Running Head: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I USE A COMMON NOVEL

# What Happens When I Use A Common Novel Approach to Implement Specific Reading Comprehension Strategies That Guide My Eighth Grade Students to Become Active and Engaged Readers?

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## Question in Context

### *What do I wish to explore about my own teaching?*

Introduction: "*Planting the Seed*"

Unbeknown to me, the seed for my research question was planted on the very first day of my 2006-2007 school year in my eighth grade Reading class when I claimed Desi K. as my personal 'I can make a difference' challenge as he proudly proclaimed to me and his classmates, "I DON"T READ." (Not, "I *can't* read," but "I *don't* read.") With my 'I can change the world' feathers ruffled, I was determined to break down Desi K's wall of negativity and underlying lack of confidence to be a successful reader, and maybe even reincarnate Desi K. into a model student who actually *enjoys* reading a good book.

Then, later on in the year, I experienced the soul-searching demands of the Regional Training Center, RTC, courses, *Modes of Inquiry and Research* and *Inquiry into Practice.* After having had the Desi K. seed planted, I knew that when I needed to select and explore an area of my own teaching, my research could only be related to motivating reluctant readers whose perception of themselves as a reader is so low it becomes self-defeating.

Unfortunately, Desi K. is not alone. As an eighth grade teacher of both English Literature students and regular Reading students, I discover too often that my Reading students have sadly lost that love of reading my more advanced English students still seem to nurture. After years of simply decoding text without going beyond the literal comprehension level, these students, like Desi K., have become non-thinking, disengaged readers who now, in their middle school years, try to avoid the drudgery of reading something they know they won't enjoy or even understand. There must be a way to

motivate my *decoders* to become active and engaged readers who will begin to visualize as they read; begin to probe more deeply and ask questions as they read; begin to speculate and predict where the author might be going; and begin to relate the story to their own lives by making connections. The seed has been planted.

Educational Setting and Current Teaching Situation: "*The Growing Field*"

Lakeland Middle School is located in a residential area in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey with a large lake, hence the name, adjacent to its sports field; and the Board of Education building is also on the same property, with Special Services housed in the middle school. According to the 2005-6 State of New Jersey Report Card, Lakeland School has an enrollment of a total of 418 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students. English is the language spoken at home for 88.3% of our students, while 16.3% have disabilities and are observing official Individual Educational Plans. Our students continually perform above the state average in "Proficient" levels of proficiency in all areas of the Assessment of Skills and Knowledge, ASK, and the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment, GEPA, but below the state average in "Advanced" levels of proficiency in all areas accept Language Arts Literacy. Being a long time member of the Language Department, I am proud to say that the percentage of our students who fall into the "Advanced" proficiency level on the GEPA has been consistently higher than the state average. Our student/faculty ratio averages at 11.3 and our total cost per pupil is $12,793 as compared to the state average of $13,169. Our local Report Card Narrative concludes with "Lakeland Middle School continues to provide a high quality of learning experiences for its students and remains

committed to continuous improvement." I am hoping that the result of my teacher research experience will contribute in some small way to that continuous improvement.

I have been teaching a variety of English, reading, and skills classes at the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade levels at Lakeland Middle School for 21 years. I am currently an eighth grade teacher of reading, language arts, English, and a Basic Skills Instruction, BSI, class we call Language Arts Literacy Skills or LALS. My two English classes contain an average of 26 above-average students and I meet with them one period a day. My LALS class is a mix of below-average and classified students whose ASK test scores indicated a need for remediation in preparation for the GEPA. These students are pulled out of their Practical Arts or physical education classes on an alternating schedule. Finally, 10 students of average ability make up my reading and language arts classes. I see these same students two 40 minute periods a day, one designated for reading instruction and the other for writing and language skills. Since it is the exact same group of students, and the periods are often back-to-back, I can use these two periods as an 80 minute block in a variety of educationally creative and productive ways. It is on this class that I have finally chosen to focus my research.

## The Evolution of My Research Question: "*Cultivating the Seed*"

When my fellow RTC 510-601 students and I were told that deciding on our overarching question or situation that we wish to explore through our research project would, in fact, be an ever-changing and evolving process, I must admit I had no idea how true that would come to be. After much change and evolution, I am glad that I waited until after I completed my literature review before I attempted writing this Question in

Context component. I thought version #3 of my Question was going to the one, and then version # 4 began to emerge. Here, I will document the genesis of my 'final' question and chronicle the thought process and other relevant events that contributed to its importance for me on a personal level. For discussion purposes and the avoidance of repetition, the wording of versions #1, #2, and #3 are documented as indicated below. Version #4, my absolute final question, which ultimately drove my teacher research, is revealed at the end of this section titled "The Evolution of My Research Question: "*Cultivating the Seed"*

Version #1:

> Motivating Disengaged Students: How do I encourage my LALS (Language Arts Literacy Skills) students to take responsibility for their own learning when they don't want to be there?

Version #2:

> Motivating Disengaged Students:
> How do I motivate disengaged students to take responsibility for their own learning?

Version #3:

> Reading Comprehension: What happens when I implement strategies to motivate my eighth grade 'decoders' to be active, insightful, motivated and engaged readers?

Initially, when challenged with the task of deciding on a research question, my intent was to select something that would have the most impact on the students who needed it the most. My LALS students came to mind first because they are notorious for being disengaged with body language and attitudes that shout out, "I don't want to be here." It should be noted here that Desi K. is also in this LALS class twice a week. Version #1 was born out of a desire to motivate them to want to learn and take

responsibility for their own learning. Version #1 soon became Version #2 out of a need to eliminate awkward wording and having to explain what LALS meant. Nonetheless, I felt that if they understood that this very disengagement and lack of motivation for learning was why they were assigned to this class in the first place, they would naturally want to change that to avoid being assigned a similar class in high school, which will be the case if their GEPA scores label them as Partially Proficient. I wanted to believe this but always feared I would get frustrated and not be successful in such a short period of time. Maybe if I had the opportunity to start the school year with newly researched strategies, I would not have felt so apprehensive and dubious.

Midway through RTC 601, I began to rethink my target group and focus on reading comprehension skills, thinking this would be a way to reach several students in a way that would affect their success in other areas as well. As New Jersey eighth grade teachers, we are always driven by preparing our students to perform well on the GEPA. One of the skills our average learners always fall short on is the ability to not only read a passage or simply decode the words, but to understand what they've read, react to what they've read, and respond to it in an insightful way. For a student to earn the highest score on their written response to a GEPA open-ended question, they must do more than retell a relevant part of the story. They need to, as the New Jersey Holistic Rubric reads, explain their answer with "insightfulness" and "link and extend beyond the text." I began to question, "What can I do get my students to probe more deeply, think beyond and between the author's words, and challenge them to reflect with insight?" From this I composed question version #3 with a variety of sub-questions falling into place such as

- "How do we define 'active, engaged reader' and 'motivated reader'?"

- "What do active, engaged, insightful readers do?"
- "Which specific reading comprehension strategies should I implement?"
- "How will increasing reading comprehension lead to insightful responses to GEPA Open-Ended Questions that are worthy of the highest rubric score?"

At this point, I was sure I was where I wanted to be with formulating my research question….until I did my Preliminary Literature Review, that is. In addition to the six articles I reviewed, I also started reading a book by Tovani (2000) titled, *I Read It, But I Don't Get It*. Tovani's very real and sincere personal account struck a cord within me: many of my decoding students are simply not engaged, motivated readers because they don't believe they can be successful. From this, I began to redefine the type of reader I wanted to encourage and teach my students to become. The terms 'engaged' and 'motivated' and 'self-efficacy' kept surfacing and finding their way into the rewording of Version #3. The role self-efficacy plays in motivating students to want to read became enormous to me. I decided that before I can guide my decoders to be active, insightful readers, I needed to find ways to engage them, motivate them, and to consequently increase their self-efficacy, or their personal belief in their own ability to be successful.

In the final stages of formulating exactly what I wanted to explore about my own teaching, I needed to factor in the obvious time constraints of the current school year and curriculum requirements of my district. With only approximately 12 weeks left of the school year and one more required challenging novel to read, it became clear that this high adventure fiction *The True Confessions of Charlotte Dolye*, which I will refer to throughout the paper as *TCCD*, would provide the textual foundation upon which my

students and I could cultivate specific reading comprehension strategies that would lead to the harvesting of active, confident, and engaged readers.

Thus, Version #4, the final question to explore, was born:

> **What happens when I use a common novel approach to implement specific reading comprehension strategies that guide my eighth grade Reading students to become active and engaged readers?**

## Literature Review

### *What is the larger public "conversation" around this question?*

In selecting and then comparing, contrasting, and synthesizing several articles of literature related to my question, I was able to identify themes, explore multiple perspectives, consider similar questions, raise additional questions, and actually gain insight and direction with my own research. I also came to the realization that I had, albeit inadvertently, selected very appropriate and relevant authors. This became evident to me when I continually discovered four of my authors were quoting and/or citing each other! Wood cited Guthrie; Guthrie cited Pressley; and Frey cited Pressley *and* Guthrie. The entire process actually caused me to rethink, or at least fine-tune, my own research question.

As the evolution of my own research question began to direct its focus on improving reading comprehension, I found myself using the terms 'active' and 'insightful' to describe the type of reader I wanted my students to become. After reading these articles, I began to discover similar but more contemporary and trendy terms being used to describe this model reader. Before my students can become active and insightful readers, they need to be motivated readers. In defining reading motivation, Wood (2006) actually quotes Guthrie, who suggests that "reading motivation consists of 11 dimensions of reading that fall into 3 categories: (1) competence and efficacy beliefs; (2) purposes and goals; and (3) social aspects of reading" (p. 55). My attention immediately went to the term efficacy, or self-efficacy. Guthrie (2001) proposes that "reading efficacy is the belief that one can be successful at reading and that it is vital to becoming an active reader" (p. 2). Wood (2006) quoted several other authors on this aspect of motivation and

further defines self-efficacy as “an important influence on motivation” and stresses that it is “critical to help struggling readers develop an accurate belief that they can do well in reading if they make the effort to learn and apply what they are taught” (p. 57). Therefore, teachers must make an extreme effort to transform the struggling reader’s “I can’t do it” attitude to the powerfully motivating “Yes, I can do it” way of approaching what they perceive to be challenging reading tasks.

Another repeated term that seemed to encapsulate my perception of the model reader was the term *engaged reading* or the *engaged reader*. Guthrie (2001) defines engaged reading as “a merger of motivation and thoughtfulness” (p. 1). He further explains that engaged readers seek to understand; they enjoy learning; are intrinsically motivated; and have self-efficacy or believe in their reading abilities. Wood (2006) also summarizes with “engaged and motivated readers possess self-efficacy” (p. 57). The more I read, the more I knew I wanted to find ways to encourage my *decoders* to be *engaged*, *motivated* and to increase their *self-efficacy*.

I found the research project conducted by Smith and Walsh (2002) titled “ ‘I don’t want to be here’: Engaging reluctant students in learning” to be both enlightening and inspiring for my own project. Their attempts to “obtain baseline information about the students’ attitudes towards school, learning and English” (p. 57) through preliminary one-to-one interviews with students gave me the inspiration to do the same. Several of their questions focused on the students’ own perception of self as a learner, which I tailored towards self as a *reader*. The outcomes of their research were realistic and well substantiated through follow-up interviews “to reassess their views on the same constructs and therefore ascertain whether there had been any shifts in their attitudes over

the teaching intervention period"' (p. 69). I believe their research plan will serve well as a model for what I hope to achieve.

In further analyzing these articles, my focus began to shift to the actual strategies explored or suggested in each of the articles for teaching reading comprehension. Pressley (2001) claims "there is a great need to know just how much of an impact on reading achievement can be made by instruction that is *rich in all the individual components that increase comprehension"* (p. 5). I began to question how might the teaching of these 'individual components', or the implementation of these strategies, actually create a classroom climate that would, in fact, guide my students to becoming highly motivated, engaged readers while establishing a more positive belief in their own ability to be successful. Needless to say, many strategies were identified, stressed, and repeated by most authors. Frey (2006) quotes Paris, Wasik, and Turner (1991) who place "reading strategies into 3 clusters: *Before Reading:* previewing the text; making predictions *During Reading:* identifying main ideas, making inferences; and inspecting the text *After Reading:* summarizing and reflecting" (p. 1). Snowball (2006) identifies the 6 main strategies as

1. Predicting/prior knowledge use
2. Answering and forming questions
3. Thinking aloud about reading
4. Using text structures and features
5. Visualizing and creating visual representations
6. Summarizing (p. 62)

In exploring the task of turning *decoders* into *comprehenders*, Marcell (2006) sums all of the above strategies into the "Big Four":

1. Visualizing
2. Predicting

3. Asking Questions
4. Connecting (p. 66)

I seem to prefer Marcell's all inclusive list of "The Big Four" but one major question surfaces: Do we teach one strategy at a time and integrate later, or do we begin by teaching students to use a variety of strategies simultaneously right away? In spite of the varying number of strategies or individual labels, Guthrie, Marcell, Frey, Snowball, and Wood seem to agree that each strategy needs to be taught, modeled, and practiced; but then an effective blend needs to be applied to various types of text to keep the reader engaged, motivated, and feeling successful. Pressley (2001) feels that "if all the components are simply thrown into the mix, instruction might be overwhelmingly complex, confusing and ineffective" (p. 5). In promoting *Good Habits, Great Readers*, Dr. Frey (2006) suggests that the four comprehension strategies of prediction, clarification, summarization, and question generation require approximately 20 days of practice to become proficient with the process of *each* comprehension strategy, with the ultimate goal of young readers gradually integrating multiple strategies in ways that lead to independent reading. Snowball (2006) agrees that "comprehension can improve dramatically after about 20 sessions of properly conducting [a particular strategy routine]" (p. 63). She encourages teachers, whether they are focusing on one strategy or integrating several, to make sure their students know that they need to carefully choose and apply different strategies to different text structures. Similarly, Frey (2006) contends that "by allowing the text to signal the reader, children learn to consolidate comprehension strategies in a fluid and natural way" (p. 12). Pressley (2001) further emphasizes that "humans only have so much short term memory capacity, which limits how much they can do consciously at one time" (p. 3). Personally, I will focus on

implementing the strategies and skills I feel to be most powerful at this limited phase of the 8th grade year and then lean towards finding and implementing effective blends of multiple strategies that will hopefully increase the motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy of my students.

Which brings me to a most profound question raised throughout this literature review: Is it too late for this year's class or, worse yet, is it even too late for any reading student entering the 8th grade in September who has already established very low self-efficacy and is not motivated to read? Pressley (2001) explores the traditional tendency among primary grade educators to hone only word-recognition skills with comprehension left to be developed in later grades. He encourages a belief that interventions aimed at comprehension beyond word-recognition do, in fact, make an impact; but his belief in this intervention still focuses on the primary years. Guthrie (2001) regrettably states that, due to several contributing factors, "Motivation for reading comprehension decreases as children go through school" (p 3). Depressing me further, Wood (2006) reminds us that "for many students, the transition to middle school marks the beginning of a general decline in academic performance, motivation, self-perceptions of ability and relationships with peers and teachers" (p. 56). She further contends that "as children move into young adulthood, the strength of their motivation to engage in voluntary reading during their free time declines" (p. 56).

A burst of hope came to me when reading an online interview (Hopkins, 2003) between Education World of EdGate and Cris Tovani, author of *I Read It, but I Don't Get It*. When asked "If a kid can't read well by sixth grade, is it too late?" Tovani responded:

> We don't discourage would-be golfers, artists, gardeners, or musicians if they aren't proficient by sixth grade. Why would we do it with kids learning how to read? [Tovani, who claims she didn't become a reader until she was 28, continued…] I guess I'm living proof that it's not too late to learn how to read. It may be too late to score well on the fifth-grade proficiency exam or be a level 42 reader by a certain grade, but it certainly isn't too late to become a life-long reader (p. 3).

Reading this interview was the motivating precursor to actually reading Tovani's (2000) book *I Read It, but I Don't Get It* where I found myself totally identifying with her as a frustrated reading teacher and as someone who also used to be, and sometimes still is, a struggling reader. Tovani shares her experiences as a clever student who became an expert at 'fake reading' as early as second grade. As she described all the tricks she used to avoid actually reading and to convince her teachers that she was reading, I began to see strikingly similar characteristics and behaviors in most of the students in the class I had selected for my research. It was becoming clear to me that in the midst of this burst of hope, I had a very difficult challenge ahead of me.

As my research plan moved closer to using one common novel and guided reading as the instructional content through which I would teach specific reading comprehension strategies, I questioned whether or not the next novel on our district's required reading list, *The True Confessions of Charlotte* Doyle by Avi, would be the best choice. Reading M. Manning's (2006) "Celebration in Reading and Writing: On the Level" helped me justify my decision to use the title I knew would be a significant degree above the reading level of most of the students in the class in which I chose to conduct

my research. Manning (2006) explains that with guided activities, students can read above their ability level and this setting provides an effective means of teaching and practicing new strategies. Manning states "We want students to be continually challenged in much of their reading because we want them to read more difficult concepts, vocabulary and text" (p. 69). I'm hoping that the book I've selected will both provide the security of text that can be successfully read and still present challenging opportunities to hone new strategies.

In summary and reflection, if I believe in Tovani's optimism (2000); adopt Marcell's condensed "Big Four" (2006); and use Walsh and Smith's (2002) research plan as a model, will I have a positive impact on the perception my students have of themselves as readers? As I implement some of the strategies I have researched, will I be able to guide my *decoders* to become *active* and *engaged* readers? Through it all and at the very least, I hope to discover something worthwhile about my own teaching and how my own past experiences can be a positive, motivating influence. I am going to allow Guthrie's (2001) final message to be my ultimate inspiration to face this reality with courage and determination.

> The message is that increasing long-term reading motivation and engagement does not result from a quick fix. Reading motivation strong enough to last across weeks, months, and years is not made in a day. However, when classroom context contains effective instructional practices, reading engagement grows and becomes self-generating. (p. 9)

## Methodology: Data Collection and Analysis Activities

### *What was the journey?*

Methodology: *"Sowing Instructions"*

Unfortunately, Desi K's seed didn't come with a set of sowing instructions. Before I could set out to research what happens to my disengaged decoders when I use Avi's *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle, TCCD,* to implement specific reading comprehension strategies, RCS's, I needed to choose and develop three major components. First, given the time constraints, I knew I needed to select and focus on a few key RCS's that I felt would harvest the best crop of motivated and engaged readers. Second, was the selection of appropriate and applicable sources of data; and, third, was the devising of an overall plan and timeline by which to collect and analyze the data.

Ideally, my goal was to encourage my students to visualize as they read; to probe more deeply and ask questions as they read; to speculate and predict where the author might be going; and begin to relate the story to their own lives by making connections. Therefore, the logical selection of key reading comprehensions strategies was, as previously indicated in my literature review, Marcell's (2006) "Big Four".

1. Visualizing
2. Predicting
3. Asking Questions
4. Connecting (p. 66)

Initially, these four RCS's were introduced, modeled, and applied in isolation format to the reading of the novel, *TCCD*, followed by a gradual infusion of natural combinations of two or three at once. For example, after forcing my students to *visualize* the reality of 15 year old Charlotte Doyle's 4' x 6' x 4 ½' rat infested cabin on this 1800's merchant ship, *predictions, questions,* and *connections* were being generated faster than I could

record them in my field notes. Knowing Charlotte was the only female passenger on this deadly voyage of mutiny and revenge, Desi K's *prediction* was that she would find a way to be invited to room in the lush quarters of the mysterious Captain Jaggery. That certainly kept my "I DON'T READ" Desi K. turning pages faster than I could have ever hoped. After a short period of time, I began to observe my students using these terms themselves as they applied them to their reading assignments; or, better yet, they unexpectedly discovered they were using them without being given a specific RCS task.

The data that informed my research came from a variety of sources. Surveys, inventories, interviews, personal and student journals, and field notes, along with general observations and student artifacts, all became very conducive to opportunities for triangulation. I began with a student Reading Inventory/Survey, which was coordinated with preliminary and follow-up interviews inspired by Smith and Walsh (2002). To integrate a professional colleague component, I also interviewed and regularly conferred with our staff Reading Specialist to whom I will refer as JT. In addition, throughout the teaching of the RCS's and the novel, my students kept a teacher-guided journal, which also served as a personal reading log. These journal/logs proved to be an extremely helpful learning tool for my students, and they were indispensable to me as a means of collecting data on their thoughts and progress. Keeping up with my ownpersonal journal and field notes was, at times, tedious and interrupting but also provided valuable data and opportunities for reflection and self-study. My on-going general observations of myself as a teacher and the reactions and behaviors of my students were ever present threads that held the research experience together. Delightful bonus pieces of data came in the form of student artifacts resulting from activities generated by the teaching of the selected

RCS's. My 'subjects' were more than willing to donate samples of their work to my study. Digesting and making sense of this variety of data sources was, at times, overwhelming and yet, at other times, inadequate for my predetermined research expectations; but, overall, I was satisfied with my choices.

The overall plan and timeline for reading this novel, implementing the selected RCS's, and collecting and analyzing data needed to fit neatly into what can be a very stressful time of a typical eighth grade school year. I needed to factor in preparing for and administering the almighty GEPA; Spring Break; the planning of and experiencing a special Holocaust Day with Holocaust survivors I had invited to visit our students; our eighth grade annual 3-day field trip to Washington DC and all its related pre-trip preparation and post-trip reflection activities; a 3-day teacher absence as I monitored the sixth grade Outdoor Education Program; several end-of-the year events such as Field Day, Yearbook Day, and Graduation Ceremony rehearsals; in addition to all of the usual demanding administrative deadlines of budget requests, book counts, final grades, yearend reports, room clean-up, etc.. Sounds overwhelming but all of the above needed to happen and somehow my research plan needed to envelop and treasure each and every observable, researchable moment in between the madness.

I began my self-study/research by attempting to formulate a baseline picture of how my students felt about reading and how they perceived themselves as readers.

Data Collection and Analysis Activities: *"Fertilizing the Seed"*

- Beginning in March 2007, I had both my 54 more advanced, book-loving English students and my 10 reluctant Reading class subjects complete the 1994 Center for Applied Research in Education "Reading Inventory/Survey".
- This was followed by preliminary interviews of a select group of students from both classes but in separate settings.
- JT, our Reading Specialist, became a reassuring and reliable source of collegial support and advice as we conferred on the survey and interview results. She also provided me with very useful and applicable materials and techniques for implementing the selected RCS's.
- To enhance my baseline image of where my students were at the onset of the research in March, I invited my students to brainstorm ideas for and then design a creative graphic visual of what they believe "good readers" look like and do. These delightful and revealing visuals were discussed and analyzed.
- In early April, the novel, Avi's *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, was introduced and the 10 Reading students were given personal reading journals/logs in which to record their visualizations, questions, background knowledge connections, responses to various teacher directed prompts, and new vocabulary building.
- The selected reading comprehension strategies were introduced, modeled and applied as we journeyed through the novel.

- I kept my own journal and field notes on a fairly regular basis as I observed student behaviors, reactions, and responses and also reflected upon my own teaching styles, attitudes, and behaviors.
- By early June, most of the data and artifacts had been collected, and we had reached the exciting conclusion of the novel. To gather the final piece of the data puzzle, I then conducted follow-up interviews with the 10 students from my Reading class to reassess their views on the same indicators from the preliminary surveys and interviews and to ascertain any changes or shifts in their own perceptions of themselves as readers.
- Finally, the collected data and artifacts, water colored by general observations and student artifacts, were synthesized and merged into a final discussion on findings, implications, implementations, emerging questions, and personal learning.

## Findings and Implications

### *What did I learn?*

Focusing my research on my diversified group of 10 eighth grade Reading students proved to be both enlightening and challenging. The chemistry of this class wasn't always harmonious or conducive to exploring new ideas. Mindy, Mandy, and Ronnie were the smart, popular students with a better than average work ethic and a willingness to participate in class activities. Mindy and Ronnie were especially appreciated by me as enthusiastic and self-motivated role models; but only two out of 10 just wasn't enough odds against Tim, Stan, and Dan, the equally popular 'cool dudes' who overtly showed no remorse or self-disappointment for being unprepared for class or for having a lack of motivation, enthusiasm, or pride in anything we did in class. Then there were the quiet ones: Iris, Angie, and Nick. Their introverted lack of participation and low self-esteem was enough to wilt a field of sunflowers on a sunny day. I was always conscience of my efforts to protect them from feeling intimidated by the others. And last but certainly not least was Desi K., the self-proclaimed non-reader who 'planted the seed' for my emerging question way back in September of 2006. Confirmed by his mother on Back-to-School Night, Desi K. adamantly made it clear to me and the class on the first day of school that he doesn't read. His low ASK scores also placed him in my Language Arts Literacy Skills, pull-out class twice a week where he reminded me of this negativity in front of another group of eight low-functioning students. The challenge was on!

I promised him and his mother he would feel differently by the end of the year. Presuming they had experienced the failure of previous promises, I sensed neither one

seemed to have very much faith in my pledge. From September to March, I chipped away at his wall bit by bit but I didn't see any real observable differences in his attitude or ability, or in any of the other students for that matter, until I began this research with the introduction of Avi's *True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle, TCCD*, and the selected reading comprehension strategies, RCS's. Before I started with the instruction, I conducted reading inventories/surveys and preliminary interviews in March 2007.

Reading Inventory/Survey:

54 English students and this diversified group of 10 Reading students completed the Reading Inventory/Survey, which provided interesting but not very surprising results. In analyzing the responses and attempting to compare and contrast similar size groups, I considered all 10 inventories of the Reading students in the analysis but included only a random selection of 20 inventories from higher achieving English students with consistent 'A' averages. I conferred my findings with JT, our staff Reading Specialist, for additional input from a trained professional. General highlights are as follows:

*Question: When you were a young child, did your parents or someone else read to you? If so, what were your favorites?*

Results: 70 % of the Reading students were read to as a child but had only vague or no memories of it or could list any favorites, while 95% of the English students fondly recalled being read to and could list several favorite titles of books, stories, fairy tales, and children's rhymes.

*Question: As a child, were there books and magazines in your house?*

Results: 80% of the Reading students said yes to the 100% of the English students.

*Question: Were you given books as presents or rewards?*

Results: This question was one of the most revealing and provided much food for thought about the influence parents and family members can have on a child's attitude towards reading and their ultimate success in school. 90% of the English students recorded that they received books as gifts for a variety of holidays and as rewards for good grades, good behavior, and even from the tooth fairy and as prizes for contests and programs in which they had participated. Sadly, only 40% of my Reading students could recall ever receiving a book as a gift or a reward and only Mindy, the best student of this group, could specifically remember receiving a book at every 'graduation'.

*Question: Did you enjoy reading in elementary school, or did you read just because it was required?*

Results: Again a resounding 85% of the English students said they enjoyed reading in school, while 80% of my Reading students said they only read because it was required. Surprisingly, Mindy was one of them. I wasn't sure what to make of this, but she later clarified that she did enjoy reading books of her own choosing that she could relate to.

*Question: As you entered middle school, did you enjoy reading? Did you begin to read more or less frequently?*

Results: 80% of my Reading students said they did *not* enjoy reading as they entered middle school while a strong 90% of the English students responded that they did. Interestingly though, only 75% of the English students said they began to read *more* frequently upon entering middle school. The understandable and somewhat commendable reasons given for still enjoying reading but reading *less* frequently by these English students were related to being busy with sports and homework, while the eight Reading

students who also claimed they began to read less discouragingly blamed it on reading being boring and too hard and wanting to hang out with their friends. This wide spread between the two groups on this question was not surprising but nonetheless fueled my personal challenge to attempt a shift in these perceptions and attitudes.

Additional Inventory/Survey Conclusions:

When conferring with JT and putting names to some of the disheartening responses, we found that of the individual students from *either* group who reported not having been read to as a child or who claimed they didn't have books and magazines in their houses, 100% of them came from families where English was not the primary language spoken. We discussed the challenges of raising children in a bilingual environment and it can, but doesn't always, have a negative impact on their performance in school. JT reminded me there are so many other factors to consider.

One of the questions whose results are not given above asked the students how they felt about reading aloud in front of a class. All comments from the English students were positive: *I was a little nervous but I was OK with it*; *I felt proud; thrilled; confident; I enjoy showing emotion and becoming the character.* On the other hand, the reluctant, less successful students expressed negative experiences of feeling *nervous, pressured, embarrassed,* and *self-conscious of reading too slowly.* Although these responses are logical and I'm not a strong advocate of all students reading aloud, they do emphasize the need for the influential and motivating *self-efficacy*, or "the belief that one can be successful at reading" (Guthrie 2001, p. 2). Facing the fact that this lack of belief in their own ability must be deeply rooted and multi-faceted, I began to question my ability to

affect change in my students' self-confidence in such a short period of time. At this point, I was determined to try my best at transforming my struggling readers' "I can't do it" attitude into the powerfully motivating "Yes, I can do it" way of tackling what they perceive to be an unreachable goal.

Finally, the Reading Inventory results further fueled my reflection on the differences in household attitudes towards reading between the Reading students and that of the English students. The list of occasions when the English students received books as gifts indicated a strong importance placed on reading in such a positive way by influential adults in their lives. Being a lover of books and a teacher, parent, aunt, and Godmother who gives the gift of books to children (and adults) every chance she gets, I was dismayed by the responses my Reading students gave to this question. It also caused me to reflect on the physical condition of text books and novels when students return them after having been custodian to these treasures for a period of time. Typically, Reading students return books in poor condition, often indicating they have been neglected and abused, while English students will remove still intact covers as they return their assigned books still in very good condition. On March 28, 2007, I made an entry in my journal that I read and reread several times:

> It is so sad that so few of these kids have received books as gifts and rewards. It's too late for the tooth fairy but maybe I could find a way to give them the gift of books. I could start by dramatically treating the AVI paperback as a piece of valuable gold as I assign a copy to each of them and reminding them of how I expect them to take care of it. I think I'll have the librarian put those clear covers on them or I could buy colorful book socks for them. Hopefully, my attitude will rub off on them. It may seem trite but every little bit helps when trying to change deeply rooted attitudes and beliefs.

The Preliminary Interviews:

The post-inventory, preliminary interviews were conducted with each group in separate settings. I selected 10 of the 20 English students whose Reading Inventories were analyzed. This selection process was based on the uniqueness and revealing nature of their written responses, combined with my experiences with their ability to express themselves verbally. When I asked them if they could recall a teacher who taught them to read and some of the techniques they used, they retrieved their recollections quickly and with impressive detail. I can only hope that in the future they will remember some of the experiences they had in my classroom. The following is a highlight of their responses (English Group Interview, March 30, 2007):

> Courtney: *Mrs. C. would print out simple words and help us sound them out.*
>
> Ryan: *Mrs. S. turned reading into a competition with candy.*
>
> Alyssa: *Mrs. D. helped us read a book about a girl who sang the ABC's and we would sing and read along.*
>
> Nicole: *Mrs. D. had us in a circle and read us farm animal stories. She also would sometimes let us pick out our own stories to read in front of the class which helped us get familiar with our surroundings.*

Only four of the 10 Reading students could recall a teacher's name and only six gave limited explanations of their teachers' techniques. They are as follows (Reading Group Interview, March 30, 2007):

> Mindy: *Read the words slowly to us.*
>
> Nick: *They would take tiny books from the shelf and would read to us at the end of the day.*
>
> Angie: *Read slowly.*
>
> Dan: *Sounded out the words.*

Mandy: *First they would tell me how to pronounce each letter and day by day each word will be taught.*

Tim: *I don't remember.*

When I asked both groups if they knew a good reader and what makes them a good reader, seven of the English students promptly and proudly responded with "Me!" Four of them very kindly said, "Mrs. Lombardi" and several added their moms and a few friends of theirs who are famously avid readers. When giving reasons for their success, they offered some of the comprehension strategies I was about to enforce in my Reading class. Impressively, they used words like *fluency, character portrayals, theme, imagining the words, making predictions,* and *connecting with the material* (English Group Interview March 30, 2007). On the contrary, not one Reading student offered him or herself as a good reader. Instead, they listed moms, cousins, or a friend and gave the following responses to what makes them good readers: *They read fast, understand what they read, and pace themselves (Reading Group Interview, March 30, 2007).*

The final question I will chronicle here asked the students in both groups to explain two or three reading comprehension strategies they use to help themselves better comprehend and enjoy what they read. Again, impressively the English students said they would *make predictions; make connections to the character's problems; make visual images; reread as needed; write about what they're reading; try to relate to the characters; make it into a movie in your head;* and my favorites, *become the character and create dialogue with accents and voices between the characters.* My about to be transformed Reading students offered these ideas: *read more books; ask the teacher questions; retell the story; reread; use a dictionary and context clues;* and the eye-openers, *predict, ask questions, and visualize.* At first, I thought *there's hope for these*

*reluctant readers*; but I later realized that they had read these latter three from a poster I had on display in my classroom, and they couldn't elaborate on them specifically. I still believe there's hope for a transformation of some sort. The fact that they even wanted to impress me by using these terms was encouraging.

The 'Good Reader' Visuals:

Recognizing that I am a visual learner myself, I thought it would be interesting and helpful to invite the original 20 English students and the 10 Reading students to create a graphic visual of what they perceive to be a 'good reader'. We did this on April 2, 2007, the day after the interviews were conducted while ideas and images were hopefully still fresh in their minds. We started with brainstorming characteristics and behaviors that could be interpreted visually on their posters. The ultimate intension was to display the drawings in the classroom as a reminder of what could and should be happening when they read and to encourage my Reading students to believe they, too, can (and in some cases already) do what 'good readers' do.

I knew that analyzing and interpreting the results without the influence my own personal biases and preconceived expectations was going to be challenging. I, therefore, made sure that their names were on the back and I randomly mixed the drawings from both classes. Then I fought the urge to read the names as I attempted to sort the drawings into 2 piles: those having highly positive and motivating connotations and those having somewhat negative or neutral connotations. I also gave anonymous copies to JT and asked her to sort them in the same fashion. With the exception of 2-3 versions, our piles were the same. After doing so and then revealing the names, it was plain to see distinct

differences between the perceptions of my reluctant readers and the English students' versions. Of the 30 posters, I placed 21 of them in the positive pile because they were delightfully riddled with happy, smiling faces; encouraging and motivating captions and phrases; mature and engaging reading comprehension strategies; and emphasized a variety of different types of 'good readers'. The following list is a sampling of some of the captions and phrases from this group:

- *Anyone can be a good reader!*
- *Take yourself to different worlds.*
- *Focus, visualize, observe, predict, learn, remember*
- *Able to imply the message of the story clearly*
- *Reading is fun!*
- *Reading to kids is fun!*
- *This is going to be a great book!*
- *That reminds me about the time I…*
- *Making Connections*
- *Asks questions*
- *I Books*
- *Imagination can take you anywhere.*
- *I wonder how this will end.*
- *Reading makes you happy!*

Of these 21 positive visuals, 3 of them were revealed to belong to Reading students Mindy, Mandy, and Tim. I expected Mindy and Mandy, two of my smarter, more motivated Reading students to put a positive spin on theirs; but Tim, one of the 'cool dudes', surprised me with his version of a smiling 'smart guy' using his imagination as he read books and was surrounded by papers with A+'s on them.

The remaining 9 visuals were labeled as having words, phrases, or images that might be interpreted as having somewhat negative or cautiously neutral connotations. Words or phrases from this group included the following:

- *Reading isn't all bad.*
- *Read! It helps!*
- *Homework: READ*

Of these 9 posters, 7 of them were Reading students and it was the images more than the words and captions that gave them what I interpreted as a negative or cautiously neutral tone. For example, Dan, 'cool dude' #2, drew a reader with almost frightening eyes with a tense facial expression reading an over-scaled book titled *War and Peace*; and Stan , 'cool dude' #3, included the caption "Read…it makes you happy," but drew a face that was anything but happy with exposed teeth and no smile. The most challenging visual to interpret (duplicated below) belonged to Desi K.

His first attempt at the top of the page never included a book; his second attempt in the middle of the page was partially erased; and in his final version, the book isn't even in the hands of the 'good reader'. The most disheartening interpretation for me was the

scribbling out of both the book and the reader as if to say, "This is *not* me. Remember, I don't read!"

More determined than ever, I hoped the reading of *TCCD*, the use of student journals, and an engaging focus on Marcell's (2006) "Big Four"…visualizing, predicting, questioning, and connecting, all within an upbeat and motivating environment would have a positive altering effect on the students in this class, especially Desi K. The interpretive results of the visuals forced me to change my mind about displaying them in the room. If I couldn't display all of them including Desi K.'s, then I couldn't display any of them. I feared that only displaying the positive ones, which were mostly from the English class, could prove to be counter-productive as it might fuel the reluctant readers' feelings of failure and defeat before we even opened the first page of the novel.

The Novel, the Journals, and "The Big Four":

To introduce the novel and present my students with their own personal Reading Journal/Log in a motivating and inspirational way, I tapped into all my artistic and dramatic resources to create as much fanfare as I could without seeming too juvenile or corny. The laminated books were hidden in a gift box decorated with graphics of nautical exploration and on top of the box stood a scaled model of a ship very similar to the one on which Charlotte Doyle was to sail in the novel. Their eyes were fixed on the box and the ship, and I marveled at the rumblings of curious questions and comments. I recall writing in my personal journal on April 20, 2007:

> Mom, you would be proud to know this ship you gave to your Grandsons when you returned from Disney World is being put to a very rewarding use. It was too delicate for the boys to play with and it collected dust on a shelf for years never knowing how important it would be in my classroom someday to helping my

> students to *visualize* the 1832 high seas setting of this thrilling adventure. [My mother passed away 7 years ago and I thought of her everyday I took out that ship.]

Ten new, red marble journals with colorful Post-It flags dividing the journals into sections for journal entries, strategies, and vocabulary were stacked and ready to be given out. Each had a name neatly printed on it and they seemed genuinely eager and appreciative when they received them. I also required them to take home and get signed a letter to their parents that I had prepared to alert their parents of the goals and the work they would be expected to achieve over the next several weeks. The letter also invited the parents to read the book along with or to their child and discuss the events of the plot while encouraging them to ask questions and make connections. I must admit, other than Ronnie and Mindy who seem to embrace parental involvement, the others were not very enthusiastic about this component. Stan and Dan implied that their parents would never have the time to help them at home and Desi K. grudgingly muttered, "Oh, man. My mother's gonna love this" (S. Lombardi, field notes, April 20, 2007).

Starting with the critic reviews, excerpts, and the illustrations on the book's front and back covers, I dramatically read aloud the first few pages, which seemed to really whet their appetite for more. I strategically stopped reading at a very curious foreshadowing event and encouraged them to *ask questions, predict,* and then go home and *check their predictions* by reading the rest of the first chapter. They charted their questions and predictions in the appropriate columns in their journals leaving the "check" column empty until Monday. I was encouraged by their desire to find out if their prediction was the going to "check" out to be the right one. The results of a quick quiz the next day to confirm that they had actually read the chapter were not disappointing.

They all, even Desi K., wrote responses that indicated a successful read. Yes! They all had ‘A’s’ so far! More importantly, they all seemed motivated to read this novel and become better readers. I attributed the initial success to ending class with a self-established purpose for reading…to ‘check’ out the accuracy of their own predictions and because it was still very early in the game.

Iris, one of the quiet ones, had been absent on the day I gave out the books and journals. When she returned on Monday, I asked if someone could explain to Iris what she missed. In response, Tim emphatically said, “Oh, yeah, we’re going to be *really* organized from now on” (S. Lombardi, field notes, April 23, 2007). At first, my internal, defensive reaction to that was ‘haven’t we been organized all along?’ Fortunately, the others chimed in with similar comments; and my later reflections took a positive, reassuring spin and convinced me that what I was doing was working. Maybe they were already seeing the value and importance of the strategies I would be expecting them to use.

The next activity worthy of observation and analysis focused on the strategies of *visualization* and *making connections.* With the help of my husband and one of our custodians, I was able to acquire a huge box that could be transformed into a full scale replica of the main character’s 4’ x 6’ x 4 ½’ rat and roach infested, barren cabin on this merchant ship. Supplying the students with yardsticks, tape measures, and duct tape, I challenged them to *visualize* and then reconstruct the walls, the 4’ door, the low ceiling, and to use desks to simulate the narrow shelf which was described to be her bed. They resisted at first and became frustrated but then began to help each other; and when they were able to clearly and cooperatively identify the parts of what they were constructing,

the comments and connections were priceless. Mindy was heard saying, “I remember when I was little I made a hideout out of a refrigerator box, but a 15 year old girl living in this is ridiculous!” Then she asked, “How long was this voyage?” which spurred lots of predictions that forced them to be aware of the limitations of ocean travel in 1832. Dan, who is quite tall, kept walking in and out of the 4’ door as he ducked down his head. Desi became very curious about the size and décor of the captain’s quarters and where the crew slept. When he later read about the luxurious cabin of Captain Jaggery, he predicted that if Charlotte was smart she would find a way to convince the Captain to let her stay with him. Other students agreed that was a great idea, and he actually wanted to read ahead to find out if that did happen. Later that day, Iris came back to me and asked if she could go beyond the assigned reading for tomorrow (S. Lombardi, field notes, April 24, 2007). Could it be interest and self-motivation already? In my journal dated April 25, 2007, I wrote:

> The ‘big box’ activity was so much fun. Mindy and Stan kept bringing friends to my room to proudly show them and explain what they had made. One of the students they brought back was an English student who had already read this book earlier in the year and said, “I knew her cabin was small but I never thought it was this small!” It was a lot of work and people think I’m crazy but when those kids started referring back to the book and rereading for clarification and interpretation, I knew it was all worth it. Will they make the effort to do this sort of thing on their own someday…probably not, but they will remember this experience. Now I don’t know what to do with this huge thing in my room but it’s staying there until we finish this book. After that, who knows? I’m sure the custodian would have my head if I asked him to store it for next year’s class.

As the Seahawk set sail and Charlotte began to meet the unique and mysterious crew members and finally the punctilious and powerful Captain Jaggery, I sensed that most of my students were getting confused about the characters and which ones Charlotte could trust. Rather than tell them what to do I decided to ask them what strategies or

techniques they thought would help us keep track of all the characters, their traits and relationships to each other and to help us formulate opinions and maybe even speculate or predict their roles in the future plot. Ronnie offered the suggestion to make character flashcards with information on them. Angie wanted to record everything on one sheet of paper and asked if I had anymore of the Character Log sheets we used for *The Diary of Anne Frank* earlier in the year. I was going to give them the Character Log sheets anyway but I thought the character flashcards would be more manipulative, hands-on, and engaging because I knew these characters didn't remain stagnant in their relationships and alliances with each other throughout the novel. If I wanted my students to relate to Charlotte's conflicts and dilemmas and be actively engaged as they read, they had to fully understand what she was thinking and experiencing without getting discouraged by confusion. We decided both ideas would work and the compromise was that they would keep the Character Logs, and together we would make a class set of character flashcards that we could add to and manipulate when things got too confusing (S. Lombardi, field notes, April 30, 2007). Several days later, we used these flashcards to clarify changing alliances and to eliminate two crew members who were murdered by the captain. I was amazed at how much these students needed to physically and concretely see which characters were part of the brewing mutiny against the captain and which ones appeared to remain loyal to their superior. Transforming the abstract concepts of loyalty and revenge into cards they could see, touch, and arrange literally open their eyes to Charlotte's dilemma. It was obvious to me that they did not completely understood what they had read the night before, nor had they done anything independently to increase their own comprehension or involvement. Stan said, "So what should she do now? Stay loyal

to the captain or side with the crew?" Desi K's comment was, "I say she should stay with the Captain because he's friends with her father and he's the only one who's got the guns." Mindy's response was, "I don't trust that guy and I don't like the way he's treating her" (S. Lombardi, field notes, May 7, 2007). Every chance I got, I encouraged my students to admit that the strategies we were using to keep them actively engaged in the reading were actually helping them. I would follow this opportunity with asking them to promise me that they would try to use some of these ideas when they are reading on their own.

Asking reluctant middle school readers to *make connections* to an 1832 high sea adventure was challenging but on in early May, nature provided a very real connection for my students. When Charlotte was with one of the crew members in the hull of the ship, she pointed to a cylinder with pipes and handles connected to it and inquisitively asked him what it was. Using typical sailor jargon, he answered with, "That's the pump, Miss Doyle. In case we take on sea." Unable to relate, no one could explain to me what 'take on sea' meant. So I asked, "How many of you 'took on river' last week when we had nine inches of rain in two days?" Ah hah! Several hands went up as they explained their tales of flooding woes and having to pump 'river' out of their basements. Pointing to the magnetic strategy display cards on the board, I said, "Now, quick! What strategy did you just use?" Desi K. was the first to shout, "Making Connections!" Capitalizing on the *Ah Hah* moment, I told them to write about what had just happened in their journals and explain how they would use this in the future (S. Lombardi, field notes, May 3, 2007). Stan wrote

> We were reading about pumps and taking on sea and I didn't really understand what that meant until we MADE THE CONNECTION to last week's

> flooding. I had 2' of dirty smelly water from the river in my basement that had to be pumped out just like the sea had to [be] pumped out of the Seahawk. Next time when I don't understand something, I will ask myself questions and see if it makes me think of something else. I was surprised at how thinking about the smelly river in my basement made me think of how bad the old water in the bottom of the ship must stink. Ugh! (Student journal entry, May 3, 2007)

Needing additional opportunities to observe and assess their level of understanding of the events in the assigned chapters and to increase motivation to continue reading, I periodically wove three visual, cooperative activities into our daily discussions of what they had read the night before. These three activities which I will refer to as *Story Rollers*, *Coming-Soon Ads*, and *Main Event Posters* were carried out with a partner and shared with the rest of the class. Inviting them to sit at desks arranged in a half circle, they chose where to sit and the subsequent pairing off of 'shoulder partners' then took the same natural course of friendship and compatibility that I would have chosen for them. The motivated, self-disciplined girls, Mindy and Mandy, continued to be good role models and their finished products tended to set the bar for the rest. Ronnie and Tim worked very well together even in the frequent absence of one or the other. Stan and Dan often needed to be reminded to take the assignments more seriously while still having fun with them. My quiet girls, Angie and Iris, were steadfast and cooperative and their level of insight often surprised me. That left Desi K. and Nick, both very quiet and unsure of themselves. Their final products were often unfinished but showed great promise if they had been given more time.

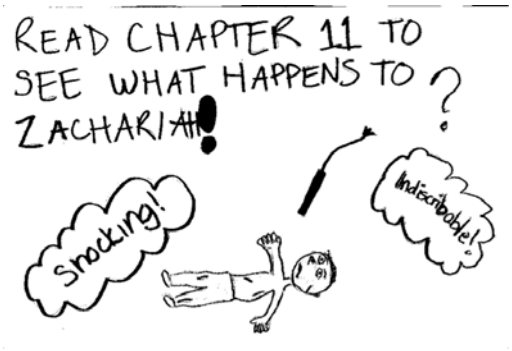
Having found a bag of several rolls of adding machine tape for $1.00 at a garage sale knowing I would find a way to somehow use them in the classroom, I decided they would become a unique medium for illustrating and then discussing the sequence of

important events of the novel. The paired students reviewed specific, action packed and sequentially relevant sections of the novel and then made their *Story Rollers* by illustrating on this continuous roll of paper what they believed to be the most pivotal and revealing details. They were encouraged to use images, symbols, dialogue, captions, and quotes from the assigned pages. As they completed the task, I was able to circulate and casually discuss the events of the story, while assessing their level of understanding. It also provided me with an opportunity to identify those who needed clarification of parts they found confusing. During these sessions, I tried to 'get up on the balcony' and just listen to the conversations. Resisting the impulsive urge to answer their questions or redirect them when I sensed they were getting off track was very difficult. At one point, I heard Iris say, "I'm confused. Just how many people were down in that scary brig with Charlotte? I've lost track of the things she said she saw." Before I or her partner Angie could answer, Desi K. blurted out, "Just go back to page 61 and figure it out. The grotesque carving isn't a person, so that doesn't count. But somebody must've put it there. Creepy!" (S. Lombardi, field notes, May 10, 2007). A later reflection in my personal journal dated May 11 revealed a powerful realization:

> My boy Desi K. came through for me today! When he told Iris to go back to page 61 and figure it out for herself, I wanted to give him a big hug. My professional conscience told me a big high-5 would be better! At first, I don't think he completely understood why I was so pleased with him but he did seem pleased with himself, and it was obvious he liked the feeling. I'm glad I fought the urge to help Iris understand the sequence of events in Chapter 7 and let them start using their own strategies to be active and engaged. Sometimes going to garage sales can be a very good thing. You never know what you're going to discover!

Almost every one of Avi's chapters ended with a thought provoking, cliff-hanger of some sort which sometimes frustrated the students who wanted to continue reading.

After having had a couple of requests to read ahead of the class because they couldn't stand the suspense, I decided to capitalize on that motivational technique used by authors as well as people who work in the film and TV industry. We began with a discussion of methods used by TV show and film producers to entice viewers to watch their shows and see their movies. We shared the effects of movie trailers, commercials, coming-soon posters displayed in movie theaters, and talk show appearances. To keep them motivated to read further in the novel, I wanted the students to entice themselves and each other. Each time we did this next activity I gave them only 60 seconds to skim the next chapter for quick clues of what happens next, just enough time to whet their appetite for more and trigger their *questioning* and *predicting* skills. Their frantic searches through the pages and sometimes lit-up facial expressions were rewarding and inspiring for me. On May 15 before assigning Chapter 11, I recall Desi K. coyly saying after his 60 second search for clues, "Ooooh, I found out what really happened to Zachariah's body but I'm not tellin' anybody!" Mindy revealed, "Oh, now I get it. That was very clever of them to fake…oops…I don't want to give it away yet." And Ronnie proclaimed, "If the captain finds out what they really did, they're all gonna be dead!" (S. Lombardi field notes, May 15, 2007). After this exciting exchange of predictions, questions and revelations, I told them it was time to visually advertise the next chapter in the same way a commercial or a *Coming-Soon Ad* might do. Both the process and the results were very effective and successfully motivated them to read the next chapters. Duplicated on the following page are two of my favorite *Coming-Soon Ads*:




The *Main Event* of Chapter 13 became the subject matter for a valuable visualization. After being shunned by the captain and deciding that survival meant becoming one of the crew, the main character had to prove her ability and loyalty to the crew by climbing to the highest point of the main mast 130' above the deck while the ship was dipping and rolling in the churning waves of the sea. Avi's account of this is very descriptive and multi-sensory but I still felt the students were not appreciating the full effect. First, I had them try to estimate in a concrete way what 130' up would be. They collectively decided to use the cinder block wall as a unit of measure and concluded that 130 feet into the air was "Wow, pretty high". While reading through this suicidal endeavor step by step, the reader needed to gain a better perspective of the parts and workings of the ship that they could tap into later in the story when a murder, for which Charlotte is blamed, takes place up in the riggings during a severe storm. Knowing that a complete understanding of this event and the changing relationships between Charlotte and the various crew members would be so important later in the novel, I had the partners draw, label, and add dialogue to a vertical image that told the story of this incredible endeavor or *Main Event*. Their task was to also record and sort the dialogue at the bottom of the drawing into positive and negative comments made towards or about Charlotte

from the crew members. This insight also helped the students later predict and decipher which crew members would defend her in her murder trial and which ones would turn their backs on her. I was proud of the effort they all made to make their posters attractive, accurate, and revealing. The reward for me came as they were reading about the murder when several students wanted to refer back to their posters to help them visualize in detail how and where the details of the mysterious stabbing actually took place (S. Lombardi field notes, May 28, 2007). In my personal journal dated May 28, 2007, I patted myself on the back.

> Today we discussed the most exciting part of the book…the murder of Mr. Hollybrass during the storm. I thought they would want to use my model of a ship but so many of them wanted to use the *Main Event* posters that they drew themselves to point out where, when, and how the murder could have happened. I think I'll have them write a journal entry of their own about the value of their own visuals. That was a good one, Sue!

Mindy wrote:

> What happened during the storm was confusing. I'm still not sure who killed Hollybrass and how could Charlotte have seen Zachariah…he's dead! I wanted my poster home with me so I could look at the parts of the ship and try to figure it all out. Drawing what we see in our minds while we read helps while we're drawing it and later on too. I just wish I could draw better…or at least draw exactly what I see in my mind (Student journal entry, May 28, 2007).

I reminded Mindy that *visualizing* didn't need to result in an actual illustration and that it was actually more useful to her to 'think' and/or write descriptively about what the words were making her see in her head. We shared this realization with the class as well.

The end of the novel and the end of the school year were rapidly approaching; and I felt compelled to cut the apron strings and expect them to independently self-initiate the use of the RCS's of *Asking Questions, Predicting, Making Connections,* and *Visualizing*

whenever they read anything and, therefore, become active and engaged readers. Throughout my teacher research, I had been encouraging, guiding, and actually assigning the use of these strategies but to have student puppets whose strings could only be engaged by the hands of the teacher puppeteer was obviously not my ultimate goal. For the last few chapters of the novel, I told them they needed to try using these techniques on their own. I urged them to listen to the voices in their head as they read and ask themselves 'What can I do to reconnect with the text when my mind wonders?' and 'What should I do to repair meaning and clarify when I don't understand something?' To help them do this, I told them I was going to give them one tool as a gift. The word 'gift' got their attention and I hoped they weren't disappointed when the gift was simply a packet of small Post-Its. We discussed how these little pieces of sticky paper could help them become active and engaged readers. Some of the student responses were encouraging:

- To write down questions we have on that page and then try to answer it as we read more.
- To make a comment or a prediction and then read more to check to see if we were right.
- To draw little pictures of what we are visualizing.
- To mark our place.
- To write down a connection to our own life.
- To point out a clue or foreshadow about how the book will end.
- (and my personal favorite) We could think of each Post-It as a mini page of our journals so we don't have to have them with us all the time when we read (S. Lombardi field notes, May 31, 2007).

For me, this last comment meant that a degree of transfer had occurred, and what teacher wouldn't want that to see her students take some knowledge or skill she taught them and adapt it for another use outside the class. I can only hope that all the guiding, instructing, and modeling of using reading comprehension strategies I provided as we

read this novel has, indeed, given them the wings they need to fly on their own as active and engaged readers, or at least more active and engaged than they were before we started.

Conclusions, Implications, and Emerging Questions:

As we approached the end of the novel and the end of the school year, it was time to reflect on the strategies they had been using, to formally assess their understanding of this novel, and to conduct the follow-up interviews to ascertain any changes in their perceptions of themselves as readers. I administered the formal assessment of their achievement with this particular novel, which was a compilation of open-ended questions, multiple choice questions, vocabulary matching, and a short creative writing/dramatization activity. For the most part, I was very pleased with the results. Everyone received a C+ or higher and those who scored lower than an 85% did not do well at all on the vocabulary section (a question for research in another lifetime!). I concluded this was a result of an over-emphasis on reading comprehension and not enough on vocabulary building.

I chose to conduct follow-up interviews with these 10 students in a very informal atmosphere and have it be more like a conversation about their experiences now that the novel was done. I began by praising them for their progress and enthusiasm as I expressed how pleased I was with the growth I had observed.

When I asked which strategies they found to be most useful, Mindy, Iris, Desi, and Stan all agreed the *Ask a Question/Predict/Check* charts were the best. Mindy said,

"Doing that made you want to try and answer the question right and then read to find out the real answer." Tovani (2000) emphasizes the importance of questioning.

> Questioning engages readers…If readers look for answers to their questions, they focus on the text and their mind is less inclined to wonder. Asking questions gives reticent and struggling readers control over their learning (p. 85).

Nick, who loves to draw, said, "I liked drawing the visualizations." This comment combined with other similar connections between drawing and *visualizing* reinforced an earlier personal observation that I had too often associated *visualizing* with the act of drawing the images generated by the text rather than encouraging them to conjure up pictures in their mind as they read. Rereading sections of Tovani's (2000) *I Read It, But I Don't Get It*, I realized I should have had a better balance and guided my students to "see it" in their heads rather than to make me see it on paper. He states:

> When a reader can visualize what is happening, comprehension improves. Students are bombarded with visual images [movies, television, and life]. These images can help readers make a video in their head. If they can "see it," they can often understand it (p. 53).

Their responses to my asking which activities they found to be most helpful were varied and seemed to show an appreciation for the purpose behind each one. Ronnie really liked drawing the steps of Charlotte's climb to the top of the main mast. He said it helped him understand what was going on and what probably happened when Mr. Hollybrass was murdered. Everyone chimed in with "Oh, Yeah! That was a good one!"

(S. Lombardi field notes, June 11, 2007). Stan and Tim raved about the *Coming-Soon Posters*. Tim said,

> "It was like a competition with the class and with yourself to find out as much as you could about the next chapter real quick and then we *had* to read it to find out if our posters were right. It was like a coming attractions commercial for a movie or a TV show. It really gave me a reason to want to read and I don't usually like reading but this book was fun and I really enjoyed reading it." (S. Lombardi field notes, June 11, 2007)

My final question reflected my concern for whether or not these strategies and activities will figuratively morph into wings that will allow them to fly on their own. I reminded them of the summer reading assignment given to them by the district's high school that they would be attending in September and I asked what strategies and techniques did they feel comfortable using that will really help them understand the reading better. Desi said he would stop and reread and ask questions whenever he was lost or confused, which reminded me of when they were making their *Story Rollers* and he told Angie to 'Just go back to page 61 and figure it out." When Mindy and Mandy said they knew they would definitely use Post-Its to mark up the pages with questions, reactions, and connections, the rest of the group agreed that would be a good idea, and it would be helpful in September to know where in the book certain things happened or where they might have been confused. Angie said she would continue to look up the definition of unfamiliar words. They all agreed that they probably would *not* take the time to draw out their visualizations but they promised me they would jot down ideas about what they were "seeing" in their minds to refer back to later.

So… did I implement specific reading comprehension strategies and guide my reading students to be active and engaged while reading *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*? Yes. That I did. But what happened when I did this? What I observed

while I was doing this was encouraging: motivated, active, and engaged students who actually seemed to be enjoying reading…an activity that 80% of them labeled as something they only did when it was required. But were they active and engaged only because it was required? Will this positive behavior associated with something 80% of them said they didn't enjoy carry over into any portion of their lives come June 21? Should reading comprehension still be taught at this level and will it subsequently improve? I believe that any tools you give a struggling student can only help his ability to achieve and feel successful. Tovani (2000) claims middle school and secondary teachers often wonder why they should teach reading comprehension strategies when there isn't enough time to cover the course material; he strongly contends that the benefits of strategy teaching are vast because these strategies are really thinking skills that are used in every aspect of our lives (p. 108-9).

An additional emerging question caused me to ponder on the relationship between vocabulary development and reading comprehension. If I'm going to concentrate on reading comprehension strategies, is it better to choose text that contains little or no challenging vocabulary or is learning the meanings of new words a major part of increasing comprehension? Although my students kept a running log of unfamiliar words and attempted to learn their meanings through various activities, there were many times I felt they were still in the dark because of the sophisticated language and technical nautical terms Avi used to authenticate his novel. I will need to be careful in the selection of future novels to avoid an overwhelming amount of unfamiliar words that could keep students from relating to the book and enjoying it.

When I saw the improved level of understanding and their increased desire to read further as we journeyed through this novel, I was convinced what had happened here was successful, even if it is only temporary. The icing on the cake came on the last day of Desi K.'s Language Arts Literacy Skills class when I asked this group to reflect on the skills they learned this year. I invited each student to tell me one thing they will do differently next year to be a better student, to get better grades, and to not score into this type of remedial class again. Without even waiting to be called on, Desi K. emphatically claimed for all to hear, "Read, I'm going to read." Even after the other 'cool dudes' in the class snickered and questioned his sincerity, he said it again, "I *am* going to read." Then he put his thumbs up, winked at me, and softly said, "Charlotte Doyle" (S. Lombardi field notes, June 14, 2007).

Had I simply gotten lucky with the right choice of book or did the focus on reading comprehension strategies and their self-perception have this effect on his self-efficacy as a reader? I tend to realistically believe that both played a part but I'll proudly take credit for the latter.

Overall, I've learned that even if my students can decode or even read fluently when they come to me in September of their eighth grade year, I can't simply expect or assume that they will instantly be sophisticated readers who can make meaning of more difficult material without specific guided instruction. It seems this type of instruction declines just when students need it the most.

I've also learned that teaching reading comprehension strategies doesn't always come with a generic set of instructions. While I enjoyed coming up with ideas and activities that worked for this novel, they might not be applicable to other books in the

same way. As a reading teacher I need to be innovative and observant but, most of all, I need to convey a sincere passion and enthusiasm for the act of reading itself and, more importantly, for what I'm actually asking my students to read. As Tovani blatantly and ironically states:

> You don't need a master's degree to help students become better readers. You can improve [their] comprehension if you become a passionate reader of what you teach…and model how good readers read. The very fact that you can read makes you somewhat of an expert. (Tovani, 2000, p. 20-21)

I may not be an expert but I'm looking forward to sharing my newly founded 'expertise' with next year's students.

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