what I was thinking before that my mind wouldn’t keep up with the words. I didn’t understand what I read; it just didn’t cross me. After first grade I started going to Mrs. Curtis every day. She helped out. She would give me work I understood. Some of the other work teachers gave me was like “Huh? I just don’t
understand it." Everything was so confusing to me. So they took me to her and she pumped some sense into me. I went to her until seventh grade.

If you ask me when I started reading I would say first grade. When I really started reading, reading by choice, was in middle school. I'm not sure why. I just decided to read for myself. In seventh grade everybody had Reading Workshop. Up to then we weren't reading much. But in that class we had to read all the time, just read. Then we would talk. Like we read Banner in the Sky. It was about some kid who was climbing a mountain that his father climbed in some Austrian country. Mrs. Love would draw a mountain, and we would do this game to see who was the first one to the top of the mountain. She would ask questions about the book and what happened, then we would all talk and explain what we understood about the book. After we talked, we got to move up the mountain. I had two other teachers trying to help me that year too, ones I got along better with than any of my other teachers. Basically what they said was "Why don't you just read and see what happens? See how you feel." And then when I said "I still don't want to read!" they said, "Well, you have to." So I thought I might just as well try. It wasn't by choice; but I actually started thinking about things longer, thinking about the events and people in the story. I don't know how. I just started doing it. It might have been through school or I might have just decided to figure things out on my own. I might have gotten there through imagination.

Now when I read I can picture the event happening in my head. Probably not the way the story is making it out to be, but I have a picture in my head of what I am reading and what it seems like. It is one of those things that happens when you really don't know it. You do it but you don't realize it. In English class we just got done reading Of Mice and Men. It's about two best friends. There was a part at the end where one of the friends killed a woman. The book was saying how he was shaking her around and all of a sudden her neck snapped. I could see what he was doing to her. In my head I could picture that
happening to her. Now when I read I always have a picture in my head, even if it is not
about the book. It may be of something else. If the book is boring another picture will come
into my head. Then I will be reading, I will be looking at the words but not really reading.
I know when the book starts to lag because my mind starts to go to other things. For me a
book is boring when it doesn’t get to the point, if it just sits there and describes boring
situations. It gets interesting when it has you sitting on the edge of your seat and getting
all psyched up, ready for what happens next. I'll start reading a book, and if I can picture
things in my head about it then it will usually trip my trigger. If I feel it is pretty boring
then I’ll just put it down.

Books are getting better I guess. The last couple of books I have read seem pretty
interesting. Like that Deathwatch book I thought was pretty good. It started off and really
had me thinking, thinking through the entire book, like what was going to happen next or
what something really looks like. I don’t know why, maybe it’s maturity. It’s one of those
things you really can’t explain. You know how sometimes you feel like an adult? Like
when your parents leave for a while and you have the house to yourself. You feel like you
are the boss. You feel like “Yeh, I'm running the place now.” Sometimes then I just pick
up a book and I say to myself, “Hey, I’m reading!” That’s a good feeling. But it doesn’t
happen that much.

Most of the time reading is a pretty passive thing. Nothing really goes on.
Nothing. Well, maybe you’re doing something but it’s just not interesting. You are just
sitting there and reading words. You are looking at a bunch of letters and paragraphs and
sentences. You just read. It is pretty basic. It’s boring. It’s different for these people that
actually like to read. They get a kick out of it. Like some of these nerdy kids. They really
get into it. They like to read, read, read. I really don’t know how people get into reading
anyway. That’s what I’m still wondering. How can someone sit around for hours and
read words all day? I couldn’t do that. I am the type of person that has to keep moving
Some people, like my mom, she can sit there for 48 hours and read a book. I could probably sit there for an hour and read a book, but I would have to stop every twenty minutes and move around and do something else.

All little kids want to learn to read. It's just that when you get there it's not that great. I would probably be reading all the time if I liked it. But why do something that you don't like, that hasn't been fun from the beginning? I know reading is important. I have already accepted that. You need reading to do basically anything. You get a letter in the mail, you look for a job and have to read job applications. You read something every five seconds, you can't help it. You see a word and you read it. Even if you don't really mean to do it, you are doing it. It just happens. It is not something like it is a pain in my ass to try to get rid of because I am not trying to get rid of it. I am going to learn more about it, but I am not going to put aside everything and just work on reading for the rest of my life. I'm still not sure how reading will fit into my life. I won't know until I get there.

The Roots of Mick's Ambivalence: His Early Reading Experiences

Reading is an enigma for Mick. When he closes his final interview by telling me how confused I will be as I listen to the stories of twenty-two Reading Workshop students, how “different kids will tell you different things about reading,” my researcher's intuition tells me to keep a close watch on how confusing dealing with his reading history has been for him. And I am right. On one hand, Mick knows the importance of reading; after all, from the early grades people have been telling him that it is “something you are going to need in life.” It's something you have to do all the time, something you need “to do basically anything.” On the other hand, though, through most of his academic career reading has seemed pointless, an activity that has taken up much of his time but has never really made sense to him. Indeed, for this adolescent reading by and
large has been pure drudgery, a never-ending struggle to master words and text which have had little or no connection to him or his life. “I’ve spent all this time on it. What’s in it for me?” he seems to be asking. He has other questions as well. Why is it that his mother, not to mention those “nerdy” kids he has to deal with in school, can sit and read for hour after hour while he can barely get through a couple of pages without being bored? What’s going on for them and not for him? And what is there about reading that can make you feel so grown up and in charge of your life? Just what has he been missing all these years?

It is only in the past few years that books have “gotten better,” that novels like *Of Mice and Men* and *Deathwatch* have begun to interest him as he has begun to visualize characters and events in his head. It is only recently that Mick has been hooked by a book, actively engaged in making sense of text. But even that new development is a puzzlement to Mick, for where do these pictures come from? What exactly happens in order for a reader to take these mind journeys? And why do most books still lead to dead ends for him? To understand the roots of Mick’s ambivalence, of the mixed feelings he has towards reading, it is important to look at his early reading experiences.

**Reading at Home.** According to Butler and Clay, “the most valuable preschool preparation for school learning is to love books, and to know that there is a world of interesting ideas in them” (qtd. in Clay 29). Early on, children who are read to at home can discover for themselves the excitement of venturing into the reader’s world, a magical place where characters and settings come alive through the interaction of mind and text, a place where everyday lives and ideas are forever expanding. Early on, they can experience for themselves a love of story which motivates children to want to learn how to read. And early on they can think to themselves, “If reading is so interesting I want to be able to do it all
by myself."

Most of the Reading Workshop students had once harbored such a thought; and like Alexis and Kayla, they poignantly recall the joy reading held for them as preschoolers, short-lived perhaps but there nonetheless. Aaron and Carol talk of the fun they had listening to stories told by parents and grandparents. "I liked it a lot," Aaron tells me in his matter-of-fact way. "I liked all the stories my parents read to me." "My grandfather and grandmother, they'd always sit down and read with me," reminisces Carol. "It was so nice. I think reading with my family really helped me out a lot." Kristin remembers the flow she experienced when she, her brother, and her mother would "get into" a story together (Romano 190).

My mom used to go to the library and get us books that had just the pictures. We used to sit there and make up our own story. Then my mom always used to read them out loud to us. We got into them together.

For some students, such positive memories are harder to come by, overshadowed perhaps by more recent chapters in their reading histories. But once retrieved, they are cherished. Although Kristy initially tells me that reading has never interested her, she changes her mind as she recalls the mind journeys books took her on during story time with her mother.

I remember my mother reading short stories, like fairy tales, to me when I was little. I always asked her to read one certain one, I think it was Snow White. She used to become the character. She would act out the voices and everything. It was so fun to listen to.

Mick, on the other hand, has always hated reading. He is one of the few students in this group who came to school without the lap reading experiences which form the basis for a child's initial love of reading. Growing up in a home where a
disabled older sister’s needs took precedence over his, he had rarely known the comfort that comes with climbing into a parent’s lap and entering the reader’s world together through the pages of a story. Indeed, only once did he remember “getting into a book” with his dad, of transacting with text as he connected with a picture book character which came alive in his imagination (Rosenblatt). And the memory of that “cool” giant was not enough to sustain him as this sociable kindergartner, labeled “very fidgety” during a preschool child check, came to look at story time as an unwelcome intruder on nap time. Simply sitting quietly in a circle and looking at pictures - for that’s all it was to him - was no treat at all for an active preschooler like Mick; indeed, to him such an activity was distasteful and pointless. Minus the lap reading experiences of his peers, this “immature little boy with a short attention span” didn’t want to just sit still and do nothing. With no mind journeys to spirit him away, Mick would have preferred to catch up on his sleep!

Reading at School. Mick came to school, then, with no initial love of reading; he only knew that it was something “important” to learn. Like many of his classmates, however, Mick’s first taste of reading instruction came in the form of isolated phonics instruction; and from the start it certainly wasn’t “fun.” As he remembers it, learning the sounds of vowels and consonants wasn’t too hard; it was only when he had to put them together to make words that he ran into difficulty. Indeed, even after two and a half years of repetitious drill his report card duly noted that Mick “has no idea why letters make the sounds they do.” Not surprisingly he recalls such instruction as “boring” and “confusing,” “senseless” learning which held less and less importance for him the longer it went on. And it went on for quite a while. After two and a half years of frustration he was referred for Special Education testing, with a notation that his
reading progress up until then had been “slow despite daily 45 minute remedial reading sessions.” Coded Learning Disabled at the end of his second grade year, he spent the next year taking reading and spelling in the resource room. It was more of the same, albeit easier work that he had more time and support to understand. This extra help went on until seventh grade.

The emphasis of his resource room reading instruction was decoding and comprehension; and his report card states that he made excellent progress that third grade year, reading “grade level passages with few mistakes and with all comprehension questions correct.” It said nothing of Mick’s growing dislike for reading; it said nothing of the pointlessness that reading held for this third grader. And despite his success, remedial instruction went on in some form for the next four years, although in Mick’s words it seemed as though he had been getting this sort of help “my entire life.” Such academic support took a toll on this ambivalent reader. Lacking the love of reading to buffer him from the pain of having to “stick with the same vowel and letter stuff until everybody understood it,” his initial disenchantment with reading had flourished with every syllabication rule memorized and main idea lesson completed. Reading may have been important, but this struggling student couldn’t understand why. What importance could it have if he were not actively engaged in making meaning, if there were no connection between what he read and what he knew? Unlike his classmates, whose love of reading diminished with the onset of formal reading instruction, Mick never remembered liking it at all.

And in all those years he certainly never understood the places where reading could take him, places never visited by worksheets asking him to circle short e’s or underline supporting details. In all those years, Mick never experienced Rosenblatt’s transaction, Romano’s flow, or Keene and
Zimmerman’s mind journey; he never ventured into the reader’s world. For him reading was a passive act, more about turning pages than thinking, more about “cracking codes instead of creating meanings” (Wilhelm 14). As he understood it, his job as a reader - and a dreary one at that - was to extract meaning from the text, not make it for himself. And why not? All through his schooling the instructional emphasis had been on decoding words and answering questions that somebody else already knew the answers for. No creative engagement was asked for or expected. What learning he remembered had very little to do with reading. When he recalls the excitement of going to the Rocky Shores in the second grade, he has no memory of reading about oceans and rocks before and after the field trip. “We talked about it a lot,” he told me. “But I don’t remember reading anything at all. Maybe we did, but it just didn’t click with me.” Instead he tells of “digging around in the rocks” and “making awesome Rocky Shore tee shirts with sponge paints.” Rather than an extension of a mind journey started in the classroom then, Mick saw the trip as an opportunity to get away from any reading and writing that he had been doing in school, a welcome detour perhaps from a part of school he had always hated.

**What’s the Point?**

Wilhelm describes an engaged reader as “an active meaning maker, one who connects personally to what is read, who spends pleasurable and stirring time with stories, and who might judge or resist the text and its author”(15). Without such engagement reading has no meaning or purpose, so it should be no surprise to us that Mick and his classmates, passive readers all, describe their reading histories as pointless and a waste of time. No mind journeys for them, reading has always been more of a dead end street - and a long tortuous one at that. Like Mick, who sees reading as pointless from kindergarten on, Keith is
blunt in his assessment of reading. “I don’t like it. I don’t enjoy it. There is no point of it.” Eric is almost as concise. “Reading is just a waste of time. Some people just don’t like opening a book and reading pages. They say it is wasting time and I say the same thing.” Cody, perhaps more mindful of my feelings than his peers, thoughtfully cushions his judgment about readers like me:

I don’t mean to offend you or anything, but I really do not understand those people who love to read. I feel there are so many other good things you could be doing. Go outside and do something. Why would you stay inside on a nice, good day and read a book?

Paul, on the other hand, is not adverse to attacking the whole Reading Workshop curriculum which I have developed over the past five years: “It’s stupid. Pointless. I don’t know why they have it in the school.”

When I invite the students to delve into what’s behind their comments, to think about the negative baggage they are carrying towards reading, their words tell me what Paul doesn’t understand about Reading Workshop. Their voices explain why a corrective reading program is a necessary part of our high school curriculum. In story after story a frighteningly similar cycle of reading dysfunction comes into focus again and again for these struggling readers: these are students who, in viewing reading as decoding from the very start of their educational careers, have failed to become actively engaged in reading as sense making. Not only that, Wilhelm’s “pleasurable and stirring time with stories,” which causes many an enthralled reader to “stay inside on a nice, good day,” is off-limits to them, at most a distant memory from their preschool experiences. Such passive and unengrossed readers find it difficult to connect with and understand text, a crucial failure which leads to boredom and a view of reading as a pointless activity. These are students who early on in their battle with the
printed word stop trying to learn how to read, who stop reading because they can’t keep up with their peers, who fall farther and farther behind with every grade. These are students who year after year have populated Daniel Webster’s Reading Workshop classes in ever increasing numbers.

**Unengaged, Passive Readers.** As Mick well knows, some of his first and second grade peers became competent and avid readers while he struggled to unlock words. For whatever reason they thrived on an instructional program which emphasized the skill and drill of decoding while approaching comprehension as something that was dependent on native intelligence and experience rather than classroom instruction (Samuels and Farstrup 146). Even without knowing it these fortunate children had journeyed into the magic of the reader’s world, active readers engaged in making sense of text. But not Mick. Still “shuffling through picture books” as his classmates covered 100 pages, he was amazed by their rapid progress in a reading curriculum he couldn’t fathom. Although he sees himself as lazy, Mick’s problem with reading went beyond a suspect work ethic; here was a child who had to put so much effort into word identification that he failed to have any energy left for understanding. Here was a child whose instruction had emphasized surface structure systems - graphophonic, lexical, and syntactic - at the expense of the deep structure systems on which meaning is based (Keene and Zimmerman 220). Not only that, engagement with text did not come naturally for this active little boy; and until seventh grade there was no one there to actually teach him how to transact with and make sense of the books he read. So for Mick, reading was more often than not a passive process where “nothing really went on,” including understanding. He was “just sitting there” and reading letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs. No wonder he preferred the colorful and changing pictures of TV to
the black and white monotony of text.

Most of his Reading Workshop peers look at reading in the same light. When asked to describe reading as either an active or passive process, Stan and Cody weigh in with Mick. "You are not really doing anything," explains Stan. "You are just sitting there reading." Cody agrees. "You are just sitting there looking at a bunch of words. Grouping them together to get them to make sense. You are sitting there doing nothing." Paul compares the active process of chess with the passive process of reading. Like Mick, he has trouble keeping his mind on the book.

In chess you have to think about what the other player is going to do and you try to stop that before he does it. In reading there is nothing going on. I don't pay attention to the book. I will be reading and thinking about something else. What I will do after school. What homework is going to be. It is weird. Then I will read a page and I will go back and think to myself "What was that page about?" Then I will have to read the whole thing over again. So I get backtracked all the time.

Eric knows the pitfalls of passive reading too, particularly when he knows he has to understand and remember something for a test. "Reading isn't active for me when I have to do it for a final or something. I have to just sit down and read it and remember it and I get really mad because I don't even remember what I read."

These students, then, know that passive reading is worthless reading, as words and ideas go in one ear and out the other. Some of the lucky ones, like Sergio, have had times when they have read actively, when they have been engaged in making sense of their reading; and they know the difference active reading can make for them.

If reading is passive you sit there and think about something else. You don't pay attention to it. You don't really care.
If it's passive I could read the whole book and I probably won't remember one word, not even one sentence. I would read it in my mind, I would hear it and say it but I wouldn't understand it. If I was active then I would be thinking of the book and I would be into it.

Fascinated by his description of both types of reading, I encourage Sergio to tell me more. “So when is it active and when is it passive?” I ask him. His reply should not surprise us.

I think active if I like the book and I want to read the book. I actually put myself through it and it is something I enjoy reading. Passive is something terrible to read. I really hate that when somebody picks a book for me and tells me a certain kind of book that we have to read. That is just passing time.

Passing time - how much of these readers’ histories have been spent doing just that? And what might happen if these struggling readers were given more time and support to read books of their choice, books where their passive stances were to give way to active engagement? Would they begin to see themselves as readers, with the competence and confidence to tackle whatever reading assignment came their way? I reflect on Mick’s recent experiences with Deathwatch and Of Mice and Men. I think of Jasmine’s description of “getting into” a book. “How I get into it is when there are funny parts I laugh. I picture things in my own mind. I think like if that has happened to you or what might happen to you if it did.” It is clear that Jasmine, like Sergio and Mick, has had a taste of what a mind journey can be. The problem it seems is how to help these students take repeat journeys to the reader’s world from which they have been outcasts for so long.

Boredom. Once students sees reading as decoding rather than understanding, once reading becomes a passive process devoid of meaning, then
boredom sets in. Without engagement reading becomes a dull and pointless activity - and a frustrating one as well, as struggling students are asked to cover more and more, knowing all the time that there is less and less in it for them. Whatever interest reading might have once held for these students is quickly extinguished. For Mick, such a negative feeling has saddled his perceptions from his earliest recollections of reading; and even now, with his memories of *Deathwatch* and *Of Mice and Men* still fresh in his mind, he does not dare to let go of the stance he has held for so many years: reading is boring. And he is not alone; virtually every student used this adjective when talking of reading. It's a descriptor with varied shades of meaning.

**Boring = Lack of Interest.** For most of these adolescents, the word "boring" relates directly to their lack of interest in and engagement with the materials they are studying. School is boring, Geo. Studies is boring, *Animal Farm* is boring. Interestingly enough, these are students who, like Mick and Sergio, have on occasion connected with a book they have liked, who have tasted what it means to be hooked on a book. And they know such mind journeys don't happen nearly enough, though they are unsure why. Kristin explains:

> You know how sometimes you can pick out a book and start reading it and it is boring? And you can pick up another book and it is really good and you keep on reading it? Some books just aren't interesting. They are boring to read. Other books are a good story. *Of Mice and Men*, I didn't like it. I don't know what made it boring; it just wasn't interesting.

Patti thinks it has something to do with the way the book is written. She doesn't like too much detail in her reading, and she looks forward to a climax in the story. “I like it when you don’t really know what is going to happen. Good is a book that has a lot of action, like an adventure to see what happens next. A bad book would be a quiet one with no climax whatever.”
Christian knows that the subject matter is key to engagement for him; "it is boring when I don’t like the book, if it is not a subject that I like." Cody agrees. "If it is a book I like reading, it is interesting because it talks about things that I like; but if it is something I don't like it is boring." Always wanting to make sure I understand his words, this garrulous young man continues: "it is boring when a book I am reading . . . , if I am reading a love book or something, a love story, a woman wants to marry or something, it is boring." Bob also realizes that the topic is the key to how he reacts to a book. "The topic can make it boring. If I read about basketball or some kind of sport, I like sounding out the words. That is cool."

Too often in their reading histories of course these students have simply been assigned texts, and for many this lack of choice is the kiss of death. Reading is going to be a struggle, so why make any effort at all when someone else picks the book for you, when it’s something you care nothing about? As Sergio explains it,

reading is boring when I am being told to read and they tell me what books I have to read. You don’t really want to read. The teacher wants you to read what she thinks might be interesting. She wants to know what the book is about, so we have to read it and we have to know all the stuff.

On the other hand, he continues,

if she says to pick your own book, something you want to read, I think that is more interesting because you find something that you are going to be interested in. If we read something we really like and we really want to know about it, it is more interesting. Then you don’t mind reading it.

For some it hasn’t always been this way. Jasmine didn’t mind being assigned reading when she first began to read.

Then you were just first learning and it was really neat because
you could actually read something. But now it’s boring because you don’t have a choice. You’re not in touch with the book you are reading. You are assigned it. You have to do it for school. You have to do it for your homework . . . and you don’t want to get into trouble at home for your report card.

Cody remembers the novelty of learning to read as well, a novelty that gradually wore off as he was continually assigned books which didn’t engage him as a reader. When he first began school “I wanted to read. It was something new. OK, if you get a toy, you really want to play with that toy, right? It is the only thing you want to play with. But after a while you get bored with it. It’s the same for reading.” Especially when time after time and class after class you’re expected to read “a love book or something.”

Boring = Lack of Success. In our schools it is clear that all students have to contend with assigned books which they cannot relate to; this sort of boredom is not reserved for Reading Workshop students alone. However, for struggling readers there is something more to the boredom they admit to. Not only are they expected to read books they cannot connect with, they are often required to read text written well above their instructional levels, resulting in a learning situation where comprehension is either elusive or lost. Such a mismatch results in another kind of boredom, the kind that springs from the frustration of being asked year after year to do something you are not capable of doing. Struggling to describe her present dislike of reading, Carol ponders the meaning of the word boring. “Right now reading is boring. How can I say this? It doesn’t interest me to pick up a book and read for two or three chapters, to just pick up a book and read it out of the blue.” When I ask her to elaborate, she continues:

Maybe I think a book’s boring so I don’t want to pick it up and read it, but yet I might think it’s boring because I can’t understand it when I read it. The information, what I read, is just a bunch of words or sentences or paragraphs. O.K., I can take a
book and read the first page, but I won't necessarily understand it; and then going from chapter to chapter I won't remember what happened in the past chapters. What happened in the beginning of the book? It doesn't really make sense to me.

Her classmates readily agree that assigned reading, almost always over their heads, almost always without meaning, leads to boredom. In Sergio's view "things that are boring are things I don't understand. Things that don't make any sense. Then I really don't care." David divides his reading into interesting books that he likes and boring books that he hates. The definers that he uses are telling; "easy books make me love it; real hard challenging books make me hate it." Alexis tells of trying to read *Deathwatch*, an assigned book which makes no sense to her, a book that gets her so bored that she is ready to cry. Eric, who from his first day in school to his last never knew the luxury of keeping up with his classmates, talks of the boredom that came with being behind in his reading from first grade on. "If we don't catch up in our reading, in the book that [our first grade teacher] gives us, we get behind and we have to read more to catch up. That gets kind of boring after a while." For this struggling student the long stories that were read to him were boring, most of the books that he looked at on the bookshelf in the library were boring, and even the authors of the books he was assigned fell victim to his longheld frustration with reading. "Most of the people that write them, I don't really like either. The way they write the books." No wonder that for Eric reading is "mostly boring because it is a waste of time to me."

Stan had an easier introduction to school reading than Eric; but the end result, a depressing and uncontrollable journey into boredom, has been the same. When he first started school, Stan liked reading. He fondly remembers sitting on the floor and listening to Mrs. Cox read. "We didn't have to do everything
ourselves.” His report card points to “good progress in all areas;” and his teacher states that “Stan seems to enjoy reading.” In his memory second grade was O.K. too, although teacher comments ominously note that “Stan tends to guess on words if he doesn’t know them. Reading out loud would help him a lot.” In third grade, as if in answer to this suggestion, came the pain of round robin reading. “We each read a page and then we switched. We had to read out loud. I read too much so I didn’t like it.” Although his report card notes that he was able to read on grade level at this time, his effort and achievement began to drop. By fourth grade he was “not using his time wisely, choosing instead to sit idly or talk to his peers.” “A good reader,” in Stan’s mind, had become “someone who could read the words.” He couldn’t. No wonder that for this young boy reading “got boring. Not very fun. You just sit there and look at words. It is not very fun for me.”

Looking at words in the absence of meaning - and stumbling over them in the company of his peers - is a memory he has not been able to shake. “We did it all the time,” he recalls. I am not surprised, then, when Stan looks up at me and quietly says, “I would rather be skateboarding than reading.”

Aaron differs from most of his peers in that throughout our interviews he rarely admitted to having trouble with reading. Indeed, he insisted to the end that reading had never given him a problem, that “I can read just great.” The reason he was in Reading Workshop, he told me over and over, was that the substitute teacher had given him the wrong test booklet. Nevertheless, his cumulative file showed otherwise. His report cards exhibited a preponderance of 70’s and an occasional low 80 in reading throughout elementary school, and his standardized test results consistently listed comprehension scores at least 30 percentile points below vocabulary scores. Indeed, in his midyear Reading Workshop self-evaluation Aaron had ventured closer to the truth when he wrote,
“My comprehension skills are very bad.” Perhaps that is why he pointed to “big books” as the impetus for his boredom with reading. Like many of his classmates, being able to decipher words was not enough for him to make sense of his required reading. The “bigger” the books got, the more he had to struggle with understanding; the greater the struggle the more his boredom grew. “Books are not very interesting,” he told me. “They are so long. There is too much in it. It goes in depth too much and it gets boring.” When I asked what he meant by boring he continued, “They kind of lose the whole point. It doesn’t teach you much. You really don’t get much out of it.” When I asked Aaron if his boredom might be synonymous with his confusion about what he was reading, he quickly resumed his tried and true stance; “I just don’t like reading. I would rather be doing other stuff. Books seem like they are going nowhere.”

Boring = Lack of Activity/Lack of Attention. Of the twenty-two Reading Workshop students in this study, seven of them have been tested at some time in their educational careers for either Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. Still others sport report card comments which describe them as “easily distractible,” “inattentive,” or “lacking in self-control,” though for some we cannot rule out that such behavior may in fact have been a manifestation of their reading struggles. It is not surprising, then, that like Aaron, they would rather be “doing other stuff.” If reading instruction means being expected to sit quietly at a desk doing repetitious worksheets or going through the motions of reading incomprehensible texts, if there is nothing going on for either body or mind, it is understandable how these active and/or inattentive children can come to look at reading as boring. For them it is surely “not very fun” (Keith). Most, to be certain, would prefer “to be outside doing other things” (Aaron).
According to his teachers Mick was fidgety from the start, loud and active and with poor self-control. As he remembers it, when he tried to read he found it difficult to concentrate; his head was always full of the wrong thing. He would be “reading the words but the words wouldn’t be processing.” Even after going on medication in second grade, he could not focus on his reading. “They gave me that Ritalin stuff and the teacher said there wasn’t anything different. They came to the conclusion that I was always going to be hyperactive,” hyperactive and lacking the attention necessary to make sense of his reading. Christian is another readiness graduate who, like Mick, has yet to move beyond the “short attention span” label which prompted the school to place him in the readiness class so many years ago. Tested for an attention disorder but never coded (“They thought I had like ADD and stuff, but I got tested for it and they said I didn’t”) he has nonetheless always struggled with the concentration that reading demands. Indeed, for most of his reading history he has been reading without comprehending, a fact which he is just now beginning to understand. “It’s hard for me to read,” he says. “When I read it is not clicking in my head. I don’t absorb it to know what I read.” Small wonder that he has never really liked reading, preferring instead to play with his friends or go to a softball game with his grandfather. “It wasn’t fun to read at all,” he admits to me.

Lest we think that only boys struggle with the boredom which springs from inattention and/or hyperactivity, listen to what Carol and Kim have to say. Carol, who unlike many of her peers only began to struggle with reading in third grade when comprehension rather than words became the focus of reading instruction, thinks that one of her problems with reading comprehension is that she can’t “sit still long enough to read my assignments. I don’t think I was that way as a little kid, but now that I’m older I can’t stand to sit still.” Sitting still
may be difficult for Carol; sitting still to focus on something she does not understand makes it even more so. Kim, a student who according to her records has never been tested for ADHD but one who in my classroom observations rarely stayed on task for more than ten minutes, hates the enforced inactivity of reading. In fact, she notices a big difference in classes where teachers work to dispel the regimen of “just plain reading.” In her mind her reading has improved in a class where she could

get up and do stuff instead of just sit there and read. In our other reading classes we went to the class, you read for thirty minutes and you did journal entries. The teachers were boring. In his class you got to do all kinds of cool stuff. You would read two days a week, you got to pick whatever book you wanted. He would give you little projects to do. You got to pick whatever you wanted to do it on. On Fridays he would bring us donuts. We got to go to the Police Station. All kinds of stuff.

It is difficult enough for an active child with no attention deficit to attend to an instructional program which focuses on the tedium of repetitive and uninterrupted seatwork interspersed with generic group work, so for students like Mick, Christian, Carol, and Kim it can be downright intolerable - or in Paul’s scathingly succinct words “totally boring.”

Initial Mind Journeys: A Glimpse Into the Reader's World

For years now, Mick has labeled reading as pointless and boring. Yet, because he has always been told that reading is important in life, there has existed an ambivalence which has prompted him to stick with it, to learn more about reading in spite of the myriad of meaningless words, sentences, and paragraphs he has had to struggle with throughout the grades. And in the past few years such determination has begun to pay off. Although Mick is at a loss to understand why, in middle school he started to look at reading in a different
way. He began "thinking longer," bringing sense making into the reading equation for the first time. For this reader, then, meaning started to gain precedence over decoding. He began to "really read," Blessed with a nurturing relationship which developed between him and his Special Education teacher and aide, fortunate to be in a seventh grade Reading Workshop class where students were given the time, choice, and response so necessary to developing readers (Hansen), Mick began to engage with the text. Without really knowing why, he took his first tentative steps in an all-important mind journey towards understanding. For the first time since his preschool years, he entered the reader's world; and almost despite himself, he liked what he saw.

It is interesting that it is in the very seeing of the reader's world that readers are hooked for the mind journey ahead. Pearson, Roehler, Dole, and Duffy propose that visualization is but one of the cognitive processes proficient readers use to engage with and make sense of text; Keene and Zimmerman outline six others which together create the mosaic of thought which leads to comprehension (22-23). Nevertheless, it is the riveting glimpse into the world of Lenny and George which "trips Mick's trigger" as he reads Of Mice and Men, setting off a construction of meaning which overcomes the boredom that has saddled him for so long in his reading. First and foremost then, it is visualization which lures this struggling reader towards books for the first time.

Mick is not alone in his ability to visualize; other Reading Workshop students have had similar experiences. In their profiles for instance, both Alexis and Kayla have touched upon their ability to "get into" the reader's world through visualization. Then too, David tells me that he now makes pictures in his mind "all of the time," pictures which help him to remember a good story long after he closes the book. Jasmine gets more specific as she outlines the way she
takes a mind journey.

I kind of picture in my head the setting of the book and what the character is doing. Like if she moves to pick up something I can kind of follow that certain picture in my head of a person picking up a certain object or something.

It is Kristin, though, the daughter of an English teacher and an artist, who is best able to paint a word picture of the power of visualization.

I can’t make a picture in my mind of all books. Some just kind of jump out. You get a picture in your head of what the character looks like and what the setting looks like. You get a view. When I read The Shining, I could actually picture things. I actually saw the hotel and the people. Everything seemed so clear when I read it. When I was reading it I saw all kinds of pictures. I think if I see the book more clearly, I understand it more. I like the book more because I know what is happening.

Interested in Kristin’s description of visualization I continue to probe for more information. “How did you learn to do this?” I ask her. “Did anyone ever teach you to do it or is it something that you figured out for yourself?” After pausing to think, she replies with a shrug. “It's just something that happened. I don't know. It's happened all along.” Her confusion at how she came to visualize mirrors Stan’s, who realizes that visualization is “doing something in your mind but not doing anything. I don’t know. It’s weird. I just started doing it when I was young.” Kristy is one of the few students who recalls anyone talking to her about making pictures in her mind. “I remember sitting down in a little part of the room and my teacher would be in this chair and she would read us a book. She wouldn’t show us the pictures. She told us to imagine it because that is what grown-ups do.” “Did she show you how to do it?” I ask. “No,” Kristy replies. “She just said to imagine.” “Well, could you do it?” I ask, wondering all the while what it might have been like as a first grader to spend read aloud time
hearing picture books read without seeing the pictures. "For James and the Giant Peach I could imagine it. But not for much else."

Without being shown how to embark on a mind journey through visualization, Kristy hit a stone wall on her attempt to enter into the reader's world. And more often than not, so too do most of her classmates. Even though some Reading Workshop students know what might trigger pictures in their minds - both Patti and Eric point to the author's use of detail as the key ingredient in their mind journeys, Christian points to interest in the book - more often than not they do not know how to activate such a voyage on their own. Lacking the metacognitive ability to think about their thinking, they are powerless to jumpstart their trip. Mick is all too aware of what happens in that case; the boredom of reading returns as his mind vacates the reader's world and "starts to go to other things." Once again he is going nowhere in his reading.

**Destination: The Reader's World**

Through the power of visualization, Mick has been afforded entry into the reader's world, usually by way of an assigned novel which unexpectedly sparks his interest and actively engages him in the reading task. More thoughtful about his reading than many of his peers, Mick exhibits a changing consciousness which has shifted him from looking at reading as decoding to reading as sense making. His deliberate decision to give reading a try, along with some serendipitous teaching and mentoring, has given him a new taste of reading that he admits to almost savoring. A "good feeling" which "doesn't happen that much," nevertheless for Mick this new outlook constitutes a foot in the door to a magical world from which he has long been denied access.

It's a world where stories come alive for the reader, where the point of reading need not be argued as students immerse themselves in technicolor
meaning making which transcends the black and white pages of the book. Whether engaged in the story through either Bruner’s landscape of action or his landscape of consciousness, visitors to the reader’s world establish contact with the characters as they construct the story landscape. Decoding words and making verbal sense of text take a back seat to the reader’s transaction with the author’s words as readers focus on empathizing, connecting, responding to and ultimately reflecting upon the story (Wilhelm 62). Liberated through a “pretty good book” from “sitting on the bench during the big game, completely bored, without even realizing [he] hadn’t participated in the action” (Wilhelm 87), Mick shakes, if only for a brief moment, his deeply engrained “What’s the point?” stance toward reading. Listen to the engagement expressed as Mick talks about reading *Deathwatch*.

It really did it for me. A lot of people didn’t like it. It was good for me. I enjoyed it a lot. I was grabbed by the entire idea about a guy trying to find water and food with another guy chasing after him trying to kill him. And then by how the author describes many situations, like how he almost gets water but the guy that is trying to kill him ruins the path, trashes the water and so on. Or he tells about how this family’s car moved down into the side of the road out in the desert. They decided to leave the car in the middle of the day time, and the sun was beating down on them and you just knew they were going to die of dehydration. And there was a part in the book where they said the mother wiped lipstick all over her children’s faces to keep the sun rays off of them. I can picture that really good in my head.

Mick’s visit to the reader’s world is matched by only a few of his peers. But through their words, like his, we can gain some sense of what is possible for these nascent adolescent readers. Kayla, for instance, had talked about “fitting myself into the book.” And in our last interview Alexis talked excitedly of the mind journey *The Outsiders* had taken her on. Grabbing a copy of the book from
my bookshelf, she recited the whole story from memory, telling me proudly that she knew the entire book by heart. "So what makes this book so good?" I asked her. At that point she opened to the first page and began reciting the text: "The first page, it says 'When I stepped out in the sunlight. . .'" "So you were right there in the book?" I queried when she stopped reading and looked up at me. "Yes. And what really interests me is the way she did it again at the end." Turning to the last page, this struggling reader again began to read, "When I stepped out. . . " "Wow," I said. "That is really remarkable. How do you remember so much?" Alexis's reply, along with her oral reading performance, should make all of us rethink her struggling reader label. "When I read it, if I like it, it will stay in my head. If you read a book, if you are really into it, you are the book. You can see in your mind what is going on in the book."

Just as Kristin was able to describe visualization, so too is she able to portray the creativity that is entailed when a reader ventures into the reader's world.

Reading is kind of like watching a movie but you get more of a picture. It is weird. Because when reading a book and then seeing a movie, you might picture everything so differently. When you see a movie [after reading a book] you say, "That person doesn't look like that." When you read, you can picture everything so clearly. You kind of make up your own story as you are reading. You make up what the characters look like or what you think the environment around looks like. It feels like you are actually there and the things are happening. It changes the book. It might make the book better. Maybe if you have a good imagination . . . you could picture stuff good and it makes the book more interesting.

Bob's words encapsulate the feelings that a mind journey engenders for him and his peers.

Everything comes to a halt and you can see what is going on in the book. You know how you go to sleep and time flies? It
is like that when I am reading. Everything around me just kind of stops but it's actually moving pretty fast. I just key into the book, like the plot and the people.

"Any kind of reading?" I ask. "I think it depends on the type of book. If it is stuff you like you can get into it. Like My Side of the Mountain, I will feel like I am in it. If it is a real sappy book, you just sit there."

The Difficulty of Taking a Mind Journey

Just “sitting there” is the bane of these unengaged readers, some of whom are fortunate enough to know what it’s like to be a part of the reader’s world, but none of whom understand how to precipitate such a mind journey on a regular basis. According to Keene and Zimmerman, thoughtful, active, and proficient readers are metacognitive; that is, they think about their own thinking during reading and in doing so, they deepen and enhance their own understanding of text. In addition to creating images to draw themselves into the reader’s world, good readers activate prior knowledge, determine importance, ask questions, draw inferences, synthesize, and utilize a variety of fix-up strategies to repair comprehension when it breaks down (21 - 23). Most of us engage in these cognitive strategies without even realizing we are doing it; and with effort we are able to make sense of a wide variety of texts, even those which don’t immediately interest us. But not these Reading Workshop students. Having been schooled in classrooms where students were expected to understand without actually being taught how to do so, they are the unlucky ones who for whatever reason did not “catch on” to comprehension. They are the unlucky ones who, in putting word attack ahead of sense making, have lost sight of the whole point of reading. Over the past few years Mick has been thinking more about his reading, and such effort has begun to pay off; but even so he is at a loss to describe why reading engagement occurs for him. Indeed, he describes a mind journey as “one

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of those things that happens when you really don’t know it.” Lacking Clay’s self-extending system of literacy expertise (317) and unable to choose books which mesh with his interests and his instructional level, Mick must rely on the luck of the draw to become engaged in a book which “trips his trigger.” For him it doesn’t happen very often.

As part of our last interview, I asked Mick to tell me what went on in his head as he was reading. “Nothing too much,” he told me. “At least not in my head. Not like all those kids that actually like to read.” Having just shared his vivid description of the pictures which Deathwatch evoked for him, he initially baffled me with his response. After thinking about his words though, I readily connected his statement to his ongoing ambivalence towards reading, of how important it must be for this adolescent that he not be grouped with the “nerds.” Then too, such a reply also served to remind me of this student’s total lack of self-knowledge, of how a struggling reader’s mind can operate without his even knowing it. I probed a little more. “I’m going to list things that people sometimes do in their minds when they are reading. See if you do any of these things, O.K.?” As I described Keene and Zimmerman’s seven cognitive strategies, with little or no thought he offered quick “no’s” to three of them - determining importance, asking questions, and synthesizing. He allowed that he sometimes used prior knowledge (“I was just reading a magazine about trucks in Reading Workshop. I was thinking about when I bought my first truck and I was trying to repair it”), inferred every once in a while (“like when I knew that guy in Deathwatch was going to get killed”), and employed the tried and true fix-up strategy of reading something over again when he didn’t understand what he had read (“Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn’t”). When I asked about visualization, Mick told me of the pictures that are always in his head, even those
which aren't about the book, and of his frustration when the ones triggered by the book fall victim to boredom. The picture inspired by the book vanishes; and this struggling reader, not in touch with the thought processes going on in his own head, is powerless to retrieve it. All that he know is that his mind journey screeches to a halt; and without really understanding why, he's no longer "really reading."

Just as I did with Mick, I asked all the other Reading Workshop students about their use of the seven cognitive strategies. As we have already discovered, visualization is the strategy applied most regularly as a mind journey jumpstart for these struggling readers. The other two cognitive strategies which they often employ to enhance their understanding are the use of prior knowledge and questioning.

**Prior Knowledge: A Helpful Tool.** As was the case with visualization, those students who used prior knowledge saw it as an important tool in assisting them to become engaged in their reading. By connecting with something they already knew, these readers were able to make better sense of what they were reading. Bob, for instance, told me how he used his prior knowledge to connect with his favorite book, *My Side of the Mountain*. He liked the book because he and his dad had done something like what happened in the book. Once my dad and I went biking. There is this trail from Eastville that goes all the way up to Canada. We would stop on the side of the road and camp out. When we got to Canada there was this tree and I got an idea. When my dad went fishing I built a shelter. He came back and we spent a week there. Just like in the book.

Kristin connects her reading with her own life experiences too. "If I am reading a book about something that has happened in my family I think, 'Oh, I remember when such and such happened to my mom.'" Like Kristin, Carol reads books
which connect with how my family has been, what's happened to one of them or what's happened to me. [I do this] instead of just plain reading it and trying to understand it and being done with it. I think that might be why I can't connect to wars and stuff because it's never happened to me. It's never happened to my immediate family.

But without fully knowing, she is able to take the use of prior knowledge a step farther than Bob and Kristin as she also realizes that information doesn't have to be first hand in order to connect the known with the new. Along with text-to-self connections, Carol can make text-to-text or text-to-world connections when she reads (Keene and Zimmerman 57 - 60).

If I have heard about it on the news, like that Oklahoma shooting in the schools, then I will read it [in the newspaper] and sort of understand it because I have heard about it before. Some article that has never been on TV or on radio before, I am going to go “huh?”

That these students grasp the usefulness of such a strategy is obvious. “It is easier to comprehend when you know something about it,” says Cody. “If you already know something, you can actually get further in the book,” adds Eric. Kristin continues to exhibit her understanding of the power of metacognition when she says, “If you are reading a book and if you connect it with something that has happened to you, you get a better idea of what happened because if it is something that has happened to you, you know what it was like.”

**Questioning: Helpful but Infrequent.** The students who see the importance of visualization and the use of prior knowledge in their reading are generally the ones who ask questions as they read, but not all of them. Mick, for one, is quick to say “no” when I inquire if he asks questions of himself during the reading process. So too does Alexis. But when engaged by his reading Bob is
always asking “What will happen next?” or “What will they do?” Kayla also admits to asking questions of herself as she reads, though “not to anybody else. Like I wonder why she is going to do that. And why won’t the father help him?” Jasmine occasionally poses the same “I wonder why. . .” questions in her head, although she states that she is more apt to raise her hand and depend on the teacher rather than herself when her reading doesn’t make sense. Carol, who throughout our interviews has shown the most frustration with her inability to comprehend ("I think I have a learning disability," she tells me. "When I read I don’t understand"), doesn’t recall visualizing as she reads; but along with using prior knowledge she also asks questions of herself when trying to make sense of a text. As she describes it,

in *It Happened to Nancy* the main character has a kidney problem. And she pees in her pants a lot. And when I was reading it I was like well, can a kidney infection really do something to your bladder? Can that really happen? And then I talk to myself about it, and if I can’t really think of the answer, I’ll ask a teacher or my parents or something like that.

And it surely shouldn’t surprise us that Kristin, clearly the most thoughtful of these struggling readers, questions herself as she reads, that “sometimes I will be reading and I wonder what this person is going to do or how this person feels.”

**Fix-Up Strategies: a Limited Repertoire.** To Keene and Zimmerman, fix-up strategies include a variety of methods used to repair comprehension when it breaks down. According to them, proficient readers choose appropriate fix-up strategies from one of Rumelhart’s six language systems to best solve a particular problem which comes up in reading (23). Such problem solving strategies might be skipping a particularly difficult word, using context, rereading, or sounding out an unknown word. Not unexpectedly these struggling readers had very few effective fix-up strategies to rely upon. Two boys, Mark and Bob, told of skipping
over the difficult word. "Then," Mark continued, "after a couple of spaces go by I
maybe will know what it means." Patti spoke of using a dictionary or "asking
people what that little phrase might mean." Four students mentioned rereading
as an aid to comprehension, although, like Mick, Carol didn't seem sold on the
effectiveness of this particular strategy. "I can try and reread it and reread it and
reread it and reread it to try and comprehend it, but to me that gets really
annoying." "But does it work?" I asked her. "No, except sometimes if I've been
rereading enough." Interestingly enough, when asked to think of fix-up
strategies they called upon when reading, not one of the twenty-two students
mentioned sounding out words as a viable problem solver. This omission seems
to lend further credence to the idea that for these students word identification is
a part of reading that has little or nothing to do with the puzzle that is
comprehension.

**Inferring, Synthesizing, and Determining Importance: Leading Nowhere.**

I suspect that all of these Reading Workshop students were at one time or
another exposed to the Barnell-Loft school of reading comprehension (as a
reading consultant I must admit to still storing one of these ubiquitous kits on a
dusty shelf in my office), that as part of their reading histories they had spent
class after class droning through multiple choice exercises taken from leveled
workbooks entitled *Drawing Conclusions* and *Choosing the Main Idea*. It seems that
such drill, however, has had very little effect on their use of the cognitive
strategies which most closely align with these skills: drawing inferences,
synthesizing what has been read, and determining the most important ideas and
themes in a text.

I had very little positive response when asking students if they ever
inferred or synthesized as they read. Even after explaining such thinking
strategies in words the students might have heard in the past ("You know how sometimes teachers ask you to read between the lines? That's another way to describe inferring." "Do you ever try to pull everything together, to retell your reading in your mind in order to understand it better? That's synthesizing"), I was more often than not met with a blank stare and a rather disinterested "no." Only Bob and Kristin referred to inferring as they spoke of predicting what might come next in a novel. And no one claimed to be able to synthesize, although both Kayla and Patti admitted to going over in their minds what they had read to make sense of it, particularly if the book were "a little bit difficult."

I had slightly better luck when inquiring about their use of the cognitive strategy of determining importance. At least this was a strategy more of these adolescents recognized, albeit with limited enthusiasm. Reflecting a distinct distaste for such a task, Patti quickly responded to my question, "Not unless I have to." "No, I just read it," replied Eric. "I try to just keep going and then maybe do it after I'm done, like if there's a question at the end of the chapter." "I write everything down in my notes," stated David proudly. One of the few diligent students in this group, he allowed that "that's how I remember what's important." These responses reflect the way many if not most high school students approach the reading of textbooks, by anticipating and searching for answers to those inevitable end-of-chapter questions, questions which ask students to retrieve and retain specific information rather than think about and make sense of what they have read, questions which can often be answered correctly without having read the text selection. Such an ability surely doesn't allow these students to decide what the piece is about by first deciding what ideas and themes are most important to each of them. Such an approach to reading surely does not remind me of the mind journeys Keene and Zimmerman

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had in mind when they described determining importance in text as making instantaneous decisions about what is important on the word, sentence and text levels and defending those personal positions in meaningful classroom discussions (94).

Finding Their Way

Within this group of readers, Kristin may be seen as the poster child of metacognition; indeed, this Reading Workshop student “sometimes” uses six of the seven cognitive strategies. In responding to my list of cognitive strategies determining importance elicited her only all-encompassing “no.” What she doesn’t do, though, is employ these strategies on assigned reading. Those books become the “boring” ones, the ones whose stories don’t “hook” her. When she compares her feelings for Of Mice and Men (“very boring”) and The Shining (“very interesting”), she is adamant about how differently the two novels affect her. But other than sketching out the two plots for me, she is unable to point out what makes one novel boring and the other interesting.

Of Mice and Men, I didn’t like any of it. I don’t know what made it boring, it just wasn’t interesting. The Shining - I liked the plot, where they were and everything. The hotel and the people and stuff... I liked the way the author wrote about them and what they did.

It doesn’t seem to strike her that her stance differs depending on whether the book is assigned or chosen, and that as her stance changes, so too does her understanding. While reading The Shining for instance, she reads slowly and carefully, thinking about plot and character all the while. She is in the reader’s world; “it feels like you are actually there and the things are happening.” With Of Mice and Men, on the other hand, she reads quickly to finish her assignment. “I don’t really concentrate and I am just reading it because I know what pages I
have to read. I am just reading and not really thinking about it.” No mind
journey here, just a tedious trip through page after meaningless page, with the
goal of passing a chapter quiz based on memory rather than understanding.

As a student who is metacognitive in her pleasure reading, Kristin stands
head and shoulders over most of her Reading Workshop peers. Without having
ever given any real thought to it, she has somehow stumbled into the reader’s
world. Although lacking the self-regulation needed to duplicate a mind journey
at will, nevertheless she has been able to rise above her reading history and
develop the cognitive strategies which initiate and sustain such a trip. Her peers,
however, have not been so fortunate. Some, like Mick, already utilize a few of the
cognitive strategies; but the entire mosaic of thought which proficient readers
create in their minds is not there for the taking. Still others have never given a
single thought to actively reflecting while reading. Paul, for instance, never
“pays attention to the book.” Nothing goes on in his head when he is reading.
“Nothing at all. [I] will just grab a book and start reading it . . . . Just turn the
pages.” Even when he goes back and “reads the whole thing over and over
again,” he comes out with nothing, “zero.” No wonder he is so frustrated with
reading; no wonder he angrily dismisses it as being “stupid” and “pointless.”
With no thinking going on, he has no chance of setting out on a mind journey.
With no thinking at all, turning pages leads to only one place for this reader, a
dead end.

For many years, Mick viewed reading as Paul still does, as decoding
rather than sense making; but his fortuitous mind journeys of the past few years
have begun to shake his “what’s the point” stance towards reading. Aided by the
juxtaposition of school, imagination, effort, and maturity this thoughtful
adolescent has come to understand the rewards that reading has to offer,
rewards that far transcend the functional use of literacy he has always accepted as important. The “what’s in it for me?” has been answered for the moment as he has become actively engaged in the reading process. Nevertheless, despite this all-important discovery he continues to be lost. Because he is still not in touch with what triggers his ventures into the reader’s world, he is ambivalent about the part that reading can play in his life. Only when Mick becomes a self-regulated constructor of meaning (Samuels and Farstrup 172) will he be able to figure out the possibilities that reading holds for him in the years ahead. Only when his reading takes him somewhere will this student be able to find the way.
CHAPTER SIX

LEARNING FROM THE STUDENTS’ WORDS

My students . . . taught me as much as I taught them, and their strongest lesson was a frightening one: adolescents who have not been successful - have failed - in traditional classrooms are at risk. Unless we find ways to engage them, they will shut down. If we continue to focus only on identifying deficits and devising sterile remedies, these students will surely use their energy and talent for unproductive purposes - or not at all.

Mary Krogness, Just Teach Me, Mrs. K., 1995, p. 1

A few weeks ago I was meeting with a group of high school teachers enrolled in a graduate level course. We were discussing the first chapters of Cleary’s From the Other Side of the Desk, a book in which the author sets out to share what has gone wrong in writing instruction for forty eleventh grade writers. Using data gained from qualitative research methods similar to mine, Cleary’s book is a compelling forum in which these students’ voices are heard for the very first time. At least this educator thought so until the other teachers in the group began ringing in with their responses to Cleary’s work. “Who are these sixteen year old ‘experts’ that they can tell us we aren’t letting them write in a ‘fun’ way?” asked an obviously miffed English teacher. “Isn’t this work a little outdated?” queried another skeptical reader. “This doesn’t sound like my classroom,” she added defensively. The history teacher in the group jumped on the data Cleary had gathered through in-depth phenomenological interviewing; “this is nothing but anecdotal evidence that can be molded to serve the needs of
her own educational agenda. I am hesitant as an educator to accept any of the changes proposed by her strictly on the value of her evidence."

Qualitative research invites such criticism, as readers with their personalized agendas construct their own meaning while weighing the ideas presented by the author. Nevertheless, I hope that the knowledge I have gained from the students, the conclusions that I have drawn from what they have shared with me, and the changes that such insights suggest will be viewed as more than words molded to fit the needs of my own educational agenda. As a reading consultant concerned with what I already knew of the at-risk adolescent reader, I set out in my research to capture the student perspective of this all-too-common dilemma. Where researchers and educators had weighed in I wanted to add the insight of the students themselves. Emerging theories gleaned from analyzing their inner voices, in combination with what I already knew, led me to create a portrait of who these adolescents are and what has gone wrong for them as readers. If we allow ourselves to learn from their voices, if what they have taught us can become the impetus for change in our educational approach to readers and reading instruction, then their words will have served them - and us - well.

Knowledge We Have Gained

What have I learned from these twenty-two Reading Workshop students? Just as Rist pointed out thirty years ago, I have come to know these adolescents as lifers. Since arriving at school as enthusiastic six year olds excited about learning, they have been locked in a losing battle with reading which has affected not only their academic progress but their self-image as well. Indeed, as their view of reading changed, from a pleasurable social activity to an unrewarding and dreaded chore, so too did their view of themselves. To this day Alexis sees herself as stupid and a failure, even as she fights to camouflage such a perception.
created through her very own words. To this day she and her peers are haunted by problems with decoding unknown multi-syllabic words, reading texts beyond their ability level, publicizing their struggle via group sharing activities, and meeting unattainable classroom expectations. Is there any escape in store for these lifers? Some, like Mick and Kayla, seem resigned to their fate, avoiding assigned reading at all costs while continuing to accept whatever help is offered for their deficiencies, help which never seems to advance them as readers but at least keeps their academic heads above water. Some, like Alexis, have sworn off the assistance offered, angrily railing against their lot in life but powerless to change it. Others, like Eric, have simply given up the fight, unsuccessful and unhappy readers who have chosen the only way they know to escape their lifer status.

What forces have conspired to create and perpetuate this group of lifers? Researchers like Johnston and Winograd and Kos have always pointed to a myriad of factors which impact a reader’s progress. The learner, the teacher, the home and school environments all play a role in this drama. And indeed they do; we cannot discount the struggling reader who does not accept and utilize our support, the disruptive family environment which makes learning all but impossible for its youngest members, the overcrowded and underfunded classrooms which challenge even the most effective teachers to make a difference for their neediest students. However, what these Reading Workshop students’ voices have illuminated most clearly is the impact that some widespread educational practices have had on them over the years, practices which researchers have pointed to as flawed but which despite that knowledge continue to be used in many classrooms today. That Allington and Walmsley’s six faulty conventional wisdoms are detrimental to struggling readers is clear
when we come to know students like Kayla, students whose achievement and egos have been battered through the grades by lack of effective instruction, a one-size-fits-all approach to learning and materials, and a mechanistic view of reading instruction which substitutes word attack skills for meaning making. Going beyond the faulty pedagogy, Kayla and her peers also point a finger at teachers who for whatever reason have failed to develop and nurture a sense of trust, comfort, and caring in their classrooms. Without that meaningful human connection, one which empowers students to learn and grow, these most vulnerable children did neither.

Mick’s words powerfully point out another common theme, that in our ongoing and unsuccessful attempts to teach these twenty-two students to read the very point of reading has been lost for them. Although most of these children came to school having learned to love books through their pleasurable preschool experiences, that love was quickly lost as primary grade teachers - and those that followed them - focused on unlocking words rather than understanding text. Just as we would show little enthusiasm for participating in a book club discussion where the emphasis was on vocabulary recognition rather than meaning (imagine being asked by a fellow reader, “on page 55 of Cold Mountain can you divide concentric into syllables and use it in a sentence and then give a synonym?”), these readers soon lost interest in reading when it became apparent that it was more about guessing the correct vowel than wondering what the giant was going to do next. And it wasn’t just pointless and boring; it was hard, so hard that if you couldn’t get it right the first time, you probably would do no better the next time around, even if a kind teacher sat next to you and helped you with the answers. Mick and his peers know that there’s nothing engaging about struggling to fill in the medial sounds of words you can’t decode; they know that

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there's nothing active about answering a short answer question about a page you
don't have a prayer of reading. Occasionally, something wonderful happened as
a book like *Of Mice and Men* captured the mind of a turned-off reader like Mick;
but more often than not this venture into the reader's world was an isolated
event, hard to understand and even harder to duplicate. What was there about
reading that caused some people to "stay inside on a nice, good day and read a
book?" Most of these twenty-two Reading Workshop students didn't have a clue.
And those who did had found the answer on their own.

**Conclusions We Can Draw: the "Ifs" and "Thens"**

Reading failure is an all-too-familiar problem. For years researchers have
been talking about the whys and hows of the painfully complicated struggle
some students wage in the name of learning to read. For the first time, though,
this study has afforded us a new lense through which to examine the dilemma, a
lense which has brought the struggling readers' voices into sharp focus. As we
listen to the understandings woven by their stories common threads emerge,
threads which if carefully contemplated may help us to tackle the task of
eradicating lifers from our schools once and for all. If we look at reading failure
as a puzzle to solve, then perhaps these students' teachings may be seen as a
missing piece, an impetus for rethinking and revising our approach to literacy
instruction.

**Learning from Alexis**

*If* Alexis and her twenty-one Reading Workshop peers are lifers, unable
to learn with their classmates in a system which quickly separates winners from
losers and doomed to failure despite all the intervention we offer along the way,

*Then...*

* we need to rethink our view of reading and reading instruction in our

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schools, placing less emphasis on skill lessons keyed to hierarchical scope and sequence charts and more on authentic reading activities which incorporate the strategies good readers use. Reading is not just learning decoding to access and communicate knowledge; it is the act of accessing and communicating knowledge itself. (Allington and Walmsley 31) We need to be sure that in asking students to attend to the business of school we do not require them to forfeit their engagement with text. All children, including and especially those who struggle from the start, must have many opportunities to know the pleasure of getting caught up in a well-crafted story.

* we need to rethink the way we view beginning readers, taking into account the wide range of differences found in a typical first grade classroom. We need to remember that all children can learn but that some will need accelerated instruction to keep them moving and learning with their peers.

* we need to educate the vast majority of our children in heterogeneous settings devoid of deadly and static achievement groups, making sure that we know each student's individual needs so that they can be attended to reliably and consistently. By getting away from the categorization and labeling of children we can help each student develop a positive self-image in a learning environment where all are motivated to strive for reasonable and attainable goals.

* we need to rethink the kind of intervention we serve up to our at-risk readers. The traditional position of the Learning Disabilities field that reading failure is a permanent and untreatable condition (Swerling and Sternberg) needs to be challenged and debated. Slowed down instruction must be replaced by accelerated opportunities to learn. Pull-out programs which result in fragmented experiences must be rethought; so too must the practices of readiness, retention,
and social promotion. Children who require extra support need to be taught by qualified professionals rather than untrained aides.

- we need to continue offering reading instruction and support through middle and high school for those adolescents who can benefit from it. Some students will always need some kind of scaffolding in order to be successful. With appropriate support they will continue to grow as self-extending readers.

**Learning from Kayla**

*If Kayla’s plaintive words, in concert with others whose voices echo hers, focus on the harm done to struggling readers by poorly prepared and unresponsive teachers utilizing ineffective instructional methods and practices,*

*Then...*

* we need to review teacher preparation programs. New teachers must not only understand what constitutes effective literacy instruction but also be able to implement differentiated teaching methods which meet the needs and multiple intelligences of a wide range of learners. The importance of nurturing and sustaining a warm student-teacher relationship which fosters learning in the comfort of a welcoming classroom community cannot be overemphasized, particularly when working with our most vulnerable students.

* staff development efforts must be revisited and redesigned when appropriate. All teachers, from those struggling through their first year of teaching to those with twenty plus years of experience under their belts, need opportunities to expand their knowledge along with support to incorporate new ideas and methods into their classrooms.

* we need to emphasize the importance of on-going classroom assessment and evaluation. In order to instruct effectively teachers must know their students; so too must students come to know themselves. Teachers need to be
aware of the changing needs of each and every child, recognizing and honoring
requests for help as a valid part of each student's development as an
independent learner. Assessment and evaluation need to drive instruction, not
vice versa.

* we need to look at the importance of choice in reading instruction. A
literacy curriculum which offers choice affords a wide range of children the
opportunity to learn by reading interesting books on a level commensurate with
their own abilities. It affords struggling readers the chance to experience for
themselves the joy and excitement of becoming passionately engrossed in a
"good read."

* we need to recapture and reemphasize the notion of reading as meaning
making. For struggling students in particular comprehension must be seen as
something to be taught rather than caught. These children need to realize that
understanding is the primary goal of reading.

Learning from Mick

If Mick and his classmates have come to see reading as pointless, a skills
driven and repetitive process to be avoided at all costs, one which fails to engage
these passive students while leading to nothing except boredom and a sense of
being mired in a quagmire of failure beyond their control,

Then...

* we must rethink the way that we approach comprehension instruction,
placing emphasis on teaching the thinking strategies that proficient readers use
to engage actively in the meaning making process. If from the very beginning of
formal instruction students learn to be sense makers rather than memorizers,
then the point of reading will never be lost for them.

* we need to give struggling readers plenty of time to practice reading in
self-selected books written at their instructional and independent reading levels. As their fluency and automaticity improves, they can devote more of their efforts to taking the mind journeys that proficient readers embark on as a matter of course.

* as we realign our reading curriculum, so too must we rethink what goes on in the name of reading intervention. For students to see any point to remediation, instruction must be in agreement with what educators know about the reading process and how children learn best. If extra work does not lead to improvement, then what's the point of doing it at all?

* learned helplessness needs to be eradicated from our schools. Instead of being given the message that they are incapable of working on their own, struggling students must be supported as they learn and practice the strategies of an independent reader. If we believe that all children can learn along with their peers, we need to be sure that these struggling readers understand this all-important truth.

The Difference We Can Make

If we have learned from the voices of these twenty-two Reading Workshop students, if we want to do our part to rid our schools of lifers and make literacy a reality for every child, it is clear that we need to make changes in the instructional practices currently dominating our classrooms from kindergarten to grade twelve. To advocate for such educational change is not to shoulder full blame for the dilemma of struggling readers; to agree that we need to rethink some of our teaching procedures is not to dismiss the roles that unwilling learners, negative home influences, and unresponsive administrative bureaucracies play in perpetuating this educational predicament. But to reflect on, learn from, and act upon our own classroom missteps cannot help but to
affect a major stride towards the eradication of lifers from our schools once and for all.

To further this end, I have spelled out for you many of the “ifs” and “thens” which the students’ voices lead us to consider, ideas which if implemented have the power to rewrite the stories these at-risk readers have shared with us. These conclusions are by no means new and earthshaking; for not surprisingly these adolescents’ words and understandings validate much of what researchers have been saying about reading failure for the past thirty years. Then too, the suggestions based on what the students have taught us closely align with many of the principles driving the educational reform initiatives of the 1990’s (Cunningham and Allington; Allington and Cunningham; Allington and Walmsley). They also parallel ideas included in recently published reports which deal with the qualities of exemplary literacy instruction. (IRA and NAEYC; Pressley et al).

What is new here is the lens through which this knowledge is viewed: the words and stories of the lifers themselves. This new perspective, I believe, cannot be ignored. Flesh and blood adolescents have breathed life into a portrait of academic failure at the age of sixteen, failure so tenacious that any hope of escaping from its grasp has all but been eradicated for them. Their voices have illustrated in living color the mournful literacy histories which have brought them to this dismal place. It may be simple enough to read what the experts have to say about what’s going wrong in our classrooms and what we should be doing about it, to nod our heads in silent agreement while writing up that same old lesson plan for tomorrow’s class. How easy will it be to turn a deaf ear to Alexis’ bristling anger, to Kayla’s resigned sadness, to Mick’s cocky ambivalence?

Have we heard enough? If so, what can be done to make a difference for
these lifers? Allington and Walmsley remind us that there is no quick fix for our literacy dilemma, no silver bullet or one-size-fits-all recipe which can guarantee success for all learners. Contrary to what some people in the field of education might want us to believe, effective literacy programs cannot be bundled into child and teacher-proof curriculum packets and distributed throughout a building for all to use one lesson plan at a time. Rather, meaningful change must come from concerned educators who see a wrong and set about to right it, teachers who are willing to read, reflect, dialogue, and experiment with innovative ideas in order to make a difference for their students. This is not a task to be taken lightly. Change is difficult. Change is slow. Change takes time, effort, and unwavering commitment. It can be frightening, requiring us to take a risk, to leave behind something that we are comfortable with for the threatening shadows of the unknown. It can be confrontational, as new beliefs and concepts clash with old. It can be frustrating, as fresh ideas fail to pan out and untested methods backfire. But meaningful change, evolutionary rather than revolutionary, can occur. It can occur for one struggling reader, one classroom of lifers, one day, one week, one semester at a time. And when it does, it can surely make a difference.
CHAPTER SEVEN

SIGNS OF HOPE

The common denominator among [lifers] is that they have become their own worst enemies. They have acquired a view that the world is populated by two kinds of people: those who can read and those who cannot, those who can learn and those who cannot . . . The key to helping [lifers] is to help them revalue themselves as language learners and users, and revalue the reading process as an interactive, constructive language process. They must set aside the pathological view of themselves, cast off the labels, and operate to construct meaning through written language using the strengths they have built and used in making sense of oral language or sign. To do that, they need support and help.


As a secondary school educator I see my role as one of empowerment, supporting all students in their quest to become independent learners capable of meeting success in a future beyond high school. Therefore, with each group of lifers that arrives at Daniel Webster, hapless prisoners of McDermott and Varenne's "culture of failure," my challenge is to do what I can to help these at-risk readers escape this label. Where many educators stress keeping up as they interact with this group of adolescents I prefer to emphasize catching up. My reasoning is simple: if Alexis, Chantel, and Mick manage to keep up with Of Mice and Men but fail to catch up on their ability to read novels independently, then what will the future bring for them except more of the same? Once a lifer always a lifer. Therefore, over the years I have strived to change the way we work with these students, by offering corrective reading instruction which helps them to
improve their abilities to unlock and make sense of text while transforming the manner in which these struggling adolescents look at reading and themselves. As lifers change their view of themselves it often happens that teachers who work with them do the same, eradicating once and for all this insidious title and all the baggage that it brings with it.

Developing, implementing, and sustaining a corrective reading program at the high school level is hard work. It's a curricular change which asks educators and students alike to revision their respective roles, priorities, and actions. Teachers need to learn to empower rather than enable, to let go of content in favor of process, to treat struggling students as able learners rather than incapable lifers. Students need to admit to the failure they have always felt in order to escape it, to reassess the power and purpose of reading, to work hard at something they have long shied away from. All need the patience to allow change to take place. But when it does - and it will - every one of us can revel in the results.

**Reading Workshop: A Shaky but Hopeful Beginning**

*Change is hard. It is slow. It is frustrating. Sometimes it can almost drive you crazy.*

I am sitting in the principal’s office on a crisp March New Hampshire morning, my highlighted copy of the first edition of Atwell’s *In the Middle* balanced precariously on the administrative pile of clutter bridging the table between Bob and me. I am there to report on the results I have just compiled from our latest round of eighth grade testing, done each spring to give us an idea of the reading abilities of our freshmen-to-be. I share the sobering fact that in an incoming class of 193 students 41 pupils have scored below the 30%ile in reading. From thirteen years of experience with new ninth graders, I know that these are the students who will struggle to meet success in high school classes.
These are the students that I as reading consultant need to support on their arrival at Daniel Webster next September. These are the lifers.

“So what are we going to do?” Bob asks me. “You say that the number of needy students is growing, that there are now too many to deal with on a one-to-one or small group basis, that what we’ve been doing in the past isn’t meeting their needs. Any thoughts?” Naturally I have a thought, or I wouldn’t have made this early morning trip to his office. Bob knows that as well as I do; and supportive administrator that he is, he’s ready to listen to my newest ideas for change in our approach to corrective reading instruction at Daniel Webster. “I want to try something different,” I tell him, gesturing at Atwell’s book. “Something that I read about in a course I took last fall. It’s called Reading Workshop. It’s based on the premise that students learn to read by reading, that at-risk readers need the opportunity to improve their skills by being given the opportunity to choose their own books, the time to read them, and the chance to respond to them in a caring community of learners. I don’t want it to be a replacement for English class, a ‘low and slow’ approach to literature and reading instruction; we all know the message that sort of tracking gives to these vulnerable students. I want us to look at the course not as less but as more, an extra dose of reading for those who need it most. I think it can make a difference for these kids. It can make a difference in the way they look at reading. It can make a difference in the way they look at themselves.”

In the best of all worlds of course I could have revised and expanded my pitch, telling my receptive principal how research shows that all Daniel Webster students would benefit from a Reading Workshop environment, that all levels of readers would gain from rubbing shoulders in a heterogeneous community of learners where the worth of each student could be validated. I could have gone
on to point out the importance of the reading-writing connection in education, of
the struggle that these at-risk readers wage with writing as well. Instead of
describing Reading Workshop I could have painted a glowing picture of a
Literacy Workshop in which reading and writing could be viewed together,
learned together, and used together as interwoven tools for learning and
thinking (Shanahan). But knowing full well the budgetary and space restraints of
Daniel Webster as well as the limitations of my one person literacy department I
held back, with the pragmatist in me settling instead for a scaled back vision of
corrective instruction which although not perfect seemed to be doable and
sustainable in this place and at this point in time.

And so Daniel Webster’s first Reading Workshop class was born five
years ago. The cornerstone of a corrective reading curriculum that now spans
grades nine through twelve, each year the program has supported at-risk
adolescents in their often reticent quest to grow as readers. They do. At the end
of each school year at least three quarters of the Reading Workshop students
"graduate" from the corrective program, having made substantial gains on the
year-end test and armed with the reading skills to succeed in high school if they
put their minds to it. Most leave the year-long course with something far more
important, a new outlook on reading as well as an enhanced view of themselves
as readers. Not that this is an easy transition; for despite the rather straight­
forward goal of giving the students the opportunity to grow as readers by
reading, the course has many obstacles to overcome. In addition to combating
the attitudes and behavior of the students themselves, a challenge which is part
and parcel of working with this group of disaffected adolescents, each year as
facilitator of the program I struggle with the realities of teacher assignment,
student scheduling, and room and furniture availability in an overcrowded and
underfunded school. Nevertheless when September comes, we do what we can to insure that we can make a difference for our newest crop of ninth grade lifers. In September and October, life in the Reading Workshop trenches may look bleak, but if you look very carefully the signs of change are in the air.

"Do We Really Have to Read Today?"

Kim arrives first. She always does, her loud voice preceding her down the dimly lit hallway leading to the Reading Workshop classroom. "Hey, Mrs. T.," she practically shouts as she spies her teacher walking into 158a ahead of her. It is the end of morning break at Daniel Webster Regional High School, a school of 700 students in rural New Hampshire. The bell signaling the beginning of C block is about to ring. "Do we really have to read today? I think we should have a big study hall period because I have lots of homework. What d'ya think Mrs. T.?"

Mrs. T. doesn't respond to Kim's request. She has lots on her mind. In her second month as a Reading Workshop teacher, she is thinking about the ninety minutes that lie ahead of her. She begins to write the day's plans on the board as her class of seven struggling readers wanders in, bearing half eaten bagels and unfinished conversations as remnants of a too short break. Each part of the lesson plan:

- 9:50-55: check agenda
- 9:55-10:10: mini-lesson - introduce Books on Tape
- 10:10-10:25: read aloud
  
  **BREAK**
- 10:25-10:55: silent reading
- 10:55-11:05: journal
- 11:05-11:20: book share/homework

evokes a cacophony of comments from this unruly group of students whose eyes have been drawn to their teacher's print. "Can I go get my agenda? It's in my
locker.” “Oh, we did Books on Tape last year. What a drag.” “Read aloud. I thought you said we could have a movie!” “I’m just gonna take a zero. There’s no way I can read today.” “Do we have to journal again?” “You expect me to talk about a book in front of these jerks?” “I’m gonna fail my health test if I don’t get a chance to read over my notes.” Kim’s booming “Do I have to wait for break to go pee?” prods her thusfar silent teacher to speak sharply. “That’s enough, Kim. All of you find places to work and take out your agendas please.” As though called to attention by a kindly drill sergeant, this squad of struggling readers reluctantly digs in for another ninety minute Reading Workshop class.

But finding a place to work in this room can be a challenge, particularly for this population of at-risk freshmen. Utilized by eight groups of struggling readers a day, the Reading Workshop classroom itself is not conducive to learning. Small and obviously makeshift, the space has been carved out of an Industrial Arts Center which by virtue of a burgeoning student population was recently reassigned for use by the Special Ed. and reading departments. The temporary walls, off white and dingy, do not reach the original high ceiling, meeting instead the water-stained and mismatched acoustic tiles which try without success to block the sounds coming from other parts of this dreary collection of rooms. Phones ring, doors slam, VCRs blare, clusters of teachers and students converse. Along with unwanted noise, heat and light - too much or too little, depending on time and location - are shared by the entire complex. Only the daylight filtering through the dirty double window at the back of the room rescues this spot from its dismal appearance.

The furniture is clearly cast-off, a collection of mismatched odds and ends, some remnants of classes which had met here in years past, some rescued from basements and garage sales by Mrs. T. in her desire to make the Reading
Workshop room comfortable for her students. The only space suitable for study is a round metal table at the center of the room; it is surrounded by two plastic molded student desk chairs interspersed with two high swivel chairs more suited to drafting students than readers. A green wicker couch leans precariously against one wall, soiled cushions askew and legs angled, as if daring one last adolescent body to precipitate its inevitable demise. Mrs. T.'s large metal desk, meant for a regulation size classroom, takes up more than its share of the room, its peeling grey paint and broken drawer handles a reminder of its age. An unlockable file cabinet abuts the desk, by necessity a haven for supplies rather than confidential records. Two outdated Apple computers flank an equally ancient printer on a narrow folding table below the window in the back of the room, accompanied by drafting stools whose seats put the keyboards out of reach for most students. A nest of flattened beanbag chairs are piled in a corner under the dusty blackboard filling the front wall, a futile gesture to comfort in this most uncomfortable room. Today two wooden straight chairs have appeared in the room and a square folding table sits next to the door leading to the Learning Lab in 158b, but depending on the day this seating collection may change. "I'm not sure," Mrs. T. confides in me, "why our furniture comes and goes."

It's not that students haven't done their best to make the Reading Workshop room a place of their own, an educational setting where they can feel at home. As if to defy the second-rate feel of the classroom, they have covered the drab walls with posters of their favorite cars and sports figures, crafting colorful collages from outdated magazines and newspapers. This week snowboarders and Chevy Blazers take top billing in this ever-changing exhibit; next month it may be wrestling and rappers. A poster of Reading Workshop
expectations, the outcome of a September class discussion, commands a prominent position in the student-made decor, mute testimony to this group’s quest for belonging.

And there are books, lots of books. What the room lacks in comfort it makes up for in reading materials. In trying to hook these reluctant readers, Mrs. T. has filled four double-sided book carts with paperback books, all carefully labelled and color-coordinated by topic. Sports are yellow; science fiction and fantasy are green. Teen issues, horror and mystery, poetry and short stories, best sellers and “real-life” (nonfiction) books - all have their niche in the room’s bookshelves. In addition, there are paired books for partner reading, Fastbacks for quick reads, Books on Tape for those who like to listen as they read, and a “New and Noteworthy” shelf for readers looking for recent additions to the Reading Workshop library. A periodical rack no longer needed in the media center is filled with outdated magazines from Newsweek to Rod and Gun. “Take Time to Read” announces a poster on the door; it is clear that Mrs. T. hopes her students will do just that.

But for this newly hired Reading Workshop teacher, the third to hold this position in three years at Daniel Webster, that’s a challenge she must struggle with every day. Working with students most of whom feel totally alienated from literacy, she must fight to change their attitude as she helps them develop effective literacy strategies. And with no background in either education or reading instruction, that’s a tall order.

Mrs. T.: When I got here this September I didn’t really know what I was supposed to do. The first day I had been given this blue three-ring curriculum binder and told to help these freshmen improve their reading. And then for the first three weeks we didn’t even have a classroom to go to. That’s when I began to wonder if what I was supposed to
do was really important. After all, I had a job, kids who struggled with reading, but no place to work with them. By the time I got settled in this room I was getting really nervous. And the kids were off the wall. I took the job because I like kids and I thought it would be a good experience. But I don't really know what to do. I'm not even a teacher.

9:50 - 9:55: check agenda

In response to Mrs. T.'s stern words Patti, Carol, and Jasmine pull their agendas from their backpacks and vie for the two student chairs at the center table. Carol and Patti win out, so Jasmine heads for the couch, placing her agenda open on her knees as she leans gingerly against the back of the loveseat. As she goes to put her feet on the back of Carol's chair, Carol bellows "Cut it out." She does. Bob and Paul, with no agendas in sight, choose to perch in the high swivel drafting chairs which can easily accommodate their desire for perpetual motion. "I left it on my kitchen table," explains Bob to his teacher as she approaches him with grade book in hand. Paul chimes in with "I didn't write in my agenda because you didn't ask for it yesterday." "Stop the twirling," demands Patti of the high flying boys. "You're knocking my chair." Christian sits silently at the computer table, fiddling with the keyboard while he waits for Mrs. T. to check his agenda. "Where's Kim?," asks Mrs. T. as she moves around the room from student to student. "Oh, she had to go to the bathroom, remember? And besides, she had to get her agenda in her locker."

Mrs. T.: I know I am supposed to be helping these kids develop organizational skills by checking on their agendas. But what am I supposed to do if they say they don't have any homework? And if they don't care even when they do? These are students who tell me they "ruled the roost" as eighth graders, who love to share stories about how they gave their middle school teachers a run for their money. I believe them. So how do you teach kids who pride themselves on being unteachable?
9:55 - 10:10: mini-lesson - introduce Books on Tape

Mrs. T. stands at the front of the room, holding an illustrated tape cassette of The Outsider. She plans to spend the next ten minutes introducing her class to Books on Tape, a silent reading activity that she hopes will appeal to some of these reluctant readers. "How many of you have ever used Books on Tape? Today I want to . . ." As if on cue, five of her students simultaneously interrupt her; only Christian remains silent as his classmates vie with one another for center stage. "Oh, we did it last year." "Hey Paul, do you remember when Mr. Miller tried to get us to . . ." "Hey dude, did you know that the shortest Book on Tape is two hours long?" "Mrs. T., can I have first pick? I know what I want to read." "I hate books on tape. Especially when you have to follow along with the words." After regaining order ("You people need to listen to one another. You're constantly interrupting your classmates"), Mrs. T. goes over the classroom directions for using Books on Tape, then lets students take turns browsing through the annotated index of available tapes. After a brief glance at the list Christian is the first to sign up. From his isolated place in the back of the room he seems to be on task. Kim, on the other hand, is not. Having returning from her agenda search empty-handed, she has focused her attention on burrowing into a bean bag chair. Suddenly jarred to attention by the ring of a distant phone she blurts out: "I hate that friggin' thing, Mrs. T. It gets on my nerves every day."

Mrs. T.: Sometimes I just can't get their attention. All it takes is for someone like Kim to set the others off. And then they never want to listen and learn. Those are the lessons that really frustrate me. I know what I want to teach them; I just can't always get it across. I guess I shouldn't be surprised though. If I were in their places, I wouldn't want to listen either.

10:10 - 10:25: read-aloud
By the time the read-aloud begins, students have used their creativity to carve out comfortable spots for themselves. Patti and Carol seem content with their chairs. Bob and Paul have stopped their twirling; instead each has built three-chaired platforms of drafting stools, stretching their legs parallel to the floor across the stools in front of them. Christian has moved to the bean bag nest recently vacated by Kim. Kim has taken a place on the still standing couch with Jasmine where back to back like bookends, the two girls listen as their teacher, from a stool in the front of the room, starts to read from David Pelzer’s autobiography, *A Child Called It*. Only Mrs. T.’s voice breaks the quiet. Students who up until now have had a hard time waiting their turn to speak are listening attentively to their teacher’s every word. Only Paul breaks the spell when out of the blue he says: “Hey Bob, you know those kinds of shirts with the button-down collars?” Six sets of classmates’ eyes quiet him with their collective glare, and Mrs. T. goes on reading. Though Kim’s eyes are closed, she laughs when David, the main character in the book, talks about “covering your ass”; even she is hooked by the story.

Mrs. T.: I’m surprised at how well the read-aloud is going. It took us a while to get into it, but once I figured out what kinds of stories the students wanted to listen to (they like Pelzer’s writing; I suppose his books really give them a picture in their mind) we were set. I think they need to hear how a real reader sounds. Hearing my voice helps them with that. And what is amazing is now some of them want to read aloud too. I guess when you read aloud you feel like a reader.

10:25 - 10:55: silent reading

The move from read-aloud to silent reading is not smooth. Even after Mrs. T. gives her class a short break from sitting (“Get up and walk around please. Say what you need to say to your friends, because in five minutes we’ll be having
silent reading time”), most students find it hard to settle down again when their teacher asks them to get out their independent reading. Adolescents who for the last fifteen minutes had listened quietly now find it difficult to return to such enforced immobility. As students reluctantly take their books from the red plastic milk carton labeled Reading Workshop Block C, a stream of objections fills the air. This group, it seems, can never do anything without putting in its own two cents worth first. But after a two minute span of “Does reading my notes count for reading, Mrs. T.?” “But I don’t want to read today!” and “I said I was going to take a zero you know!” interspersed with Mrs. T.’s “Settle down, please!” and “Kim and Paul, each of you find a place to read – I mean now!” quiet once more encompasses the room.

Six of the students, having returned to the comfort of their read-aloud spaces, are digging in for the thirty minutes of reading ahead. Mrs. T. has taken out her book and joins Patti and Jasmine at the center table. Even Kim has her book open; only Paul seems unable to settle down. “I said I would take a zero,” he repeats for the third time to anyone who will listen. “I have the biggest hangover.” At this Mrs. T., obviously used to Paul’s defiance, approaches him wordlessly, shepherds him towards a corner chair and hands him a Hot Rod magazine. She then returns to her own reading.

Over the next twenty-five minutes the Reading Workshop class reads, the silence broken only by an occasional whisper and the squeak of Paul’s sneakers as he mashes his Nikes against the tile floor while turning the pages of magazine after magazine. “How many more minutes, Mrs. T.?” queries Kim. “Another five minutes and you can get your journals out.” But five more minutes are evidently too long for this reluctant reader. Without another word Kim pulls her sweatshirt hood over her head, leans back against her couchmate Jasmine and closes her
eyes. Her reading time is over.

Mrs. T.: Silent reading is usually not a problem anymore. Now the kids know it’s part of the day and once I can get them to settle down they do it. All except for Paul. He has such a hard time sitting still. In a way I don’t blame him. He’s a kid that needs to get up and walk around, but if I let him he distracts everybody else. The mix of a class like this can make or break a day. You just never know.

10:55 - 11:05: journal

“O.K., get out your journals.” The silence in the class ended by Mrs. T.’s voice, students once more move to the milk carton at the back of the room, trading in their bookmarked novels for spiral notebooks. “I don’t want to write in my journal today,” announces Patti. “I have nothing to say.” “Just write a summary,” suggests Jasmine. “Then tell what you think.” As students jockey for the few favored spots in which to journal, Bob proudly announces that he has just finished half of his book. “That’s the most I’ve ever read,” he says to no one in particular. Searching for Kim’s misplaced notebook, Mrs. T. still manages to give him a thumbs up.

“I guess I took it home last night,” recalls Kim as Mrs. T. comes up empty-handed. Can I get credit if I hand it in late?” Mrs. T. shakes her head “no” then turns her attention to the rest of the class. “Remember what we talked about in last week’s mini-lesson, about things that good readers do? One of the things they do is ask questions as they read. So along with your response please ask three questions about what you have just read.” These not-so-good readers greet her request with moans and groans. Journaling gives way to frustration as Paul voices what some of the others are thinking: “But I never have any questions when I read, Mrs. T.”

Mrs. T.: I have learned how important it is to get these kids to connect with their
reading. And I work to get them to be “in” their books. Sometimes it’s hard, but I think those kids who try are going to become better readers by doing it. Even when Patti says she has nothing to write about she still turns around and does a good job. But the kids who blow it off, they’re the ones who will be back in Reading Workshop again next year. I can see it now.

**11:05 - 11:20: book share/homework**

When given the choice between talking about their books or doing homework, Kim and Paul quickly pick homework. “Can we go into the Learning Lab?” asks Kim. “We need to study for our health test. I promise we won’t steal anything, we won’t let ourselves be tempted by what’s in Mr. Dooley’s desk, and we won’t bother anybody else.” “And I need to type on the new computer,” adds Bob.

Minus three of the most disruptive students, the rest of the class gathers around the table with a secretly relieved Mrs. T. Christian, who has been silent through most of the class, seems equally unburdened that his classmates are gone. “Mrs. T.,” he says tentatively as he sees the Learning Lab door close behind them. “Before we talk about stories we’re reading, can you read us what I wrote for English class? It’s about a rock group, just like the one I’m in. I want to hear how my story sounds.” “And then maybe we can talk about Christian’s story,” suggests Jasmine. “Why don’t you read it yourself, Christian?,” asks Mrs. T. “I’d feel too stupid,” he replies almost under his breath. And then in a firmer voice he adds, “I know that you can do a good job.” His face flushed with embarrassment the nervous author hands a crumpled handwritten page to his teacher. Mrs. T. begins to read. Jasmine, Patti, and Carol listen respectfully, unsure readers eager to give support to a classmate willing to take a chance with words. “Two months ago,” Mrs. T. thinks to herself, “this never would have happened.”
Mrs. T.: The hardest part of this job is classroom management. Without the Kims and Pauls, things would go so much better. But they’re part of the job and I know I have to learn how to deal with them. It’s all about trust, don’t you think? These kids come to me with a long history of reading failure, of hating reading. If I can get them to trust me, if I can guide them through the year, then perhaps they’ll come to believe that reading is not the worst thing in life. They might not like it but they’ll know how to do it better. And as a teacher that’s all I’m going to ask.

11:30:

The bell rings. As if on cue the C block Reading Workshop students end their discussion in mid-sentence, hoisting backpacks while chattering of English assignments and cafeteria menus in preparation for the rest of their day at Daniel Webster. “Push your chairs in please. And have a nice day!” As he reenters the room to grab his books, Bob spies Mrs. T. walking towards her desk. “Will you be at the basketball game tonight? I think I’m gonna play.” “I’ll try to be there,” she responds. “You know how much I want to see one of my students score the winning basket!” Absently pushing in the chairs that her exiting students have neglected, Mrs. T. is jarred by the loud voice of a newly arriving E block Reading Workshop student. “Hey, Mrs. T.,” Mick bellows. “Are we gonna have to read again today? I’ve got so much work to do. Can we have homework time today? What d’ya think, Mrs. T.?”

Reading Rebound: A One-on-One Intervention with Promise

Change can be frightening, requiring us to take a risk, to try something that nobody else has tried before.

The first time I met Brian, he was sound asleep on his desk in the middle of a reading test. While the other tenth grade students in the class bit their lips and gripped their pencils tightly as though trying to squeeze out enough correct
answers to "test out" of their Reading Workshop II class, Brian lay with his head on his front row desk, legs outstretched in the aisle, poised it seemed to trip anyone who tried to venture too close. Because the classroom teacher needed to run a quick errand, I had volunteered to stand in for her for a few minutes. To signal my distaste for Brian's inattention, as I took my place at the front of the class I threw my most teacherly glare towards the recalcitrant tester in front of me. But to no avail. He remained prone on his desk, eyes seemingly closed.

When Mrs. Patrick returned, I touched Brian on the shoulder and asked him to join me in the hall. Stifling a long yawn, he pulled in his legs, pushed back his chair and ambled slowly through the doorway after me. "I don't think I know you," I started out as he stood facing me, arms folded across his chest. I tried unsuccessfully to hide the growing annoyance I was feeling towards this seemingly self-assured young man who had flaunted authority by sleeping through the year-end reading assessment. "I'm Mrs. Mueller, the reading consultant, and I'm wondering who you are and why you aren't taking the test with the rest of your classmates." He looked me up and down, then replied with a cocky half grin, "My name is Brian." Then barely missing a beat, he added in a confident voice, "I'm in tenth grade and I don't know how to read." Seeing surprise cross my face undoubtedly encouraged him to continue: "I don't have to do this reading test, Mrs. Mueller. You can't make me. Mrs. P. is nice. She never makes me do this kind of stuff. She tells me that I can't learn to read so she will just have to read it for me. And she does." He paused, undoubtedly waiting for the response his comments had provoked in this ticked off reading lady standing next to him. "What do you mean you can't learn how to read?" I queried, challenging him to back up his words. After a moment Brian dropped his eyes; and all the bravado disappeared as he answered in a subdued voice, "I just can't
that’s all. Ever since first grade. I’ve always stunk at it. Lots of people have tried, but nobody’s ever taken the time to really teach me.” I paused for just a moment, made fleeting eye contact with this suddenly vulnerable adolescent, then said in a firm yet kind voice, “I don’t care what Mrs. Patrick says. I’m sure you can learn how to read. And you know what? Next fall I promise I am going to teach you.”

"I’m a Reader Now"

My chance meeting with Brian was the inspiration for Reading Rebound, a program of intensive one-on-one remedial reading instruction for adolescents patterned after Marie Clay’s Reading Recovery model of reading intervention for beginning readers (see figure 2). It’s a program tailor made for students like Brian, who at the age of sixteen continued to be deeply mired in the reading acquisition phase of reading, stuck at the fourth grade level despite year after year of remediation. It’s a program for lifers at the very bottom of the barrel, students so needy that even the supportive environment of a Reading Workshop is not the answer. It’s a program that I took a risk on, not knowing where Brian or I would end up but determined to give it a try nonetheless. Indeed, as I was working to develop the model, well-meaning friends warned me that this innovative idea of mine might not work; “they say you can only use Reading Recovery methods in the first grade,” one of them helpfully reminded me. But the response I gave to my critics was simple; what have we got to lose? For years kind people like Mrs. Patrick had been telling Brian - by words and deeds - that he couldn’t read, and by the time I met him he had long ago internalized their somber pronouncements of failure. Now it seemed as though he were taking this belief one step further, saying that if everybody thought he couldn’t read he wasn’t going to. Not on a test, not for a class assignment, not for anything. And yet if I believed that all children could learn to read, why not Brian?
**READING REBOUND: INSTRUCTIONAL COMPONENTS**

1. **Re-reading**: Student re-reads familiar material. Familiar material (from step five of previous sessions) is kept on hand for repeated reading.

2. **Running Record**: Using the previous session's "new reading" material (not the material read to fluency), the student reads orally from a passage of about 100 words (student chooses which passage) and the teacher takes a running record.

3. **Word Study and Metacognitive Strategies**: Based on the running record (step 2), the teacher works with the student on a word study strategy. This may be "chunking" words into readable parts, or focusing on the structure of language. The strategies related to monitoring reading ensure that what is being read makes sense.

4. **New Reading**: This step involves pre-reading preparation and either silent or oral reading by the student of new material. This is a guided reading activity.

5. **Reading Practice**: The student chooses a paragraph from the material just read (step four) in order to practice to fluency. To practice for fluency, the teacher and student read the passage (can be repeatedly) in paired unison with the teacher gradually fading support until the student is reading it alone. This passage can be used for the first step of the next session as familiar material.
In ten short months of Reading Rebound, Brian soundly disproved the words of his critics. He became a reader, in the process breaking away from the bonds of lifer that had held him for so long. Starting in September, when he confessed to me in the privacy of my office that if given the chance he “would like to read a little better,” this proud eleventh grader spent three blocks a week working on his reading. Supported by Mrs. Daley, a kind and supportive teacher who believed in Brian and his abilities, day after day he spent E block reading familiar material, studying words, working on metacognitive strategies, tackling new material, and finally reading a short selection over and over until he became fluent. In addition, he listened to Mrs. Daley as she read aloud, then spent time discussing what he had heard and journaling with her about the reading. Well known for his ability to wangle his way out of any class or assignment (when one irate teacher asked the guidance counselor why Brian had not been required to fulfill his community service hours that year, she answered: “But remember, it’s Brian we’re talking about. . .”), both his teacher and I were delighted at his uncharacteristic dedication.

In November I was a presenter at a regional reading conference, sharing my Reading Rebound experiences and ideas with a large audience of interested middle and high school educators. When I first told Brian of my planned presentation, in a moment of daring he said that he wanted to go with me. Teachers needed to know what learning to read as a junior in high school was like, how Reading Rebound was affecting him as a reader and a student. At the last minute though, this “work in progress” got cold feet. I could use his words, he told me, but he’d rather not appear himself. The message that he asked me to deliver was concise yet poignant:

This program is helping me. It makes me understand the book. I could never do that before. Mrs. Daley and I talk
about the book and it makes sense to me. She reads to me, we read together, I read by myself. She writes in a journal the things I’ve been thinking about. The word board helps a lot too. I get what words say now. I think this year is going to help me. I’m actually going to learn how to read. I may never like it but I’ll be able to do it.

Brian’s words about reading were well-received at the conference, but Brian the reader was not yet quite ready for prime time. That would come later.

When I had given Brian an Informal Reading Inventory in September, I had been hard pressed to note any reading strengths that I saw in his performance. He was cooperative and seemed willing to put some effort into his reading; that was about it. On the weakness side of the ledger though, I had a long list of areas he needed to work on: little or no self-correction of miscues; ineffective use of syntax and context; a lack of automaticity and fluency as he got bogged down in multiple mispronunciations, substitutions, and omissions; a weak vocabulary; and limited experiential background from which to build a context for understanding. Not surprisingly, when retelling a story he was unable to retain and put facts together to see the “big picture,” a problem compounded not only by multiple miscues but also by his inability to visualize what he was reading. Through the first semester his desire to learn remained constant as he continued to work hard through lesson after lesson, and in time areas in which he had struggled began to give him less trouble. He began to pay more attention to his reading, to notice a miscue and attempt to correct it, to stop and think when something he read simply didn’t make sense. His word identification skills became stronger as he developed a method for unlocking multi-syllabic words. And he began to enjoy what reading could hold for him, beginning a self-selected novel, Wrestling Sturbridge, which managed to capture his interest from day to day. “I wonder if we’ll find out. . .” he would often say.
to himself and his teacher as he opened the book to the next chapter.

In January, as part of his mid-term exam, Mrs. Daley asked Brian to comment on his Reading Rebound experiences. His words tell of his growing knowledge of and faith in himself as a reader:

I can read better now. I don’t struggle as much. I have a place where I can read to somebody else and not be embarrassed. I am learning strategies and I know that I can get better with practice. My advice to anybody who wants to become a better reader is to read more, to read lower books and practice so you can move up to higher levels. If you want to know how to read better, just keep on reading.

Brian kept on reading. Indeed, Mrs. Daley asked him to set a reading goal for the second semester; and in doing so he said, “I would like to prove to people that I have really learned how to read better. I want them to come and listen to me. They’ll see what I know. I’m a reader now.”

This nascent reader read and practiced, read and practiced for the next three months. He finished the first novel that he had ever read from start to finish. He picked out a book of short stories to read; he brought in magazines with articles about about cars and trucks; he laughed at some Shel Silverstein poems that Mrs. Daley shared with him. He even attacked Ethan Frome, required reading in English 11, with help from his Reading Rebound teacher. At the end of April, in order to reach the reading goal he had set for himself, Brian compiled a guest list of ten people he wanted to invite to a “private reading” scheduled for the morning of May 29. On the list were his parents, grandmother, favorite Daniel Webster teachers and guidance counselors, Special Ed. staff members, even the principal. He created an illustrated invitation on the computer, then sent copies to all the people on his list (see figure 3).
INVITATION TO A PRIVATE READING

BY BRIAN L.

THE DATE: MAY 29, 1998

THE LOCATION WHERE IT WILL BE HELD

WILL BE AT DANIEL WEBSTER REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

IN THE GUIDANCE CONFERENCE ROOM

THE TIME WILL BE FROM 11:30 A.M. - 12:15 P.M.

WE WILL PROVIDE SNACKS

AND BEVERAGES FOLLOWING THE READING

R.S.V.P. TO MRS. DALEY AT 537-6765 OR IN PERSON

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An invitation was sent to Mrs. Patrick, who had left Daniel Webster at the end of the previous school year. "I’m so mad she can’t come," Brian told me when he heard that his ex-teacher wouldn’t be able to attend. "She would have been so surprised when she heard how well I can read now," he added with pride.

After arranging to reserve a conference room and planning the refreshments he would serve to his guests (the Daniel Webster cafeteria ladies were more than happy to help him out with cookies and lemonade), Brian tackled the most important task, deciding which selections to read aloud. He ran some questions by Mrs. Daley and me ("Do you think it’s dumb to pick a picture book I read to the second graders during Study Buddies last year?"), but in the end the eclectic choices were Brian’s own. To prepare for the private reading, he spent the two weeks before the presentation reading his selections over and over during Reading Rebound class time. "I gotta be sure to do this right," he told his teacher more than once. When May 29 arrived and his invited audience assembled in the conference room, a nervous but well-dressed Brian, his worn jeans and t-shirt for once replaced by khakis, shirt, and tie, handed out typed programs to each of his guests. (see figure 4)

When all had been seated, Brian moved to the front of the room. "I’m here to show you I can read," he began in a voice barely above a whisper. And show them he did, in a proud voice which grew in volume as Brian demonstrated to himself and his audience what he had worked so hard to become, a reader.

A year later, as Brian gave an oral presentation on the senior project which each Daniel Webster graduate is required to plan and carry out independently, his subject was still reading. Fittingly, his words to his committee validated once and for all the innovative road to reading proficiency which Brian had traveled with Mrs. Daley as his guide.
I chose literacy tutoring as my senior project because when I was young I had difficulty reading. No one had the time when I was younger to teach me how to read. I wanted to be a reading tutor for a first grader who couldn’t read. I wanted to help Charlie to learn to read better. I wanted to help him know what letters or words are. I wanted to show him how to make fun out of reading . . . During my sophomore year I had a 4.8 reading level and now I read at the 8th grade level. I couldn’t read then. I can now. I still don’t like to read on my own. It’s not easy for me to sit still and concentrate so it’s better if someone reads the hard stuff to me. But when I go out in the real world, I’ll have to do it on my own. And the good thing is I know I can do it. I’m not worried. I am a reader.

Figure 4: Brian’s Program

The Reading List For Brian L.

#1) If You Promise Not to Tell - Joe Wayman
   - I Hate to Wait  pg 4
   - Bored pg 49
   - Questions without Answers  pg 8

#2) Where the Sidewalk Ends - Shel Silverstein
   - Us  pg 36

#3) Children’s Books
   - Chimps Don’t Wear Glasses by Laura Numeroff
   - Tacky the Penguin by Helen Lester

#4) Wrestling Sturbridge - Rich Wallace, chapter 11

Hope you enjoy the show!
Engaging With Text: An Arduous Journey to Understanding

Change takes patience. It can tax your faith in yourself and your students.

I have known Marie since she transferred to Daniel Webster towards the end of her freshman year. She had been referred to me by her newly assigned guidance counselor, an educator who often used my office and my services as a last resort for students who had nowhere else to turn as they struggled with the ever-growing demands of high school. “She and her family just moved here from Riverside,” Jim told me. “She’s a discouraged student who seems to be afraid of her own shadow. She has no Special Ed. coding, but for whatever reason she’s spent most of her life in self-contained classrooms. Her reading scores are low, and she’s having a hard time in all of her classes here. It’s too late to put her in Reading Workshop this year, so I think she could use your help.” When Marie arrived at my office that first afternoon I was quick to notice her slumped shoulders and downcast eyes. Yet even her body language couldn’t prepare me for the very first words out of her mouth: “My name is Marie and you need to know that I’m stupid. I’m stupid and I can never do anything right.”

As I worked with Marie that spring, assisting Daniel Webster’s newest lifer as she struggled to make sense of her English and Geo. Studies assignments, I soon realized that this needy adolescent, coming to my office twice a week to deal with the pressures of a new academic environment, had misjudged herself. This timid and discouraged student whose favorite phrase was a teary “I can’t” was not stupid; indeed, when given the opportunity to complete an assignment with my support, she drew from a well of intelligence and abilities she didn’t even think existed. It became painfully clear in working with Marie that I was rubbing shoulders with a poster child for learned helplessness, a pupil who through the words and actions of others had come to see herself as incapable and
incompetent. In time, though, after her woeful “I can’ts” had been forever banned from my office (“I don’t want to hear it,” I would say as soon as she launched into her tried and true reaction to any and all assigned work), Marie started to see herself in a different light. She began to develop the ability to think and work on her own. She displayed the beginnings of self-assurance. Her sophomore year she participated in Reading Workshop, and at the end of a year of reading practice and skills development she had shown remarkable growth. The student who had spent a lifetime saying “I can’t” was now willing to give her courses and herself a try.

In January of her junior year, a “new and improved” Marie swooped unannounced into my office. I had seen her in the cafeteria earlier that fall, sporting a provocative mini-skirt and an updated hair do to match. “Don’t forget that I’m here if you need me!” I had called to her across a throng of laughing adolescents jockeying for position in the hot lunch line. “Oh, Mrs. Mueller,” Marie had giggled through a brightly lipsticked mouth that seemed to highlight this student’s march towards young adulthood and independence. “You know that I will! Have you ever had to worry about me?” Listening to her confident bantering, I marveled at Marie’s transformation from self-effacing ninth grader to poised upperclassman.

“So young lady,” I began as I looked up from my desk and saw Marie standing in the door that winter morning. “What brings you here today?” “Not much really. I just need a little help in English,” responded Marie with a smile. Then without missing a beat she continued, “Miss Sizer says that for the new semester each of us has to pick out a novel and read it on our own. Then in six weeks, at the end of the book, we have to do a project. Geez, I don’t know what to do. I really don’t have a clue. Can you believe she really expects us to do this?
We all tried to talk her out of it, but she won’t change her mind. Mrs. Mueller, can you help me p-l-e-a-s-e? If you want, I can come here three times a week during my study hall. We can do it then. We can read and talk, read and talk, just like I learned to do in Reading Workshop.” Marie’s request, so simple and yet so challenging, sent both of us on a journey of discovery as she learned for the very first time what it means to engage, really engage in your reading, while I learned firsthand how difficult but rewarding such a task can be for a revisioned lifer like Marie. My teaching journal captured our belabored voyage, page by page and week by week.

“We Can Read and Talk, Read and Talk!”

Jan. 28

Today I met Marie in the library. Miss Sizer had given me a list of English novels Marie could choose from. Before I saw her I went over the list carefully, discarding those whose readabilities are over Marie’s head. I want her to be successful. Then I gave the revised list to Marie so that she could start the semester with a book she really wanted to read. Flowers for Algernon was included; so was Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, my “secret” choice for her. As we were going over the list Miss Sizer walked by and said: “How about reading Animal Dreams, Marie? The kids always seem to like it and I’ll bet you can really connect with it.” She was obviously alluding to rumors about a miscarriage this woman-child sitting next to me had suffered that fall; Codi, the main character in the book, had had one too. Since none of the other books seemed to please Marie, she jumped at Miss Sizer’s suggestion. I am excited because I love Kingsolver’s writing. I don’t know the readability of the book, but if Marie really gets into it what does it matter? Word attack has always been a strength for her; she doesn’t get thrown by multi-syllabic words like lots of her peers. We got two
copies and we looked at the cover, a stylized painting of a Native American pueblo I think. It didn’t look at all familiar to Marie. I’ll bet she has never been anywhere near a town like Grace, Arizona. Next class I plan to bring in pictures I took when our family was out there two summers ago. That’ll give her some background for the setting of the book. I told Marie to go home and look over the book. I’ll do the same.

**Jan. 31**

After looking at my pictures and talking about the west (the farthest from New Hampshire Marie has been is Rhode Island, to visit her father after her parents got divorced), we scanned the book together, talking about how the book is written in different points of view, with flashbacks, dreams, and Native American legends all mixed in. She seems to be comfortable with all of that. She even told me they talked about flashbacks in Miss Sizer’s class last semester. We reviewed the names of all the main characters so that Marie will know who’s narrating each chapter. She liked the fact that this was about a girl who is looking for her own identity. “So am I,” she told me. Maybe this book will do what good stories are supposed to do, letting Marie learn more about herself as she gets to know the people and the plot. We have six weeks to read this book, but I’m going to start off slow. I asked her to read just the first chapter. I had wanted to read it in class but we ran out of time. We talked too much. Oh well, it’s only two pages long.

**Feb. 2**

Good grief. Here I thought this was a book Marie would enjoy reading on her own, and the first thing she told me was that she didn’t get it. Two pages and she didn’t get it. Not at all. She got the words, but she didn’t know what they were saying. So I suggested a think aloud. I’d read it and tell her what was going
on in my mind when I was reading. She would follow along in her own book. I assured her that this was the same thing she did in Reading Workshop when they did shared readings, just that the book was a little harder. When reading, I was going to model the seven metacognitive reading strategies that they’d gone over and over in Reading Workshop class. We did that, and she seemed to understand. Then on to the next chapter, with another character narrating and including a flashback in his musings to boot. Marie wanted me to keep reading and thinking so I did. I questioned, I visualized, I predicted and read between the lines. I drew her into the conversation so she would know that she was a part of this reading and sensemaking. We covered sixteen pages in ninety minutes. I decided not to ask her to read on her own yet. I think she has to get comfortable in the book before she can take off solo. But there are 325 pages to go and only five and a half weeks until the book has to be finished. Miss Sizer wants her done by then. Yikes!

Feb. 4

Today I suggested to Marie that we take turns reading a paragraph aloud and then stopping to talk about it if there were any questions either of us had. Read and talk. Read and talk. I reminded her of how well that strategy had worked when I helped her make sense of April Morning last year. We’d do the same with this book. It only took me one two and a half page chapter to realize that we are in way over Marie’s head. She may have been able to make sense of books she read for Reading Workshop, she may have been metacognitive during our April Morning sessions, but not with Animal Dreams. With Kingsolver you have to think and reason all of the time, pulling in what you already know to make sense of the multiple (and now it seems to me nonstop. . . .) nuances of her style and story. For struggling readers her style is truly inconsiderate. And for
struggling reader with limited experiential background it’s even worse. We got through another two chapters today; we’re on page 36. Three hundred pages and five weeks to go. Still no independent reading. What’s the point? Without the talk that goes along with the reading, there is nothing there for her.

Feb. 7, 9, 11

What a disaster! When we started the book I told Marie that we were going to take turns reading (she likes to read aloud - and she’s very “fluent”), discussing what we had read at appropriate points. Well we’re doing that, but let me tell you, we have been doing a lot of discussing. Hardly a sentence goes by without that panicky “I don’t get it” look crossing her face. We then stop and talk, me trying to pull from Marie her ideas as I model what I want by sharing mine. After sixty odd pages of hard hard work, it has become very clear to me that understanding this book goes far beyond the Barnell Loft strategies of picking out main idea and supporting details. In order to grasp the essential, in order to construct meaning, I have reverted to one long “think aloud” with my well-intentioned but struggling student. I am looking at comprehension in a totally new light. And I wonder how she’s looking at herself. Marie has come so far since her “I can’t” stance of two years ago; I only hope this ordeal doesn’t make her fall back into that helpless pattern. Whose bright idea was this anyway?

Feb. 14

Valentine’s Day, but there’s not much to love about what’s going on between Marie and this book. She hates the book. She hates Codi and her father and all the people in Grace. Not knowing what else to do in our quest to “conquer” this book, Marie and I spent today doing just what we’ve been doing for the past two weeks. Or almost. I read aloud. (Marie has given up on reading
aloud herself. She has realized that when she does she puts all of her energy into words and none into meaning.) Marie doesn't get it. We talk in order to figure things out. And so on and so on. At the end of the block Marie told me once more how much she is disliking the book. So I made her a promise. We will keep plodding on until we get to page 100 (twenty long pages from where we are now. . .). If by then it is still a struggle we will throw in the towel. Let me tell you that I am almost looking forward to doing that. Don't know what I am going to say to Miss Sizer but. . .

Feb. 16

Today we had worked our way through a LONG chapter, fourteen pages to be precise. I went to close the book and Marie surprised me by saying, "Let's keep reading. The next chapter's a short one." We did; and at the end of the chapter, without any prompting, Marie said,"You know why I think he did that, Mrs. Mueller?" Clearly understanding the essence of the text, she went on to make a thoughtful inference, then a prediction. I was taken aback by her comments; for on her own she was beginning to reason, to make sense of the story as she read it. On her own she was beginning to see the point as she became an engaged and thoughtful reader. I think we are going to finish this book.

Feb. 18

Suddenly we are moving faster. Marie is beginning to connect with Codi's pregnancy; without really telling me the details of her own plight this reader is using the novel as a way to come to terms with her all-too-similar history. I can see it in the way her thoughts are beginning to develop and grow, no longer the staccato of sentence by sentence meaning making but rather the flow of page by page understanding. Now we have decided that Marie will do some reading on her own. To try it out, before the block ended we each read the same short
section to ourselves. I told her that the think aloud that I have been doing would now go on in her own head. When we finished we talked. It wasn’t smooth and easy; we still had a lot to go over. But some of the responsibility for meaning making is moving to Marie. Atwell would be proud of this handover! And for the first time I gave her a reading assignment. Over the weekend she’ll try to finish the rest of chapter 12 on her own. I suggested that she attach a sticky note every time that she comes to something she doesn’t understand or wants to talk about. I will do the same. We’ll see what happens.

Feb. 21

It’s a start. Marie got through three pages on her own - and the sticky notes worked! One asked the meaning of “mortar” (it’s so easy to forget how limited Marie’s vocabulary is) and how a baby could be “mortared” into a wall (even when knowing what mortar is, that picture stretches a reader’s use of the word, so typical of Kingsolver . . .). The other gave Marie’s surprised reaction to Codi and Loyd’s lovemaking, “Do you think he planned all of this?” followed by “I don’t get it. Does he know about her pregnancy or not?” We silent read through a five page chapter, then discussed it as a whole. It’s hard, though, to get away from the little things that come up over and over to puzzle Marie. I’ve got to realize that what counts for her is the big picture the author wants her to come away with, not the nuances that I understand but which go right over her head. She needs to make sense of her reading on a level which works for her. On her own she will read the next five page chapter, using sticky notes again.

Feb. 23, 25

Marie is really beginning to get into the book now. Today as we read together silently, there was a part about Codi’s attempt to teach birth control to her high school students. Marie laughed to herself, then suddenly looked up and
said, "I'm surprised that I know so much!" Then she paraphrased what Codi had been telling her class: "If they're gonna do it, they'd better know what they're getting in for!" It's easy of course when Marie can connect with the text; it's much more challenging when there's a divide between what she knows and what the book is telling her.

For the first time I feel that we're making progress. If Marie works hard over the weekend, we will be at the halfway mark in the book. I must admit I'm getting worried about her finishing on time; there are only two weeks left for this assignment. I'm not sure what a stickler Miss Sizer is for deadlines, and I doubt she realizes what a stretch this assignment has been for Marie. Too often teachers are simply unaware of their students' abilities (but I'd better not forget that I was part and parcel of Marie picking this book in the first place. . . .) It's not as though Marie hasn't been working. She's surprised herself with what she has been able to accomplish. When I mentioned my concerns Marie told me that Miss Sizer is going to give them class time to do their independent reading. If she does that I think Marie will be able to take advantage of that time. I asked if she thought that journaling would help her to understand the book. She's used to doing journal entries; that activity was a part of Reading Workshop that she really liked. She's going to give it a try.

**Feb. 28, March 1, 3**

Things are going much better. Between reading with me, reading in English class, and reading on her own, Marie is really making progress in the book. The journal entries seem to be helping her as well. They are taking over from the sticky notes, giving Marie a place to record what she is thinking - and to get her to think some more. Here's a part of one of her journal entries:

> About the book I disliked how Codi's father wouldn't talk to her about their relatives. Why does he have to keep it
hidden from her? She's old enough to know. I think that
Codi is getting stronger. At first all she wanted to do was
leave Grace after a year. Now I think she may hang around.
I can just picture Codi standing up and talking to all the ladies
in town. She must have been afraid. But she must have been
proud too. I thought the cock fight was disgusting. I wonder
how anybody could do that to an innocent bird.

March 6

Because I want Marie to think about how she is growing as a reader this
semester, I have asked her to use her journal as a place to reflect not only on the
book itself but also on the strategies she has used to make sense of it. My goal, of
course, is to help her to realize that she is capable of doing independently what
we have done together. I want her to become Clay's self-extending reader. I'm
beginning to think she's well on her way. Here is an entry in which she honestly
and successfully evaluates herself:

As a reader I have learned that I can read anything as long
as I ask questions or stop to think about what I read. I feel that
I am pretty good at visualizing what I read. I ask a lot of ques­
tions too. I sometimes can predict what's going to happen next.
I need to work realizing that books take time and patience
and understanding in order to read them.

March 8

I must admit that I have not stressed synthesizing with Marie. For me the
act of synthesizing seems like one of the most sophisticated cognitive strategies
used by good readers, so with Marie I have been intent on stressing other things.
We have put a lot of effort into visualizing (she's good at that now), asking
questions/predicting (another emerging strength) and inferring (ditto). She has
been using fix-up strategies and working at picking out what's important in the
reading. And then today, as we finished reviewing some reading that Marie had
done on her own (that's how we spend most of our time now, going over text she
has read independently), she turned back to a page that had really been puzzling
her. "I still don't get this whole thing," she said. After we talked it out together, she wrapped up our discussion with, "I know. Codi feels so alone." A slight pause. Then "Oh, so that’s what the whole book is about, isn’t it?” She seemed slightly disgusted when she said this, as if she should have known this all along, as if perhaps I should have told her this before we even opened the book. "I know how she feels. I often feel alone, even in the middle of a room full of people.”

March 10

For the past week I’ve been worried about what’s going to happen if Marie doesn’t finish the book on time. But I had decided to let Marie take care of that matter; after all, it’s her responsibility. It turns out I shouldn’t have been so concerned. As break ended today, Marie flew into my office, her face flush with excitement. “Mrs. Mueller, guess what? I’m not gonna get marked down for being late finishing the book. Miss Sizer has decide to give all of us an extra week. When she asked me how much I have to read, I told her that I had only four chapters left, that I can’t wait to find out if Codi is going to leave Grace or not. I can’t understand why she would; doesn’t she understand how much Loyd and Emmelina and everybody else really need her? I wouldn’t go if I was her. See you this afternoon.” Then as quickly as she had entered my office, she turned to leave, intent on catching up with her classmates who were straggling out to catch the morning voc. school bus. Breaking into a half trot, this revisioned lifer threw one parting line at me: “I really love this book, don’t you Mrs. Mueller?” "Yes, Marie," I thought to myself as I watched her rejoin her laughing group of friends. I really love it too. More than you’ll ever know.
The Reading Workshop "Graduate": An In-Between Reader

Change is fragile. It needs to be monitored carefully. When you're not looking, it can take you two steps forward and one step back.

As part of her graduate studies, one of the Daniel Webster teachers did a program analysis of the school's Reading Workshop curriculum (Rogers). Utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods, she included data drawn from both students and teachers to present a clear picture of the effectiveness of the program. Her findings were encouraging; not only were the classes successful at substantially increasing the reading levels of most of the participants, but both teachers and students felt positively about having participated in the program. In addition, students saw the Reading Workshop class as a safe place to look for the personal and academic support many of them needed to make the grade in high school. The expected stigma of such a leveled placement seemed to fade in light of the human and educational gains made by the vast majority of the participants.

Laura showed me the results of her study at about the same time that I was completing my student interviews for this research project. Pleased to see that my work with at-risk readers had been validated, I was inspired by her findings to search out one of the original Reading Workshop students still at Daniel Webster. If the freshmen and sophomores in Laura's study felt that Reading Workshop was making a difference for them, imagine what a senior would have to say of its lasting effect on his academic career. In thinking about whom to approach, I immediately recalled Joe, a personable young man who as a sophomore had impressed me with his ability to interact with teenagers and adults alike. When I had first met him two years ago, he had been a student in Reading Workshop II, a follow-up reading class for those twenty percent of at-
risk readers who had failed to "test out" after their first year of corrective
instruction. He had worked hard that second year to improve his reading skills
so that he could make the grade on the spring test, and indeed that May he had
scored high enough to proudly leave reading help behind once and for all.

He was a student, I knew, who wouldn't be intimidated by my position to
tell me what he thought I wanted to hear; instead I could count on him to tell it
like it was. And tell me he did, opening my eyes to the fragility of change, to the
lot of revisioned lifers who have the safety net of reading support pulled out
from under them just as they are savoring the intoxicating air of reading
achievement. These are newly successful readers who confidently insist that they
want to "do school" on their own but who too often find out that they are not yet
fully prepared for the academic independence such success demands of them.
These are vulnerable students whose hard won confidence is too easily shattered
by classes and teachers demanding too much too soon. As an eloquent
representative of this group, Joe offers up an additional lesson that we educators
of at-risk readers need to learn.

"I've Got the Knack of It Alright... But Only to a Point"

When I was in Reading Workshop the second year all I wanted to do was
get out. Because I felt there was something better on the other side. Not that I
didn't like it. It gave me time to read the book and get credit for doing it. I mean,
I knew I was getting something out of it, learning to read better and a credit on
my transcript too. And it was fun most of the time. It's kind of not cool that my
classes aren't fun any more. The people too - I liked the people in that class. Just
the other day I was thinking about the teacher, Mrs. Patrick. Oh, she was a good
teacher. I liked her. She was so nice. She always, like when I didn't do something,
she didn't just go "Well, if you don't do your work you're not graduating." Not
that that’s not logical. But when we didn’t do something, and all of us didn’t get it, she’d take a step backwards and do it in class. If one person out of everybody didn’t get it she’d reteach it. That’s good for the kid who doesn’t get it and it’s also good for the people who do get it to learn more about it. Most of the times you don’t get everything, you pretty much get a concept of it but you don’t get everything. It’s not going to happen. So then people get an even better understanding of what happened.

I felt smart in that class. I felt like I was one of the smartest kids in that class. Maybe it’s because of who I was up against. Plus it was like I was competing with everybody and I knew I had a chance to win. That’s the way I’ve always been. Even where I work part time at Market Basket, I have a friend and I’ll go to stocking and if he tries to get faster than me, then I’ll turn it up a notch so that I’m faster than him. In Reading Workshop when I’d go to read something I knew I’d have more time to read it, and I’d be the first one flipping the pages. Not like in my English class now. We read a lot more. We do a lot harder stuff, and sometimes I just can’t do it. Like we have really smart people in my class like Mark O’Donnell and Dick Blake. Really smart people, where if they have to read something, they’ll complain about it and everything else but they’ll read it and they’ll get it done; and when time comes for conversation or whatever they know all the questions and the answers. I can’t compete against them. I don’t know, maybe I got lazy or something. Or I’m just lazy when it comes to reading.

I’m a slow reader. In that English 12 class Mrs. King tells us to read page 1 to 60 in Catcher in the Rye and then the next day we’d come in and have kind of a circle group and discuss what we read. I really get into discussions, I really get into talking and what not, like I’m the voice of the automotive class at Lincoln High Voc. Center, and I’m really good at that you know? But sixty pages? I tried
to read it but I only got through twenty. It probably took me, well because I got up and got a drink, it still took me about an hour and a half to read those twenty pages. That’s a lot of time to spend reading. I mean, come on. So we go into class and start to talk. I’m talking about the first twenty, everybody else is up to sixty. I definitely get behind because if I’m reading the next twenty pages, everybody else is reading the next eighty. O.K., I can talk a little bit. But then they’re reading the next eighty and I’m still back here on page forty. I’m going, “I want to talk about what we were talking about yesterday.” I get left way behind. Because I don’t . . . , it’s not really that I don’t have the time, well I really don’t have the time to use up reading eighty pages at a time because there’s no way that I can do that.

For me now a good reader is somebody that can read up to a certain speed and remember what they’re reading. Maybe I could do that in Reading Workshop but not now. I try to fool people, like I have another class where Mr. Rheault passes out a paper and it’s four pages long and he says, “Take five minutes and read this and we’ll discuss it.” So he gives us our five minutes; we read it. It seems like when I look around the room everybody’s turning pages and reading. I don’t know if they’re actually doing it, because that’s what I’m doing. I’m turning pages but I’m only pretending like I’m reading. I read as much as I can, until I hear a few people turn pages, and then I’ll turn the page. And read as much as I can on that page, until I hear some more people turn pages and then I’ll turn the page. It’s not just the kids getting farther than me that bugs me, because when I’m at my house I’m the only one reading so I don’t know what everybody else is doing there. All I know is that it’s taking me way too long. I thought I was a good reader when I got out of Reading Workshop. Now good readers are everybody but me.
But the speed thing doesn't bother me when I'm reading something that's important, when I'm reading the procedure on how to do a tune-up on my '94 Z24 Cavalier. I mean you have to pull the bottom engine out, you have to rock the motor forward to get to the back spark plugs. I'll read that; if it's a paragraph I'll read it four or five times just to make sure I can understand it. And the time thing won't bother me; if it takes me an hour to read it, it won't bother me. It won't bother me because first off I want to make sure I do it right, and second off no one else is standing around and turning pages faster than I am.

Reading is part of my life now. You teachers have always told me that. Now I know you're right. Every time I work on a car I have to read something. That's the way it is. You can't go in, you can't even pop the hood of a car and actually go for what you're looking for most of the time without picking up a book. A lot of the cars I work on are in "no start" conditions. They won't idle. They won't run. You can't just go under the hood and go "O.K., I know the problem's over there." It's not possible. You need a book. And even when you know what the problem is, like it's a speed sensor let's say, you don't know where it is. You gotta read, you gotta remember, you gotta understand. That kind of reading I can do.

It's the school reading I have trouble with. When I have to go home and read and understand sixty or eighty pages or something it's just not going to happen. The problem with reading is that if I have to read something that doesn't apply to me or my life, like a fictional book, it's not important so I won't remember it. My memory has like this filter in it. Whether I want to or not the story itself just won't get let in. It's weird. Give me a used car buyer's guide or something along those lines. I'll read specs, dimensions, I'll read wheel bases, I'll read sizes of motors and what not. I'll remember every word of it you know. I
could tell you the torque specs of any part of a 350 right off the top of my head because it’s important to me. But Catcher in the Rye? I can barely remember who the main character was. Even though he did a lot of things like I do, so it does kind of connect with me, it’s like who cares about this type of thing. It’s a fictional book. Oh, once I read about a concept car, they call it a jeepster, with four wheel drive, 18” aluminum rims, nice tires, big motor. I can remember it and that’s fiction, that’s not fact. So I guess it’s not the fiction that doesn’t interest me, it’s what’s in the fiction that doesn’t interest me.

I’m not sure how I even tested out of Reading Workshop because the reading on the test couldn’t have been something that I was interested in. It was hard work. But I wanted so bad to test out. I had to read things over and over again, to make sure I got the answer right. I’d read it the first time, I’d go to the question and if I didn’t remember it I’d have to read it again. I think that nobody finished before me. Because when somebody finishes a test before me, especially comprehension questions, that’s when I go to the Christmas tree idea. If I’m first to finish, if I’m not pages and pages behind, it makes me feel more confident about my reading. It’s not that being first makes me a better reader; it just makes me feel that way. I’ve already been reading for a while, let’s say ten years or so, and I’ve got the knack of it alright. But only to a point. Being behind when I read in school, like with Catcher in the Rye, makes me truly believe in my mind that I can’t do it. And most of the time I don’t. I give up.

At the end of tenth grade I felt good about me and my reading. Not now. I hate to say it, I wouldn’t want to ruin it for everybody else, but probably you should have kept me in Reading Workshop. I know I have been forced to learn more from Mrs. King, because that’s just the way it is. I mean we just keep going on to other things, and we keep having to learn other things no matter if you’ve
learned the first thing or not, and eventually you get the knack of it because the first thing always leads to the second. But there’s got to be another place in there somewhere. I’m like in between as a reader. It’s not that those kids in English class are smarter than me, because that’s just not possible. But maybe they are better readers. And reading is I think the only thing in my whole life I won’t try to get better at, to beat other people at, except when I’m in a place like Reading Workshop. I worked real hard to pass the test; I thought the grass was greener on the other side. But now I’m not so sure.
REFERENCES


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REFERENCES - CHILDREN’S AND ADOLESCENT LITERATURE


The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research has reviewed and approved your request for time extension for this protocol. Approval is granted for one year from the approval date above. At the end of the approval period you will be asked to submit a project report with regard to the involvement of human subjects. If your project is still active, you may apply for extension of IRB approval through this office.

The protection of human subjects in your study is an ongoing process for which you hold primary responsibility. Changes in your protocol must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to their implementation. If you have questions or concerns about your project or this approval, please feel free to contact me directly at 862-2003.

Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this project. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Kara L. Eddy, MBA
Regulatory Compliance Officer

cc: File
    Tom Newkirk - English