A NEW APPROACH TO MIDDLE SCHOOL READING INTERVENTION BALANCING SELF-DETERMINATION AND ACHIEVEMENT

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A NEW APPROACH TO MIDDLE SCHOOL READING INTERVENTION

BALANCING SELF-DETERMINATION AND ACHIEVEMENT

by

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A NEW APPROACH TO MIDDLE SCHOOL READING INTERVENTION
BALANCING SELF-DETERMINATION AND ACHIEVEMENT

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While research on Response to Intervention (RTI) has focused almost exclusively on elementary education, an increasing number of middle and high schools are adopting this framework as a way to match student needs with instruction that accelerates academic growth. Without age-appropriate models, curriculum, or interventions, secondary schools often attempt to simply replicate elementary practices with limited success. These attempts typically take a prescriptive approach to reading instruction for struggling below-grade-level readers. However, this self-study examines how one research-practitioner designed, implemented, and modified a middle school Tier II RTI reading course with the goal of improving student self-determination as well as reading achievement. The course fostered self-determination via promoting autonomy, relatedness, and self-competence while using individual literacy stations and small group instruction to grow reading achievement. The study offers a fresh approach to working with struggling middle school readers and highlights the tensions between theory and practice and between teacher control and student autonomy.
Dedication

My parents, Patrick and Mary Ellen Mancini
For instilling in me a love of reading and a passion for learning.

Special Thanks to:
My daughter Abbigail
For your patience

Corey Florendo
For your unending support

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For always believing I could do this

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For rooting for me every step of the way
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Struggling Middle School Readers

Every day, about thirty-six middle school students, in groups of twelve, join me for 72 minutes of reading class. Some students burst through the door of my classroom and race to the reading corner to sit on the couch. They grab the magazines and “save” their favorite books for silent reading time later. Other students saunter in dangerously close to being tardy, slump into a desk, and close their eyes. Even though we read every day, some students greet me with a chipper, “Are we going to get to read today?” Other students attempt to remain unnoticed, simply nodding when I welcome them. Some of my students, especially the sixth graders, still look like elementary students with Kool-Aid mustaches and too large backpacks, while others tower over me and have clearly started shaving. Regardless of the differences in size, shape, attitude, and demeanor, all of my students have been labeled “struggling readers” by my school district (Ridgeport Public Schools, RPS (this and all names throughout are pseudonyms)). My job is to help them shed that label and gain grade-level reading strategies.

During the 2012-2013 school year, I began a new position in a newly created program at Ridgeport Middle School, RMS. As the Reading Specialist, I was responsible for teaching all the intervention reading classes for the twenty-four lowest readers in each grade: sixth, seventh, and eighth. I was faced with the occasionally daunting task of helping students who have typically scored three grade levels behind in reading to gain grade-level skills. This task was given to
me without any set curriculum or special materials. I was to design this course, teach the course, and produce results.

At the beginning of the 2012-2013 school year, I had a roster of students, data about their past performance on standardized assessments, a computer program for testing their growth, a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework to follow, and a large empty classroom. I had two main goals for my students: 1. Help them to grow academically and to read at grade level, 2. Help them grow personally and become more motivated, engaged readers who wanted to read. My district assigned the first goal; the second goal came from a culmination of my teaching experience, observations, and research about reading and reading instruction. From this context and these goals grew the present research study. I asked two questions: (a) How can I create and implement a course that assists struggling middle school readers in gaining reading strategies while helping them to persist in the face of reading difficulty? (b) How do I assist students in becoming both skillful and willful readers?

The Present Study: A Preview

In this self-study of my teaching practice, I closely documented the creation, implementation, and modification of the new reading course during the 2012-2013 school year. The course was intended to serve as an intervention for struggling readers as part of RPS’s RTI framework. My purpose was to examine how my decision-making and teaching changed through the school year in an endeavor to refine students’ reading strategy instruction. These changes often occurred in response to students’ self-reported motivation and student
achievement on standardized assessments. In this pursuit, I examined what I did as well as how five students reported experiencing the course.

To document this yearlong process, I relied heavily upon my own lesson plans and journals, still photographs, and observation notes from peer observers. While the primary focus of the study was my practice, I used data from five exemplar students to illustrate the relationship between my teaching moves and student learning.

RPS chose to create this position and course to address students’ lack of success on the State Accountability Assessments. Of major concern for RPS has been failing to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the previous two school years (2010-11, 2011-12) as required by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. As a result, RMS has been listed as a Needs Improvement school. In fact, RMS’s performance from 2010-11 to 2011-12 declined from Met to Not Met in the following student groups: White, Students eligible for free and reduced lunch, and English Language Learners. Only one student group remained the same: Special Education students were graded Not Met in both 2010-11 and 2011-12.

In an effort to offer more specialized reading instruction to individual students who had not met grade-level requirements, and to have more students proficient on the State Accountability Assessment, the district implemented an RTI framework for identifying students in need of support and systematically providing them with additional instruction.

**Understanding the RTI Framework**

RTI came about as part of the reauthorization of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) in 2004 (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008). RTI is a
multi-tiered framework intended to assist schools in identifying struggling learners and providing students with individualized interventions to develop strategies that can lead to skills (RTI Action Network, 2013). In an RTI system, all students receive quality core instruction, known as Tier I instruction. In Tier I, teachers use research-based, best practices for a prescribed number of minutes per day. At RMS this was 72 minutes every school day, which was equal to one block in the five-block schedule. When a student failed to meet grade level expectations as demonstrated on several assessments, known as universal screeners because they are given to all students to screen for problems, then the failing student received more intensive instruction, known as Tier II instruction.

At RMS the universal screener was the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test by Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). If a student scores below the 40th percentile on three of the last four MAP tests and/or State Accountability Assessments, then that child would qualify for Tier II instruction. At RMS approximately 10.5% of students were enrolled in the Tier II Reading class in the 2012-13 school year.

A district committee, of which I was a member, developed the RTI governing framework for RPS in line with federal requirements over the course of the 2011-2012 school year. This framework defined Tier I instruction for RPS, selected the universal screeners, and defined how a student would be selected for Tier II instruction. The decision-making rules for placing a student in Tier II and other portions of the plan are modeled closely after the RPS elementary program, which had been in place for two previous school years. (See Appendix A for the decision-making rules for the RMS program).
*Reading*, the focal course for this study, was a Tier II course, meaning students received extra strategic instruction in concepts where they scored below grade-level. The students were enrolled in an every other day block (72 minutes) of *Reading*. This course took the place of one elective course in the student’s schedule. Because the class met every other day, on the opposite day, students were still able to take an elective course such as art, music, or careers. *Reading* was a supplemental class that did not replace the daily 72-minute block of Language Arts that all students in the school took.

Within the 72-minute intervention course, each child spent thirty minutes in differentiated instruction, which targeted individual areas of need. For example, an eighth grade student in *Reading* might spend fifteen minutes each day working on sixth grade vocabulary if that were a deficit area while a different student in the same class worked on main idea/detail, figurative language, text features, or text structures. The remaining class time was devoted to small-group or whole-group reading and instruction of strategies that all students in the class needed to practice. During the time a student was enrolled in the Tier II course, that student’s progress was closely monitored to discern his/her improvement in the targeted areas. Simply put, this improvement is the Response part of RTI.

Ideally, an RTI framework allows teachers to individualize their approach to teaching (Burns, 2010). Each student’s data from screening and progress monitoring assessments are viewed individually rather than collectively. In other words, while the class overall might have scored well on an assessment about similes, if Billy did not, he would receive individualized attention and re-teaching while other students would work on different areas.
RTI provides a way for educators to be purposeful about differentiation. By using progress monitoring and diagnostic assessments, the teacher knows exactly which concepts need to be taught to each student, and the teacher can evaluate how those students are improving. Data helps inform decisions and allows for the evaluation of effectiveness. A hypothetical student, Kelsey, can serve as a simplified example of how the system works. If three of Kelsey’s universal screeners showed that she were reading at a fifth grade level in the eighth grade, which is below the 40th percentile, she would be enrolled in an intervention. Further diagnostic assessments by Kelsey’s teacher show that she particularly struggles with finding the main idea in non-fiction and writing an accurate summary. Interventions would focus on building those specific strategies through repeated practice. Then, at designated points in the term (typically every 2-3 weeks), Kelsey’s progress would be monitored with a brief assessment to discover if she were improving in the targeted areas. At that point, the teacher would use the data to decide if Kelsey needed to continue with practicing the same strategies, move to the next concept in need of remediation, or if she could be released from intervention altogether.

In many RTI frameworks, Tier III follows Tier II. Students typically qualify for Tier III instruction when Tier II interventions have not resulted in improved student performance. Tier III interventions are supposed to be more intensive with greater time and sharper focus. For many districts and states, Tier III includes students who qualify for special education. At RMS Tier III interventions and/or courses have not been implemented at this time, but the structure exists in the RPS framework. In places where Tier III has been
successfully implemented, and in certain states, a lack of response to Tier III interventions can be used in the process for identifying children with specific learning disabilities and special education.

**Critiques of RTI**

RTI has been strongly critiqued in many circles for its over-reaching pervasiveness before strong empirical evidence has been established (Allington, 2009). Burns (2010) added that the research base for RTI is still not definitive. The problem is even more pronounced for middle and high schools where research on RTI models is in the beginning stages (Burns, 2010). Nevertheless, RTI is one of the most discussed and implemented educational initiatives in the nation (Burns, 2010). The lack of empirical evidence is perhaps understandable since RTI is implemented in a myriad of ways using a myriad of interventions. RTI looks differently in every district throughout the nation, therefore evidence showing that RTI “works” is elusive.

Without support for RTI as a whole, Allington (2013) encourages schools to make sure that the individual interventions and teaching practices have research support. The key to success is using interventions shown to be effective with struggling readers.

Perhaps the greatest drawback to RTI is not its lack of empirical research but in how schools often implement it. Even though RTI legislation was originally designed to be flexible, responsive to local needs, and useful in preventing the need to identify students as having learning disabilities (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008), the tiers of RTI are often equated with packaged reading programs or marketed interventions (Allington, 2009). RTI Frameworks
become lock-step rules where flexibility is not possible. For example, a framework may dictate that all students who are on Tier II for reading will get the *REWARDS* fluency program for 20 lessons regardless of the students’ deficit area (Vachon, Gleason & Archer, 2011). Then the same RTI framework may say that any student in Tier III gets the *SRA Corrective Reading* program rather than regular classroom instruction for Language Arts (McGraw-Hill: SRA, 2010).

Unfortunately this entrenched approach directly contradicts the ideal of individuation to improve performance.

As a single example of how universally accepted such packaged programs have become, the best-selling professional development book on RTI, *Pyramid Response to Intervention* (Buffman, Mattos, and Weber, 2009), lists several pages of packaged reading intervention programs. More recommendations about effective research-based programs can be found at the *What Works Clearinghouse*, sponsored by the United States Department of Education and summarized in USDE publications (e.g., James-Burdumy, 2010).

Regardless of how supported these programs are by the federal government, they have several problems related to implementation. First, they cannot offer instruction that addresses individual needs because they are designed for large groups of students (Allington, 2008). Secondly, the overuse of under-qualified staff in teaching interventions is a problem nationally (Allington, 2013). In an online interview, Allington (2010) stated,

> If you want a kid to remain illiterate and ultimately end up in special ed., send him out to work with someone who lacks expertise in teaching reading. If you want him to develop literacy, put him
with someone with expertise in teaching kids at that age to read.

(Paragraph, 12)

Finally, RTI and RTI research is still in its infancy at the middle and high school levels. While elementary schools have been implementing RTI frameworks for nearly 20 years (Burns, 2010), middle and high schools are just beginning to think about what RTI will look like at the secondary level. Even without research evidence, many schools and districts are forging ahead.

There are unique challenges to implementing interventions in a middle school where a much more strict schedule is governed by credits and minutes. These challenges are added to problems with finding qualified educators to teach reading at this level (not English or language arts). Equally challenging is finding suitable materials for teens who are reading well below grade-level. One can add the issue of finding appropriate interventions for the types of advanced academic reading teens have to do as opposed to basic phonemic awareness and decoding interventions at the elementary level. Without the professional development materials, without student materials, and without high-quality models to follow, many secondary schools are simply trying to make an elementary system work in their buildings (Samuels, 2009).

A Place for Self-Study in RTI Research

Many studies have been conducted on motivation and reading achievement, and many studies have examined the effectiveness of various RTI interventions. However, very few of these studies have investigated how all these factors interact from the insider perspective of a practitioner-researcher teaching within an RTI framework. My project documented how I applied theories about
student motivation to create and implement a motivationally minded middle school approach to RTI instruction.

**Expanding data sources.** In particular, two books illustrate the way literacy self-study can be conducted in the middle school by practitioners: Allen and Gonzalez’s (1998) *There’s Room for Me Here: Literacy Workshop in the Middle School* and Wilhelm’s (2008) *You Gotta Be the Book: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents*. In this regard, these studies are models for how my research design is structured. The strong design-experiment of Wilhelm (2008) and the equally strong case study of Allen and Gonzalez (1998) create rich, full descriptions of how two teachers chose to work with struggling middle school readers. These approaches document the individual lessons, student products, and teacher reflections over the course of years in classrooms. Neither Wilhelm nor Allen and Gonzalez discuss how their students improved in reading achievement. Content to make statements about personal growth, esthetics, or pleasure in reading, these books did not offer any quantitative data to support such instructional methods.

Certainly, neither study set out to examine changes in achievement, they were meant to document methods and strategies that were successful in working with struggling readers in their individual classrooms. One must remember that both studies took place before the advent of NCLB in 2001, when the demand for achievement data to support instructional practices was not as high (Wilhelm’s original study was conducted in 1996). While my study does not qualify as “research-based” or “scientifically validated” according to NCLB, I did use
objective measures of reading achievement to help in my decision making when modifying instruction or student goals.

In my daily teaching practice, I use a great deal of quantitative data to analyze student growth. This is both a requirement of working within the RTI framework and a way for me to answer my own inner voice, which often queries, “Yes, but is this working?” By extension, it makes sense to support my qualitative self-study with the quantitative assessment data that is central to my practice and decision-making.

Conversely, qualitative voices are missing from most, if not all, RTI research studies where best practice research dominates. I am writing a qualitative study that tries to fill a small piece of the large void in RTI research. Reading research conducted since 2001 has been dominated by best practices and research-based practices (Barone & Morrow, 2003; Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007; Pressley, et al., 2007). This has led to the proliferation of quantitative studies. For example, in a content analysis of 246 peer-reviewed journal articles published in 2004-2005, 56.1% of the studies utilized either correlational or experimental/quasi-experimental methods (Halladay, et al., 2007). To meet the stringent demands of federally prescribed methodology, these studies are often narrowly focused on a single intervention or practice (Halladay, et al., 2007).

**Practitioner research.** Many practitioners, myself among them, still strive to have a child-centered practice. I still see the need for contextualized, authentic literacy experiences as necessary parts of student motivation and learning, but I have a hard time finding current examples within the middle
school or RTI research literature to follow. Many practitioner studies were conducted before NCLB and the Common Core State Standards, so teachers typically discount the studies for being out-of-touch with present reality.

Through my study, I document how I created a reading course with motivation in mind. I believe that this type of instruction is still possible in the midst of our Common Core environment and want to see if such instruction would help students achieve proficiency as defined by district, state, and federal governments. While I may not always agree with our nation’s emphasis on testing or its reductive effects, I realize that testing is here to stay for the foreseeable future. Such tests, when considered in context with other assessments and classroom work, can yield a picture of a student’s growing ability.

I hope this study can be a voice in the growing movement of practitioners pushing back against a packaged approach to reading intervention. While reading programs have become so pervasive that they seem to have become almost synonymous with RTI, the courses I taught during the 2012-2013 school year were individualized, responsive, flexible, and targeted to local student interests. This is an opportunity to enter the academic conversation about what works in classroom practice to aid struggling readers. For me, practitioner inquiry values pragmatism as a way to promote action. Because in the end, the research I conduct and the practices I develop have to work in my local setting and must inspire action to be valuable.
CHAPTER 2
THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

My theoretical understanding of motivation in reading came primarily from Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a meta-theory useful in organizing other motivation mini-theories and providing a way of understanding intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). SDT is an umbrella that brings together what Deci and Ryan (1985) argued are the three basic needs for personal growth in any area: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. SDT allows for an examination of the classroom cultures, individuals, and experiences that collectively affect how students grow their self-competence and strategic knowledge through continual connections.

I organized my guiding theories into a framework of relational, motivational, and strategic reading clusters, all of which play a vital role in shaping reading achievement. This framework, which is illustrated in Figure 2.1, serves as a guide throughout the chapter.
Figure 2.1. Framework of theories and practices working together for reading achievement.

In this chapter, I overview the framework and define key terms related to reading and achievement. Then, each portion of the framework is examined in turn: (a) reading instruction and cognitive support, (b) the self-determination umbrella, and (c) motivation as a mediating factor. Finally, all these pieces are pulled together into a cohesive whole that illustrates how students can become strategic readers and improve their reading achievement.
Overview of the Framework

The primary goal of my reading instruction was to aid my students in becoming independent, strategic readers and meaning-makers, and who could improve their reading achievement over time. I wanted students to become skillful and willful readers.

To fully understand these statements, definitional clarification is needed.

- “Strategic readers” are readers who can pull upon a variety of explicit comprehension strategies, use their prior knowledge, and allocate working memory to the task of reading in appropriate ways through self-monitoring and adjusting (Shell, et al., 2010).
- “Meaning-makers” transact with a text by entering a mental conversation whereby they construct meaning, make connections, and expand their understanding (Rosenblatt, 1985).
- “Reading achievement,” for the purpose of this study, refers to a student’s test scores as measured on standardized scales of achievement; some examples include grade-level equivalencies, percentile rankings, and scale scores.
- “Skillful, willful readers” are students who have accurate and automatic knowledge of reading and are motivated to use their knowledge. Through practice, they have turned their conscious, effortful strategy usage into nearly effortless skill usage. They are still strategic readers when a difficult task faces them, but they possess the desire to persist in the face of difficulty. (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; Paris, 1983).
To help students utilize their reading strategies, teachers should support them in an environment that encourages self-determination (Ames, 1992; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hawkins, 1974). Students must be motivated to persist through a difficult task and be willing to put effort into reading (Bandura, 2001; Deci, 1996; Guthrie, Wigfield, & VonSeker, 2000). The three self-determination needs affect student motivation. Motivation becomes a mediating factor helping students to make the choice to access prior strategies or knowledge and to use them when reading new materials (Shell et al., 2010). In other words, to be successful, students must possess both the skill and the will to read. When students are skillful, willful readers and they are correctly matched with differentiated reading activities and texts, reading achievement can be affected in powerful ways (Allington & Baker, 2007; McTigue, Washburn & Liew, 2009).

**Reading Instruction and Cognitive Support**

What do students need to know and be able to do to be proficient readers? This question is so common in educational circles that it is now a cliché. I believe that more exists in answering this question than figuring out a list of facts, skills, and activities. In particular, three factors (shown in the top cluster of Figure 2.1) heavily influence students’ ability to access and understand what they read. First, explicit comprehension strategies are a necessary starting place because students must develop the automatic skills to understand and make sense of what they read. Second, a student must access prior knowledge during reading; this can be prior knowledge of vocabulary, the genre being read, the topic or theme of the work, or
a host of other schemas of knowledge. Third, students must devote their attention to the task of reading if they are to learn from and remember what they read.

**Explicit comprehension strategies.** According to Harris and Hodges (1995), *comprehension* is “the construction of the meaning of a written or spoken communication through a reciprocal, holistic interchange of ideas between the interpreter and the message. . . . [T]he content of the meaning is influenced by that person’s prior knowledge and experience” (p. 39). Therefore, in reading, comprehension is the construction of meaning through an interaction between the message on the page and the reader. Comprehension seems to happen automatically for good comprehenders, but in reality, all readers use the same processes, some just more consciously and explicitly than others (Rasinski & Padak, 2008).

Various studies and reports have tried to list the most effective strategies for improving comprehension. The National Reading Panel (2000) selected visualizing, comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, graphic representations, question generating, and summarizing as the most consistently effective. Pressley and McDonald-Wharton (2002) added transactional strategies to the list, including interpreting texts and responding to texts based on prior knowledge.

Teachers have been encouraged to explicitly model comprehension strategies. During modeling, teachers help students access increased amounts of reading through demonstrating how to navigate a piece of text and use comprehension strategies. Taylor, Pressley, and Pearson (2002) called this
“direct explanation” where the teacher models, through thinking aloud, how she is accessing various strategies and why she is using them (p. 364). Explicit instruction of comprehension strategies is more effective than less explicit methods in affecting reading comprehension outcomes (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005).

Other researchers have added more strategies to these lists; however, the important thing to remember is that students need a variety of strategies they can pull upon as needed to meet the demands of a text (Collins Block & Pressley, 2007). These strategies become part of the student’s knowledge base that is brought into play when a student interacts with a text in an effort to construct meaning.

**Prior knowledge.** Prior knowledge is a wide category; it includes all the skills, content, and strategies a student has at his/her disposal for making sense of text. This knowledge can be procedural: e.g., how to set a purpose for reading, how to approach reading non-fiction; or it can be declarative: e.g., why this concept is like another, how this information is related to what is already known. Prior knowledge is known to have a strong effect on learning outcomes, and the amount of prior knowledge a person has predicts the ability to recall factual information (Shapiro, 2004).

With its link to learning and recall, prior knowledge is a powerful tool which teachers often encourage students to use. In the classroom, teachers frequently try to help students recall prior knowledge before reading so new information can be attached to old information (Rasinski & Padak, 2008). This process is frequently referred to as activating background knowledge.
In this way, prior knowledge is linked to the concept of schema, or knowledge structures (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). The ability to expand our knowledge structures, add to them, transform them, and use them makes prior knowledge particularly useful as students make sense of what they read (Alvermann et al., 1985; Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

Unfortunately, some students have little procedural knowledge, for example, how to successfully begin a reading task or how to successfully select a strategy for comprehension. Sometimes those same students require new declarative knowledge about the facts and information in the reading passages. As a result, the teacher must build both types of knowledge through explicit lessons. I often teach students procedural knowledge by using guided whole-group lessons; these strategies are then practiced individually or with a partner. For example, my students learned how to preview a text and make predictions as a group. Then the students practiced that strategy for the next several weeks. Each time the students learn a new or practice an old strategy, the class begins by talking briefly about our declarative knowledge of the topic in the passage. Rasinski & Padak (2008) recommend teacher sharing, student brainstorming, direct experience, and movie clips for building this type of declarative knowledge. I have often found that a combination of these methods is successful in helping students.

When students recall their prior knowledge about a subject, or build new knowledge, they can be mentally ready to read and learn new information. At this point, they can make decisions about comprehension strategies and what is useful with a particular type of text based upon prior experience using the
strategies. Next, students need to focus their attention and working memory on the reading task.

**Working memory.** Shell, et al. (2010) explained that working memory is where temporary storage and processing of information happens in the brain. Our working memory holds information for learning, but it can only hold approximately four chunks of sensory stimulation at a time. Since we are constantly surrounded by sensory input, our brain must make choices as to what it will attend. Through concentration, we focus and redirect our attention toward the things that we believe are most worth the effort. According to the Unified Learning Model (Shell, et al., 2010) three major rules exist for governing how we use our working memory to guide learning:

1. Learning requires attention: We must place new information in our temporary working memory then attend to it so it enters long-term memory.

2. Learning requires repetition: We must rehearse and repeat memories to make them permanent.

3. Learning requires connections: We must connect our memories to our prior knowledge and put it into manageable chunks based on categories of knowledge.

As teachers, we hope that students will attend to the lesson and required reading, but students will make their own choices. How are these choices made? How does a student (or anyone for that matter) make a choice about what is important enough to bring their attention, working memory, strategies, and knowledge into
play? The major mediating factor that helps a person decide whether to allocate working memory and prior knowledge to a task is motivation.

**Self-Determination Umbrella**

Motivation is an extremely complex construct comprised of many dimensions. These dimensions include both intrinsic elements like self-efficacy and extrinsic elements such as recognition (Bandura, 1997). Motivation is even more complex because not all students are motivated in the same way or by the same factors (Baker & Wigfield, 1999).

As a result of this complexity, the study of motivation, and specifically motivation in reading, is a constantly evolving field as new understandings illuminate how the dimensions interact and affect readers. Nevertheless, several findings are clear about motivation’s connection to reading: motivation to read has been shown to be predictive of performance on standardized tests (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008). Motivation is correlated with longer time spent reading (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997), a larger breadth of topics in reading (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997), a greater frequency of reading (Baker & Wigfield, 1999), and improved reading comprehension (Guthrie, et al., 2006; Guthrie, et al., 2007).

In many ways motivation is foundational for reading success and reading enjoyment. Reciprocally, reading success has an influence on future motivation for reading (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Mucherah & Yoder, 2008).

With a myriad of factors to consider when studying motivation, the meta-theory of Self-Determination provides a way to organize and consider motivation
through the constructs of autonomy, relatedness, and self-competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

**Autonomy.** Being autonomous means “acting in accord with one’s self—it means feeling free and volitional in one’s actions” (Deci, 1996, p. 2). Autonomy is the desire to be the origin of one’s own action, to feel as if we choose our own behavior. In this way, autonomy is an important part of intrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Importantly, not all students will want control over the same aspects of their learning (Pink, 2009); some students may want control over what they read, others want to choose their work team, while still others want to control how they demonstrate their new knowledge. Regardless of how a person chooses to exercise autonomy, all people want to feel like they have control in their lives, and promoting choice is a primary way to promote autonomy (Deci, 1996).

In education, students should be able to make choices about reading materials, genres, and how they demonstrate their knowledge based upon their reading (Guthrie et al. 2007). Gambrell (1996) found that in interviews with third- and fifth-grade students, children mentioned self-selection of texts to be the most important factor in motivating them to read. Edmunds and Bauserman (2006) confirmed this finding with fourth-grade students. In interviews with struggling middle school readers, Ivey (1999) found that the students liked to read more when they chose from interesting books at a variety of reading levels.

When students make choices in reading, they begin to believe they are in control of their reading activities. The choices do not come with a complete lack of teacher control or guidance because as Pink (2009) cautions we cannot pluck
people from controlled environments and give them total autonomy; they will
flounder. Teachers must scaffold them toward accepting autonomy and choice by
providing opportunities to exercise control over progressively larger decisions.
This means that teachers have to support choice to make sure it does not feel like
a burden and create anxiety for students (Deci, 1996).

Autonomy is not the same as independence. All humans still need
relationships and others, and we need limits and boundaries. Autonomy is not
unbridled freedom without consequence; it is the freedom to choose within limits
that respect others and promote wellbeing (Deci, 1996). Being autonomy
supportive as a teacher means relating to students “as human beings” (Deci,
1996, emphasis in original, p. 100).

Autonomy is strongly linked to engagement. Engaged readers are
intrinsically motivated, mentally active, strategic, and socially interactive
autonomy and engagement: the opposite of autonomy is control by others;
control leads to compliance, and autonomy leads to engagement. In a series of
laboratory experiments, when people were given a task but given freedom to
choose how to accomplish the task they were more fully engaged (Deci, 1996). In
other studies, students of autonomy supportive teachers were more curious and
willing to explore new knowledge (Deci, 1996).

**Self-competence.** Self-competence is our belief in our capabilities and
strategies for securing an outcome (Deci, 1996). Importantly, self-competence is
not the same as actual competence; self-competence is related to what we believe
about ourselves as learners. These beliefs are molded over long periods of time
and can be found in ingrained patterns of thinking and problem-solving. This thinking is often expressed in the self-talk of struggling readers: “I’ve always been a bad reader and I always will be” (Tovani, 2000, p. 7).

People develop a sense of competence when they take on and meet “optimal challenges” (Deci, 1996, p. 66). Through a longitudinal study of middle school and high school readers, Watt (2004) found that competence beliefs in reading and math are partially tied to performance evaluations and perceived aptitude. When students experienced success (as defined by their teachers or by themselves) in reading/language arts, their perceived competence did not decline at the same rate as students who believed they were unsuccessful (Watt, 2004).

Students take on increasingly difficult reading tasks during their elementary years. If students do not meet with success and begin making negative social comparisons with their peers, their self-competence in reading falls dramatically (Jacobs, et. al, 2002). Jacobs and his colleagues (2002) found that children’s self-competence in reading/language arts declined rapidly during elementary school and continued to decline into high school where it leveled off. Perceptions of ability, not a student’s actual ability, explained over 40% of the decrease in perceived self-competence. Students with a low sense of self-competence dwell on their inability to perform rather than working to accomplish the task. “They slacken their efforts and give up quickly in the face of difficulties. They are slow to recover their sense of efficacy following failure or setbacks” (Bandura, 1994, p. 73).

Conversely, a strong sense of self-competence can lead students to believe that difficulties are simply challenges to be mastered and overcome rather than
chores to be avoided and ignored (Bandura, 1994). People who feel competent believe that through effort a sense of mastery can be achieved (Ames, 1992). Moreover, feeling competent at a task can improve one’s intrinsic motivation and intrinsic satisfaction (Deci, 1996).

Our self-competence is connected to our motivation to learn and engage in learning behaviors. If students feel they can be successful at reading, they will be more motivated to try to read (Shell et al., 2010). As Baker and Wigfield (1999) point out, “Reading is an effortful activity that children often can choose to do or not to do” (p. 452). Students’ reading self-competence is tremendously powerful in influencing their ability to persist through reading tasks.

**Relatedness.** People need to feel autonomous and competent, but they need to feel connected to others. Deci (1996) defines relatedness as our need to “love and be loved, to care and to be cared for” (p. 88).

**Environmental aspects of relatedness.** Teachers must create classroom cultures that foster connections and promote a positive approach to reading (Gambrell, 1996). Often teachers wish to improve motivation in their students, but this implies that motivation is something that can be done to someone. Instead, Deci (1996) suggests that we should try to create environments where students are more self-motivated to read. These environments should be what McMahon, et al. (2009) describe as warm: promoting safety, acceptance, and achievement. Teachers have reported that a safe learning environment guided by a teacher is central to a successful reading class (Allen & Gonzalez, 1998). Gambrell (1996) adds these spaces should be book-rich environments where access to books in the classroom and social
interactions with books are a part of regular classroom practice. Social interactions can include partner reading, side-by-side independent reading, and shared conversations about and with books.

When learning spaces promote safety and comfort, students are more willing to build positive relationships with adults (McMahon, et al., 2009). Supportive and non-threatening environments promote a student’s sense of enjoyment and accomplishment (Charles, 2002). LaRocque (2008) found that a student’s perception of the classroom environment was significantly correlated to a student’s achievement in reading. The elements of safety, security, and support create a space for relationships to develop.

When researchers ask students about what encourages them to read, or what helps them to be willing to engage in a reading task, students frequently mention a variety of factors related to the classroom environment: accessible, diverse reading materials (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001); a quiet and safe place to read (Allen & Gonzalez, 1998); and even comfortable seating (Allen & Gonzalez, 1998). Access to reading materials seems to be particularly important to students. In a study of reading motivation and practices of older elementary and middle school students, a majority of students selected books from the classroom library instead of the school or public library (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1995).

Clearly, the space where learning takes place is vital to creating a classroom culture that communicates a caring, warm approach to learning, and the culture that grows in that environment promotes positive relationships.

**Social aspects of relatedness.** Classroom culture is created by more than the physical space and the materials in the room; other relational factors
important to students include social collaboration or social interaction about books (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie et al., 2006). Social motivators are particularly strong with struggling readers who mention discussing books, reading aloud to others, and teacher read-alouds in response to interview questions about what they enjoy (Ivey, 1999). This includes reading and talking about reactions to books in groups (Guthrie et al., 2007). Reading with others is important to students because they often attach a positive affect with collaboration (Guthrie et al., 2007).

Social relationships between the teacher and the student are perhaps the most important social aspect in the classroom. Hawkins (1974) takes up the philosophical proposition that the quality of teaching and learning depends upon the quality of the relationship built between students, teachers, and the object of study (in my classroom, learning to read). Hawkins’ perspective is that through conversation and mutual respect a relationship can be created that enhances the learning experience. In the context of this relationship is a place where students are ready to engage willfully in a task. Hawkins suggests that by talking to students about what matters to them, by asking them about their reading experiences, and by listening to their responses this crucial relationship can be strengthened and teachers can come to understand how students need to be taught.

In creating relationships, teachers should demonstrate caring attitudes and enthusiasm (Gambrell, 1996). Murdock and Miller (2003) examined the attitudes and efficacy of 208 eighth grade students and their perceptions of teacher caring. When the researchers controlled for previous levels of efficacy
and motivation as well as parent and peer influence, perceptions of teacher caring accounted for significant variability in motivation and efficacy. Perhaps, most importantly, this study highlights the notion that teachers can influence motivation, regardless of what other influences may be present in a student’s life. In other words, teachers matter and their beliefs in their students’ abilities matter. Behrmann and Souvignier (2013) discovered that teacher’s beliefs about their students and reading explained differences in reading achievement even when the teachers were using the same materials and methods.

**Motivation as a Mediator**

Students’ sense of self-determination (how autonomous, competent, and related they feel) can strongly influence which reading activities they choose to complete, for how long, and with how much effort (Bandura, 1997; Deci, 1996; Shell et al., 2010;). A student can have the ability to perform a task, understand how the task is to be accomplished, yet still never act on accomplishing it (Shell et al., 2010). The missing element is motivation. In this regard, a student’s motivation is the element that will determine just how many strategies, how much working memory, and what prior knowledge will be used in completing the reading task. Recent research on the human brain supports this link among, motivation, effort and memory formation (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2009). If students choose to put forth effort during reading, they are more likely to remember what they read (Shell et al., 2010).
As evidence of the increased attention that motivated readers give to reading, students who were highly interested in a topic had a higher memory recall for the events and topics in the text; students with low interest had dramatically lower memory of what they had read (Guthrie, et al., 2007). Students with interest in a particular topic were often quite knowledgeable in their preferred topic, and their expanding knowledge through reading created even more interest (Guthrie et al., 2007). This upward spiral of interest, turned into motivation to read, turned into expanded interest, can positively affect reading achievement and comprehension (Guthrie et al., 2007). On the other hand, teachers should not be hesitant to push the boundaries of student interests because there seems to be a connection between interest and novelty or uniqueness (Shell, et al., 2010). Continually trying new topics, offering new ways of doing things, and trying new ways to interest students can reap benefits for teachers since one cannot assume that the same things are interesting or motivating to everyone (Shell, et al., 2010).

When students are interested in a topic they increase the number and frequency of strategies utilized when reading about that topic (Guthrie, et al., 2000). Interest in a topic can also increase persistence in the face of a challenging reading task (Fulmer & Frijters, 2011). When students were given a reading task well above their ability, the students were almost twice as likely to persist in reading the entire passage if they rated the topic "interesting." Students rated "interesting" readings as more enjoyable than students with "uninteresting" topics (Fulmer & Frijters, 2011).
When texts are not linked to student interests, engagement can decline. Kelley & Decker (2009) tied the decline in engagement and motivation in the eighth grade, as compared to the fourth grade, to a decline in student interest. In other words, as students continue in their education, they are presented with fewer books and passages tied to their interests, and this can translate into an overall decline in their interest in reading. These students begin to read less, so their achievement falls off, resulting in the eighth-grade slump (Kelley & Decker, 2009).

Motivated, self-determined readers will not only read and learn about the things placed in front of them by teachers, but they will seek out new opportunities (Deci, 1996). This is a prime example of what Stanovich (1986) calls the “Matthew Effect” in reading whereby early success is compounded by more success. Students with stronger self-competence, involvement, and interest are more likely to create situations and places where reading can take place; they are more likely to expand their knowledge and skills through increased exposure to a greater breadth and depth of texts (Guthrie, et al., 2007).

In contrast, the students with low involvement (low amounts of time spent reading), low efficacy (doubting their capability), and low interest (no favorite topics or authors) in September, were not likely to create for themselves the literacy opportunities that would enable them to increase in comprehension. Their motivational attributes did not afford enough encounters at sufficient depth to improve their reading comprehension. (Guthrie, et al., 2007, p. 309)
The result of the Matthew Effect is that the highest achieving students continue to improve at a greater rate than the struggling students, so even though the lower achieving students are growing they can still never seem to close the widening gap between themselves and the top readers (Stanovich, 1986).

When motivation and cognitive skills are combined, students will be more likely to choose to be strategic readers and meaning-makers (Shell et al., 2010). This choice requires purposefulness and motivation to a high degree (Deci, 1996). Students are able to read and comprehend through intentional forethought and action. In other words, motivation can lead students to a place where action can happen, and in that place they choose to use their skills, knowledge, and memory to address a reading task. At this point students have both the skill and the will to be strategic readers.

**Correctly Leveled and Supported Lessons and Materials**

The student is now in a place to be a strategic reader, but one more element is necessary if students are going to improve reading achievement: correctly leveled and supported lessons and texts.

The entire idea of leveling materials and supporting students through stages of learning and growth is not new. Vygotsky first proposed the Zone of Proximal Development in the 1930s and socio-cultural theorists expanded it to include scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) helping a student bridge the gap between what he can do alone and what he can do with assistance (Tracey &
Morrow, 2012). In reading, scaffolding is often discussed in terms of finding the correct texts for a student to grow as a reader.

The purpose of offering leveled reading materials is to offer opportunities where students can access the material and find success in the reading task. Low performing readers often wish to get better at reading, but many are faced with difficult materials above their reading level without enough instructional support (Allington & Baker, 2007; Ivey, 1999). If the materials are too difficult they can impede students’ ability to comprehend regardless of how skillful or motivated they might be (Allington & Baker, 2007; Rasinski & Padak, 2008). Texts can prove difficult for students for a variety of reasons, the actual readability may be above a student’s reading level, but the text might be difficult because it is an unknown genre or about a topic which the student does not possess enough prior knowledge (Rasinski & Padak, 2008).

For a teacher, this can often create internal conflict as she attempts to balance choice with correctly leveled materials; a solution can be choice within teacher-defined parameters (Pink, 2009). In the classroom this may involve students choosing books from a certain genre, from a list of authors, or out of an area of the library. This balance can be achieved through helping students to self-select books at the right level with selection strategies (Kragler & Nolley, 1996; Wutz & Wedwick, 2011). Teachers can scaffold students toward increasingly more independence and choice as the selection strategies become skills (Wutz & Wedwick, 2011).
When a text is at the correct level of difficulty and an expert teacher is available to help students to build knowledge, improve strategies, and boost effort, the final pieces are in place to improve reading achievement.

**Moving Forward with Student Reading Achievement**

This entire framework of reading theory and research has been leading toward improved reading achievement. When the pieces of the framework work in concert, students have a better chance of increasing their reading abilities as evidenced by growing achievement scores.

Notably, the graphic illustrating the framework (Figure 2.1) contains directional arrows. The process is a loop of growth leading to even higher levels of achievement (Bruner, 1960).
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Overview of Research Design

In this self-study of my teaching practice, I closely documented the creation, implementation, and modification of the new reading course during the 2012-2013 school year. The course was intended to serve as an intervention for struggling readers as part of RPS's RTI framework. My purpose was to examine how my decision-making and teaching changed through the school year in an endeavor to refine students’ reading strategy instruction. I documented changes I made in my instruction in response to students’ self-reported motivation and student reading achievement. This approach was two-pronged and asked both what I did to influence student motivation and achievement as well as how the students appeared to respond (or not respond) in these areas.

I gathered documentation from the first teacher workday of the school year, August 6, 2012 through the final student attendance day, May 17, 2013. The documentation included my lesson plans, my teacher journal, many still photographs of my classroom and workstations, and observation notes from peer observers who visited my classroom during the school year. The students’ reading achievement was measured using three standardized assessments: the STAR Reading Enterprise, produced by Renaissance Learning; the State Assessment-Reading; and the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test, produced by Northwest Evaluation Association. I gathered documentation from students: the Student Survey and Interview (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001), various
reading inventories, and student online discussions were all collected during the school year. I gathered information about how students experienced the class and grew during the year through a variety of sample student products and class work.

**My Role at School and in the Study**

Beginning in the fall of 2012, I was named the Reading Specialist at RMS. This was a largely undefined role that I took on with a great deal of excitement and eagerness. I saw it as an opportunity to finally put into practice all the strategies I had learned through my Master’s program in pk-12 Reading. It was an opportunity to work largely alone, to set a curriculum, to decide the course structure, and to select all the materials. I was excited to work with the neediest students. Perhaps, the students and I could accomplish something special and unprecedented in our school.

Along with my classroom responsibilities, I continued to serve on the district RTI committee, collaborate with the high school RTI teacher, and serve as a resource for the faculty at RMS. As part of my responsibilities as a Reading Specialist, I tested all students considered for intervention, communicated about student needs with grade-level teams, collaborated with departments on their reading goals and instruction, served on the school's leadership team, and offered study assistance to students during study hall. Since *Reading* was a new course in a new program, my position was without precedent in my district.

The RPS district did not supply a predetermined curriculum or a program of materials for teaching this course, due in part to budget constraints and due in part to the realization that every student was probably going to need something
different to address his or her skill deficits and reading difficulties (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008). The entire premise of RTI is that each child gets what he or she needs to succeed (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008), so I asked myself the question, “How can I create and implement a course that assists struggling middle school readers in gaining reading skills while helping them to persist in the face of reading difficulty? How do I assist students in becoming both skillful and willful readers?” Moreover, with every student needing different instruction, the question I quickly followed with was, ”How can I provide quality, differentiated instruction to 12 students at a time with 12 different sets of needs in a way that is both efficient and effective?” I realized that I had to do this in a way that utilized the school’s currently available materials and was engaging so students would actually participate and try.

This new role put me in the unique position to carefully consider how to approach designing, implementing, and transforming a course that considered students' motivation, while promoting learning and growth in reading achievement. I was in a position to do it from within an RTI framework, which demands empirical data, individualization, and results.

**Students Enrolled in Reading**

All the participating students enrolled in the reading intervention course met the qualification criteria established by RPS (Appendix A). Students needed to have scored below grade-level on three of their last four standardized assessments in the area of reading (MAP or State Accountability Assessment-Reading). Because more students qualified than space allowed to be served, students were ranked from lowest achievement scores to highest. Once the
lowest achieving students were identified, then any students receiving services elsewhere (special education language arts, English Language Learners’ (ELL) language arts) were excluded. The remaining 24 lowest achievers were enrolled in the course. At the end of each quarter, student progress was evaluated by the building RTI data team, and students either continued in the class or were dismissed because they had met grade-level expectations.

As a result, each quarter a few students exited the course, spaces were created, and new students entered. By design, this was a fluid process. During the school year, the exemplar students for this study were enrolled in the reading course for at least three quarters of the school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Quarter 1</th>
<th>Quarter 2</th>
<th>Quarter 3</th>
<th>Quarter 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3.1. Number of students enrolled in and dismissed from Reading by quarter.*

**Five Exemplar Students**

All the students in my classes gave regular feedback, in response to direct questions from me and in reaction to classroom activities. Their feedback helped
to guide my decision-making. Of all the students enrolled in my classes during the 2012-2013 school year, only five students agreed to participate in the study. Although this is a sample of convenience, the students who agreed to participate offered a variety of perspectives and achieved various levels of success. Since many of the changes that occurred in the class took place in response to student feedback, these five students’ information can help confirm and support my self-study of the course and the reasons behind my decision-making. Table 3.1 describes characteristics of the exemplar students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>F/R Lunch</th>
<th>SPED</th>
<th>ELL</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabitha</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Entered Quarter 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jillian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Exit Quarter 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Exemplar Students’ Demographic Characteristics.

**George.** George had a reputation as an angry student who frequently picked fights with other students. During the preceding school year, he had numerous office referrals for problems: harassment, bullying, fighting, and insubordination. His track record was such that George was placed in RPS’s Alternative School during the year of the study. This placement was typically reserved for the students who did not learn well in a traditional classroom. The Alternative School was in a separate building on the grounds of RMS. Alternative
School students were self-contained all day for all classes including physical education, electives, and lunch. George was not placed within RMS for any of his classes, except for one: the reading intervention class I taught.

A few days before the school year began on August 14, 2012, I found out that George would be joining me every other day during the eighth grade block. Because George had been enrolled in a self-contained Special Education language arts class the prior school year, the Alternative School team felt he needed added support in reading beyond their classes. With Special Education verification as Specific Learning Disabled in Speech/Language, George had received years of assistance, modifications, and accommodations.

During the previous school year, George had been enrolled in my 20-minute end-of-the-day study hall, so he knew me already and I knew him. Based upon my experiences during that study hall, I was less than enthusiastic about his return. I worried that his combative nature would hijack the new reading class and make it impossible for other students to work. My fears quickly turned out to be unfounded, and George eventually developed into a respectful, responsible student in my class.

**Katherine.** Katherine was a typical 8th grade girl in many ways; she giggled with her girlfriends, whispered about boys, and enjoyed learning about fashion and celebrities. She was a kinetic ball of energy who burst through the door each day with an improvised dance, song, or loose-limbed galloping jump. She would smile and laugh and talk animatedly to all of her classmates and to me. She brought joy with her into any room she entered. As the year progressed, Katherine would share her answers in the mimicked voices of her favorite
celebrities. She would sit on the floor snuggled next to the other girls, and read with great animation. Eventually she began to elect to come to my classroom during the last 20 minutes of each day to work on projects for me, get help with her homework, or just chat while searching for a new magazine to read.

Katherine had been in my grade-level language arts class the year before the study. In that class, I was always frustrated by the disparity between what she did in class and how she performed on assessments. I saw an enthusiastic, energetic student who enjoyed our stories and activities in class then turn around and score three grade-levels below in reading. Something was absent in her reading skills; we would try to find the missing piece all school year.

**Alicia.** I had not met Alicia before she was enrolled in my course in August. A shy, quiet girl, she wanted to do well and worked hard each day. She too found a haven in my classroom, volunteering to come in during the last 20 minutes of each day with Katherine and Jillian to complete classroom errands and projects for me.

For Alicia, there was an even bigger disconnect between her official label and the student I came to know. Alicia was identified for Special Education with an “Other Health Impaired—Attention Deficit Disorder” label, yet Alicia was perfectly willing to read for extended periods of time and to work tirelessly on an elusive concept. Unfortunately, she was one of the lowest achieving students enrolled in my courses. Alicia struggled with basic decoding and never scored above the 4th percentile all year. In spite of effort, work, and targeted instruction, Alicia’s achievement scores showed no improvement during the entire school year. Her reflections and survey answers tell a slightly different story.
**Tabitha.** Tabitha joined my class at the beginning of second quarter when a student not included in the study exited the program and created an opening. Tabitha brought with her a sweet nature, a desire to please, and a genuine longing to improve. Tabitha, more than many of my students, struggled with self-confidence. Many of the conversations we had focused on helping her to see that her effort and her work were the catalysts for her scores. She bloomed when complimented and encouraged. During the year, her thorough answers on surveys and in her journal reveal a girl who is trying to succeed. Her journey was as much about building her self-concept as it was about strategy building. By the end of the school year, she had reached proficiency on the State Accountability Assessment and improved on every measurement.

**Jillian.** Jillian was a rough diamond, but she was a pleaser. Like George, she had a reputation that preceded her. She could be loud, brassy, and a bit aggressive. She loved anything dramatic. From school gossip to family squabbles, she shared all of it in class. Jillian wanted someone to believe that she had the ability to improve. She desired praise for a job well done and acknowledgement for her efforts. She became an early leader in the class, encouraging other students to do well.

Jillian and I developed a special bond during our three quarters together in class. She would often send me messages through our school website asking for help or telling me about one of her successes. Soon she was visiting me after school and sharing her problems with family, friends, and boys. Although she was released from the class at the end of third quarter, she still came in daily
during the 20-minute study hall till the end of the school year for help on homework and to keep a connection.

**Location**

RMS is the only public middle school in a town of 22,000 residents in a rural plains state. According to the state’s department of labor, the city’s economy has the second largest share of manufacturing employment in the state. RMS served over 800 students in grades 6-8 in the school year prior to the present study (the most recent year for which data is available on the state accountability website). In this small rural town, 51% of students at RMS received free or reduced price lunch, an increase from 39% of students my first year in the district (2006-07). The percentage of students receiving ELL services was 14%. Two racial groups make up over 96% of the student population: 65% White and 31% Hispanic. Students receiving special education services (16% of all students) receive instruction in a variety of ways from pullout settings to three levels of inclusion classes (below, at, and above grade-level courses).

The shifting student demographics at RMS have placed greater stress on student services. RPS has responded to increased demand for services especially related to poverty. For example, new services have been added in the areas of social work, after-school programs, and summer meal programs.

RMS uses a 5-block schedule with alternating A/B days. Students receive Language Arts and Math daily with other courses (electives, social studies, science, health/fitness) offered every other day. The reading intervention course
in this study were taught every other day to qualifying students in place of one of their elective courses.

**Procedures**

**Timeline.** District permission was granted for this study in the summer of 2012, and IRB approval was granted in October of the same year. Approval allowed for the retroactive inclusion of data from the beginning of the school year. Data collection began in August 2012 and continued through the entire 2012-13 school year concluding on May 17, 2013.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month/Year</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
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| **August-September 2012** |  ● Course was designed.  
  ● Students took Fall MAPs test  
  ● Students filled out beginning of year inventories  
  ● Here and throughout the study students took the STAR test three times per quarter (approximately every three weeks)  
  ● Teacher reflection journal was completed regularly here and throughout the study |
| **October, 2012** |  ● IRB permission obtained  
  ● Consent obtained from parents  
  ● Students completed “Reading Interest Inventory” and “Reading Activities Inventory”  
  ● Students responded to surveys about course design |
| **November-December, 2012** |  ● Read and reflected on surveys, notes, journals, and feedback to make adjustments to instruction  
  ● Students completed the School Attitude Inventory  
  ● Student products were collected here and throughout the entire study that show insight into student understanding |
| **January-March, 2013** |  ● Read and reflected on surveys, notes, journals, and feedback to make adjustments to instruction  
  ● Students took the Winter MAPs Test  
  ● Data collection practices established in preceding months continued. |
| **April-May, 2013** |  ● Final adjustments to instruction were made.  
  ● Students took the State Accountability Assessment  
  ● Data collection practices established in preceding months continued |
| **Late May, 2013** |  ● School year ended. |

*Table 3.3. Timeline for Data Collection.*

**Length of study.** When planning the length of the study, I considered my position as a practitioner-researcher in the setting. I not only contemplated
what was expedient and practical, but I also thought about what would create a reliable study.

Originally, I thought I might conduct the study for only one semester. Then, I reflected upon some of the seminal practitioner research (Heaton, 2000; Hoffman, 1996; Wilhelm, 2008) and ethnographic studies (Armstrong, 1983) and concluded that a full academic year was the appropriate unit of analysis. I think that when dealing with self-study and qualitative methods, time is one of the most important investments a researcher can make. Taking the time to gather the necessary amount of data ensures a thick description that is multi-layered and complex. When researchers observe carefully over the course of a school year, they witness the dynamic nature of the classroom much more so than when only observed for a short time. Designating an academic year allowed me the opportunity to adequately reflect on my practice and make reasoned adjustments.

As a veteran teacher, I know that a quality student/teacher relationship is built over time. This trust is not always visible in the first few months of school, and often winter break is long over before students begin opening up and sharing their stories with me. I wanted to ensure students were given time to gain a level of comfort to be truthful in their answers to survey questions.

**A School Year, Divided**

As the school year began, I did not know how this course would evolve and change. I had an overall game plan for course design, but I did not know how my reflections, my students’ reactions, and my students’ results would cause me to change that plan. At the end of the school year, I realized that the course seemed to go through cycles of creation, implementation, reflection, and change. The
cycles’ timing closely approximated the change in the academic quarter and my student enrollment. At the beginning of each cycle, I defined a set of individual reading goals for each student. I assigned a series of stations to help them learn the concepts related to those goals, and students spent instructional time with a small group or the entire class. During each section of time, I maintained the documentation of my teacher decision-making. In each of the time periods, students took three achievement assessments and wrote their opinions and perceptions in journals, surveys, and inventories. Based upon these results, I made adjustments to class structure (e.g., number of student goals, amount of time working on goals, and the inclusion of technology).

**Data Collection**

To offer a full picture of my decision-making process in designing, implementing, and adjusting my instruction, I used a variety of qualitative and quantitative data sources. The data sources are summarized below. Figure 3.1 shows how each source connects to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2.
Qualitative data about and by the teacher. I selected qualitative data sources to offer a variety of insights into my decision-making and teaching. Validity was improved through the use of multiple data sources from my own products, other educators’ observations, and objective data sources.

Teacher journal. I wrote a teacher’s journal on a regular basis, approximately once per week during the school year. The goal of the reflective journal was to document classroom activities, reflect on lessons, reflect upon
student conversations, ask questions about instructional methods, and generally document changes and the thinking that went into the changes.

**Daily activities.** I documented daily classroom activity in a variety of ways: (a) lesson plan book, (b) calendar, (c) pacing guide, (d) spreadsheets of student stations, (e) individual learning goals, and (f) substitutes’ lesson plans. I took numerous photographs of all the learning stations, various lessons in action, as well as the classroom layout and environment. The photographs served to document daily events when I was immersed in teaching and not able to write. This allowed me to go back and reflect on the photographs and the lessons they represented. Finally, I saved copies of all learning materials. From card games to learning station directions, from foldables to notes, I kept a copy of all items used for instruction during the year. This wealth of artifacts afforded me the opportunity to revisit lessons later during my analysis.

**Observation notes and reflections.** My classroom instruction was open and available for any teacher to come in and observe my teaching for instructional ideas at almost any time. At RMS, each teacher is required to observe another teacher once a quarter and reflect on what he/she learned from the process. During the school year, two administrators and over 20 teachers visited my classroom for approximately 20 minutes each. These observations were followed by typed reflections, email communications, and verbal discussions. After gaining permission from each of the administrators and teachers who observed me to access his/her notes and reflections, I used this information to help confirm my own observations about the course and guide my understanding of what was working well. I tended to think about what was not
working in my own journals and notes; whereas, other observers tended to focus upon the positive.

**Qualitative data about the students.** Data was collected and analyzed from the five exemplar students. The purpose of this data is to show the types of student responses that factored into my teacher decision-making.

*Ivey & Broaddus (2001) “What makes students want to read in middle school classrooms” survey.* This 10-question survey can be used to discover what students enjoy about reading and what makes them want to read. The authors originally surveyed over 1700 6th grade students about their reading practices and motivations for reading. The survey consisted of open ended, short-answer questions as well as a checklist of items. Sample questions include: “Which reading activities do you enjoy most in this class?” “How do you find the books you like to read?” and “What’s a good book or story you read in this class this year?” The original article with this survey has an appendix for coding and interpreting student results.

This checklist survey was given two times during the year: at the beginning (August) and at the end (April) of the school year. This quick survey takes only 5-10 minutes to complete and was given to the entire class at the same time.

**The reading interest inventory & interest and activities inventory.** Taken from McAndrews (2008), these inventories help to define what students like, what they are interested in, and how much time they spend in literacy activities. Questions range from favorite color and music to career interests. The inventory includes a long checklist of genres and interest topics. I gave the inventories at the beginning of the year and to new students joining the
class each quarter. Together, the inventories take about 15 minutes to complete. The purpose of the inventories was to aid me in selecting reading materials for students and in helping students to select independent reading material.

**The school attitude inventory.** Taken from McAndrews (2008), I gave this inventory at the beginning of the school year as a written interview. The goal of the inventory was to help figure out general attitudes about school and academics. Example questions included “How do you feel about going to school?” “What do you like about school?” and “Tell me about reading in school.” The inventory requires more constructed responses than the previously listed inventories and generally takes about 10-15 minutes to complete. I used the inventory as a get-to-know-you activity at the beginning of the year, allowing me a sense of my students' attitudes about school.

**Student response journals.** My students kept journals as they read and responded to texts throughout the school year. These journals were sometimes paper journals where students answered questions, created charts, or made connections to the text. Other times, students shared journals online in a blog or discussion forum. Students read and reacted to each other's online journal responses. Each exemplar student created two hand-written journals with an entry for each reading day (approximately 15 entries), and they participated in numerous online discussions where the minimum requirement was one original post and two replies to other students. The purpose of using student journals in this study was to gain insight into growing student understanding of reading and to monitor what students thought about the course and the activities they completed.
**Student products.** I collected classroom assignments, projects, posters, and other items created by students during the year related to their reading activities. Students produced a variety of artifacts such as notes from mini-lessons about figurative language, posters with a “Reading Timeline” of all the books they read in a year, a mythology packet with annotated texts and group discussion notes. Products vary greatly from student to student, in terms of number, content, and quality. The student products help to illustrate student understanding and growing reading skills.

**Quantitative data sources.** Quantitative assessment data plays a large role in RTI decision-making and instruction. My students’ quantitative scores permeated my conversations, reflections, and decisions. As a result, this information was necessary in this self-study to create a full picture of what was happening with regard to my decision-making.

**STAR reading enterprise.** This standardized test is a 34-question assessment created by Renaissance Learning and given on a computer. The reliability range for grades 6-8 was .90-.91, and the median reliability for correlations with state accountability measures was .73 (Renaissance Learning, 2014). The assessment takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. Students enrolled in Reading take this assessment three times per quarter (twelve times per year). Other RMS students do not take the STAR. The assessment is used as a progress-monitoring tool for evaluating student growth and response to instruction. The test covers five domains: Word Knowledge and Skills, Comprehension Strategies and Constructing Meaning, Analyzing Literary Text, Understanding Author’s Craft, and Analyzing Argument and Evaluating Text.
Based upon student results, the program offers “Instructional Planning Reports” with recommended skills for student growth. At the beginning of each quarter, these reports helped me select which stations a student would work on for the duration of the quarter. Reports from the program include a “Diagnostic” which lists instructional reading levels, grade equivalencies, mastery of grade level skills, and percentile rank. Other reports create trend lines, graph student growth, create skill recommendations for groups or whole classes, and make predictions about proficiency on the end-of-year state test.

The STAR Reading Enterprise was the primary assessment tool used to guide instructional decisions in this reading intervention class.

**NWEA’s measures of academic progress (MAPs).** MAPs is a computerized assessment RPS uses as its national norm-referenced test as required by the State Department of Education. The test takes approximately 50 minutes to complete and features longer reading passages than the STAR Enterprise. The test is given two times per year (August and January) to all students, grades 2-8 in RPS. The district began using this test in 2005, so any student who has been enrolled in the district typically has MAPs data going back to second grade. The MAPs reading test assesses five domains as well, but for the purposes of this study and Reading, only the overall reading score was used. MAPs scores below the 40th percentile are considered when enrolling a student in Reading. In RTI parlance MAPs would be considered the “universal screener” since all children take it and helps identify students who are performing below grade-level.
**State accountability assessment in reading.** The state test is given each March in accordance with state requirements. The computerized assessment is designed to determine student proficiency on the state standards. Featuring long literary and non-fiction passages, the state assessment takes two 45 minute sessions to complete. Several months after completing the test, the school is notified if each student did not meet, met, or exceeded the grade-level expectations. Each child receives an overall scale score in Reading as well as sub-scores in Vocabulary and Comprehension. Students who fall into the “Not Met” range for two years in a row are considered for enrollment in Reading.

**Addressing the Challenges of Self-Study**

The challenges inherent in self-study have been thoroughly discussed in the literature (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Some researchers question self-studies’ lack of objectivity while others dismiss it as intense navel gazing (Reinking & Bradley, 2004). In spite of these, and other critiques, practitioner research and self-study is a growing field in educational research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). This growth is due partially to the ability of practitioner research to do something that no other method can do: offer an insider perspective of what actually happens on a daily basis in the classroom.

Conducting a study of one’s own practice is not an easy task; balancing the roles of being a teacher and a researcher is certainly difficult. As Heaton (2000) pointed out, “It is challenging to know how to manage the examination of teaching in ways that respect the practitioner and the ideas being studied while pushing at the status quo of theory and practice” (p. 18). This difficulty is borne, in part, by the constant examination of one’s practice with regard to the students’
learning and at the same time to the study at hand: being true to the theory, pushing the theory, and improving practice. In this way, teacher-researchers become change agents who simultaneously create new practices and investigate the creation of those practices. This takes a tremendous amount of learning, faith, and confidence on the part of the teacher. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) wrote that this process of practitioner inquiry is how “deep and significant changes” are manifested (p. 6).

Through my experiences, relationships, and conversations with students about their learning, insight emerges. As a practitioner-researcher, I can have daily exchanges with my students about a myriad of topics from football to vocabulary, from how to complete a task to how to get along with others. This ability to talk to students about learning and their growth furnishes another perspective and another source of solutions. Students become not only the source of practitioner-researchers’ investigated difficulties but critical partners in finding ways to deal with those problems (Heaton, 2000). In this type of inquiry, students become as integral to the process as the teacher. As my students respond to my surveys and answer probing questions about classroom procedures, they provide information that I use to transform classroom lessons. They then feel empowered and enfranchised to volunteer their own information and suggestions. Through this process, we create our educational space, and I continue to guide and study this creation.

This degree of proximity to the “participants” in the study might be considered problematic for traditional researchers who call for a certain level of distance to be maintained. Heaton (2000) and Wilhelm (2008) both prove that
intimate knowledge of classroom experiences, to which only teachers are privileged, can enrich a study and give a voice of authority that cannot be obtained by an outside observer. Gonzalez in *There’s Room for Me Here* (1997) and researchers-turned-participants such as Armstrong in *Closely Observed Children* (1983) and other researchers share this viewpoint. Both indicate that working with and studying students over a long period can make us better educators and better researchers. Reinking & Bradley (2004) even suggested that this type of research best illuminates the subtleties of instruction and allows us to see what would normally go unnoticed in the daily operation of a classroom. Armstrong (1983) contended that since most transitions for children happen slowly over time we should not use “transient conditions arranged for the benefit” of outside researchers but rather our research must be done “in context to be given significance” (p. 4). By being able to see the face and name behind the numbers, teacher-researchers bring a depth to their work that simply cannot be obtained from the outside.
CHAPTER 4

FINDING THE PATH BETWEEN RESEARCH AND EXPERIENCE

Introduction

A few days before the end of the 2011-2012 school year, I found out that I would be the Reading Specialist for RMS. No one knew exactly what this job would entail. To borrow a phrase from the superintendent of RPS, we were building the plane while flying it. From these confused and vague beginnings, I had to create a course that would help struggling below-grade-level readers gain reading strategies and improve their reading achievement. I knew that RTI instruction ideally focused on differentiation and giving each child what he or she needed, but I had very few secondary models to follow. RTI research has overwhelmingly focused on elementary interventions (Allington, 2013). I wondered how this process would look at the middle school level.

The RTI district team for RPS had searched nationwide for example schedules and courses in other districts that implemented RTI at the middle school and high school levels. Our research yielded minimal results; only a few videos from the RTI Action Network (e.g. http://rtinetwork.org/professional/videos/virtualvisits) discussed scheduling or courses. Without models to follow, I had to work with the RMS administration to make a plan for scheduling. We relied heavily on our own understanding of the schedule, what we believed would work in our building, and what research we hoped would apply to our level. With a dearth of age-specific research or models, we had few other options.
The format, content, and structure of the courses themselves were solely my responsibility. The planning process, and in fact the entire academic year, was going to be a constant negotiation as I reconciled applicable research with my own professional experiences in the classroom. As I combined advice from various authors, I struggled and questioned my path. By the end of the year, after much hammering, the give and take of research and practice created an alloy stronger than either one would have alone.

**Making a Plan**

**Naming the course and scheduling classes.** After a brief conversation with my principal, we decided to simply name my course *Reading*. Without a cutesy name to explain or an acronym to decipher, we hoped it would be obvious to anyone who looked at the schedule just what the class was about.

Then we decided the classes would be taught during the elective block for each grade, and the class would replace one elective course for the student. This was not an easy decision. An extra block of reading in a student’s day meant that something else had to be taken away. In a middle school philosophy, students are supposed to explore options and discover what they like and where they excel (National Middle School Association, 2003). Taking away an elective contradicted this philosophy. Whether to take away electives for intervention classes was part of an on-going conversation in the district RTI committee for over two years. In the end, those who believed that reading and RTI courses trumped all choice compromised with those of us who believed that choice must be preserved. The compromise to allow one elective choice and one prescribed block of reading intervention was one I could support.
At RMS students follow two alternating schedules of five classes each, these schedules are called A Day and B Day. I would teach a 72-minute block with 12 students on A Days for each grade and a 72-minute block with 12 different students on B Days for each grade. At first we considered having the A Day focus on certain areas of reading (e.g., fluency) and B Day focus on a different area (e.g., comprehension), in which case we would enroll students in the course that best met their needs. However, students might need Band on A Day and Fluency on A Day as well. This would not preserve the spirit of the compromise reached by the RTI committee.

The schedule that would give us the most flexibility, but the least differentiated class-level grouping, was to offer the same course both days so students could be enrolled in either one. Therefore, students had an opportunity to take any elective on the opposite day. Consideration for student motivation was key in this decision because we did not want students to believe they lacked any choice in their schedule or to believe that Reading was a punishment.

Overall, this compromise has worked, especially for sixth graders who did not realize that we removed any of their elective courses. Students like Jillian and Katherine continued to be enrolled in Band, while Tabitha and Alicia took Foods, Fashions, and Careers. For me, providing students with autonomy, choice, and positive experiences in their school day has always been worthwhile in helping them to be motivated when they arrive to my class.

**Dividing the block.** Now that I had a schedule, I had to decide how students would spend their 72-minutes in class. I needed models for dividing
the time in class to offer various types of literacy activities and incorporate all components of “effective literacy instruction” (Reutzel, 2007, p. 313)

**Time.** First I turned to Allen and Gonzalez (1997), where I found a sample middle school schedule for a remedial reading class that used the workshop model. In this study, Gonzalez was the classroom teacher who had the advantage of seeing her students daily in a 90-minute block. Mondays and Fridays were devoted to independent literacy and reading exploration while the other three days of the week included a variety of small-group and whole-class reading and writing activities. This schedule was a start, and it started me thinking about how to designate chunks of time to different types of instruction. Inspired to make sure that my students were spending time alone, time with partners or groups, and time with the entire class, I sought out other sources for models.

Reutzel’s (2007) chapter “Organizing Effective Literacy Instruction” mainly discussed a 120-minute literacy block for elementary students, but some ideas he offered about time and grouping could be applied to my class. Reutzel began by suggesting that the block be divided into chunks of time for literacy topics such as word work, comprehension, and fluency. This suggestion echoed Allen & Gonzalez (1997) and others who used time management to ensure all types of instruction and all topics were adequately covered.

**Centers or stations.** After reading Reutzel (2007), I considered transferring the idea of elementary centers to my middle school class as a way to group students and differentiate. When I imagined how twelve different students would practice twelve different strategies at the same time, I could not think of another way to accomplish it. I looked for examples of middle school literacy
centers or stations, but nothing surfaced from academic sources. Aside from a few (very non-academic) teacher blogs, I came up with absolutely nothing beyond about the fourth or fifth grade, and even sources about those grade levels were rare.

Most teachers using centers seemed to be teaching in early elementary classrooms. Nevertheless, the ability to have students work on different goals was going to help me attend to the requirements of RTI while providing the students with variety, choice, and structure. My goal was to support students’ autonomy and help them take a step toward being more self-determined.

Using centers in a middle school class was a break from the way teaching is typically done at this level. No one I knew personally was teaching this way. The term center brought up images of kindergarteners matching letters on seasonally thematic cards and making ladybug cutouts to count dots in their math center. If the available materials on websites like Teachers Pay Teachers and from popular manufacturers were any indication, my images were not far from reality.

The term station used by Diller (2005) is defined as “an area within the classroom where students work alone or interact with one another, using instructional materials to explore and expand their literacy” (p. 3). This definition represented a closer approximation of what I wanted my students to accomplish. These stations would be an integral part of my students’ learning and would be differentiated for various needs and levels. Nevertheless, I wondered if I could make the stations developmentally appropriate. Diller’s photographs of third graders contrasted sharply with my mental image of the eighth graders who
would soon inhabit my room. In this moment I swallowed my teaching unknowns and “what ifs” to embrace the advice of an expert. Without a more viable option, I put stations into my plans and hoped I could figure out how to make them work with older students.

**Grouping.** I decided that small-group instruction should not exceed 5-6 students at a time. If six students were in small-group instruction, the other half of the students would have to be at stations working independently. I decided to divide the block in half, but I knew from classroom experience that I had to allot time for transitions between stations, housekeeping, and instructions. Every day in the classroom, minutes are needed for attendance, transitional movement, cleaning up, and closure, so one of the biggest mistakes to avoid was scheduling 72 minutes of instruction. In my early years of teaching, I often made this mistake and I became frustrated about running out of time. I decided to divide my class into 30 minutes for stations, 30 minutes for small-group reading instruction, and the remaining 12 minutes became a sponge for vocabulary building games and the aforementioned logistics. The decision to focus on vocabulary building during the last 12-minute part of the block came from RMS’s and RPS’s focus on improving vocabulary at all grade levels and in all courses.

Within the 30 minutes for stations, I decided each student would have 3 stations to visit for 10 minutes each.
At this point, I believed that students needed variety, movement, and short activities improve engagement (Diller, 2005). One of my biggest concerns was that students would become bored in their stations; Pekrun (2002) had linked boredom to achievement, motivation, and learning strategies. If students were going to be engaged in the activities enough to learn and affect their achievement, I had to keep them interested. I thought that a quick pace would not afford them time to be bored.

I would still need to decide which reading strategies each student required, but at least I had a basic time structure and a sense of the flow of the class period. As Figure 4.1 shows, I was fully engaged instructing a set of students at all times. This schedule did not allow any time to support students individually. At this point in my planning, the lack of teacher support for students in stations concerned me a little. Reutzel (2007) and other elementary sources about stations (Diller, 2005), did not have teacher support in stations either. Moreover,
according to Diller (2005) work in stations should be completed independently, and it was simply further practice of strategies already taught in a class. Based on this reading, I decided not to give credence to my concerns.

Perhaps I would not allow myself to trust my teacher instincts in this moment because what I was embarking on was too far beyond my experiences and outside my comfort zone. In this moment before the start of the school year, I made a very conscious decision to trust the experts. This tension between my internal teacher voice and the research I was trusting for advice would continue through the year.

**Setting up the room.** I needed to devote areas of my room to the different types of literacy instruction that would occur (Gambrell, 1996). There had to be areas for whole-group instruction, small-group reading with the teacher, independent reading, and stations. I poured over images in Diller (2005) and trolled the Internet for pictures of classrooms set up with stations. No one I knew was using literacy stations in their room, so I did not have any classrooms to visit or teachers to ask. My current furniture had to be repurposed, moved, and removed.

Blessed with thirty lecture-style desks set up in six neat rows of five, my first resolution was to have fifteen of them removed. I needed the space; more importantly, lectures were not part of my plan. While I really wanted larger desks, since mine were barely large enough for a notebook, nothing else was available in storage. I was used to ideals crashing into the daily reality of “make do,” so fifteen lecture-style desks it was!
I began creating my reading nook. Upon the advice of Gambrell (1996), I devoted a large space in my room to a classroom library. I wanted this room to be welcoming, warm, and positive (McMahon, et al., 2009). I wanted the space to bring students in and invite them to learn. I hoped the comfortable seating and the relaxed atmosphere would communicate a non-threatening approach to an academic area where these students had previously only faced failure. If I was going to promote self-determination through relatedness, I had to communicate my values for students through everything, even the space around us.

Figure 4.2. (Left Photo) Comfortable seating, pillows and genre posters. Bookshelf with tubs for station materials and reference books. (Right Photo) Classroom library bookshelves organized by genre and series.

The books in the small bookcase were organized by genre, with baskets devoted to topics such as “Horror” and “Romance” or creative basket labels such
as “Freaky Future” for dystopian romances and “Ms. M & M’s Favorites.” Books on the larger bookcase were organized by series or general interest level. The larger bookcase housed our reference books. Inside of the library, I placed a third bookshelf with plastic tubs for station materials. Framed with a couch, rocking chair, and pillows this area was comfortable, organized, colorful, and inviting.

The entire perimeter of my room became locations for stations. The back wall was a towering floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall bulletin board. By placing tables and seating strategically near the wall, I created station areas. I had two student computers that also served as stations. I even used the wall under my chalkboard and the front of the heating/air-conditioning unit to set up station areas with laminated poster-sized graphic organizers and baskets of books. As Diller (2005) recommended I used every available space for learning.

![Figure 4.3. Classroom back wall with station headings, before the start of the school year.](image-url)
In the center of the room, I created two more distinct areas. First, I used student desks to create a large double-row U facing the projector screen; this area was for whole-class instruction. Although I did not allot a specific time for independent reading or much whole-group instruction in my rotation plan, this would happen on days when students did not do stations, such as days with a substitute, testing days, or days when they learned new strategies. I needed a whole-group place for directions, logistics, and our end-of-block vocabulary activities.

*Figure 4.4. Classroom diagram with distinct instructional zones.*

In the front of the room, I placed a round table adjacent to my teaching desk. This round table with five chairs was going to be for our small-group reading time. I had seen kidney tables in pictures of elementary classrooms for small-group work, but that formation communicated that the teacher was the
center of the discussion. I wanted our small-group time to be a collaborative discussion where I presented strategies and students talked through the short story using those strategies. I had the advantage of already having two round tables in my room. My classroom set-up was a combination of philosophy, function, and pragmatism.

My use of space contrasted sharply with the classrooms surrounding mine. As teachers walked by in the hallway, several came into my room just to see what it looked like. Word was spreading around the building: my room looked different, and people were curious. One colleague remarked, “the room itself has become another teacher” (post-observation notes 8/2012). A floor plan with designated areas for different types of instruction was a huge departure in my building. People’s curiosity about the room was indicative of how different this year would be. The academic year had not begun and my colleagues were already looking for what was successful or not. In many ways, this new program and my classroom were conspicuous; I was acutely aware of the eyes upon the program.

**Suspension of planning.** At this point, before the students took their first reading assessment, I had not determined the specific content of the stations. The boxes were ready for station materials, and the titles “Word Work” and “Non-Fiction” were on the wall, but no materials sat beneath those posters. If I created content and selected materials before assessing the students, I ran the risk of fitting students into the types of stations I had created, which would only be perpetuating the type of education they had been receiving for years. I relied on my teacher experience and years of analyzing RMS’s Measures of Academic Progress (MAPs) and State Accountability data to predict that some students in
my class were going to need vocabulary help, some would need nonfiction strategies, and other very broad categories of reading instruction.

The RTI research supported differentiated instruction and encouraged assessment followed by curricular decisions (Burns, 2010; Fuchs et al., 2008). In many ways, suspending these decisions filled me with trepidation because I knew a large amount of work was going to be required quickly to create all the stations once the students had been assessed. My teacher experience and instincts cried out for preparation and planning. My sense of self-preservation struggled to put off until tomorrow what could be done today. Faced with this tension, I again chose to follow the research, and I suspended planning the stations. It may have been the right choice in order to put students’ needs first, but it was incredibly difficult at the time.

More different than the same. About a week before school was scheduled to begin, it was time to update what I call the *syllabus*, but what is in reality a two-page handout with course objectives, rules, procedures, materials, and grading policies. This annual task was one I had adequately perfected over time. I took out my tried and true handout, and soon discovered that I needed to completely revamp the syllabus. I could not possibly list course objectives when every student would be working on different things; moreover, I had not defined what the objectives would be. Nothing was the same inside this new reality of RTI and differentiated instruction. My experience and prior work only partially applied. I seemed to take a mental sigh, as I realized that even the simple was going to be a complex negotiation this year.
Looking further down the syllabus at the grading policy, I realized that grading this class would potentially be a nightmare. I had followed RMS’s policy of only grading summative assessments for the last six years, but now I would have certain students doing a set of lessons, quizzes, and projects, while other students did completely different ones. I had not decided whether to have summative assessments, so I wondered what I would be grading. I was overwhelmed with all that I did not know or understand.

I returned to the administrator’s office again where we decided that this class would not be graded, but recorded as pass/fail. This was for several reasons:

- A grade in the class might be misleading for both parents and students. For example, if a 8th grade student earned an A in Reading for demonstrating proficiency in all of her work, which was at a 4th grade level, then the A might communicate to parents that the child had a greater level of proficiency than was accurate. As a result, the parent or child might not understand the need to continue in Reading. We wanted our messages to be clear, meaningful, and accurate; traditional grades would actually muddy our message.

- The focus of Reading would be improvement in reading achievement. Traditional grading evaluates hitting prescribed expectations by a certain date. The course would not prescribe a standard curriculum nor expect everyone to achieve at the same level or grow at the same rate. Traditional grading would not have been a good fit for a growth-oriented class.
• Grades can be very demotivating, and this course was supposed to help students become motivated readers. Kohn (1993) argued that grades are often used a punishment or a reward which destroy potential learning because grades are ineffective motivators. This is shown both in the research (Deci, 1996; Kohn, 1993; Pink, 2009) and by the track record of my students who had spent years earning Ds and Fs. “Students whose grades don’t measure up often see themselves as failures and give up trying to learn” (Pink, 2009, p. 188). If I wanted my students to focus on growth, improvement, and learning, then grades had to disappear from our conversation.

• From a purely pragmatic standpoint, each student would be learning different strategies and completing different activities. If I were to grade the work, entering grades into the electronic grade book would be impossible. The grade book program is set up to have all students complete the same assignment on the same due date.

• As a final consideration, the Special Education department had set a precedent of offering alternative curriculum courses pass/fail. This gave us some security in how to justify our decision to go grade-less to the outside world.

On the syllabus, I wrote:

Each student will set a goal for improving reading skills and strategies as measured on the STAR Enterprise test and other assessments. If you work hard, practice reading skills, improve your score, and grow during the quarter you will receive a passing grade. Failing grades will be earned if
you do not complete activities, do not improve your skills, and don’t meet your goal.

I did not realize it at the time, but this plan for determining a pass/fail grade would not pan out. The use of assessment data for goal setting and measuring student growth turned out to be far more complex than a simple Met or Not Met.

**Communicating the Plan**

The students were assigned workstations, but how were they supposed to know where to go or what to do upon entering class? Managing the station rotations would take detailed planning and thought. Elementary examples of organizing centers abound; middle school examples do not. While moving names glued to clothespins works when a teacher has 19 students, it would be a Herculean task for me to do daily (or every other day) for approximately 75 students. My purpose was different from an elementary teacher; I wanted each student to practice an individualized and limited list of stations. I was faced, yet again, with trying to figure out how to make the available models fit my practice.

I decided that each student would have his/her stations printed on cards; the cards would be placed in a library pocket labeled with the student’s name. In other words, the names stayed in one place, and I switched the cards at regular intervals based on new assessments. I decided to assign the stations for longer periods of time than elementary teachers would (originally I thought about 3 weeks, but it turned out to be for a full 9-week quarter). My goal was to promote growth through repetition, lower cognitive load through limiting new procedures, and self-determination by allowing students to achieve independence in their strategies. On the teacher side, this method reduced my cognitive load as well. I
was able to devote my mental energy to differentiation in small-groups and supporting students rather than thinking about station rotations. This communication system put the responsibility on students for knowing what to do each day. They independently navigated the system, practiced their strategies, and grew their autonomy. The system has worked so well, that I still use it to communicate with students.

Students were given two different colored index cards in their name pockets. Each card had six items, one for each of the 10 minutes of class. The examples below are Jillian and George’s pink cards from the first quarter. The stations listed there, are further described in Appendix C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jillian</th>
<th>Pink</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Computer Figurative Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Comparison Map</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. iPad Idioms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Guided Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Guided Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Guided Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>George</th>
<th>Pink</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Guided Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Guided Reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. iPad Figurative Language</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Fact and Opinion Sort</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cups of Vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Non-Fiction Prediction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.5* Jillian’s and George’s stations for quarter 1.

The Internal Critic.
I would be directly engaged in teaching students every minute of the block. I was concerned about classroom management, and I worried that the students in stations would not have enough supervision. My internal teacher voice warned that engaging activities would not be enough; it begged for more structure and more teacher guidance. Again, I turned to Diller (2005) for advice, and I decided to limit stations to 10 minutes each. This quick pace would hopefully help prevent boredom. My internal critic worried about talkers and time-wasters, so I decided I would only schedule one student at a station at a time. I hoped by keeping everyone at a different station, I spread students out around the room to help prevent unnecessary talking and hopefully increase focus.

My classroom was as prepared as possible considering I did not know what types of stations or lessons to design. I confessed in my journal “I don’t have a curriculum. I don’t have a plan past day one!” (8/8/12) I knew I would be having the students do small-group reading and stations, but of course the content was still undetermined. This was no small source of stress. Best practices demanded that I have a well thought out and articulated curriculum (Reutzel, 2007); I did not. I was going against the advice of many researchers who called for clear objectives, structured goals, and teaching with the end in mind. I was instead favoring researchers who promoted tailored, differentiated learning where the child’s needs dictated the path. I was favoring researchers who promoted student choice over teacher control. While I felt as if I could stand in that truth, I had an internal monologue of warnings and critiques borne on the back of years of teaching experience that did not fit this new model. Taking a new path was scary and enthralling at the same time. I was taking a tremendous leap of faith and
hoping that focusing on student engagement would get the students where they needed to go.

I feared I was setting myself up for failure by not having a curriculum plan, but I could not press the pause button since the school year was beginning in a matter of days. I could not respond to student needs if I had already decided what they needed before meeting them. Each minute of the day, I was creating materials that I hoped would be useful. I sent off graphic organizers to the printer and made game cards for vocabulary. I bought games about affixes, and I searched the Internet for ideas about syllables and Greek roots. “I just feel like I am gathering nuggets of lessons, ideas, charts, and activities much like a squirrel gathers nuts. I don’t know what I will need or how much, but I know I need nuts—and lots of them! As I look at my blank plan book, I just hope I can fill it and my students will benefit” (Journal, 8/14/12).

Reflecting One Year Later

The tension I felt those first days of planning was greater than any I had previously experienced in my teaching career. I was faced with an under-researched mandate in the form of Middle School RTI paired with elementary teaching model, albeit a self-selected one. I was trying to enact a new (to me) approach to learning by putting self-determination and individualized lessons first. Every day, I was attempting to find a balance between what my teaching experience told me to do and what the research suggested.

In those first days, I repeatedly trusted the research when my gut would have been right: the students did need more feedback than the schedule allowed me to give. Conversely, I listened to my internal critic when the research would
have served me better: engaging lessons would make classroom management a non-issue.

A year later, I wonder why I made those choices. Although I did not recognize it then, in many ways I was a first-year teacher again. I was enacting my learning and my theoretical models but without the real classroom experience to guide me about where to place emphasis at any given time. I thought that my classroom experience of teaching language arts and social studies for eight years qualified me to make these choices and strike this balance. What I envisioned as a new teaching position or new lessons was actually an entirely new reality.

Placing students and their learning before a curriculum, putting a premium on student choice and autonomy, and finding a new path of teaching with motivation in mind, created something wholly new and different so my experience only partially applied. I was walking a new path, and like all explorers I made several more missteps before I found my way.
CHAPTER 5

WALKING THE PATH WITH AN INCOMPLETE MAP

The First Days

On the first day of school I was buzzing inside. I had prepared the rules, the class format, and the room itself. I was excited, anticipating how the year would go. In my journal I wondered, “How will they respond? Can I make relationships with these kids the way I have in the past? Can I collect all the data?” (8/13/12). These questions revealed my doubts about my abilities as a teacher and a researcher. I wondered whether I could hold onto the tenuous balance I had struck between the research and my experience.

I felt an overwhelming need to sell the class to my students. I believed from the beginning that they would resist this class and their placement in it. After all, this class was taking the place of one of their elective courses, and my understanding of choice and self-determination theory led me to believe that taking away their choice would engender feelings of resentment and resistance (Deci, 1996). I assumed that they would not want to be in Reading, so I set out to convince them this was a worthwhile class.

I began on the first day by discussing the syllabus. I particularly focused on the “What are we going to learn” and “How will we be graded” sections. I told students on the syllabus, “My goal is to help each of you become a better reader, and I will try every day to have interesting and engaging activities for you to do which will help you grow. If you come every day ready to work hard and learn, I
have no doubt that you will grow during the quarter” (See Appendix B for the full syllabus).

On that first day, I used a sports analogy. I told the students that to improve at something we must practice. We must try hundreds of times before we become good at throwing free throws, and we have to read hundreds of things before we become good at reading. We cannot go out onto the basketball court at a game without having gone to practice, and we cannot fail to practice reading then expect to do well in Language Arts or to understand what we read. I wanted to place a strong emphasis on the importance of effort and practice to improve, not on ability or intelligence.

This analogy blended my thinking about motivation and cognition. I wanted students to understand that purposeful and self-determined effort could make the difference in their performance (Bandura, 2001; Deci, 1996; Shell et al., 2010). I hoped they were listening. I certainly hoped they were “buying what I am selling” (Journal, 8/13/12). I did not recognize that the advice applied to me as well, for I needed to practice my new way of teaching. Doing something wholly different put me in the role of a novice, just like my students.

**So Much Depends Upon the STARs**

On the second class meeting, my students went with me to the computer lab to take their first STAR Enterprise assessment. The test was supposed to take fifteen minutes; we were in the lab for over an hour. First students had to learn how to log onto the computers, find the test website, log on to the test, change passwords, and listen to lengthy standardized instructions read aloud. After the tests were complete, I was excited to pull the data, to look at the instructional
planning reports, and find out just what my students knew about reading. I printed hundreds of pages of reports, and I was overwhelmed by two thoughts: 1. my students are at a much lower reading level than I ever imagined, 2. these reports are huge, and I have to figure out how to use them.

I began with the “Student Instructional Planning Report” and “Student Diagnostic Report” for each child. The diagnostic report listed a scale score, percentile rank, a grade equivalent, and a breakdown of domain mastery (see Appendix D for a copy of Alicia’s first diagnostic and instructional planning reports as examples). This report helped me understand for the first time the tremendous deficit my students needed to overcome. The average grade equivalency for the students in my classes was shocking: 6th grade, 4.0 GE; 7th grade 4.5 GE; 8th grade 4.8 GE. If these initial scores were accurate, and I had no reason to believe otherwise, I was faced with the realization that the typical below-level reader at RMS was entering sixth grade about two grade levels below and only gaining eight months of achievement after two years of instruction. The plateau had to be faced.

The scale scores and grade equivalencies helped me decide how to group students for our small-group instruction rotation. I placed students into groups with the four to five other students who had the most similar scores. Originally, I had hoped for only two groups in each class, but many of my classes ended up with enrollments of 14 and not 12 as originally planned. Seven was simply too large for small-group work; as a result, all but two classes ended up with three groups. This new plan allowed for 20 minutes of small-group work and 40
minutes for stations. Instead of the original plan created just a week before, the new plan looked more like this:

![Diagram of modified time allotment for three groups.]

*Figure 5.1: Modified time allotment for three groups.*

This entire plan looked shaky to me. I worried about students only getting 20 minutes of time with me and 40 minutes of independent work. I worried about so many students in stations at the same time. I wondered in my journal, “How on Earth are nine middle schoolers going to stay on task and focused for 40 minutes?” (9/3/12). I hoped that the games, activities, and independent lessons would be engaging enough to hold their attention. I hoped that changing places and tasks every 10 minutes would stave off boredom. In spite of my trepidation, I
forged ahead with my plan. I believed I had little choice considering we were on our fourth day of school.

I assigned the student groups in the STAR program based upon student scale scores, and I was able to print instructional planning reports for each group. These group reports listed five possible goals in each of the five domains that all the students in the group needed to work on. Obviously, a group could not focus on 25 different goals, and I could not even begin to teach 25 different goals. I had to narrow my focus for small-group time, especially with only twenty minutes for instruction. I selected goals that I knew from experience to be particularly difficult for students. For example, one group worked on recognizing and understanding the ways that the setting of a story affects the plot, while another group examined the elements of Greek mythology and the repeating themes in literature. These goals could not be practiced independently in stations, so I used them in guided reading.

The instructional planning reports worked the same way as the group reports, five domains with five goals each. Since each student was going to need four stations per card (eight stations total), I wanted their goals to hit a broad range of strategies that could be practiced independently.

During the first quarter, each student was assigned eight of the twenty-three stations (listed with descriptions in Appendix C). The combination of stations was unique to each student and was based on the goals listed in the planning report. For example, Jillian’s report suggested “Recognize and explain the meanings of common idioms (e.g. sold like hotcakes) in grade appropriate prose and poetry (reading level 6.5-8.1)...” so I assigned her the iPad Idioms
station. This station required her to play any game I had placed in the Idioms group on the iPad.

Her report suggested “Explain similarities and differences (e.g. purpose, organization, main ideas) between texts on the same topic,” so she was assigned the Comparison Map station. At this station, students were given a box of short non-fiction books on a variety of topics such as cooking, animals, cars, hunting, and crafts. They had to select two books on comparable topics (e.g., *Cooking the Spanish Way* and *Cooking the Italian Way*). Then using a poster-sized laminated graphic organizer and a dry-erase marker, the student had to find areas of comparison (use of rice, types of spices) in the books and describe them on the organizer.

As I read the reports, I simultaneously selected goals, assigned stations, and designed stations. I would select a goal off the instructional planning report. Then I would see if it matched a station I had created for someone else or if I needed to create a new station. By far the most assigned station was “Non-Fiction Prediction.” I assigned twenty-six of my seventy-two students to the station which required students to preview a passage, predict words that might appear in the passage, read, and then confirm predictions. Finally students used key words, including those predicted, to write a summary of the passage.
In the Non-Fiction Prediction station, students selected one *Zoobooks* magazine on an animal that interested them. The magazines are written at a 4.0-5.2 reading level but appeal to the interest level of middle school students. Since my own reading experience in middle school rarely included non-fiction, I was surprised to find that students frequently reported that *Zoobooks* were their favorite thing to read.

I was providing choices, leveled materials, and enjoyable materials all in the same station. This combination seemed like an ideal blending of my goals, and I was really pleased with my effort. I hoped that stations like this one would help students practice essential strategies.
As I assigned the stations, the entire class was put into a spreadsheet so I could track where each student was during any given 10-minute increment of the class. I could scan horizontally to understand a student’s rotation that day (e.g., first guided reading, then the computer, comparison map, and iPad). I could examine a column and ensure only three students were assigned a computer or iPad at any given time. The entire process of selecting goals, creating the stations, assigning stations, creating the spreadsheet, and creating the printed cards so students knew where to go was completed in just one weekend.

While this process feels very prescribed and not at all respectful of student choice, I strove to offer choice within the stations. For example, a student assigned Figurative Language on the computer could select among any of the 17 games linked in the Figurative Language folder on my webpage. A student who was supposed to use the Zoobooks to write a summary could select any animal and any page. Students in other stations could choose from a variety of matching games or choose the category of vocabulary words.

While this type of scheduling was not a perfect arrangement, it represents a balancing act between respecting self-determination research and my efforts to assure that students are practicing the strategies they truly need to learn. Of course, I felt a tinge of guilt about the compromise I was making. I knew I was being less supportive of student self-determination and autonomy than of their explicit strategy building. I hoped I could continue to tweak this balance and introduce more autonomy as the year progressed. I understood that autonomy needed to be scaffolded, but I felt guilty nonetheless.
I had originally planned on doing many other diagnostic assessments besides the STAR test including decoding, fluency, and phonemic awareness. As I confessed in my journal, “but the large number of goals and areas of need from STAR make me reluctant to find out more. I am in a hard place--assess more and have more goals or find out how we do with just a few” (8/20/12). A part of me wanted to be the ultimate reading teacher; I wanted to attend to all the research simultaneously and attend to all students’ reading needs. I reminded myself, “so slow to go fast” and left other assessments for another time (8/20/12). I had to respect my own limits of attending to too many goals at the same time, and my students’ limits to the number of strategies they could learn.

**Student Goal Setting**

On the following Tuesday, I gave the students a “Goal Setting Sheet.” On the sheet, students filled in their scale score from STAR and made a goal of increasing their scale score by 2 points in three weeks (the suggested level of growth that 50% of students met in the same time period according to STAR). I wondered whether this was an appropriate goal for my students. My students obviously had not been growing as fast as their peers in the past, so maybe the growth goal was too high to be realistic. Conversely, because they were receiving targeted interventions, they could potentially grow faster than predicted and the goal was too low. Without knowing how testing would pan out at the local level, I had to simply go with the recommended goal. This was yet another moment when I thought, “I don’t know the answer, but else what can I do?” (Journal, 9/3/12).
Then students filled a section of their goal sheet that said, “To do this I will work on the following skills during ‘Station Time’” and they listed their stations. Next, they wrote that they would work on “Guided Reading,” “Vocabulary,” and “Figurative Language” with me since those were broad categories I knew I would include in my small-group instruction, and I still did not have more specific goals. Finally, the form concluded with a goal statement, “I know that I have to practice and work hard to get better. To help myself focus, I promise to do the following things:” Students then listed two promises. Alicia promised to “get to stations right away,” while Jillian promised to “study” and “pay attention.” Although this was the infancy of goal setting, I knew that this type of exercise would help students focus and achieve. I knew that the language emphasizing work and effort had to become part of how we talked in class. It had to become part of how we thought about reading if these students were going to see success and grow their self-competence.

**A Small Model and a Scarcity of Supplies**

In the next few days, I had to set goals, make objectives, find books or other materials, and make plans, fast! I took a few days to teach and practice the stations, but by the second week I needed to start our small-group instruction.

With sixteen small-groups meeting during each two day time period, I knew that finding stories, setting goals, and selecting strategies for each small-group was going to be a huge undertaking. The elementary model I was using assumed a classroom of approximately 20 children and three to four groups. I was struggling to put a first-grade-sized sweater on a middle schooler, but at this
point in the school year I believed that I could still make it fit with enough stretching.

Faced with the constant onslaught of eight preparations per day, I confessed, “I begin to understand the allure of a boxed program. This is an incredibly difficult and complex job. The planning could easily overwhelm. To take my teaching to the next level, we must become more direct and focused. It all comes down to my preparation for guided reading…. This week I step up my game”(9/3/12).

I took on a can-do attitude; I was heavily invested in this model in terms of mental capital and physical work. I was intent upon making the sweater fit. Because I was consumed with self-preservation, I could not see that the model could not simply be transferred to middle school. I recognized the stress and the enormity of the job, but I did not understand all of the elements stacked against success. I thought that work ethic could overcome the roadblocks.

I was so narrowly focused on the daily grind that I thought my biggest obstacle to making small-group reading work was a lack of reading materials. In a class entitled Reading, not having anything to read is a problem. I had to seek assistance in gaining materials. I knew I could not purchase items, so I sought out the advice of the assistant principal. She suggested we go looking for materials in the building, and that was the beginning of my closet spelunking adventures. In this process, we discovered forgotten novels, work-texts “For Struggling Readers” that accompanied our grade-level basal readers, and even board games left over from a defunct program. These cobbled together supplies would have to become my materials.
I could not simply claim these materials; using these seemingly abandoned items required gaining permission from the departments and grade levels to whom they had originally belonged. By sending out permission seeking emails, teachers gave permission to use many of the items we found, but several novels and one grade-level of the work-texts were reclaimed. I could have easily given in at this moment and succumbed to all that was working against me: too many preparations, a paucity of materials, a short timeline, an untested-at-this-level model, a new focus on growth and self-determination, and a new RTI system. I was working on the fringes of my school’s culture and programming. At the time, I did not have the mental energy to devote to this level of reflection and critique. I was so engrossed in simply figuring out how to make it all work that I was unaware that the odds were stacked against my success and my students’ success. I marched forward.

**Starting Slowly**

In my plan book, I originally allotted one day for teaching the games and stations in my classroom, but instead I took four. After the first day, I admitted, “I am not naive enough to believe that they actually know what they are doing. We may have to reteach the centers on Wednesday” (Journal, 8/20/12). It was only the first day after assessments, and I was already adjusting my instruction as I realized that students needed more guidance.

Never having had learning stations before, I thought students just needed a little introduction, modeling of how to complete the station, and guided practice. I did not realize the students needed continuing support; after all,
stations were touted as a way for students to engage in independent practice. Later, I would discover just how wrong this assumption was.

Before beginning a full rotation, I led whole-group guided practice of selected stations. The students seemed to understand because they could answer questions about what to do. I believed we had followed all the recommendations about successfully introducing stations. After two days of learning stations and two more practicing them, we had to move on and actually enact the plan.

I was still hesitant about leaving this phase of modeling and guided practice behind us, but I saw the days ticking by on the calendar. I worried that I was losing instructional time. At the time, I did not recognize that explaining the stations was instruction. Teaching procedures and strategies but not teaching so-called real content was new to me. I believed that it was “taking forever to get started. I am afraid I might lose the students before I even get them” (9/3/12).

**Quiet Does Not Mean Good**

When I talked with my colleagues at RMS about what I was doing with stations, their questions and concerns seemed to revolve around classroom management. They vocalized my internal fears. I was worried that students would be off task, uncooperative, and sneaky. I was worried they would be talkative, loud, or disruptive so the students in guided reading could not focus.

I turned to Diller (2005) again. She advised having clear directions for how students in stations should behave while the teacher is engaged in guided reading with a group. I had made the sign about how to behave during stations, and I had taught the rules during our first days of station instruction. The result was nothing short of magical. Students were quiet. They were located at their
station. They were not disrupting the guided reading students or me. They appeared to be working most of the time.

Nevertheless, I wondered if effective learning was taking place. I was engaged with my small groups at the round table in the front of the room, but when I glanced around at students in stations, I felt a tinge of unease. Were the students actually engaged? Were they actually completing their card games? Were they using the keys in the card games to check their work or “cheat?” I had no way of confirming or disconfirming this internal voice. It was not that I lacked confidence in my students or their intentions; I simply had no evidence of their work. I could not understand their needs without ever observing or assisting them. I could not assess or conference individually with my students, check their progress in their games, or ask them if they understood their mistakes. My feedback to my students was sorely lacking as a result. I was beginning to understand why elementary schools had 100 minutes to pull off this type of differentiated rotation; I did not have enough time to support everyone in all the ways necessary.

Observers in my classroom believed the students were engaged. One wrote, “Your students are highly engaged and have so many different activities to work independently as you work with small groups” (post-observation email, 8/21/12). I could not confirm any of these observations for myself because I was stuck at the round table. I wished for a para-educator to circulate and help students, but I was going to have to problem-solve this alone.

“Finally, I feel like the centers are okay or ‘good’ but not great. I need students to bring passion and effort to the activities--how? Computers and [the]
iPad are the most engaging, but I only have 2 computers and 1 iPad. That’s 3 engaged kids and I have to occupy 9!” (9/5/12). In this reflection, I unintentionally revealed the problem with the stations: I was “occupying” students so I could teach small groups. From the beginning I worried about keeping everyone quiet, moving them around to prevent boredom, and keeping them engaged. Consciously I was trying to have hands-on purposeful practice that was linked to individual goals. My problem was that subconsciously I had equated busy with engaged and I was using stations to keep students busy so I could teach others. If I was going to inspire my students’ mental and emotional engagement, and if they were going to perceive their work as valuable, some major changes had to occur. I reflected and read more about stations, and I hoped the solution would present itself soon. Weeks would pass before I put these thoughts into action.

**STAR Scores and Student Feedback**

By September 19th, we had been in school for five weeks. We had taken our second STAR test, and the results were nothing short of shocking. Students were supposed to grow by approximately 2 scale score points per week (6 points in three weeks) according to projections by the STAR test, but the average change was +45 scale score points (approximately 4 percentile points). Perhaps these changes would have been a cause for celebration, but within these averages were individual students who had dropped double and triple digits and others who had gained the same (e.g., Alicia, -25; George +62; Katherine +123; Jillian +54). Students did not forget what they knew about reading, yet many of their scores
showed a decline. Conversely, I could not believe that a student could gain a full grade level in just three weeks. Something was amiss in the scores.

Yet again, I went to the assistant principal to try to decide what had happened and hoping we could talk through these very strange data results. I had so many questions racing through my mind. I questioned the validity of the scores. I wondered if one score were more accurate or another represented an outlier. I could not know without more test scores. I was supposed to decide whether a student would pass or fail my course by meeting his/her goal, but the scores seemed to be unstable. I had to keep using the testing program since it was my progress-monitoring tool, and it was a large part of our RTI plan. I hoped that a trend would emerge in the data if we stayed the course and continued to test every three to four weeks. In the meantime, I decided that individual student effort and practice would have to be the determining criteria for pass or fail.

With such varying results, I decided to ask the students about their scores. I showed them the State Performance Report with a graph; it shows student progress in a visual way with each test score plotted.
Figure 5.3 Sample State Performance Report--Student. The graph features a goal line aligned to the State Accountability Test and a student trend line.

When I showed students their graph, I asked, “What can you tell me about why your score is so different from last time?” I asked, “What do you think was different this time?” I spoke with each of my students for about a minute or two. Most students were unused to being asked to think about their scores. Universally, students seemed surprised and responded with shrugs. When pressed for more, answers varied from “I didn’t try” to “I had a headache” to “I
just guessed” to “someone was tapping his pencil.” I tried to help them begin to make the link between their actions and inactions and the score they earned.

Now, my needling feeling that my setup was not working had become strong enough that I needed to find out what the students thought about the class and its structure. On September 20th and 21st, I asked students to write their answers to six quick questions:

1. What is your favorite activity? Why?
2. What activity is your least favorite? Why?
3. What activity helps you learn the most?
4. What should we change about the way we spend our time in class?
5. Rate your effort in class: 3—I work all the time, 2—I work sometimes, 1—I just hang out.
6. What do you wish about reading class?

Favorite activities varied greatly, from “Cups of Vocabulary” game to the “iPad” from the “comparison map” to just “reading.” Of course for every favorite, someone listed the same activity as their least favorite; George was one of the few students that listed the iPad as his least favorite. Clearly, the research about every child being engaged by different topics and different activities was showing up in my classroom. All exemplar students said that “whole group” or “guided reading” helped him/her learn the most. Yet, overwhelmingly, these same students wanted more time in their stations not more time with guided reading.

On his survey, George asked for “more minutes in stations.” While Jillian simply said, “amount of time” in response to the question number four. When I asked Jillian for additional details, she said, “I just get settled down and figure out what
to do, and it is time to change again. I just need more time to play the games.”

The final theme that became clear on this quick questionnaire was a need for more independence. Katherine said, “I think we should take a trip to the IMC [school library].” Jillian said, we should “go to the IMC more” and “I wish we did more indepident (sic) reading.”

Some students’ feedback was positive, and it showed the beginning of a student/teacher relationship. Jillian sent me an email through the school website: “im so proud of my self i read a book in 1 day. i think it was way to easy but theres a word or 2 words i need help on that i have no idea wat they mean[..] so ya it was 3.0 [grade level] i think...but ya i need help under standing tham...” (8/31/12). In this moment, I felt relief that Jillian was beginning to turn to me for help. She was beginning to grow her capacity for self-evaluation and her ability to trust me enough to help her. It gave me a glimmer of hope that perhaps something I was doing was going to work for students. I hoped this class would work for more students, and I wanted to be able to support all of them where they struggled. Success in this course might help others sense the budding pride and self-competence.

**Changes are Afoot**

The student feedback on the survey confirmed what I knew to be true with my gut teacher instincts. I could no longer ignore the feeling I had that the independent station time simply was not working for most students. Regardless of the reason it was not working, whether it was a lack of teacher support, a poor time schedule, a questionable set of underlying unconscious goals, or some combination, I had to make changes. Even though it was mid-quarter, and even
though my plan had only been sputtering along for six weeks, I made the calculated decision to overhaul my class structure. We would switch from part of the students at stations while the others were in guided reading to everyone at two stations followed by everyone in guided reading. This was not because small group instruction was not working or because the stations themselves were ill conceived. Rather, making these changes served a greater good: teacher support and feedback during independent work time, more time to practice fewer strategies and concepts, and teacher-guided group reading. The balance of power between research and practice, between autonomy/choice and guidance, between ideals and reality was constantly shifting. Every change I made in the class was an adjustment to one of these pairs. My ultimate goal was to bring these elements into harmony rather than continue as opposing forces.

One of the best ways to facilitate autonomy is through choice (Deci, 1996), but I had not been giving students very much choice. I was balancing a need to help students be more self-determined and my need to ensure their learning. In response to student request for more time in their stations, I decided to try 15 minutes per station. To accomplish this, I reduced the stations from three (or four) per day to two. While their cards listed three or four stations, I decided to not remake all the cards and rotations. For the next three weeks of the quarter, I simply allowed students to pick any two of the stations on their card. The only rule was that they had to select a station that was on their card and available, meaning only one student per computer and only two students with a game. Allowing students to choose from their cards was really self-preservation on my part, as the thought of remaking the entire station spreadsheet filled me with
horror. It was also a way to afford autonomy to the students. This switch allowed them to choose their activities within parameters of those listed on the cards thus scaffolding their autonomy (Deci, 1996).

Next, I placed everyone in stations simultaneously. For the first 30 minutes of each block, students would work individually in stations with me circulating from station to station, providing feedback, and facilitating learning. This meant that small-group guided reading, as it currently existed, had to disappear. I was really torn about this decision, since so many students said this helped them the most. The compromise was to put all 12-14 students together for whole-group instruction for the other half of the block. This was roughly half the number of students in a typical middle school reading class, so that helped ease my mind. I would still use guided reading techniques including questioning, close reading, and mini-lessons tied to the text. Of course, this half of the block would be for all students and not differentiated as I had originally intended guided reading to be.

**Eye Opening Events at the End the Quarter**

**Discovering the truth about stations.** In our first few days of teacher supported stations, I heard myself saying, “What have you been doing all this time?” over and over. I found student after student who did not know how to play their matching games, who did not know how to find the actual game listed on their card, and who did not know where to sit for a particular station. I was dumbfounded. Large three-inch letters on the wall proclaimed, “Non-Fiction” yet students did not know where to go for their non-fiction station! “Cups of Vocabulary” was written on the wall with bright pink cutouts of cups, yet many
students would look at me and ask where to go. Typed up sheets of directions with steps hung in page protectors on the wall next to the stations, yet almost no students looked at the steps or used them to help themselves move forward. I would point to the sheet, inches from the student, and ask what they needed to do next, only to be greeted with, “Oh yeah!” or “I don’t know.” Students took out cards that were to be sorted into order to make a paragraph, and instead simply sat and read the cards over and over without even beginning to make a paragraph.

I was shocked, frustrated, and confused. I had labeled, modeled, and explained everything. Students had practiced, yet everyone seemed to be lost. I had three weeks to figure out the problems with the stations before the quarter changed and the stations changed too. I believed I had to do a better job of instructing and scaffolding. Looking at my students, I realized that they were coming out of six to eight years of schooling in which the teacher was always there directing each action. They were also coming out of a collective experience of failure. After trying and failing for years to meet teacher expectations or trying and failing to anticipate what the teacher wanted, my students were frozen. I asked the students to tell me about reading in school, and Alicia told me, “I don’t do good in reading.” Jillian said, “It boring” and school is “scary.” Moving forward was going to require a combination of better teaching and better support for students’ perceptions about reading.

**Guidance through a ghost story.** Stations were taking up nearly all of my mental energy and my planning. I was conducting a major overhaul of the way I structured class, and I was investing time each day reflecting on how to
improve the stations and improve student experiences. While I recognized the need to offer differentiated lessons to my classes in whole-group reading time, I decided to do one novel with one set of strategies well rather than overload myself with too many things to plan and teach. As a result, on October 1st and 2nd, all of my classes were given the same novel: *Stonewords: A Ghost Story* by Pam Conrad (1991).

I had used their *Reading Interest Inventories* (McAndrews, 2008) to find the most popular genre, and by far the most students had picked “Horror and Thriller” or “Mystery.” This was also the genre most checked out from my classroom library. While I was assigning a novel to read, I hoped that by respecting their collective preferences that students would respond positively. Over all when I told students that I picked a ghost story because of their inventories they were appreciative and excited.

I defined a set of goals based upon my understanding of engaged reading and the essential elements taught in the regular language arts classes. I introduced the novel with a presentation on which I stated the goals for the unit: (a) ENJOY a spooky ghost story! (b) Read an entire novel and UNDERSTAND what we read! (c) Make PERSONAL CONNECTIONS to what we read. (d) DISCUSS what we read.

During the next few weeks of the quarter, students read this novel together and worked on strategies about 30-35 minutes per class. From finding evidence in a text to learning the meaning of the word *shrill*, they worked on a variety of literacy skills.
I was familiar with this type of instruction. I was guiding a group of students through strategy practice and reading a novel. I recognized that this was a step back from the differentiation I had attempted the first few weeks but I decided that my priority was making the stations work. I knew I would eventually improve differentiation and student choice, but I was going to revise one major part of Reading class at a time.

**Critical reflection.** Through supporting the students in their stations and talking to them about what was working and what was not, I came to a few conclusions about what I needed to change next quarter.

First, I had not explicitly taught students how to problem-solve when they were stuck. I assumed, wrongly, that when a student forgot the next step at a station he/she would look to the direction sheet for what to do. Students did not use the direction sheet, or any tools, because they had never been taught how to “unstick” themselves. I was going to have to teach them piece by piece, step by step what to do to solve their own problems. This was not a reading strategy, but a school coping strategy, and one they needed to become successful. Students looked to me to solve their problems and help them play the games. When I was occupied with small-group instruction, they did not have an adult to consult. Without my help, they simply sat quietly since they had been admonished to not interrupt me. If we wanted to move forward, students needed to learn to use the resources in the room besides just me to answer their questions.

Second, I realized that students had too many things to remember. Seeing four stations for ten minutes, then not seeing those stations till four school days later (a day in another class, a day at different stations, then a day in another
class before they returned), they simply could not keep straight the routine of which box to grab, which set of rules to follow, and which place to sit. Stations needed to be simplified, labels had to be clearer without codes or numbers. I had to reduce the number of stations each student had, reduce the number of steps to follow, reduce the number of supplies needed, and clarify directions to the essentials.

Third, stations needed to be correctly leveled. For example, the “Main Idea and Detail” station required students to take out sentence cards, sort the cards into paragraph piles, and then organize each paragraph pile into the correct sequence beginning with the main idea sentence. This purchased station was surprisingly difficult for students to learn since they struggled to understand how to sort the sentences into paragraph piles to begin the game (by matching the pictures on the back of the card).

Once the students understood the rules, the task appeared to work well for 6th graders and even offered a challenge while the 8th graders were easily bored. According to the average STAR scores, all the grades had similar reading levels. I had to figure out another way of deciding what was suited for 8th grade versus 7th versus 6th beyond just looking at reading level. I had to think about maturity level, interest level, and task complexity. Having stations leveled by reading ability only was not going to allow enough differentiation.

Fourth, higher level thinking stations needed simple directions and simple steps, so students could devote their time and working memory to the literacy task. The “Cups of Vocabulary” station failed miserably in this regard.
Figure 5.4. Cups of Vocabulary station.

The directions asked students to draw the name of a place from a cup (e.g., grocery store or school) then draw a vocabulary word from the science or social studies box. Students were to write a sentence using the target word in the given context. For example, if I pulled “democracy” from the word box, and “school” from the cup, my sentence might be “My teacher practiced democracy when she let us vote for our review game.” This required several things from the student, 1. gathering all the materials (paper, pencil, words) from different places in the room, 2. a deep understanding of the term beyond the definition when only the definition was being practiced in their content class, 3. writing and expressive language skills, 4. creativity and higher order thinking. This station asked a lot from students mentally without enough scaffolding. Most students assigned this
station were still confused at the end of the quarter. No wonder many of them sat staring blankly at the cups until I came to help them. On the other hand, Katherine listed Cups of Vocabulary as her favorite game “because it is fun to make sentences for them.” Perhaps there was hope for this type of activity. In the future, if I wanted students to do higher order thinking such as making inferences or synthesizing information from two sources, then the station directions needed to be simple and clean. The vocabulary had to be well known for high order tasks. If the vocabulary were new, even if it were being studied in Science or Social Studies, then the task needed to be less complex. The concept of cognitive load came to the forefront of my thinking, as I realized that I was overloading too much at once--new words plus new task plus high order task.

Finally, stations needed to have enough variety to last through repeated plays. Unlike elementary centers, which change frequently, these stations stayed in place for a full quarter. By the end of the quarter, students had exhausted the “Fact and Opinion” sort, had read the same “Main Idea and Detail” paragraphs multiple times, had matched roots and definitions till they could do it in only a few seconds. The number of cards that came with purchased games was not enough for the number of repetitions, and I could not manage changing the two-dozen stations more frequently. By the end of the quarter when students had actually been practicing all their stations for three solid weeks, I reported in my journal “students are getting bored and unengaged. Only the computer and iPad hold their attention. Frankly, I’m bored too” (10/15/12). Whatever I created for Quarter 2 had to have enough options and variety to avoid boredom and allow growth.
**My moment of clarity.** Students needed frequent, actionable feedback. Just before the end of the quarter, I attended a professional development session focusing on feedback. I asked myself whether the feedback I was giving to my students in the last few weeks had truly been actionable. Did it lead them to the next action step they should take? Beyond giving students a score, showing them which items they had matched wrong in their station, or showing them “how-to” what was I doing to help them move to the next level? Unfortunately, the answer was very little.

I needed to refocus students on effort, being accountable, and being able to attribute their success to their work. I wanted to add individual student conferences to my practice, and I wanted a way to track my feedback to students. Too often they completed a game, and put the cards away while I was helping another student. This left me without anything to examine for feedback and it left me without a sense of how the student was performing. I had to improve my feedback and our classroom procedures to supply more opportunities for feedback. This was intimately tied to developing the self-competence of students in reading. They needed assistance in seeing their successes and their growth. Their self-competence could help them take risks to be more autonomous and self-determined. Feedback was also going to provide an opportunity for me to develop relationships with students as I talked to them about their learning.

With feedback and conversation focused on reading, the students and I could enter into a valuable relationship.

**Reflecting One Year Later**
Those were harried, stressful times. I remember just running from moment to moment and not knowing how anything would go. On October 15th, I wrote, “Quarter 1 is almost over, and I have very little. My practice this quarter was a failure.” This seems so harsh in light of all the reflecting and changing I was doing. I actually took the amount of time I was spending as a bad sign, “I know that I spend hours a day making decisions. I spend hours with data and reading books for ideas for lessons.” (10/15/12).

I look at that teacher who was so desperate to sell her class to students, and I shake my head. Now, I no longer try to sell the class because great literature in a positive place of growth and support will sell itself.

My articulated goal for using stations was to differentiate, and that goal is clearly achieved each day in my classroom. A student who is testing at the lowest reading levels, 1st or 2nd grade, work on syllabication while another student about to test out of the program with a 6th grade reading level is reading a graphic novel and filling out a plot diagram. Inspiring autonomy and choice through stations had not met with as much success, but I would continue to work on it during the next quarter.

I still have all of my students in stations at the same time, and I still use the basic format of “Pink” days and “Blue” days with separate goals. I still use my station time to connect with students, individually support their learning, and provide frequent feedback. Nevertheless, I sometimes try to reconfigure the class in my mind to somehow return to small-group guided reading with half of the students in stations while the others are with me. I have adhered to that ideal as a way to differentiate.
Perhaps the biggest change that happened in my thinking since that first quarter, is that I now conceive of my class as a yearlong course. I don’t feel the pressure to rush into differentiation or into stations for fear that the 22-day quarter will disappear. I now realize that many of my students will be with me for an entire school year or more. I am more patient and more willing to slow the pace of my instruction. I realize now that my students need many, many more repetitions in directions and procedures than I ever believed before. Investing time in procedures has helped everything else go smoothly.
CHAPTER 6
LEADING, FOLLOWING, AND DRAWING A NEW MAP

Introduction

Throughout the first quarter of the school year, I had been enacting my instructional plan and reflecting on the process. Now, I needed to move forward and make adjustments to my instruction and the class format based on those reflections. In broad terms, these adjustments fell into four categories: (a) teaching students metacognitive strategies, (b) refining the independent literacy stations, (c) improving student engagement, and (d) increasing student autonomy. By the end of the school year, the feedback from students and data story both tell of improved student motivation and achievement.

Teaching Metacognition

During the first nine weeks of school, I had already witnessed my students paralyzed in the face of indecision and choice. I had seen them give up at the slightest sign of difficulty. I had listened to them say that an activity was too hard or boring before even beginning the task. My students were in need of self-reliant strategies which they could employ when faced with a challenge (Greenleaf, Schoenbah, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). They had been conditioned to ask the teacher or give up when unsure, often they did both. Getting them to become self-reliant enough even to try a new task was a process that took the entire rest of the school year.

Goal setting. If students were going to learn to have faith in their abilities and learn to move themselves forward, then they had to know where they
were headed. At the beginning of the second quarter, I wanted my students to return to their first quarter goals and continue the process of becoming more self-determined in their reading education. I directed students to write what their individual goals were, what they needed to accomplish those goals, and how those goals would help them. I asked them to rate their effort toward accomplishing their first quarter goals. My purpose was to have them link their effort during first quarter with their success or failure in meeting their goal.

The students were surprisingly self-aware of what had prevented them from being successful during the first quarter. George and Alicia both rated their own effort as a 2 meaning “I work half the time;” whereas, Jillian and Katherine both rated their effort a 3 meaning “I work most of the time.” Based upon this self-assessment of their effort, students made promises to themselves about how to improve. Alicia wrote, “Quarter 2 Promises: 1. to get to my station right away and to start right away, 2. to not talk as bad as I did last quarter.” Jillian focused on home and school factors when she wrote, “This quarters promises: 1. sleep more, 2. not talk so much, 3. pay attention and ask questions.”

Students understood why they were in Reading and what they ultimately wanted. Alicia simply said she needed “...to become a better reader” and Katherine wrote, “My goal: to get out of this class and pass the test.” Unfortunately, students did not always know how to get to their final goal. Alicia wrote, “My Goal: By the end of the quarter, I want to make my graph line go up and my reading. I also want to not have to read more.” Obviously, avoiding reading would not help her become a proficient reader. She and I were going to have to work on this misconception. Tabitha was particularly introspective and
wrote “I need to feel accomplished at the end of the year.”

Many students were simplistic in their answers like George, “Goal: work harder.” Other students still communicated a strong reliance on teacher transmission and teacher guidance; such as Katherine, who wrote her goal was “Paying attention, because you are learning what the teacher tells you.” While other students took more upon themselves in improving their achievement; Jillian said, “[I will] sit some where else, not be afraid of being laughed at.” The variety of student responses is an indication of how varied their experiences and self-competence were. They had various levels of self-competence based upon their past experiences; therefore, they had different expectations for their outcomes. While I was going to help them grow their competence, some of their struggles would be related to gaining a new understanding of themselves as readers and students.

We repeated this goal-setting and goal-revising exercise at the beginning of each quarter. At various times between goal-setting sessions, I pulled the goal sheets from their folders and discussed with students their behavior and learning in class with regard to how it matched up to their self-defined goals. I wanted them to be mindful of their goals and make connections between their daily actions and their achievement. Before these conversations, many students had not connected the amount of reading they did with improvement in their reading achievement. They had also not connected their effort to any acquisition of strategies or skills.

By the end of the school year, students began to put together their effort and their results. On one of the last days of school, Tabitha wrote, “This summer
ill try to READ...I learned from Mrs. M&M was that reading helps me!! :D”

**Self-evaluation and reflection.** At various points in the year, I asked students to evaluate their own learning beyond goal setting. On December 14, 2012, students engaged in an online discussion in response to the following prompt: “What have you learned in Reading Class this semester? Be specific. What helped you learn? What do you still need to work on? What do you need to get better at next semester?”

The student discussion began simply with comments like “I learned a lot about figurative language” or homophones, or affixes, or facts/opinions. Then, when pressed by other students to explain, they began to write how they had improved or what they needed to do. A strong theme that surfaced in the comments was practice and hard work.

- “You get to play all sort of games. The way it helped me was that practicing and practicing really helped,”
- “i still need to work on littery devices. i need to focus more n be relax.”
- “this semester i’ve learned tons of things. all the bunches of games that were really hard i got the hang of it<.”
- “i love the contxt clues because i honestly am gettin better and its fun! :)(:”

They began to offer each other the advice I had so often preached in class: practice leads to improvement. One student stated that “afixes that is what I need to get better at.” and another student replied “really well all that you can do is try to do your best at it and eventually you will get better at it like i did :).” At
this moment, I was convinced our work in class was finally coming to fruition. Students were beginning to internalize the message that work and practice leads to improvement. Students were beginning to see themselves as capable of improving their reading achievement. They could see a connection between the practice in class, the increasing ease of a task, and their improved scores.

**Using the STAR to build awareness.** While we continued to take the STAR test every three weeks as part of our progress monitoring, I decided to remove the score and score improvement from the goal-setting sheet. Incremental improvement of two scale score points per week might have been true on average, but it did not hold true at an individual student level. My students had not experienced average growth for nearly their entire school career, to expect them to suddenly grow at “typical” rates experienced by “50% of students taking the test” simply was not going to happen (Renaissance Learning, 2014).

Their scale scores bounced around with large leaps and dips, so I was still a little concerned if I could even use these scores at all. Though, as the school year continued and students had more data points to compare, individual scores began to stand out as outliers and trends emerged. I began to realize that I could use the scores, but in a slightly different way than I had first conceived.

I had to move students away from a concrete scale score or grade equivalency as their goal. Instead I began to use the test results to talk to them about their growth trend and their motivation. The students and I reviewed their graphs of scores after each assessment. I individually conferenced with each student every three weeks, and we discussed the trend in their scores. While
other students read silently from their free-choice novels, I called students up to my computer one at a time to discuss their most recent test results. These mini-conferences were designed to give constructive feedback and encourage metacognition in students. For example, students whose scores declined were often asked what they believed the reason was for their decline. These one- to two-minute conversations allowed students to attach importance to their effort and allowed us to celebrate growth, no matter how small. We talked about how their attention, effort, and focus both during the assessment and in class may have contributed to the results they were seeing. I frequently reminded students that no one grows in a straight line, so while individual scores may increase or decrease as long as the trend was improvement then we should both be pleased.

One particular conversation with George illustrates how students began to develop awareness and self-competence slowly with prompting. Following the STAR test on October 25, when George came up to my desk I pointed to the graph which showed his growth from the beginning of the year at a 2.8 grade equivalency (1st percentile) on August 17th to a 4.3 equivalency (8th percentile) on this test. The intervening tests showed gradual growth to this point.
I was pleased with George’s progress, and proclaimed, “George, isn’t this awesome! Look at how much you are growing and learning about reading!”

He replied, “I have to be honest. I just guessed.”

“Really? You don’t think you have improved? Look at how your graph shows a little growth each time.”

George, “But really, I just guessed.”

“Do you think you might have learned something?”

A skeptical smirk and a slight head shake from George.

“Do you think that you have gotten better at guessing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you have learned some things that might have helped you eliminate
really wrong answers and make a better guess between just two choices. Do you think?"

A small smile spread across his lips, and George replied, “Yea, maybe.”

George’s first instinct was to attribute any success to luck or guessing, but with prompting he was able to see that part of his success was due to his own actions. At the end of the school year, George performed his best on the STAR assessment. Ending the year at a 5.4 grade equivalency (13th percentile), his growth, both personal and academic, was nothing short of amazing. George wrote on his final survey that the thing he liked the best about Reading was “I get to learn” and what he liked most about his time in class was “working.”

The STAR results became a way for my students to grow their self-competence. They were able to begin to see scores as the result of effortful action and practice. They were also able to attribute a personal locus of control to their results. When their scores went down, they learned the importance of effort and attention, both in class and on the assessment. Growing self-competence helped them desire to use their newfound strategies, leading to greater success and further feelings of competence.

**Purposeful partnering.** Teaching students to rely on each other or themselves instead of relying on me to answer questions was a challenge. To encourage them ask a friend for help before asking me I began to pair students together in stations. I intended to give students a resource and a person to keep them on task through purposeful partnering.

Clearly, my prior attempts to keep students working independently at different stations did not succeed. Students did not have common content or
common strategies to discuss with others. They ended up migrating toward each other with their games, so talk quickly turned to pre-teen drama, last night’s television shows, and music. If students were talking and working together anyway, then perhaps their conversations would become about content and strategies if they were given common tasks.

Some partnerships functioned better than others, and I repeatedly reflected in my journal about improving the groups. I wanted to put together students who were not necessarily friends, but who were compatible and worked well together. “Students who are generally not engaged…. Perhaps put them together? Would they have to participate and work then? Or would they fall even further behind?” (Journal 1/11/13). The answer was that some students were just not ready to take charge of their own learning, and without another student to pull them along and force their participation, I often had to sit with the least engaged group and facilitate (Journal, 2/13). I did not want to monitor a group’s every movement. I wanted them to facilitate for themselves, so I could walk away and have the learning conversation continue.

Over time, I discovered that as students grew their competence as individuals, their partnerships grew as well. By March, I would briefly stop by each partnership, check progress, and rotate to another station. Then, by April, I was no longer concerned with managing groups, and students formed their own partnerships. Katherine explained that “sitting with your friends is fun. You get to talk about books” (Blog, 5/15/13) In this statement, she reveals an important shift in student thinking: classmates were now friends who learned together. Students with already formed friendships added mutual learning to their
relationship, and learning partners became friends. The strength of peer
relationships allowed me to step away. I had been trying to forge teacher/student
relationships to aid their academic growth, but I discovered that fostering
student/student relationships was just as powerful.

**Refining Stations**

For the second and third quarters of the school year, modifying the
stations continued to be the main focus of my planning. Certainly, stations
casted the most mental tension between my ideals and my reality. Stations were
the portion of the classroom time that I most valued since they represented the
best of RTI: individualized, differentiated practice focused on areas of need.
Because I highly valued stations, I kept refining them until they were finally
effective learning tools.

**More failure before success.** According to surveys, students were
concerned at the end of first quarter that the stations were not interesting enough
and did not have enough variety to last the entire quarter. I began looking at
books about elementary centers for ideas. I decided that modified versions of
classbook and foldable centers would provide engaging, hands-on, and longer-
lasting opportunities for students to be creative and have fun while learning.
Instead, these stations became yet another example of how what works in the
elementary classroom does not necessarily work with struggling middle school students.

Students had had many lessons in both *Reading* and Language Arts class
about the different types of figurative language. With this base knowledge,
students at the figurative language station were supposed to use magazines to
find examples of similes, metaphors, hyperboles, and other types in advertisements. The students were supposed to cut out the advertisement, glue it in the classbook, identify the type of figurative language, and explain the meaning. Other students in a different station were supposed to find words in magazines and newspapers with certain affixes (the 20 most common prefixes and suffixes), cut them out, glue them into a classbook, and then document their work on a chart. Students had to break the word into its morphemic parts and make a guess at the definition based on the morphemes. Yet still other students studying homophones/homographs could select a word from the list on the wall and make foldables with the different meanings and/or spellings illustrated with drawings and pictures from magazines.

Unfortunately, built into the structure of these stations were multiple opportunities for students to stall. Students could spend an entire 15 minutes flipping through a magazine “looking for suffixes” or “trying to find onomatopoeia” without actually finding anything. Students were supposed to fill out a sheet with the words they found, or sign the classbook on the pages they completed as a way to have accountability, but this failed too. If a student claimed they “couldn’t find anything,” they obviously could not fill out the sheet. I could work with the students and help find words or examples, but they wanted to revert to their ingrained pattern of letting the teacher do all the work. Resolved not to do the work for them, a typical scene included me going to the table with the books and magazines, asking students what they were finding, directing them to certain magazines or certain pages that would be fruitful, giving them direction and guidance through questions or hints, then stepping away to
help another student across the room. When I was helping the other students, the ones with the magazines stopped working, doodled, cut out random pictures, and perhaps glued one word or example into the classbook. More often than not, students chatted, wasted time, and were unengaged.

These stations were an even worse failure than those in the first quarter. To help students self-direct and self-evaluate, I would ask them, “Does this represent 15 minutes worth of work?” The typical shy response was, “No.” This allowed us to revisit their goals (e.g. improving in reading, trying harder, moving out of the class) and talk about how those goals could not be achieved without strong effort. The conversations about goals were largely unsuccessful, and by the mid-point in second quarter, I had to sit with the magazine and foldable stations nearly the entire fifteen minutes and have students in other stations bring me their work if they had questions; I could not step away. I was managing behaviors and acting as the warden rather than as the facilitator. This was precisely what I did not want to do.

While sitting at the table, I began to wonder why projects touted by so many other teachers were such a failure for my students. First, I believe that students did not have any ownership in the classbooks. Because the books belonged to everyone, they belonged to no one. Without any sense of personal responsibility or ownership, there was no reason to invest time and effort into creating this book. My classes do not have a class identity such as an elementary classroom where the 20 students are together all day long, all year. My students were with different classmates in each class all day, and in each quarter of my class students exited and new ones entered.
Secondly, the station projects asked for self-directed time management and a sense of urgency to accomplish a task in 15 minutes. This need for urgency was combined with a typically relaxing and leisurely activity: flipping through a magazine. According to their interest surveys, my middle school students were voracious magazine readers. They had a well-practiced set of behaviors for using magazines, and urgently looking for figurative language and affixes did not fit their schema.

Third, by making the activities project based and without firmly defined necessary outcomes (i.e., a required number of items completed each day), which I did to avoid control and facilitate autonomy, I created a situation for which the students were simply not ready. They still needed scaffolded supervision that would give them guidance and accountability without me sitting beside them. In other words, I could supply a little more control in the initial structure or I would end up taking much more control in the execution when students did not have the tools to create their own structure. This was a valuable lesson in how scaffolding in small steps is absolutely necessary for student success.

**Improvements.** Students needed a little more guidance up front if they were going to be more independent in the end. First, I simply added more information about the stations to the cards. New cards included a title, a basic reminder of what was needed at the station and/or where the station was located. Here are two of Tabitha’s cards as an example:
Giving students just this much information took away many of the “Where do I go?” and “What does this mean?” questions. If a student still asked, I requested that they read their card aloud. Quickly, questions ended and students wasted less time.

Posting the center directions on the wall had not been successful first quarter since practically no one had read them, but if I wanted students to become self-directed, I had to keep giving them tools. One improvement in station directions was the result of a happy accident. Rushed to change, design, and put up all the new stations for the second quarter, I did not have time to type up and print out direction sheets. Instead I simply hand wrote the directions in marker on pieces of paper, and I taped hand written signs to the station tubs. I fully intended to replace them with typed sheets later, but I suddenly found students reading the sheets and using them.
Figure 6.3: (Photo, Left) Handwritten station directions and (Photo, right) station tub labels.

Students began to follow the sheets on the wall and read the labels on the boxes. Even my newly enrolled students had picked up this behavior, so I began to ask about why students were reading more directions. Students gave a variety of answers, including: 1. they had not realized that I had created the typed labels and direction sheets, 2. The fancy typed fonts were too difficult to read, 3. I was just going to make them read it anyway if they asked. In their minds, the typed labels and sheets were written by a random sign maker, so who knew if those directions really mattered. When the sheets became handwritten posters, students realized that I actually wanted them to do the steps. It personalized the directions and built upon our student/teacher relationship.
The fonts were not what I would have considered difficult, but for students who were struggling with decoding and still looking at each letter in a word to identify the word, not knowing if a letter was an A or an O made it impossible to read the sign. The cognitive load of deciphering the font, deciphering the words, and understanding the directions was just too much. By taking away one piece of the struggle, the font, students were able to move forward.

Finally, students realized that I was simply going to point to the sign and ask them to read it when they asked me for help, so they began to skip a step and read first. It was a small victory for independence and problem solving.

**Increasing accountability and feedback.** Now that students were largely getting to their stations and following directions, I wanted to equip them with a better gauge of how well they were progressing. They needed a way to measure and self-evaluate their time management. I needed to hold them accountable for how they were spending their time without being a warden and without sitting next to them the entire time.

During the third quarter, I introduced checklists into many of the stations as a way to accomplish my varying goals. For example, when a student was assigned “Figurative Language Games” on their card, they were given an accompanying checklist to keep in their class folder. I wanted to give them the autonomy to choose among several games or activities, so I placed seven or eight games on a topic in a tub. The checklist contained a list of all the games, directions and hints for each one, and a place for the students to mark when they had completed an activity. The sheet had a place for me to initial that they had shared their learning with me each day. Students were expected to show me what
they accomplished and have a discussion about where they were confused. This conversation could happen at any time during the class. If another student were assigned the same station, students could choose to work together or separately to practice the strategy and get their sheets initialed together. Students responded positively with several blog comments about the “games with packets” being favorite activities (Blog, 5/15/13).

Through the checklists, students gained a sense of personal control over their work. They could choose their own order of completion, select their partner, and constantly review their progress. Students knew whether they had completed a task and whether they had shared their learning. Their progress and feedback was no longer housed in my head; it was in their hands. Checklists provided autonomy through guidance.

**Authentic audiences.** Not only were students sharing their learning with me, but they were also sharing their products with their classmates. Since ownership had been a problem with the classbooks, I decided to introduce stations that allowed individual students or pairs of students to create their own items and display them for all the classes to see. In the Newspaper and Poetry stations pictured below, student work is displayed next to the station rules and headings. The authentic audience encouraged students to create better products and finish more tasks so their work could be displayed.
Figure 6.4. Newspaper and Poetry stations with displays of student work.

Some students created items in their stations that other students could use as a resource in theirs. In the photo below on the left, students at this station have created synonym cards with common words such as “mad” and “cute” at the top and lists of more interesting words below. Then students at the “Sentence Strip” station used the synonym cards to revise sentences and make them more interesting. In this case, “good” becomes “suitable,” “mad” becomes “upset,” and “cute” becomes “adorable.”
Figure 6.5. (Photograph, Left) Synonym cards created by students. (Photograph, Right). Sentence strips with synonym substitutions.

For the students making the synonym cards, knowing that another student was going to use their card as a resource created an authentic audience. It also created an interest in what others were doing. Students would come into class and want to see which of “my words” someone else had used. This paired station opened content rich discussion as students in the Sentence Strip station asked advice from the Synonym Card students. Fostering community and discussion was more than I had anticipated by putting these stations next to each other. The situation made me realize that station placement could play a key role in engagement, as well.
The classroom environment and layout continued to create learning opportunities. The relationships the environment fostered improved motivation to complete higher quality work.

**Clicking Along.** At the beginning of the fourth quarter, I finally felt like I had found the right balance in stations. As another teacher observed, the class was a “well oiled machine. It [was] a lot of work, but absolutely worth the effort!” (Observation reflection, 3/2013). I wrote in my teacher journal:

Two students are working together and deciding on figurative language categories. All the students are engaged and quietly working. This would never have happened at the beginning of the year. What has changed? They know where to go and what to do. The stations are clearer and straightforward. Everyone works the whole time! (3/28/13).

This change did not happen by accident and many minor adjustments had brought us to this point.

Because the stations were working so well, I decided not to make any real adjustments to the stations themselves in the final quarter. Instead, this quarter I involved students in the process of helping to select their stations for their cards. I held one-on-one conferences where students showed me their third quarter progress on larger projects from stations such as the “Multi-Meaning Book,” in which students were illustrating and writing using homophones, homographs, and homonyms. Several students chose to continue their unfinished book or other project from last quarter. After discussing unfinished projects, each student chose to continue working on a topic (e.g., Figurative Language Games, Context Clues) or switch stations. I pulled up their “Student
Planning Report” and together we chose a new goal and a new station if necessary. Students also selected the iPad or Computer for their technology time. This gradual release of control absolutely worked for my students:

The year is drawing to a close and all is working like clockwork. Centers run smoothly, kids work, get help, ask for correction, cooperate, improve, smile, and produce work. (Journal 4/4/13)

Without a strong commitment to individualized learning and a dedication to adjusting the stations, the year would not have ended as well for my students. I could have easily abandoned stations in favor of direct-instruction and more whole group time. I might have decided that the stations themselves were the problem rather than how I structured them. Had I taken those paths, my students would not have had the benefit of independent, effortful practice. Persisting through my own negotiations resulted in a powerful combination of self-determination and learning.

**Improving Engagement by Increasing Technology Usage**

**Blogging.** Just before the beginning of quarter 3, I was discussing the engagement problems of my students with a colleague. After explaining that most students come into and out of engagement at a station several times during the fifteen-minute period, she asked me what was the most engaging station. Without hesitation, I stated, “The computers and iPad.” Giving me the obvious answer, she asked if there were a way to get all kids on computers more often. I decided that I would make changes again, and my students would spend half of a block one time a week using the computers and school website to have an online discussion or a complete a computer activity. Signing up for the computer lab
was tricky, but I was able to get each group to the lab six times in the quarter.

Knowing that technology was only a tool, no matter how engaging, I had to decide how to best use it to help students make connections and grow as independent readers. Using our discussion board and blog features on the school web site, I began to post weekly discussion questions related to the class novel. During our first online discussion, the eighth grade students made 124 comments and replies in just a half-hour. I was stunned. This level of rich discussion and risk taking never occurred in the classroom. My students were engaging with each other and responding to each other without my input or prompting.

Students, such as Katherine, really used the online discussion forum to use evidence, make personal connections, and push their understanding:

Hope [in the novel *Hope Was Here* by Joan Bauer] does not want to move because she is going to miss her friends in new york. On the front cover she is looking back like she is going to miss new york and everything about it…. i would be super sad if i had to move away from here it would be super sad for hope since she has to move all the time. (Blog 1/15/13)

Other students were going to need more help. George, who typically resisted talking and writing, found blogging particularly difficult. He simply wrote “she feel depressed. The way she look” (Blog 1/15/13). Learning the academic language of discussion also required scaffolding, and many students struggled to reply to others:

I tried blogging today also. One of the biggest frustrations has been getting kids to give quality replies. I have gotten them to stop ‘chatting’ but I have not gotten them to go beyond ‘Nice’ or ‘I agree.’ To push them
to give a fuller reply, I gave them sentence stems today. This really seemed to improve the quality of the replies. I also tried to give them prompts that required a longer comment. (Journal 2/20/13)

On this day, students began to write, “I agree because...” and “Could you give me an example of...” and other constructive replies that moved the discussion forward. Tabitha set a trend for other students to compliment each other’s work. She was the first and most frequent complimenter on this day and thereafter. By using the sentence stems, she made specific compliments that used evidence, “i agree you did awesome!! i like how you put in so many examples! it made the story alought better!!” (Blog 2/20/13).

By the end of the school year, students were unanimous in their praise for blogging and online discussions. They explained that the blogging allowed them to say things without being embarrassed and that they could hear what more people thought about the book. My students valued discussion, and they valued the input of their classmates. The online format gave them a safe, non-threatening way to engage in that discussion.

**Technology in the classroom.** Unfortunately, during 4th quarter, I could no longer take my classes to the computer lab because it was testing season and all the labs were occupied. This is the type of negotiation that often has to happen in schools with limited technology access, but I was not ready to forfeit all the progress we had made during third quarter.

First, I ensured that all students had at least one technology station in my room during station time. Since my class sizes had been reduced to the recommended twelve students or less, many of my students were able to have two
One teacher observed, “I could see how [technology] improved student attention and participation” (Observation reflection, 5/2013).

**Increasing Autonomy Through Literature Circles**

Now that I believed stations were finally accomplishing my original goal of providing engaging and interesting individualized strategy practice, I could begin to make adjustments in how my students were experiencing our whole-group time.

Prior to fourth quarter, students had read whole-class novels: *Stonewords: A Ghost Story* by Pam Conrad (1991), *Hope Was Here* by Joan Bauer (2005), and *The Road to Paris* by Nikki Grimes (2006). All the books were well received and students enjoyed them, but there was no individual choice. During the first three quarters, students were learning the basics of discussion and often had to have assigned roles to make talking about their book more meaningful. Students rotated assigned roles in discussion: predictor, reader, summarizer, organizer, and/or wordsmith. “Students take on roles. They say things like ‘I’m the summarizer.’ ‘Hey organizer, do your job, make sure they are filling in stuff’” (Journal, 1/11/13). Students learned to self-identify their comprehension problems and talk issues through to increase understanding. A fellow teacher observed students checking their own comprehension, “having students mark where they got stuck may be more beneficial for improving independence.” (Observation reflection, 9/2012). They also grew their discussion and comprehension skills on the online blog. This scaffolding toward independence and improved comprehension afforded my students a new challenge in the final quarter of the year.
For the final nine weeks of the school year, I introduced literature circles and allowed students to vote on their choice of book. I then placed students into groups of four to five and gave each student his or her first or second choice of novel. I stepped away from directing the discussion, feeling that they were now in a position to apply the skills they had been practicing during quarter two and three.

During Literature Circles, students engaged in self-guided journaling and discussion. Rather than assigning roles or giving out discussion questions, students simply had a long list of about thirty journal/discussion starters. Prompts included the following: What you liked or disliked and why, what you wish the author had included, your opinion of the characters, what you noticed when you read, questions you have after reading. The journaling served the dual purpose of making student comprehension, or lack thereof, apparent while providing the students a record of what had been read and a platform for oral discussion. As one teacher observed in my classroom, “[Journaling] Reminds me that some kids need to write it down to actually think about it.” (Observation reflection, 2/2013).

Students set their own daily goal for reading in their group. They would discuss how much to read before beginning work for the day. “I gave them meaningful sentence starters for conversation...aka discussion stems. It is gratifying to hear what they have to say when they have the tools to discuss.” (Journal, 4/5/13)

During the reading time in class, each group could decide to read aloud, read silently, or listen to the book on CD. On any given day, all the groups might
select reading silently or each group might pick something different. The power to choose how to read and how to respond resonated with students: Tabitha wrote, “i really loved to read in the small groups too cause it was fun but i also liked reading by myself too because we could read at our own pace and know what we are learning in the book!!” (Blog 3/22/14). For Alicia, journaling was the special part of literature circles: “But with the journaling I like because I get to explain in my own words and say how I like it.”

Students began to form communities around their books. Tabitha wrote, “it was fun just to go off and read with friends instead of reading together!” (Blog 5/15/13). These communities afforded a safe place for students to share their thoughts. Katherine shared, “I love doing small groups because when you are with big groups some people don’t ask questions because it is in front of the whole class and they get scared and i also like them because you get to pick out of some books which ones you would like to read!!” (Blog 4/5/13).

The groups became a support for building vocabulary and comprehension. On March 26, 2013 I noted in my journal that during a single eighth grade class a student relied on her group mates to define unknown words, another group decided to go back and reread a two-page section they did not understand, while a third group filled out a character chart to help themselves. These sophisticated and independent negotiations represented the application of a year’s worth of strategy instruction. By April, I was rotating from group to group as an interested observer and active listener. My students had reached a level of independence that I did not believe was possible at the beginning of the school year.
CHAPTER 7
THE PATH: LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

Introduction

During the school year, I had repeatedly tried and failed to enact what I believed was the best way for students to improve their reading. Through reflection and reinvention there came a new approach to reading intervention; one that valued motivation and achievement. I continually redefined the balance between research and experience, control and autonomy, self-determination and teacher-determination, skill and will, data and observations, and individuals and groups. I attempted to strike a balance between these opposing forces by listening to and watching my students. Together, my students and I formed a new path toward growth.

Student Feedback Themes to End the Year.

During the entire academic year, I had sought the advice, opinions, and input of my students. As I tried to find lessons, activities, and methods that spoke to them and inspired them, their input was invaluable. Seeking student feedback sometimes happened formally on a blog or survey, but it more often happened informally as one of my colleagues observed: “She needed to change plans. The change was made to help students meet their goals. A change in plans is not always a bad thing. The students feel valued and listened to.” (Observation reflection, 3/2013). On the formal blogs and surveys, students expressed their frustrations, wishes, and praise related to the Reading class. At the end of the school year, I tried to find common themes that would guide future instruction.

Enjoyment of books. Overall the books selected for both the whole-
class novels and the literature circles were well received. Katherine said what she most liked about *Reading* was that “the books are interesting,” and Tabitha agreed that the best thing was “The books that we can choose from.” (Ivey & Broaddus survey, 3/20/13). I believe that this was largely because I selected genres that students enjoyed based upon their interest surveys. Alicia and Tabitha both stated that mysteries were the main reason they wanted to read in class (Ivey & Broaddus survey, 3/20/13). Even George, who typically skipped any survey question requiring more than a checkmark, said: “i like the book stonewordes.... i like beaues it is neat book” (Blog 3/22/13).

Many students had said at the beginning of the academic year that reading in school was boring because the topics were uninteresting. I had spent a great deal of time finding titles that appealed to a variety of interests and genres while making sure I had several choices that hit the most popular areas of mystery/horror and realistic fiction. Investing the time to find books students wanted to read helped to encourage reading. This seems like such an obvious fix for student motivation in reading, yet the solution is one often not employed. I, myself, had not listened to students when selecting novels before this academic year. Now, it seems like such a missed opportunity not to do so.

**Enjoyment of technology.** Not surprisingly, every time students were asked about their favorite activities and activities that helped them grow, computers and iPad topped the list. Students saw the games and activities as both interesting and useful. Katherine replied to another student when she said, “yah computer games help me the most to!!! :)”

Sometimes a favorite game captured their attention, such as Katherine
who wrote, “I love fling the teacher [a figurative language game] because right when you get one wrong then you go back to the beginning it is really fun” (Blog 12/5/12). It seems that the challenge of the gaming encouraged her to keep playing. Attempting to beat the computer helped students to maintain interest and return to the same games over and over. This phenomenon was fascinating to me since the challenge of reading a book or completing a difficult activity often made students quit. Perhaps for students it was about how things were “supposed to be” and not about how they are. Gaming and computer activities are supposed to be challenging and you are supposed to have to work to win. Many of my students believed that reading was supposed to be easy; after all, in their minds it was easy for others. Therefore, when faced with difficulty in reading they saw it as a demonstration of their inabilities rather than a challenge they were supposed to overcome.

The most frequently used word to describe the computer, iPad, or other technology activity was “fun.” Alicia enthusiastically said, “I think the best one is the iPad... oh its really fun” and Tabitha wrote, “I liked going to the IMC. It was fun watching the mythology videos.” Regardless of the device, the program, the game, or the activity, technology handily beat out all other lessons and types of reading. This element of fun was not to be ignored. For my students the opposite of fun was boring. For them, everything in class fell into one of the two categories.

The lesson for me is that improving student engagement for struggling readers has to include as many opportunities for using technology and gaming as possible. The element of challenge and fun could be introduced in a variety of
ways. My challenge as the teacher is to find a way to incorporate these elements even when technology resources are not available.

**Enjoyment of class structure.** Although the class structure changed several times during the academic year, students still had time in stations and time together in groups reading. Through working together to read and learn we were fostering a community of readers. Creating this community of trusted relationships took the entire academic year, but eventually students formed relationships with each other and with me to support their learning. Katherine said that her favorite thing about Reading was “class books; I like reading a book together.” Sharing that experience fulfilled a social and an academic need at the same time. Students recognized that this class operated in a new way. Katherine said about class, “That it is still fun but we still learn. And it is different from all our other classes” (Ivey & Broaddus survey, 3/20/13).

**Frustrations and wishes for change.** In spite of their praise, students were very honest in their wishes for improving the class. They had a great deal to say about how to improve the stations, from the amount of time we spent there to the activities they had to do. Students critiqued the types of word cards, the book selection in stations, the variety of games, and the perceived “fun” of each station. They asked for more games, more options, and more choices.

Students asked again and again for more trips to the IMC (school library) and for more independent reading time. From the first surveys to the last, no matter how much I increased our visits or increased the minutes of silent reading, it was never enough. This survey response was unexpected. I expected students who struggled in reading to want to avoid the IMC and want to avoid reading in
favor of activities. However, they never stopped asking for their own private time to have with a book.

**The Data Story**

The testing and achievement data were not forgotten during the school year, but they ended up carrying far less weight than I ever believed they would. Going into the school year and operating within an RTI framework, I fully expected the numbers to guide every curricular decision and assist me in evaluating the effectiveness of individual interventions. I expected to see students improve their reading achievement due to interventions, and if they were not improving, then adjustments in interventions would lead to better improvement. The true story was so much more complex and nuanced.

Quantitative data did indeed inform many of my choices, but it was the personal data from students and observations that gave the quantitative numbers context and meaning.

**STAR trends.** For the progress monitoring STAR test, a student’s trend line became much more important than their individual assessment scores.

Tabitha is an excellent example of how focusing on individual scores, or only one or two scores, would paint a very different and rather inaccurate portrait of her growth. Tabitha first tested on October 25th at a 5.1 grade level (scale score 541, percentile 19). On her next test in November, she showed an improvement (5.5 grade level, scale score 589, percentile 25). If we were to look at only these two scores, there would be much rejoicing. Gaining .4 grade level and 6 percentile points in just a month is amazing. In December, Tabitha took the same STAR test and scored a 3.5 grade level, scale score 405, and a percentile 5.
Later that same day she went home ill. Clearly, her score was affected by being unwell. If we were to take a narrow view, and only examine the beginning of the quarter and the end of the quarter score without taking into account any personal information (i.e., illness), the quarter was a complete failure, and entirely new interventions would be called for. However, I was interested in taking a broad view of the assessment results, and decided to stay the course with Tabitha. During the next several months Tabitha continued to practice her individual stations, work on whole class literacy lessons, and take the progress-monitoring test. When one looks at her performance graph, the trend line is clear and the narrowing of the gap between her scores and the goal line is clear as well.

![Figure 7.1. Tabitha’s State Performance Report.](image)

Tabitha was not the only student for whom the individual scores obscured the data story. For both George and Katherine, similar remarks could be made
about their graphs as Tabitha’s. For Jillian, the individual scores did not obscure the data story; they hid the personal and achievement stories.

Jillian came into the class with fairly strong scores (33, 40, and 38 percentile); after just one quarter, I was impressed with her work and her results. I mentioned to her mother at parent/teacher conferences that we would consider graduating Jillian out of *Reading* in December if she continued to score at this level. Her mother was proud of Jillian’s work, but Jillian was less than thrilled with this idea; she loved *Reading* and wanted to stay. She purposefully began to throw her assessment results. She knew good STAR scores were the key to graduating from the program, so she made sure her scores were low (10, 17, and 20 percentile on the next three tests). She continued to work hard in class, perform at a high level in her stations, and show improvement on my classroom rubrics.

Jillian knew we would consider her for graduation from the program, so the day before our meeting to decide class enrollment, Jillian said, “You should have me come to the meeting and tell them that this class is helping me” (Journal, 12/18/12). Knowing how important the relationship she was building with me was to her and her growing academic success, we decided to leave her in *Reading*.

At the end of the third quarter, her STAR scores still had not improved, but her academic improvement could not be denied on any other assessment and Jillian graduated from *Reading*. She continued to come and visit me during study hall and after school, our mentor relationship continued, and Jillian passed her state assessment at the end of the year and qualified for RMS’s upper level
eighth grade language arts class. If the RTI data team had only considered the progress monitoring assessment scores, Jillian would have still been labeled a struggling reader, and she would have been over-served in my classroom.

Adjusting to this interpretive view of data and test results was somewhat difficult. I believe that the entire RTI data team came into the school year wanting to rely on hard numbers to tell us how to serve the students in what ways for how long. Instead, a much more interpretive and subtle approach was needed to best serve our students. The data was used as a piece of the story of student growth and student achievement.

**State accountability assessment.** To qualify to be in *Reading*, students needed to score below proficiency on three of the last four major assessments (State Accountability or MAPs). For many of the students in my classes, they had rarely, if ever, been proficient on any major assessment. For example, in the 2011-12 school year, only 7 of the 96 students who would be enrolled in *Reading* the next academic year were proficient on the State Accountability Test (5th grade 5/37, 6th grade 0/29, 7th grade 2/30) None of the five exemplar students had been proficient. At the end of the 2012-2013 school year, 50 of the same 96 students were proficient (6th grade 14/37, 7th grade 21/29, 8th grade 15/30), including Tabitha, Jillian, and Katherine.
Figure 7.2. Graph of Student Proficiency.

My students and I celebrated this level of success. For many of my students this was the first time they had ever passed the State Accountability Assessment. Of course, I recognize that one year of proficiency does not prove that my students had gained all of the grade-level reading skills they needed, but it was another measure, that when placed next to their growing STAR scores indicated reading achievement growth.

These students were also enrolled in Language Arts and a variety of other classes that worked on reading strategies, so I cannot be sure that Reading class was the difference maker in their improvement. During the same time period, RMS students overall increased their proficiency levels from the previous year. The school wide proficiency levels from 2011-12 to 2012-13 increased from 67% to
77%. Perhaps the increase I saw in my students’ proficiency is a question of a rising tide that floats all ships. Certainly, stronger Tier I core instruction combined with additional Tier II support in Reading benefited many students.

Students enrolled in Reading spent the academic year practicing strategies in a variety of ways. Perhaps the metacognitive test-taking strategies and reading strategies worked together to help them achieve an improved level of achievement. Continued data analysis over the course of several years will be needed to help pinpoint whether Reading is an effective intervention in helping students achieve at grade level. Certainly, the anecdotal evidence from students and the preliminary data are encouraging.

**Returning to the Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework (Figure 2.1) that guided my decision making during the school year gains value only by being enacted. To read about autonomy and succinctly state that all children want to exercise autonomy in different ways is one thing. To be faced with over 90 students in a school year and attempt to provide them with the type of autonomy that they find motivating is something entirely different. This truly is theory in action; it is research in practice.

**Reading instruction and cognitive support.** During the school year reading instruction happened in a variety of ways, from small groups to whole groups, from literacy stations to explicit instruction. As a singular example, the non-fiction prediction station pulled upon all three of the key elements of reading instruction: explicit comprehension strategies, prior knowledge, and working memory. Students began by selecting a topic based upon their interest areas,
which helped them devote working memory to the task. Then, students used prior knowledge to predict words and phrases they believed they would encounter in the reading, and they recorded their predictions. Using an explicitly taught and practiced strategy, students confirmed or crossed-out predictions based upon the text. Students focused on key words and vocabulary while reading and added those words to their list. Finally, students pulled upon prior knowledge, the created list, and a summary strategy to use their working memory and create a five to six sentence summary of the passage. This type of strategy instruction and practice allowed students to reach independence in indentifying main ideas and key details. It also allowed them to develop a note-taking strategy that could be transferred into other academic areas.

Hundreds of practice sessions and lessons during the academic year focused on strategies from highlighting and color-coding literary elements to using text evidence to support a claim. Students continually practiced their reading strategies, and their acquisition of these strategies shows in their improved class performance and assessment results at the end of the year.

**Self-determination umbrella.** Helping students to take a hand in their learning by being self-determined readers and learners was challenging. Growing the self-competence for struggling readers who have a long history of academic failure required focusing on their metacognitive strategies and helping them to focus on their ability to self-monitor, attach success to effort, and self-evaluate. Through reflective goal setting, teacher/student conversations, and peer discussions, students began to see themselves as capable of growing and achieving reading success. They made specific comments on blogs, surveys, and
in conversation promoting practice and effort.

I had to strike a continual balance between student control and teacher control. Remembering that autonomy is not unbridled freedom, but rather choice within parameters, much of my school year was spent defining the edges of the parameters. In the case of the stations at the beginning of the year, there was too much freedom and autonomy. Students were left floundering in an unsupported environment; they froze at stations unable to overcome obstacles and isolated from their teacher and peers who might have been able to assist them.

Conversely, in the beginning students had absolutely no choice which stations they would complete, in what order, with which students. Over time, students were given increasing control over increasingly larger decisions. At first they were given the ability to choose within a station (a passage, a theme, a game) then they were able to choose the order of their stations, then they were able to choose learning partners, finally they were allowed to help select their learning goals and stations for the last quarter of the year. Scaffolding their ability to take control of their learning was a slow process, but one that facilitated their own self-competence and self-determination in reading.

**Motivation as a mediator.** This element of the theoretical model was perhaps the most evident during my discussions with students regarding their assessment results. As scores fluctuated during the year, students connected their approach to the test with the results they saw. For example, through metacognitive conversations students began to recognize that days on which they did not try, did not bring full attention, were distracted, or were tired, their scores
declined. On days when they were determined to show their growth and focused on persisting through difficult items, their scores improved. While this is a simplified example, it showed very concretely that students’ motivation mattered in their ability to pull upon prior knowledge and reading strategies and skills.

**Creating skillful, willful readers.** Promoting self-determination, which places a premium on student control, while simultaneously engaging in reading instruction and cognitive support, which require a fair amount of teacher-determination and planning, only makes sense in the daily action of the classroom. The benefit of placing both reading instruction and self-determination into my theoretical framework is that I was constantly forced to examine if one piece or another were taking too much precedence. I had to ask if I was putting too much emphasis on one at the expense of the other, knowing that they both needed to come together in order to have skillful, willful readers. While reading achievement could not always be easily quantified, many of my students showed growth on a variety of measures. Certainly, their feedback indicates growing self-competence and faith in their ability to improve in reading. As the design of *Reading* class shifted during the year, this framework kept me centered and focused on my ultimate goal and my plan to achieve it.

**A Final Reflection, One Year Later**

At the end of my second year of teaching *Reading*, I am in many ways still astounded at the tremendous changes that occurred in the course design, in my students’ academic lives, and in my teaching. I have discovered that the struggle for balance and harmony is constant. I have discovered that listening to my students’ feedback and melding that with the advice of experts yields amazing
results. I have also discovered that there is no one right path to reading achievement or reading motivation.

I have created a course that attempts to support both achievement and motivation, and for many students it has been successful. However, some students have still not found success. Some of the students at the end of the 2012-13 school year were still not proficient according to the STAR and the State Accountability Assessment, so they were enrolled in a second year of my course (or the course at the high school for the graduating eighth graders). After two full years in *Reading* and some moderate gains, a handful of students, probably around 5-6, are still not achieving at grade-level and are still not proficient on accountability measures. In the next iteration of this course, I will have to find new approaches and new learning experiences for those students. This is not an end product proposition. I will never discover the magic path to proficiency, but I do believe that I can create an environment and learning opportunities that can bring more students to a place where they are able to find success.

As I focus in on those students who have not made substantial gains over two years, I will again return to literacy research. I plan to read research on “treatment resistant” learners for new ideas and new approaches. I will again attempt to balance that new knowledge and advice with my knowledge of my students and my philosophies related to learning. I am sure that I will try and fail several times. I will have to balance my need to take control through teacher-determined lessons and more intensely structured learning experiences with the need to respect my students’ need for choice, autonomy, and self-determination. The iterative process will not end with the end of this study or the end of this
writing. My students had to learn to persist through their reading difficulties, and I have had to persist in my struggle to find approaches that encouraged their achievement and motivation. Persistence in the face of difficulties is the heart of motivation, and it is the lesson learned from this experience.
## RPS Decision Making Rules

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CMS Decision</th>
<th>Core Time</th>
<th>Tier II Decision Indicators</th>
<th>Tier II Strategic</th>
<th>Tier II Interventions</th>
<th>Tier III Decision Indicators</th>
<th>Tier III Intensive</th>
<th>Tier III Interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 6th          | 72 minutes daily in Language Arts 60 minutes every other day in Guided Practice Skills | • At least three of the following data points showing insufficient growth.  
• 5th grade NeSA “Below Standards”  
• 4th grade MAPS below the 40th percentile  
• 5th grade MAPS below the 40th percentile  
• DIBELS Next from 4th and 5th grade below benchmark | • Add minimum 72 minutes every other day intervention  
• Progress monitor with the STAR Universal Screener  
• Progress monitor three times per quarter | • Direct, explicit instruction matched with identified student deficit areas  
• Low teacher-to-student ratio to allow for frequent/intense differentiated instruction  
• Scientifically-Based Instruction (to be determined)  
| Suggested Materials: Rewards, Reader’s Journey, and Passport Reading Journeys | • At least 6 additional data points, or one-quarter Tier II data showing insufficient growth after Tier II intervention, including information on frequency, duration, intensity, and fidelity of intervention. (STAR Universal Screener) | • Add additional 72 minutes daily intervention.  
• Progress Monitor six times per quarter | • Direct, explicit instruction matched with identified student deficit areas  
• Low teacher-to-student ratio to allow for frequent/intense differentiated instruction  
• Scientifically-Based Instruction (to be determined)  
| Suggested Materials: Rewards, Reader’s Journey, and Language |
APPENDIX B
SYLLABUS FOR READING

Reading

Ms. Mancini-Marshall
Room 313

What are we going to learn?
Everyone will learn different things in this class! You will take some assessments to let me know where you need help in reading. Then you will work on the skills and strategies that you need. Sometimes you will work with others and sometimes you will work alone. However, everyone will work on READING! Everyone will work on at least one of the 5 BIG AREAS OF READING:

- Phonemic Awareness—the sounds words make
- Phonics—the letters that go with the sounds
- Vocabulary—what words mean
- Comprehension—understanding the text
- Fluency—reading with accuracy and “flow”

What are the basic rules?
Students will

- Be on time and be prepared for class
  - Be in class when the bell rings. Check in with me first before going to the bathroom
  - Bring your READING BOOK EVERYDAY
  - Bring your supplies everyday
- Complete work on time and with proficiency (at least 70%)
- Use work time appropriately
  - Remain on task when working in groups
  - Allow other students to work and achieve their goals
- Demonstrate respect for people and property
  - Use classroom appropriate language; offensive language of any sort will not be tolerated
  - Honesty is the most important form of respect
- Respond appropriately to staff directives
  - Follow directions the first time they are given

What happens if a rule is broken?
RTB uses the RTB program. RTB will be utilized in this classroom. However, if a student chooses to behave in a blatantly disrespectful or disruptive way, that student will be removed from class (office referral) and additional consequences may result.
SYLLABUS FOR READING (CONTINUED)

Are there any other rules?
1. You must have your lanyard to receive restroom or drink passes. You must use the facilities at the end of the hallway.
2. Bring all materials everyday. No locker passes will be given from class.
3. Make sure that all homework is neat. Work that contains doodles, graffiti, rips, or "fuzzies" will be given back to the student to redo.
4. Use blue or black ink or pencil to complete assignments.
5. Wait to be dismissed from class by the teacher.

What do we need?
- Pencil or black or blue pens
- Your AGENDA EVERYDAY

What will we do?
1. Whole group instruction
2. Small group guided reading
3. Partner or individual center work
4. Independent reading

How will we be graded?
Each student will set a goal for improving reading skills and strategies as measured on the STAR Enterprise test and other assessments. If you work hard, practice reading skills, improve your score, and grow during the quarter you will receive a passing grade. Failing grades will be earned if you do not complete activities, do not improve your skills, and don’t meet your goal.

My goal is to help each of you become a better reader, and I will try every day to have interesting and engaging activities for you to do which will help you grow. If you come every day ready to work hard and learn, I have no doubt that you will grow during the quarter.
APPENDIX C

STATIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS, QUARTER 1

1) **Nonfiction Maps and Graphs**—students choose from a variety of graphs and maps in a file to analyze and answer application questions.

2) **Nonfiction Biographies**—students read a 5-6 paragraph biography of a famous person (32 to choose from) and answer 9 comprehension questions.

3) **Nonfiction Prediction and Summary**—students select one of a dozen magazines, predict vocabulary they will encounter, read, confirm and modify predictions, and write a summary of the text.

4) **Cups of Vocabulary Game**—students select a science or social studies vocabulary word and a location (e.g. grocery store, school, church). They write sentences using the word in the context of the selected location.

5) **Root Word Matching**—students match roots taken from science, social studies, and language arts classes to their definitions.

6) **Affix Concentration**—students use matching cards to match prefixes and suffixes to definitions. 6 sets each of prefixes and suffixes.

7) **Comparison Map**—students select two non-fiction books from a crate and compare the topics using a wall sized erasable graphic organizer.

8) **Context Clues**—Flash cards; students read a short paragraph containing an unknown word then answer a multiple choice question about its meaning.

9) **Fact/Opinion Sort**—students sorted a sentence strips with facts and opinions into categories.

10) **Main Idea/Detail Card Sort**—students sorted sentences into topic piles. Then they sorted each pile into a paragraph.

11) “**Syllascramble**” game—students used parts of words (syllables) to build, transform, and break apart multisyllable words

12) **“Let’s Examine Our Text”**—students used science and social studies text books and *Kids Discover* magazines to find examples of text features. Examples were put on post-it notes and placed on a class chart

13) **iPad Stations**—Students were assigned a category (folder) on the iPad with various apps from which to select.
   a) Idioms
   b) Figurative Language
   c) Homophones
   d) Vocabulary

14) **Computer Stations**—Students were assigned a category (link folder) on the class webpage with various online games from which to choose.
   a) Figurative Language
   b) Bias
   c) Homonyms
   d) Idioms
   e) Root Words
   f) Vocabulary
   g) Inference
APPENDIX D
SAMPLE INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING REPORT

STAR Reading Test Results
Current SS (Scaled Score): 356  Test Date: 08/17/2012
IRL: 3.1  ZPD: 2.7-3.8
Projected SS for 09/14/12: 374  Based on research, 50% of students at this student's level will achieve this much growth.

Abstract: Current Performance

Skills to Learn
Skills listed below are suggested skills based on the student's performance on the STAR Reading Enterprise Test. These skills should be challenging, but not so difficult that the student may not be able to learn them. Combine this information with your own knowledge of the student and use your professional judgment when designing an instructional program. Use Core Progress learning progression for reading to find additional information for each skill, teacher activities, and sample items.

Word Knowledge and Skills
This score suggests the student should practice the following strategies and skills to improve comprehension of words in texts at this reading level:

1. Identify and understand homophones (e.g., hole/whole, weak/week) and homographs/multi-meaning words (e.g., sentence, hard, chest) in grade-appropriate text (reading level 3.0-4.7)
2. Understand that words with similar denotative meanings (e.g., ask, beg) can carry different connotations
3. Use knowledge of word relationships (e.g., similarities, associations) as a means of comprehending text
4. Identify and understand synonyms for grade-appropriate words (grade level 3.4- tale/story, fearful/afraid)
5. Use context clues (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, examples, situation) to determine or clarify the meanings of unfamiliar words in grade-appropriate text (reading level 4.0-6.6)

Comprehension Strategies and Constructing Meaning
This score suggests the student should practice the following strategies and skills to improve reading comprehension in texts at this reading level:

1. Identify and explain the main idea and distinguish it from supporting details in informational text
2. Distinguish opinions by analyzing text for words that can signal opinions such as comparative and superlative adjectives (e.g., better, best)
3. Monitor and adjust understanding of text by using background knowledge, creating sensory images, and generating questions
4. Identify comparisons indicated by clauses beginning with words such as but and however
5. Explain how details support the main idea
SAMPLE REPORT (CONTINUED)

Student Diagnostic Report
Enterprise Test
Printed Saturday, August 18, 2012 12:08:30 PM
Test Date: August 17, 2012 12:32 PM
Test Time: 9 minutes and 57 seconds

School Benchmark - Grade 8

STAR Reading Scores
SS: 360 (Scaled Score)  ■ Urgent Intervention
PR: 2 (Percentile Rank)  ■ scored greater than 2% of students nationally in the same grade.
FGL: (Functional Grade Level)  ■ FGL represents the student’s level of mastery of grade-level expectations. See Functional Grade Level (FGL) Score for STAR Reading™ for more information about using Scaled Score as an indicator of mastery.
GE: 3.2 (Grade Equivalent)  ■ A test performance is comparable to that of an average third grader after the second month of the school year.
IRL: 3.1 (Instructional Reading Level)  ■ This student would be best served by instructional materials prepared at the third grade level.

Core Progress™ Domain Scores
Word Knowledge and Skills: 20
Comprehension Strategies and Constructing Meaning: 18
Analyzing Literary Text: 13
Understanding Author’s Craft: 17
Analyzing Argument and Evaluating Text: 11

Domain scores, ranging from 0-100, estimate percent of mastery on skills in each domain at a fourth grade level.

Reading Recommendation
ZPD: 2.7-3.8 (Zone of Proximal Development)  ■ ZPD identifies books at the right level to provide optimal reading challenge without frustration. Enter ZPD in www.ADFbookFind.com to find appropriate books.
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