STRUGGLING READING STUDENTS AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY: A PRACTITIONER INQUIRY ANALYSIS

By

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To Constance Houchen who continually struggled to become educated in the midst of adversity. Your integrity and strength shaped my thinking about my abilities despite the limitations the world intended. Your guidance has been without fail.
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I acknowledge the presence of a lineage. I am center stage in the writing of this, but in reality I take my place among women who tore up pieces of the Bible to teach the alphabet, men who passed down to sons old tales of African Gods and Pantheons, and grandmothers reminding their children to get their learning at all cost. I am because they were. That spirit has shaped our course without error or want.

I have only had three teachers in my schooling who marked my way; whose knowledge of content and craft went beyond a profession to a calling. My first was my third grade teacher, Mrs. Sterling, my second was my eleventh grade English teacher, Mrs. Maples, and my last was Dr. Dorene Ross, who served as Chair for my Thesis. The first two are long gone. Relics of another age, they left their imprint on me and are now relegated to my lore and memoir. The last, Dr. Ross, is thankfully still on this journey with me. I acknowledge her great wisdom and herald the manner in which she has artfully chiseled this thesis into something worth saying. Thank you.

Last, I acknowledge my students. Those mentioned in this work and those unmentioned. You are bright as the sun and the world needs to know it.
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Much attention has been focused on the conundrum within American public schooling known as the Achievement Gap. This phenomenon demonstrates that students of color, primarily African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans underperform their White counterparts in all major measures of achievement. This thesis is an effort to understand that phenomena within the localized context of one High School Intensive Reading classroom with primarily African American students.

This research utilizes Practitioner Inquiry to systematically pose and answer questions regarding my practice as a classroom teacher and its implications for student achievement and performance. In order to accomplish this, I first review literature related to my content area and pedagogical stance. Then the remainder of this thesis is a description of the curriculum I developed as a result of that review, the process by which I collected data for instruction and reflection, and the results and implications of this inquiry.
CHAPTER 1
BACKGROUND

Introduction

In 2007 the Florida Senate enacted a statute that required all students who scored a level one on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), based on a rating scale of one to five, to enroll in and complete an intensive reading course that is scientifically grounded in reading research and provides intensive interventions for students (The Florida Legislature, 2009). The rationale for this mandate was that students who score at a level one have been poor readers for a large portion of their academic life and therefore need carefully crafted interventions. A report by reading experts and presented to the Florida Commissioner of Education stated that a student’s, “current reading fluency difficulties result from the fact that they struggled to become accurate and confident readers early on, did not develop independent reading habits, and have done very little reading compared to students with average or above average reading skills (Florida Department of Education, 2005, p. 2).

Data from the 2009 FCAT indicated that 70% of white students passed the test by scoring level three or higher while 22% percent of this subgroup scored a level one. Comparatively, 36% of African American students passed while 54% remain at a level one (Florida Department of Education, 2005). Hispanic students and American Indian students also scored below White students with 50% and 64% respectively passing the test. The gap in achievement on Florida’s state assessment measure reflects similar national gaps in assessments, graduation rates and dropout rates known as the achievement gap (Haycock, 2001).
With the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, the achievement gap began to take center stage in the agenda to reform education in the United States. As its primary goal, NCLB states that all children, despite differences in economic status and ethnic history, will graduate from high school with skills that prepare them for college, in the year 2014. While this goal may be noble and good, current data and trends suggest that it will certainly go unmet (Berlak, 2001).

To date there has been no one proposed theory that accounts for all of the factors that have caused the achievement gap. Nor has there been one set of strategies that has fully eradicated it (Kober, 2001). Research suggests that this phenomenon does not lie squarely within the parameters of schooling, but rather has its roots in the collective social and economic history of this country with implications as far reaching as health care, psychology and policy formation thus some researchers within the education field reject the notion that the achievement gap can be fully eradicated by the institution of schooling (Rothstein, 2006).

But all would agree that best practices in teaching and high expectations for all students are a significant part of the achievable solution within the institution of schooling. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) note the capacity of best practice, especially as demonstrated by practitioner research and professional development communities, to lessen the impact of “factors and forces outside of school, including failed social policies, poverty and racism as well as a system of schooling in which low expectations and outcomes for certain groups and subgroups of students are endemic” (p.1).
Statement of Purpose

Thus it becomes critical to investigate best practices as they relate to students at risk for academic failure as defined by standards addressed in state standards. More specifically, what teacher beliefs and behaviors, curriculum choices and pedagogical assumptions constitute best practices for these students? In this thesis I will investigate these questions as they relate to my practice as an intensive reading teacher.

The purpose of this study was to document my beliefs and practices as an intensive reading teacher through the process of Action Research in order to examine how my students respond to culturally responsive pedagogy, best practices in reading and English instruction and changes in my pedagogy over time. Specifically, my inquiry was guided by the following question:

What happens when I draw on students’ academic histories, interests, and culture to teach struggling readers more responsively?

In order to investigate the particular context of my intensive reading course I utilized action research to understand the relationship between instituting culturally responsive pedagogy and scientifically based teaching practices, and the achievement of students. Practitioner inquiry is defined as systematic and intentional study in which teachers examine their own assumptions, and develop local knowledge of their own classroom practice over time. Practitioner inquiry on the whole contributes to the existing paradigms in educational research by providing an alternate; emic voice that highlights teacher concerns and has the capacity to affect change in localized scenarios (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Dana & Yendel-Silva, 2003).

Three distinct bodies of literature contribute important perspectives in the understanding of best practices with respect to students of color who are struggling to
read and need to gain proficiency in literature based lexicons. These literature bodies focus on culturally responsive pedagogy, effective English instruction, and effective reading instruction.

Effective English instruction and effective reading instruction are both terms that indicate the body of knowledge within education research that seeks to define, describe and measure what teacher practices and student strategies result in achievement gains for students within the respective disciplines. Culturally responsive pedagogy is a term used by education scholars who are seeking ways to promote achievement, justice and representation for all students, especially those marginalized by what is perceived as an educational system that by and large caters to and serves non-Hispanic white students. To that end, scholars have created a body of knowledge that enables students to maintain their cultural identity while achieving academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995).
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF RELAVENT LITERATURE

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Recent demographic changes coupled with projections for more aggressive change over the next fifty years provide a portrait of an educational constituency more diverse than ever before. Additionally, we face a significant gap in achievement in ethnic groups. Both then require teachers to grapple with the influence of culture on learning and achievement (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008).

Citing the work done by socio-cultural theorist Lev Vygotsky (1978), multicultural scholars and proponents of Culturally responsive pedagogy argue that all learning is mediated by culture, thus, in order to impact students’ long term educational outcomes teachers much adopt practices and implement curricula that are culturally relevant to students (Durden, 2008). Culturally responsive pedagogy seeks to identify and articulate theoretical assumptions as well teaching practices that have the explicit goal of collective empowerment and student academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) first entered in the discourse of educational research largely as a result of the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings. Ladson-Billings’s six-year research project with excellent teachers of African American children culminated with a description of a pedagogy that Ladson-Billings termed culturally relevant, and in the opinion of Ladson-Billings, is central to the success of African American students as well as others who have been on the margins of our nation’s public schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In contrast to either deficit models of school reform, which problematize the student, or curriculum based reform efforts that address the content of instruction, CRP
concerns itself with deeper questions of why, how and what by reflecting upon and highlighting teachers’ beliefs, teachers’ practices, and curriculum choices. Ladson-Billings asserts that, “culturally relevant pedagogy is designed to problematize teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of the student-teacher relationship, the curriculum, schooling, and society. …We need research that proposes alternate models of pedagogy, coupled with exemplars of successful pedagogues” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 21)

Using Grounded Theory, Ladson-Billings analyzed the practice of eight teachers identified by the community as outstanding teachers of African American children. Out of this work she extrapolated three broad propositions which undergird teacher practices that are contextualized as culturally responsive. These three propositions are: teaching promotes academic success, teaching helps to develop or maintain students’ cultural competence, and teaching aids students in developing a critical and broader consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Research by Irvine (2000), Irvine and McAllister (2000), Gay (2002) as well as others has done much to broaden and support the theoretical framework to include implications for teacher education programs as well as linkages between CRP and multicultural education (Banks, et al., 2005; Hefflin, 2002; Irvine, 2001; Irvine & McAllister, 2000; Tileson & Darling, 2008). However, there is still a need for concrete examples of teachers who have translated this theory into practice within the context of their classroom and respective discipline (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008).

Ross, Dodman, & Vescio (2010) categorize these essential teacher practices as those which:
• establish an ethos of care and respect
• utilize “warm demanding” skills to provide a classroom structure where everyone succeeds.
• are culturally familiar, differentiated, explicit and focused on mastery.

Each of these components move beyond the notion that students simply need more support in order to successfully navigate the system of public education as it exists now. Rather, collectively they suggest that teachers need to adopt new tools to maximize the learning of each student. Therefore this section will address each component in turn.

**Ethos of Care and Respect**

Ross, Dodman, & Vescio (2010) describe an ethos of care and respect as a foundational value that supports both instruction and management practices of teachers. Fundamentally, teachers must care about students’ world views, backgrounds and demonstrate that care to students in ways that are recognizable by students themselves. Howard’s (2001) research examining student perceptions of culturally relevant teaching practices found that an attitude of caring was most frequently mentioned by students as a factor in creating a successful learning environment. Gay (2002) states that cultural caring begins with a degree of sensitivity in which teachers learn about students’ cultural experiences so as to scaffold knowledge for the sake of high-level success. Gay states, “this is a very different conception of caring than the often-cited notion of ‘gentle nurturing and altruistic concern,’ which can lead to benign neglect under the guise of letting students of color make their own way and move at their own pace” (Gay, 2002, p. 109).

Furthermore, culturally responsive caring and respect position the teacher in partnership with students as allies acting in the best interest of students. Thus teachers
genuinely believe in students’ academic potential and gifts and therefore share the responsibility to actualize success with students. Morrison, Robbins, & Rose’s (2008) synthesis of classroom practices that utilized CRP describes an interaction in which a teacher exhibits this sense of partnership and personal responsibility by quoting the teacher’s remarks to her Spanish students after a difficult first semester, “It was my fault you failed last semester. I promise you’ll pass. All you have to do is try and come every day” (p. 5).

Research also suggests that caring and respect extends beyond instruction into how teachers manage classroom relationships and peer to peer interactions. Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, (2008) describe the explicit creation of nurturing and safe, supportive environments where students experience a sense of belonging through the use of such activities as sharing events, peer to peer interviews, morning circle and field trips. These classrooms then become communities of accountability, with the ultimate accountability for the success and well being of all lying with the teacher.

**Warm Demanding**

The term “warm demander” denotes a particular teaching disposition that affects all roles of a teacher from disciplinarian to caregiver and characterizes a teacher that is successful in working with students of color (Bondy, Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007; Ware, 2006). More specifically, it often denotes a “no-nonsense” approach to classroom structure, communication and environments wherein the teacher insists on and reinforces a standard of academic excellence in students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). One example given by Ladson-Billings (1995) demonstrates warm demanding in action in a description of a teacher who challenges the African American boys who possessed social power in her classroom to take on academic leadership rather than act out in
negative ways thereby influencing other students to develop similar characteristics and thus create success for the whole class.

Warm demanders however, do more than challenge negative behavior but rather create a sense of authority and discipline in which the teacher is in total control. Thus warm demanders may use strategies such as raising their voice, “mean-talking” or correcting disciplinary problems with students as they arise during instruction with quick, direct commands and then a return to the lesson (Ware, 2006). One student describes a warm demanding by stating, “She’s mean and she hollers a lot, but you learn. I know that I have learned a lot this year, especially in reading and math. And if you look at all of the kids who make the honor roll or honor society, they’re mostly in her class, so I guess it’s worth it” (Howard, 2001, p. 139).

Ware’s (2006) research on warm demanding found that ultimately teachers were creating a culture of achievement by exhibiting firmness in such a way as to challenge students to overcome their personal limitations. Strategies that support this culture include modeling, scaffolding and clarifying curriculum that presents challenges to students by thinking aloud, encouraging collaboration between students and closely monitoring student learning (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). Teachers also use students’ cultural knowledge and instructional strengths as starting points to expand students’ understanding before moving on to harder material (Gay, 2002; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). In one example, a teacher who recognizes that most of her Latino/a students were not well versed enough with formal written Spanish to pass her AP tests began by creating tasks that used oral assessments until her students were able to read and write successfully (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008).
In short, warm demanders are teachers who “expect more” from students and demonstrate that expectation by whatever means are appropriate. They are, as Ware (2006) suggests, “ordinary people” who respond to diverse circumstances with skill and high expectations in such a way as to warrant study and modeling (p. 453).

**Culturally Familiar, Differentiated, Explicit and Mastery Focused Instruction**

Teacher instruction practices beginning with the conceptualizing of curriculum through assessment of standards and benchmarks need to be viewed through the lens of Culturally responsive pedagogy. Thus strategies such as adopting discourse patterns of students, choosing literature and materials that are relevant to students’ lives and activating prior knowledge through examples and objects from student’s home communities are critical to the success of diverse children (Gay, 2002; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008).

Hefflin’s (2002) description of two teacher’s attempts to incorporate culturally familiar practices into instruction illustrates a teacher’s use of call and response to elicit classroom participation from African American students. Also within this study, is the teacher’s journey in incorporating literature that deals with a common experience within the African American community, cornrowing hair. As the teacher learns more from her students about what cornrows are and their significance in the culture, she is able to incorporate this knowledge into the lesson, the reading of a text and follow up lessons designed to help students think critically (Hefflin, 2002). Thus the teacher was able to increase the engagement of students in the process of learning by drawing from an example within their own community.

Other strategies described include teachers requesting that students bring in primary source materials, games, and allowing activities such as step dancing to
enhance curriculum. Teachers also utilized individuals of color as teaching resources and have extended learning beyond the classroom by attending events and speeches from other perspectives (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008).

The goal of these efforts is always to attend to students’ learning styles and cultural variations in such a way to build on students’ “funds of knowledge” in order to provide for each child’s needs and achieve mastery of content while maintaining cultural competence (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). With this goal in mind teachers learn to differentiate and specifically tailor instruction and assessment to student needs. Specific strategies aimed at this include: allowing collaboration in work, explicit and direct instruction of concepts, allowing for student movement during lessons, and providing hands-on active learning formats in instruction (Gay, 2002; Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008; Tileson & Darling, 2008).

Effective English Instruction

Classroom Practice of an Effective English Instructor

Judith Langer (2001) identified six features of effective instruction in reading and writing for middle and high school students. Her conclusions were based on a four-year qualitative study of 25 schools with 44 teachers over a period of two-years. Distinguishing features of instruction in schools that were higher performing included:

- skills and knowledge are taught in multiple types of lessons;
- tests are deconstructed to inform curriculum and instruction;
- within curriculum and instruction, connections are made across content and structure to ensure coherence;
- strategies for thinking and doing are emphasized;
- generative learning is encouraged; and
• Classrooms are organized to foster collaboration and shared cognition (Langer, 2001, p. 24).

**Repeating and Connecting Skills and Knowledge in Multiple Lesson Formats**

Langer’s research suggests that two methods used for instruction by exemplary teachers are teaching skills and knowledge in multiple lesson formats as well as making connections throughout the curriculum. In her research Langer delineated three different types of instruction -- separated, simulated and integrated.

Separated instruction is direct instruction of isolated skills and knowledge, which usually occurs when the teacher leads students in exploration of rules, conventions or facts. Simulated instruction differs in that it involves the application of the concepts or rule within a unit of instruction. Simulated instruction may include exercises prepared by the teacher, where students work with short units of texts to practice the skill or concept of focus. Integration is defined as that which takes place in an imbedded context in a larger more complex product with the goal of a quality finished product such as a letter, or report. In an integrated activity the skill or knowledge is used as one factor contributing to the overall success of the work. Using this method a teacher is able to provide students with numerous opportunities and formats for apprehending skills as well as providing venues in which a student displays higher levels of critical thinking (Langer, 2001).

An example of an isolated approach to instruction can be found in the classroom of Chris Kurchner, a high school English instructor observed as part of a case study of effective English instruction (Ostrowski, 2000). In Kurchner’s classroom, students are observed in the middle of a grammar activity where selected students are role playing the parts of a complex sentence, each student wearing a name tag that denotes a
particular part of speech, while the remainder of the class directs the sequence of the parts based on the rules of conventional grammar. This highly engaging yet isolated activity on grammar becomes what Langer terms an integrated activity as students create an essay for publication and Kurchner reminds students that she will be focusing on the particular grammar structures highlighted in the former lesson.

Ostrowski describes teachers, such as Kurchner, who have the ability of, "reinforcing and integrating what students learned in one domain or context in other domains or contexts when the opportunity presented itself" as "connectors" (2000, p. 21). Ostrowski recognizes the effectiveness of these teachers in that they understand that all elements of English must be understood holistically, and as teachers, it is their responsibility to highlight the connections for students as often as possible.

**Embracing and Assimilating the Test**

It is impossible to ignore the prominence and significance of standardized tests in the lives of students. Langer suggests that a highly effective teacher is able to deconstruct these tests and weave their content through curriculum and instruction. This approach, as opposed to teaching to the test directly, can both increase the chance of success on the test as well as help students to broadly sharpen their reading, writing and critical thinking skills (Langer, 2001). In one exemplary school in Philadelphia, teachers and administrators chose to create a block of time in the instructional week where test preparation was imbedded into authentic classroom activities and instruction with a focus on the development of writing skills, problem solving abilities. Teachers and administrators felt as though it was important to incorporate test preparation as intrinsic component of lessons instead of narrowly focusing on specific skills thought to aid students on the test. (Travers, 2009, p. 17).
Langer notes that effective teachers create collaborative environments such as professional work groups to thoroughly digest the material and standards covered by the test, even taking the test themselves in order to move beyond a surface knowledge of skills tested to a deeper understanding of the knowledge that underlies success in English (Langer, 2001). Whereas in a more typical school (typical indicating average test scores) teachers often devote a semester or more in the curriculum for separate instruction that was often considered test practice and took place totally separately from the curriculum. Langer noted that this type of test prep most often focused on the surface features of the test rather than addressing the deeper skills necessary for success. (Langer, 2001).

**Strategies for Thinking and Doing are Emphasized**

Teachers in higher performing schools explicitly teach students how to think about the work to be completed rather than focusing only on the acquisition of new knowledge or new skills (Langer, 2000). Langer states, “In higher performing schools, students learn and internalize ways to work through a task, and to understand and meet its demands. Through these experiences, they not only become familiar with strategies they can use to approach other tasks, including high stakes tests, but they also develop ways to think and work within a specific field” (Langer, 2000, p. 10)

Teachers often provided students with rubrics and reflective assignments in order to engage students’ metacognitive processes while completing assignments. For example, a teacher in California is described as discussing a unit of curriculum on character analysis where she first introduces “critical thinking questions” and then leads her classroom through small group analysis of book characters based on the critical questions they have crafted. By this teacher’s definition, critical thinking questions are
universal in nature but are also a launching point for the discussion of a text. This activity which highlighted how to think about character rather than a skill based discussion on one character in a text provided students with a method for thinking about character analysis within the context of literature (Langer, 2000).

Langer also noted the use of rubrics and reflective questions to help students understand what is necessary to achieve a higher score on an assignment as well as to assist students in developing thorough, complete, and organized work. Teachers also provide an opportunity for students to collaborate on the development of rubrics (Langer, 2000).

**Generative Learning**

Generative learning allows teachers to continually reach beyond the tasks completed in class to a deeper knowledge and “generativity of ideas” (Langer, 2000, p. 12). Thus students acquire skills and knowledge and are then expected to use that knowledge both critically and creatively in new contexts (Langer, 2000). Understanding is considered a launching point for imagination and new discoveries (Langer, 2001). Conversely, more typical schools stop exploring when a learning goal is met and students often move on to a new unconnected skill or topic.

Langer’s work suggests the following type of activities that foster generative learning: text exploration and writing utilizing different points of view and subject approaches, using research and discussion to extend texts and well as student concerns, extending understanding of literature beyond students’ initial interpretations and developing follow up assignments to highlight this (Langer, 2000).
Collaborative Cognitive Spaces

Classroom space in high performing schools is utilized in such a way as to promote shared learning and social interaction between students. Students work in “communicative groups” that draw upon their own knowledge base as a person, a member of a culture and a student. These groupings are often flexible and require students to assume the role of teachers, students and researchers. Teachers facilitate this type of work by treating students as active participants in a dynamic community that relies on the interactions of its members to achieve goals (Langer, 2000). However, in more traditionally achieving schools teachers limit group discussions about issues of classroom management or time spent off task and often provide students with questions that have clear predetermined answers.

Strategies for Reading

Much of the literature on success in reading is focused on the use of either teaching or learning strategies to help students make sense of texts and master metacognitive processes that are necessary while reading (Kamil, 2003). Teaching strategies are content focused and teacher initiated while learning strategies are student directed and used to build independence in reading. Examples of teaching strategies include guided reading, direct instruction, and the use of graphic organizers. Learning strategies include note taking, metacognitive training, and outlining. A 1991 report by Alvermann and Moore (as cited in Kamil, 2003, p.5) reviewed the literature on literacy for grades 7-12 and found that there was approximately a 60 percent “significant facilitative” effect in studies regarding strategy instruction (Kamil, 2003, p. 5). However, this effect was much lower than that assumed by scholars using these strategies; the
report concluded that if scholars were to understand literacy instruction at the secondary level then much more work would need to be done.

Another report by the National Reading Panel (NRP) analyzed 203 scientifically research based studies of comprehension strategy instruction that have been conducted over the last two decades and then classified and grouped the studies according to the kinds of strategies used and the efficacy reported in the study. NRP concluded that the following seven strategies show strong scientific support for the claim of improving comprehension: comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, graphic and semantic organizers including story maps, question answering, question generation, and summarization (National Reading Panel, 2000). The report continues in defining and discussing each strategy in turn.

**Comprehension Monitoring**

Comprehension monitoring is the active process by which readers decide whether or not they understand the text and then apply strategies to correct problems in understanding (Kamil, 2003). The NRP (2000) report found that while studies on comprehension monitoring were both reliable and replicable, the strategy did not seem to have a large generalizability factor and therefore this strategy although useful was not able to be used in a variety of types of texts such as narrative or expository not could it transfer easily across content areas. Evidence seems to indicate that the strategy should be used within a process that includes multiple comprehension strategies. The report also noted that studies dealing with comprehension monitoring were conducted on second to sixth grade students only (National Reading Panel, 2000).
Cooperative Learning

Cooperative learning utilizes small groups to engage students in the learning process both socially and synergistically (Kamil, 2003). The NRP report (2000) found that peer-to-peer instruction of reading strategies increased retention of the strategy and promoted intellectual discussion among students thereby increasing reading comprehension. Cooperative learning also allows students to retain a sense of control and autonomy in the classroom (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers are representations of text that are either visual or spatial. Extensively researched in Social Studies and Science disciplines, graphic organizers appear to increase the retention of information within content areas (National Reading Panel, 2000). However, the NRP report continues that students need to have skill in reading and writing in order to utilize this strategy effectively. Common graphic organizers used in literacy instruction include: Venn diagrams, KWL charts (what I know, what I want to know, what I have learned), timelines, story strips, maps and webs (Kamil, 2003).

Question Answering

Question answering, a very popular form of reading assessment, is also used as a comprehension strategy (Kamil, 2003). Used as one of a multiple of comprehension strategies, question answering can have a significant effect on comprehension and may enable teachers to guide and monitor students progress (National Reading Panel, 2000). Kamil (2003) noted the use of a technique called QAR (Question-Answer-Relationships) as an effective strategy for teaching the locations of answers within texts.
**Question Generating**

Question generating refers to the process by which students are taught to create and answer their own questions about a text; NRP (2000) notes that this strategy yields the strongest scientific effectiveness with respect to standardized tests, short answer and summarization assessments. Kamil (2003) notes that this strategy can be used as a single strategy or as part of a combination of strategies such as reciprocal teaching using cooperative groups.

**Summarization**

Summarization is the process of reading text and articulating the most important information within. NRP (2000) found three major effects of this strategy. Summarization increases the writing skill of the reader, aids recall in question answering and improves the identification of main idea.

The goal of all reading strategies is to have students become more aware of their metacognitive capabilities and aid them in supporting their efforts to understand what they are reading. In order to successful instruct students in the use of these strategies a teacher must acknowledge the limitations and applications for each and utilize his/her own pedagogical leanings to craft a curriculum that supports students. However, even with the use of these strategies and Langer’s (2001) work on effective English instruction, it is possible to leave the needs of some students unmet. Therefore we must consider the case of students who are termed struggling readers and often fall within the lowest quartile on standardized achievement tests.

**The Case of the Struggling Reader**

The portrait of a struggling reader differs from that of a student reading at or above grade level in many ways. In a descriptive study of 354 adolescent readers on 11
measures of reading, Hock’s (2009) research identified that the skill profile of an urban struggling reader was below the mean by one standard deviation in each measurement of reading administered. He found the greatest deficits were in both fluency and comprehension but major deficits also were found at the word level. Hock’s work suggests that teachers of struggling secondary students must be able to address deficits such as word identification and word attack skills that are often overlooked in a high school English class.

McDonald, Thornley, Statey & Moore's (2009) work with the San Diego Striving Readers' Project identified five sets of strategies that proved to be successful both within content areas and English instruction for secondary students identified as struggling readers. The list is comprised of: previewing text and applying knowledge of text forms and ways to use this knowledge to prepare for reading, using the surface and language features of texts, making inferences and synthesizing information while cross checking with reading previews, solving vocabulary problems as they arise while reading, and writing for different purposes (McDonald, Thornley, Staley, & Moore, 2009).

Other studies corroborate the effectiveness of comprehension strategies and explicit instruction for struggling readers. Deshler et al. (2001, as cited by Nesh), examined instructional interventions and found that teachers overwhelmingly utilize level 1 interventions to address students’ struggles. Level 1 interventions include modifying content and curriculum but do not incorporate more elaborate techniques and learning strategies. Most often, teachers cite time constraints as the reason for choosing level 1 interventions (Ness, 2008). Level 2 interventions however yield gains in
struggling readers understanding of texts and retention of specific content area information in secondary classrooms (Ness, 2008). Level 2 interventions include explicit literary instruction, or direct instruction of text and vocabulary.

Many districts are turning to commercial reading programs in order to address the need for Level 2 interventions with struggling readers (Fisher & Gay, 2006). Fisher and Gay (2006) discuss the use of such programs and highlight fundamental conditions that need to be present to support the achievement of struggling readers. They find that the following five elements must be present in any intervention program:

- The teacher must lead the assessment and instructional efforts in order to provide an individualized experience that incorporates student’s needs and maximizes engagement and motivation.

- Interventions should represent a big picture comprehensive approach to reading and writing and thus instruction at the word level should be incorporated to help maximize understanding of the texts.

- Engagement, at the secondary level is key. Effective instruction therefore must include student’s personal interest, reflect real world literature and utilize diverse materials and multiliteracies.

- The intervention must be driven by thorough assessment. That is, assessment beyond the standardized test that secured the student’s placement in an intervention. Struggling readers are complex and need to be assessed using a variety of measures in a variety of reading purposes.

- Authentic reading and writing needs to be the focal point of the intervention. Skill instruction and acquisition should be used to support the actual reading and writing taking place in the classroom.

Thus teachers of struggling reading students must incorporate these elements of instruction and utilize the research in effective strategies for particular weaknesses within this subset of reading students. While all teachers have the goal of incorporating assessment to influence practice as it develops over time, teachers of struggling students may need to assess more often and more thoroughly to meet the evolving
needs of individualized students. Research on this group also suggests that engagement is a linchpin of achievement. Thus it becomes necessary to delve further into the research on student perceptions of the experience of being a struggling reader and how best to actualize engagement within courses.

**Perceptions and Engagement**

What differentiates a struggling reader and a proficient reader in terms of their placement within courses in most high schools is their ability to attain a score on a standardized test that equates with on grade-level performance. Once students perform below this standard they are often placed, by state mandate, in intensive reading courses designed to aid their growth. Often this placement comes at the loss of an elective course for the students (Donaldson, 2007). Students are often then left with a series of academic courses that they struggle with as well as a sense of loss and failure based on the mandate that put them in the intensive course. In Donaldson’s case study of students placed in intensive reading courses, she found that the majority of students felt surprised or upset that their elective classes were being replaced. Students also reported having received negative social feedback regarding their ability to read. One student responded, "It made me feel dumb" (Donaldson, 2007, p. 224).

Self efficacy plays a large role in the motivation or lack thereof of a struggling reader (Hall, 2007). Across studies on this topic researchers conclude that struggling readers may believe that will have little success in reading therefore it is not worth their effort, and students may also behave disruptively in order to keep form reading (Hall, 2007). Motivation to read is described as a powerful tool that can overcome reading weaknesses and allow students to comprehend material far beyond their normal capacity.
Conclusion

Based on the review of literature in Culturally responsive pedagogy, effective English instruction and strategies for reading I derived several guiding principles to inform my practice. Those principles were: creating strong and caring relationships with students based on mutual respect and high expectations, accessing student thinking regarding their own learning needs and their cultural background to inform the curriculum, teaching skills in multiple formats both explicitly and generatively, and consistently utilizing a variety of scientifically proven reading strategies to support metacognition and comprehension.

As an experienced reading teacher I felt proficient at designing a curriculum that included aspects of Langer’s (2001) synthetic analysis. In the past, over a series of assignments on a set of related texts, I provided students with multiple opportunities to practice and sharpen reading skills by scaffolding instruction beginning with an explicit teacher directed lesson and exercise to gradually encourage students to become more generative in their work production, critical analysis and outcomes. I was accustomed to providing students with multiple opportunities to acquire new skills by repeating and revisiting strategies at different times throughout the year through different texts and in different formats.

However, I did not specifically utilize the seven strategies provided by the National Reading Panel (2000) strategically nor did I focus instruction for struggling readers using the five strategies suggested by the San Diego Striving Reader’s Program (McDonald et al, 2009). My focus now is to weave these recommendations together within framework of Culturally responsive pedagogy through a process of action and
reflection in order to tailor the curriculum to the needs of the struggling readers in my classroom.

Thus my revised practice began with an establishment of an ethic of caring and high expectations within the classroom. Specifically, I sought to learn about my students’ world view as shaped by their cultural experiences and in this discover their aim for education and motivations to learn. My aim was to develop a thorough understanding of my students’ particular assets and to begin to assess where their cultural capital might influence our curriculum and classroom environment.

After getting a clearer picture of who my students were I began to weave best practices in English instruction and strategies for reading within the context of the curriculum. My focus therefore was on providing a wide spectrum of opportunities for learning to provide explicit instruction of skills while never losing sight of authentic opportunities for reading and writing and critical analysis of texts and concepts through the use assignments that are generative and creative in nature. The following chapter will describe the process by which I implemented the guiding principles into action.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH PLAN AND METHODS

Practitioner inquiry is a cyclical process that most commonly begins by posing questions or "wonderings" that arise from problems within the classroom, collecting data in order to gain insight into the wondering, analyzing data along with reading relevant literature, making changes in practice as a result of new understandings and sharing conclusions and findings with others (Dana & Yendel-Silva, 2003). My wondering was: What happens when I draw on students’ academic histories, interests, and culture to teach struggling readers more responsively? Sources of data included student focus groups interviews, individual interviews, teacher reflection journal, student artifacts and statewide assessment measures.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), note that action research is a continual cycle in which the researcher questions, observes, and acts with the goal of improving practice and sharing findings within the educational community. This cycle is often fluid in nature but has its foundation in methods of qualitative data analysis within social science fields (Dana & Yendel-Silva, 2003). In order to analyze data I coded data from student artifacts, assessment documents, focus groups, and my own teacher journal.

Background and Context

My course was taught at P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School. P. K. Yonge Developmental Research School was established in 1934 as an affiliate of the University of Florida. P. K. Yonge’s objective is to create innovations and solutions to concerns within the educational community that can be disseminated to others in the state and nation. The school serves as its own school district and enrolls approximately
1150 students from kindergarten through twelfth grade annually (University of Florida, 2010).

All schools in the state of Florida were affected by the 2009 State Statute (The Florida Legislature) which mandates that any student who scores at a Level 1 on FCAT in Reading must be enrolled in an Intensive Reading Course, which will provide small group instruction, and appropriate strategies for diagnosing and meeting the needs of students. Furthermore the statute states that this must happen in addition to the student’s regular English course and will occur in a 90-minute block of instruction.

Historically, P. K. Yonge has accomplished this mandate by either enrolling students in a Reading Intervention program such as Read 180, which is offered by Scholastic Inc. and purchased by schools or districts for use, or by creating a course with an individualized curriculum specifically designed for the students in attendance. However, during the 2009-2010 school year the Administration at P.K. Yonge worked cooperatively with me in allowing me to create a curriculum that would meet the needs of my students utilizing my professional knowledge as a Reading teacher. Thus, I began to research and create a scope and sequence of curriculum that would instruct students in the standards to be covered on the 10th Grade FCAT exam.

**Inquiry Method**

I utilized a cycle of planning, action, assessment, reflection and re-planning to both create my curriculum and research my practice and make changes in the curriculum as needed in order to reach the goal of helping students pass the FCAT exam. The following is a description of the cycles and the choices I made over the course of the academic year.
My practice underwent three distinct cycles over the academic year. These cycles were used to both address my wondering and to create, assess and adapt instruction with regard to student learning and achievement. Ultimately, my students would be assessed through their performance on the FCAT test, which was the reason they were in this course and would serve as the gateway to their graduation. Therefore, although I examined a variety of data throughout the study, their performance on the FCAT exam was a key criterion for evaluating my practice.

The FCAT test in Reading for 10th grade is a criterion referenced test which measures students’ progress toward benchmarks identified in the Sunshine State Standards (Florida Department of Education, 2008-2010). The test’s content is broken down into four clusters of skills, which require students to show ability in their understanding of words and phrases in context, to identify main ideas, plot and purpose of a text, to compare and contrast information and identify cause and effect, and to use reference material and undertake research. Therefore my goal was to create a curriculum that would instruct students in these clusters so that they would be successful on the FCAT.

Unit Cycles

Unit 1: Class Building and Diagnostic Assessments, August 24, 2009-September 4, 2009

I planned the first unit in order to begin practicing the essential principles I put forth in my literature review. Thus my goals were to create a cohesive classroom culture, assess students’ abilities to work collectively, to gain an understanding of students’ cultural world view, assess students’ personal learning styles and preferences, and to diagnose basic reading and writing ability. I chose to focus on these particular aspects
for several reasons. As a class, we would be spending much of our time in small
groups, working with partners, or working as one large group therefore I wanted to
judge students’ competence and comfort level in working in these environments and I
wanted to access information regarding themselves, their experiences and their worlds.
Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students (Cushman,
2003), suggests that students feel cared about and respected when asked to share
responsibility for envisioning the goals and expectations within the classroom, therefore
I utilized a cooperative format and allowed students to co-generate rules and guidelines
for communication and interactions within the classroom. This activity set the stage for
my practice as a warm demander and created a set of standards that I could enforce
and refer to as needed. Cushman also suggests that students felt cared for when
teachers to get to know aspects of their home life, personalities and learning styles, thus
I used an on line multiple intelligences test, and several other assessments to gather
needed information. The following section will detail the assessments used in unit one
and provide information regarding how those assessments informed instruction

Teacher observation

Assessment began with teacher observation. This first observation was designed
as a two-day observation of group problem solving activities within the context of
creating a group map of important locations and events within each student’s life. For
this assessment students were given a series of tasks that required students to
individually list the locations of their homes, as well as important social or extra-
curricular activities and then as a group to create a map and plot each of these locations
in relation to the others on the map. I provided students with an example of a map with
my home and other important locations plotted, but gave no further directions as to how
group should carry out the task as I wanted to see how the group would choose to go about the assignment and what roles each member of the group would naturally take one. As students worked I took detailed notes which focused on describing each student’s ability to articulate information verbally, work with peers in a small group of three to create a graphic representation, and then organize and present orally demonstrating their final project.

**Multiple intelligences test**

The second assessment was an on-line Multiple Intelligence test based on Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligence (http://www.bgfl.org/bgfl/custom/resources_ftp/client_ftp/ks3/ict/multiple_int/index.htm) Gardner (Gardner & Hatch, 1989) describes seven different forms of intelligence that allowed humans to solve problems or create products that have value in different cultural contexts. The seven intelligences are logical-mathematical, linguistic, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Gardner’s Theory postulates that standard assessments, which rely on linguistic symbolization and logical-mathematical symbolization almost exclusively, depict only a limited view of human intelligence and are therefore a narrow portrait of a student’s abilities and predispositions. Tests based on Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligence seek to provide a more comprehensive view of human intelligence and provide clues to students’ dominant ways of organizing information about their world. As such, the assessment helps a teacher plan ways to initiate instruction to make student engagement and success more likely.
The on-line assessment creates a pie chart for each student that reflects a ratio score of each of the seven intelligences. From these profiles I created class profiles that reflected the categorical intelligences of the whole group.

**Autobiographical essay**

A final assessment was a five paragraph autobiographical essay. Each student was first asked to interview a classmate on his/her personal history, family of origin, educational history and future goals. Students then handed their notes over to the originator of the information who in turn created a five paragraph essay describing this information. Essays were evaluated using a rubric that assessed clarity of writing, use of details and descriptions, topic sentences, organization and writing conventions (See Appendix A). The writing assessment provided individual profiles for each student and a class profile that indicated general weaknesses in sentence construction, grammar, and clarity of writing whereas most students were proficient in organization of an essay and the use of topic sentences. I used this information as baseline data as well as diagnostically to create a plan of action for the next unit of instruction.

I also used this information to aid my understanding of the social and cultural world of each student. From this assessment I began to understand my students’ connections to each other, the important people in each of their lives, their goals and the story by which they narrated their own life and experience. As a culturally responsive educator this information was critical to designing a curriculum that would best meet the long term needs of my students.

**Unit 2: Short Term FCAT Preparation, September 7, 2009-October 9, 2010**

The retake of the 10th Grade Reading FCAT was October 13, 2009 therefore I designed a unit that would reinforce skills my students would need to understand the
format of the test, to think critically about the content, and to utilize test taking skills to maximize their score. Specifically, I taught students standardized test deconstruction, test taking strategies, the process of elimination and how to write both short and extended essay responses for standardized tests. I also began to teach critical thinking skills and reading strategies in non-fiction texts. Instruction and assessment for unit two were connected and cyclical as explained below.

**Student journal entry**

First I analyzed a student journal entry. For this entry students were directed to keep a running record of any observations, self reflections or questions that arose while taking a sample portion of a released 10th grade Reading FCAT exam. I gave students examples of appropriate responses for this journal entry and emphasized the importance of their explicit comments and the diagnostic nature of the FCAT portion they were completing. I categorized the data based on the types of comments made and number of times each comment was mentioned by students. Those categories, in order of significance were: comments on attention and focus, vocabulary, organization of passage, and specific questions regarding an item. I then addressed these comments and questions in subsequent whole class instruction.

**FCAT sample test passages**

I introduced students to skills that would support success in standardized test taking such as re-reading questions, skimming and summarization, underlining boldface words and definitions, and becoming proficient in the use of the process of elimination. Over the course of the unit I worked cyclically first introducing several skills and then testing the use of those skills in the completion of a sample 10th grade Reading FCAT passage. I scored each sample passage both for the use of the strategy taught and for
correct responses. After each sample test, I re-taught any strategy in which students were weak using whole group instruction for areas where over 60% of the class were deficient and individual instruction for other areas of deficiency as needed. I continued this cycle of focusing on several strategies then providing a sample test then repeating instruction for areas where students were deficient three times thus in the course of the unit I covered the five skills mentioned above at least once and repeated instruction for each an average of one time.

**Essay writing**

For each student, I also scored two short and extended essay responses using the rubric designed by the Florida Department of Education (Appendix B), and over the course of the unit scored 3 passages with questions and answers from a 2007 released 10th grade FCAT exam.

**Critical reading guide**

At this time I introduced students to a strategy of critical questioning in reading using a Critical Reading Guide Worksheet that formed the basis for instruction on critical thinking while reading texts in our course. I assessed students’ ability to answer a series of questions on a variety of texts including a short fiction text, a poem and a short non-fiction text, all the while scaffolding instruction in the use of the strategy. First, I introduced the strategy in a whole group format using the lyrics of a popular song as a text, and then assigned a fiction text to be read silently and had students answer questions as a whole group with my assistance, then as a partner activity with my assistance if necessary, and lastly as an individual activity to be completed silently and turned in for grading (see Appendix C).
Unit 3: Immigration, October 19, 2010-December 14, 2010

In this unit I began to integrate the principle practicing skills in multiple formats into the reading of nonfiction and fiction texts. Specifically I taught skills of evaluating reliability and validity of information in a non-fiction text, articulating and summarizing the main idea of a paragraph, chapter and text, synthesizing several sources of data and identifying themes and author’s perspective in fiction. Once again I worked cyclically, first to instruct students in concepts, then to provide strategies to practice skills then to assess student progress and re-teach as necessary. All assessments within unit three were curriculum based and one major goal based on the principles identified within my literature review was to scaffold students’ understanding in such a way as to gradually lead students toward activities that support generativity and creative critical thinking. The process below details the sequence by which I accomplished that goal.

Text based instruction

First, I introduced a nonfiction text on immigration and instructed students in the use of comprehension monitoring while reading, then students completed the Critical Reading Guide Worksheet and I assessed students’ answers for percentage of answers correct. During the course of the unit we read a series of fiction and nonfiction texts on the subject of immigration. One was a fictionalized account from the point of view of an immigrant, another was a large document that contextualized U.S. immigration policy historically, and other texts addressed specific issues such as procedures for citizenship, pro/anti immigration arguments, and narratives of immigrants. Over the course of these texts, I instructed students in the strategies of comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning groups, question generation, and summarization.
Generative activities and lessons

I evaluated students by requiring students to generate questions related to immigration on a Wiki (houchenspace.pbworks.com) and required each student to select another student’s question to answer utilizing the texts we discussed. I utilized a rubric to assess students’ answers on the wiki (Appendix D). I also evaluated student-generated multiple choice test questions for reliability and validity, and students scores on a culminating unit test.

Unit 4: Mid Year Reflections, January 7, 2010-January 15, 2010

During this time I analyzed FCAT retake scores from the October 13, 2010 test. Six of the fourteen students who retook the test passed at this time with a score of level two or higher and were thus removed from my class. Of the remaining eight students, 75% displayed an increase in their Developmental Scale Score from their previous FCAT score in April of 2009.

I conducted student focus groups to gather information on students’ perceptions of self-efficacy, classroom management, engagement and curriculum (Appendix E). Student participation in focus groups was entirely voluntary. Focus group interviews were conducted during lunch with students receiving parent permission prior to attending. Ninety three percent of class participants opted to partake in the focus group interviews. Over the course of three months I held four focus group sessions and each student was placed in one focus group session. Each session lasted approximately forty minutes, during which I posed the questions in Appendix E and took notes on their responses using a word processing program. I sat apart from students and created an environment where they engaged in conversations with classmates in order to answer the questions.
I also held informal discussions in class to solicit feedback on students’ needs with regard to classroom environment and students’ suggestions for classroom practice in the two months leading up to the next FCAT exam on March 9, 2010. I coded these data into categories that included: students needing more structure, students needing frequent breaks in class, suggestions for break activities, and comments on classroom management. I then adjusted my practice based on these findings and incorporated them into the framework I developed utilizing my review of literature.

Unit 5: “Same Kind of Different As Me” by Ron Hall and Denver Moore, January 15, 2010-March 9, 2010

In this unit I focused instruction on teaching students how to make inferences from texts, identifying and articulating author’s purpose in a text, and strategies for decoding unfamiliar vocabulary terms. I also continued instruction on reading for comprehension. I chose these areas of instruction as they are commonly assessed on the FCAT test and are necessary skills to understand canonical fiction at the High School level. I utilized a nonfiction narrative text as a base for instruction and provided students with large chunks of classroom time to read the text, uninterrupted but with support if needed, utilizing the strategies addressed in former units.

Curriculum based assessments

Two curriculum based assessments were used. First, I assessed student’s ability to read for comprehension by assigning the use of sticky notes as a means of monitoring comprehension and checked these notes for unresolved questions and comments by students while reading, most of the items noted on sticky notes were addressed as students continued to read the text. Second, students participated in two Inside/Outside circles. Inside/Outside circles are a strategy designed to facilitate
discussion and critical thinking in students. Students are given a series of questions or conversation prompts based on the text or subject and then assigned a particular seat either in an inner intimate circle of four to five students or in a surrounding outer circle which holds the remaining students. Students in the intimate circle are expected to hold a conversation on the text/subject using the teacher generated questions and conversation prompts. Students on the outside of the circle are to listen critically to the ensuing conversation, when they feel as though they have something to impart they may tap a member of the inner circle on his/her shoulder and take their place in the circle. Thus, the goal is to have a fluid and sustained conversation which allows students to participate equitably and at their own discretion. As students participated in the Inside/Outside circles, I used a rubric to assess the quality of students’ participation and comments in the circle discussion as well as their understanding of the text (Appendix F).

**Test data**

I also evaluated multiple choice test questions generated by students for comprehension of the texts as well as for students’ ability to generate valid multiple questions using a similar format as standardized tests. Then I assessed students’ results on a unit test that contained short answer, multiple choice and essay questions. Finally, I analyzed students FCAT scores from the March 9, 2010 test for gains and weaknesses and to assess my practice as a whole in helping students meet the goal of passing the FCAT with a score of a level 2 or more.

The next chapter will contain an analysis of my practice through the lens of the theoretical framework I researched in my review of literature as well my reflections on my practices and my insights as I sought to incorporate elements of Culturally
responsive pedagogy, effective English instruction and effective instruction for struggling readers into my practice.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

In order to answer the wondering, what happens when I draw on students’ academic histories, interests, and culture to teach struggling readers more responsively, I completed a review of relevant literature in the areas of culturally responsive pedagogy specifically for African American students, effective English instruction for secondary students and effective instruction for struggling readers. I then attempted to put the research into practice in my curriculum and instruction. This chapter will elaborate on that process by describing my practice in detail and then for each cycle I will report on results and achievement, specifically with respect to major classroom exams and FCAT achievement.

The first distinct cycle of inquiry occurred from the beginning of school on August 24, 2010 until the retake of the FCAT test on October 13, 2009. The second cycle began after the FCAT and ended on January 15, 2010 as I finished analyzing FCAT retake scores, results of focus groups and informal discussions with students, and the last cycle began on January 18, 2010 and ended on March 9, 2010 as my students took the final FCAT of the year.

Cycle One

During the first cycle, I drew largely from the literature on Culturally responsive pedagogy for African American students as the majority of my students were African Americans, and the literature regarding strategies for reading as my class make up was 100% struggling readers as defined by their scores on the FCAT test. We had only a short amount of time to prepare for the first retake so I wanted to utilize strategies that would have the most benefit.
Immediately I sought to problematize teaching for my students in such a way as to suggest that the disconnect between their scores in reading and their ability to read may not be indicative of an intelligence problem but related to problems of ineffective teaching, poor curriculum choices and/or a teacher who lacked training in their specific needs as learners. These were strong claims, but I felt as though they were credible and well situated in the research on Culturally responsive pedagogy for African Americans. Also, I wanted to communicate to my students my belief in their ability to succeed and provide a means for distancing their past failures from their present.

Thus in the first days of class I presented my personal history, my teaching philosophy, and details of previous academic successes and failures that I had faced in my school history. I presented this with the intent to create an authentic relationship with my students, one where I was willing to share first and then expect them to follow suit. I elaborated on this by sharing my own autobiography during the first unit of instruction as an example of a well-written five paragraph autobiographic essay but also with the intention to answer lingering questions about my identity and my beliefs.

I followed up with two important gestures. First I established a motto for my teaching performance, which was, “If you fail, I fail.” Thus directly tying their performance on the FCAT to my performance as a teacher and last, by providing students with both my home phone number and my cell phone number. I allowed students to enter this into their phones on the spot and then reciprocated this by entering as many phone numbers as students would give me into my cell phone as well. My hope was that students who resonated with the notion of a warm demander (Bondy,
Ross, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2007) would identify with this behavior and become more receptive to learning and more engaged as participants in the course.

Over the course of the first cycle, I continued to exemplify tenets of Culturally responsive pedagogy by eliciting student suggestions on our physical space in order to make it as inviting and culturally congruent as possible. Student suggestions resulted in our class moving locations from a small room at the back of the school library to a separate portable with more possibilities with respect to flexible grouping and individual work.

I infused the curriculum with literature and music that resonates in the African American community. For example, as we began to study literature during the second unit of cycle one, I used a popular rhythm and blues song by the artist Usher to introduce students to the Critical Reading Guide worksheet. I knew the majority of the class would be familiar with the song’s lyrics and the narrative content and thus be able to draw out details of the song’s plot as they answered the critical reading questions. My hope was that if I could use the bridge of culture and restore a connection to a familiar text then students would be more apt to focus on the unfamiliar strategy of analyzing a text critically. After this exercise, I introduced more traditional short fiction texts and non-fiction texts into the structure of the Critical Reading Guide. Repeatedly, I referred back to the initial exercise with the Usher song to aid students in their analysis of unfamiliar texts.

The first short non-fiction text I introduced students to was chapter 1 of Fires in the Bathroom (Cushman, 2003). I chose this text because it includes the voices and writing of students who appear to be very similar to my students but is also editorialized and
synthesized by Cushman, which adds more sophistication and complexity to the text. Thus the text was similar to that which I expected students to find on the FCAT. Do to the dual nature of the work, my students were able to connect with the cultural congruencies within the text and also begin to tackle material that would be more in line with what they would be receiving on the state exam. Once again, we used the Critical Reading Guide worksheet to analyze the text and students completed the worksheet in partners, as CRP research suggests that African American students benefit from cooperative learning environments and flexible grouping (Shade, Kelly, & Oberg, 1997).

Subsequently during this cycle, my instruction became two pronged. On one front, I was attempting to help students increase in their generative understanding and appreciation of literature. More specifically I was attempting to introduce students to literature that would contain real world relevance and significance for them while engaging them in critical dialogues and analysis of the texts. On the second front, I was instructing students in comprehension and question answering strategies for texts that may hold no real world significance, but would be similar to those that would appear on the FCAT.

For the texts that were similar in nature to those that would be found on the FCAT exam I focused on comprehension strategies and test taking skills that would help students remain attentive throughout the passage. Repeatedly we practiced how to keep the pen moving while reading by asking questions, underlining important information and replying to the text. We also spent a large amount of time in this unit deconstructing question stems so as to understand what was being required of the student. In order to accomplish this, I had students translate example question stems
into their own pattern of speech. The point was to create a cue phrase that students would be able to refer to repeatedly when encountering a question stem that they had already deconstructed. We then used these cue phrases as we continued to read and answer questions on FCAT style passages for the remainder of the cycle. For example, if a question was worded in such a way as to require students to understand the author’s purpose for writing a text, we substituted the phrase, “what’s he trying to tell me or get me to do” for the question stem at hand.

There were several assessments in this unit but the most important was the FCAT retake and the scores for this would not be available until the end of my second cycle. However, results of classroom sample FCAT exams indicated that my students had on average increased their scores approximately 15% over the unit and the scores ranged from the 35% percentile to the 75 percentile on the last sample FCAT I evaluated shortly before the test. Over half of the students were scoring below the 60th percentile on each sample FCAT given.

**Cycle Two**

During cycle two, I integrated Langer’s (2001) work on effective English instruction into the curriculum while maintaining a culturally responsive framework and utilizing strategies for teaching struggling readers. We began the unit by completing an activity called Take a Stand (Appendix G) where I gave students a fairly controversial topic (Immigration) and asked students to voice and justify their perceptions and opinions with respect to it. Activities such as Take a Stand provide a learning context that is both generative and cooperative, two strategies illustrated as effective in both Langer’s work and within the literature on Culturally responsive pedagogy.
I found that students had a wide spectrum of opinions with regard to legal and illegal immigration policies in the United States and also seemed to be highly motivated by this topic. Thus we spend a large part of the cycle studying the topic with the goal of having students refine their position while simultaneously gaining reading skills. I felt that utilizing this topic would be a good way to capitalize on an authentic interest in students and push them past their current knowledge.

The assignments in this unit culminated in a large jigsaw project with information, opinions and questions and answers about immigration displayed on wiki pages. The project was done in steps with students working individually, in partners and as small groups as the need arose.

Students completed the work in steps in order to create a large body of knowledge as a final project. First, students read and analyzed a short story by Amy Tan in which she fictionalizes an account of a person’s immigration experience in the United States. I instructed students again in the skills of recognizing an author’s purpose and perspective, which are both areas tested on the FCAT. However, by reintroducing these skills in the context of someone’s experience with immigration I was able to provide a different format for the skill. In addition the assignment was contextualized because the students had already formed strong opinions and attachments. Langer (2001) states that repeating skills and lessons in multiple formats results in more effective instruction and retention on the part of the students.

Next, students worked with partners to comprehend and take notes on a large packet of information about immigration. The information, compiled by The New York Times Upfront, a magazine for High School students, was a fifty page special report,
which provided a historical and issue based analysis of current topics in immigration policy. The report included text, charts and graphs. For the assignment, each set of partners was given six to seven pages of text, on which they took notes and then presented a summary of the information to the whole class so that everyone would have an overview of the entire packet without having to read fifty pages.

My instructional aim for this section was to have students get acclimated to attentively reading large chunks of nonfiction text. I wanted them to practice skills of skimming, underlining, summarization, and comprehension monitoring, all skills which are scientifically known to improve comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). During this instructional period I re-taught those skills and supported students in their use as they were completing the work on their packets. Having to present the information to the whole class provided added incentive to complete the job well and to articulate their understanding of the text. Additionally students had the benefit of working with partners to complete the activity.

In the third step, each pair was given one specific text to analyze and deconstruct. Then the pair had to create their own wiki page of notes and information that addressed the main points of their article. For this section of the unit, I focused instruction on creating graphic or semantic representations of text, and continued to support students in their efforts to read for instruction and find the main idea.

According to the National Reading Panel (2000), creating graphic representations of text is one strategy that improves comprehension in readers; therefore I wanted to integrate this into the curriculum. I wanted to do this critically, without handing students the graphic and having them fill it in. This exercise allowed students to work with
partners to create their own graphic representation of the material. Each group did this
differently; some used a chart, some used a flow diagram and some created symbols to
represent important information. A few used no graphic at all, but instead used bullets
or numbers to articulate the important information.

Finally, after each pair of students had created their page of information, students
listed a lingering question on immigration on another wiki page. After all questions were
listed, students went back and selected one question posted by a classmate to answer
using any or all of the information we studied in the unit: the text by Amy Tan, the
packet from the New York Times, and the student notes uploaded to the wiki. My focus
was to require students to use writing skills to synthesize information into a cohesive
explanation or argument. Their responses, written in essay format, were graded through
the use of a rubric.

Major assessments for this unit included analysis of wiki based essay responses,
and a culminating unit test. Student essays were scored with a point scale from 0-35,
with 35 points equating to a letter grade of A. The average score was 24 points, which
was a percentile of 68. All students who scored below a C on the assignment were
required to redo their essay. The culminating test was comprised of short answer
questions; student generated multiple choice questions, and essay questions. There
were a total of 84 points possible on this test. The average score for the test was 64
points, which was a score in the 76 percentile. Although the average scores for these
major assessments were fairly low. I knew that I had created assignments that were
quite difficult and required students to perform tasks that exceeded the complexity of a
multiple choice examination such as the FCAT. My hope was that if they could attain a
grade of C or D on my assignments that they would be prepared to excel on the standardized test.

At this time, I received scores from the October 13, 2010 retake of the FCAT exam. Fifteen students took the exam. Six students passed the test with a score of Level two or higher thus they no longer needed to be enrolled in Intensive Reading and were removed from my course. Thirteen of the fifteen students showed an increase in their scores since their spring 2009 attempt. I was thrilled. As a class we poured over our scores in detail and celebrated with a doughnut party. I followed this up with a two light days where we watched and discussed the movie, The Great Debaters.

**Cycle Three**

In this cycle I focused instruction around a novel. Students spent large chunks of in class time reading aloud in groups of three the text, *Same Kind of Different as Me*. My focus was in part fluency including word attack skills and vocabulary as suggested by Hock’s work on struggling readers (2009). My rationale for this focus and for the use of the novel was that students who remained in my course needed additional support and interventions in order to perform adequately on the FCAT. I continued instruction on reading for comprehension through the use of “during reading” strategies such as note taking, question generating, and summarizing. I also used the text to review concepts such as Author’s purpose and making inferences from a text. The most significant element of my instruction in this unit was to require students to continually generate multiple choice questions using question stems from former FCAT tests. By assessing their questions I was able to assess their understanding of what is being asked in a given FCAT question. By assessing their answers to their own questions, I was able to assess their understanding of the text.
The novel that I used for this unit was unique in its dual authorship. One chapter of the text would be written by Denver Moore, an African American sixty-year old male. The next chapter would be written by Ron Hall, a white fifty-year old friend of Denver’s. The story that ensued is the narrative of their unlikely friendship. I used this text to compare and contrast the writing styles of Denver and Ron, as well as their histories and cultural background. My aim was to include in the curriculum a text that exemplified characteristics within the African American community in hopes that my students would be able to connect with the authors and draw background knowledge from their own experiences.

Over the course of this cycle I graded 20 multiple-choice questions created by each student. On average, students scored in the eighty percentile. I also assessed a unit exam with a possible score of 90 points. Students’ scores ranged from 55 points to 90 points. The average score for the unit exam was 75 points, which was a percentile of 83. At the end of this cycle students once again took the FCAT exam. At this time, seven students took the retake exam and five passed with a level two or higher, ensuring that they would not be in Intensive Reading for the next year. Six students took either the 9th or 10th grade FCAT exam for the first time. Those scores are not yet available.

Thus, at the end of this inquiry, thirteen of the fifteen students who had not passed the 10th grade FCAT exam previously passed and I await scores for the four students who took the exam for the first time in March. Two students are ninth graders with a possibility of testing out of Intensive Reading based on the score on their ninth grade test.
CHAPTER 5
WHAT THE STUDENTS TAUGHT ME

A large part of my inquiry attempts to access my students’ thinking about reading and their experiences with schooling in order to understand what works for them academically. These students were all older adolescents; ages 15 to 18 thus it felt especially important to understand their will in relation to their work habits, their level of engagement in school, and their achievements. This chapter will address what I learned from my students through focus groups, my own reflective journals and impromptu conversations in and out of class, the next chapter will report my findings with respect to my students’ academic growth over the course of the inquiry.

I have organized this chapter into key lessons that were significant for my classroom practice or important to students and therefore recurred in their writing or conversations. Although these topics were not the focus of my review of literature, they proved to be incredibly important to my pedagogy. They informed the method in which I managed my class, the literature I chose to teach, and the organization of our daily activities and time. The five key lessons are: failure on the FCAT test can translate to personal failure for the student, a common phenomenon exists for struggling readers, relationships are built one on one, a relaxed class is not a lax class, and non formal learning contexts can bolster instruction.

Failure on the FCAT Test Can Translate to Personal Failure for the Student

During pre-planning, as I prepared my curriculum and assessed my students’ based on their most recent test scores in reading, I assumed that I would teach one lesson for both my Intensive Reading classes due to the similarities in test scores and skill weaknesses and strengths of the two classes. As I met the students in the two
classes I learned that this assumption was incorrect. I was struck by the difference in the social and learning environment of my two classes of students despite the fact that they had fairly similar reading profiles. The two sections of Intensive Reading I taught were divided based primarily on the age of the students so that in one course (Section A), I had mostly 11th and 12th grade students, with the exception of two ninth grade students, and the other course (Section B) was comprised of mostly 10th grade students who had not yet taken the 10th grade FCAT but who had scored a level 1 on the Ninth grade test FCAT test and a few 11th grade students.

Although these groups of students were very similar in skill proficiency they were miles apart in their beliefs about their own efficacy. I found that 11th and 12th graders, that is students who had failed the 10th grade FCAT test, which determines their ability to graduate with a standard diploma, were more withdrawn, angry, and reticent with respect to learning than my 10th grade students who had not faced this failure.

During the first week of classes I noted, “Students in this class (Section A) seem unreceptive to learning in general. They provide very little feedback, non-verbally or verbally. One student, kept his eyes down on the floor for the majority of the period.” Then later on,

By the middle of the second week it is clear that I am going to have to differentiate instruction for the two classes despite their reading similarities. The format that I had conceived is not working with the older group. They are not willing to participate in ‘connections’. “Connections were class building activities I use to center their focus on our classroom unit and our day’s lesson. They giggle, are rude, call out when they should not and do whatever they can to derail the activity in progress. (Teacher journal entry, August 19, 2009)

With these students, who seemed to suffer significant emotional effects from their previous failures in reading, my approach needed to be more matter of fact and
outcome oriented. They were withdrawn from the process of reading and the supposed joy in learning. They did not to want to connect, to reveal who they were and to bond as a class. Following this date entry, I changed several aspects of my practice. Instead of beginning class in a whole group activity (a circle intended to allow students to share insights from their day or from our last class time together) we began the day in rows facing forward, quickly getting into the subject matter at hand despite the look of apathy I regularly confronted. And usually, they performed. Thus, I learned that for these students, connecting with others, sharing personally, and intentionally building a classroom community of openness and good will was not the most effective strategy. Some students required distance and impersonal professionalism in order to thrive in an area where they have found failure.

**A Common Phenomena Exists for the Struggling Reader**

The second lesson I learned from both classes is situated in their experience and perceptions of being classified as a struggling reader and thus mandated to Intensive Reading courses. It is important to note that all of my students were in this course not of their own free will but due to a Florida State Statute that requires all students receiving a Level of 1 on the FCAT test to take an additional Intensive Reading course to support their learning and help students overcome their skill deficits. It became clear to me that while the students may have benefitted from this mandate academically, they perceived a loss, with regard to their experience of schooling and their self-perception.

On the first day of class, as I met students from Section B at the door, one student entered and remarked, “Do I have to take this class? Does this mean I’m slow?” Both her concern with her academic ability and her reluctance to be in this course were eye opening, alarming and common among the participants. In subsequent focus groups,
several other comments highlighted the same sentiment. One student stated, “As soon as I found out I was in this class, I was like-I don’t want to be in the slow class.” Another student remarked that she felt both, “mad and sad because she tried hard to do well on the previous year’s FCAT.” During these groups, at least five students commented on the loss they felt at trading an elective course such as Performing Arts, Weightlifting or Art for Intensive Reading.

At least 50% of the students in the course had been in an Intensive Reading course for 2-3 previous years. One stated, “I thought that since I was in this course before, it should have helped me and I shouldn’t have to be in it again.” These comments represent a certain negative disposition that I encountered often while teaching. This negativity extended outside of the walls of my course into student’s social lives as well. One student remarked,

Other students try to crack jokes about me being in here but I just laugh with them. I make fun of myself so that they can’t make fun of me first. I also hear comments from other teachers.

Very often during the first two months of class, I was told by a particular student, “I hate coming to this class, Ms. Houchen, no offense to you.”

As a teacher, I repeatedly felt frustrated and at a loss in combating this. My overall strategy was to share my own life failures and subsequent successes, and to share those of others through our content study while allowing space for students to either express their concerns verbally or non-verbally. Therefore, often students came into my course with a disgruntled disposition and I completely let that slide and did what
I could to enliven the subject matter and to value each class participant as unique, welcome and talented.

**Relationships Are Built One on One**

In The Courage to Teach (2007), Parker Palmer states that, “If a space is to support learning, it must invite students to find their authentic voices, whether or not they speak in ways approved by others. Learning does not happen when students are unable to express their ideas, emotions, confusions, ignorance and prejudices. In fact, only when people can speak their minds does education have a chance to happen” (p.117). Thus, as an educator I took the stance that student misbehavior should be met with as much understanding and instruction as I could muster.

Upon taking this position, I met with the Assistant Principal, who provided me with a brief personality and behavioral history for each of my students. He stressed the need for forming a partnership with him in order to help my students understand the consequences of their behavior in class. It was clear that he anticipated behavioral deviance in class. At least 60% of the students in my older class had received numerous discipline referrals from other teachers the previous year; in my younger class the number was slightly lower but still significant at 35%. One student was in my course because another teacher refused to teach him in her Intensive Reading course citing personality problems that were unsolvable. Another student was facing potential expulsion if he was unable to turn his behavior around.

It was important for me to draw my own conclusions based on the relationship that I created with each child. It was also important for me not to utilize the Assistant Principal in establishing power in the course. I wanted to create a relationship with students based mostly on mutual respect, boundaries, and communication, skills I knew
they would need in their latter life. To that end, on the first day of class I had each
students fill out a 3 x 5 card which among other things, provided me with his/her
personal mobile phone number.

I told students that if I had a concern with their behavior, I would be calling their
cell phones, not their parents and I expected that we would be able to work things
through. I chose this method for dealing with behavioral concerns because my students
were older and as such wanted to be respected for the choices they made and were
quite capable of making good choices and understanding consequences. Moreover, a
high percentage of my students had repeatedly experienced bad encounters with regard
to discipline. It seemed vitally important to send a different message and replace
punitive practices with something else.

In every behavioral instance that occurred over the year, except for one, this
strategy worked and the student and I were able to come to a suitable agreement.

From my journal,

Daniel and I had a very tough time working through his defiance today. We
had a fire drill and all students needed to evacuate the classroom quickly,
stand silently outside, and wait for a signal to return to our classroom.
Daniel chose to talk loudly while waiting for the signal. After one warning, I
walked up to him and told him to ‘be silent now.’ He was visibly angry and
began to argue with me. I knew I had a choice. I could, with full backing of
the student discipline code, write Daniel a discipline referral and send him
to the office or I could try to work this through. I chose the latter. (Teacher
Journal Entry, November 11, 2009).”

The situation with Daniel took the majority of the classroom period to resolve and
required that I dismiss the remainder of my class back to the room to read silently while
I stood on the field talking with him. This was another important moment of choice.
Would I sacrifice the learning of the entire class to deal with one student? I did. On the
field, the student expressed frustration and I in turn expressed that his non-verbal body
language, anger and defiance felt disrespectful to me as a person first and a teacher second. I wanted to make sure that he understood this and could connect it to his own life experiences. I asked him how he would treat his mother or family member in the same situation. We left that day with an uneasy peace but I felt as though I had honored my decision to relate to my students based on mutual respect and communication.

The next day this student returned to class greeting me with, “Hello, Auntie Houchen.” This was significant. He had never called me this before and had clearly been positively affected by our conversation on the field, despite the apparent unpleasantness of it and the time that it took from the rest of my students’ learning. Through this and similar incidents I learned that it was extremely important for my students to feel as though someone was willing to engage with them as individuals capable of getting angry, relating and rebounding. Using only rules and boundaries to shape classroom management was not going to work in this scenario. I had to learn each child and reach a breakthrough with them individually.

Another student aided me in learning this same lesson. Seventeen years old and a junior, Janissa had been in Intensive Reading courses since Middle School. In her last year at P. K. Yonge she had received three discipline referrals. Within the first three weeks of our course, Janissa began to behave in class in a manner that was unacceptable and disruptive. From my Teacher Journal, September 14, 2009,

Today, Janissa seemed to do everything she could to disrupt my lesson, get under my skin, and be rude to me. She keeps a running conversation going with John who is on the verge of being expelled from this school. Today, I had it and called Janissa into the hall in the middle of class to discuss her behavior. I was short, direct, and visibly angry as I told her that she had a choice, either she could stay and learn and be respectful of me
as a person or she could leave. ‘But know this, if you leave you will not get
the skills you need to pass this test, and I know you want to pass the test
and you are so capable of doing it, but you waste your time, joking and
laughing and being rude in class. That’s your choice. But you are not
going to waste my time anymore.’ Then I walked off.

In her own time, Janissa returned to class, reluctant, and visibly angry, but quiet.
That evening I sent her a text message saying, “You are far too brilliant and talented to
waste your time behaving ugly. Come back to class tomorrow and bring your “A”
game.” She sent a text back responding, “Yes, ma’am. I am sorry I was rude. I’ll see
you tomorrow.”

Both these situations are examples of discipline situations that could easily have
been solved by sending a student up to the office, referral in hand to visit with the
Assistant Principal. In fact, the expectation and norm was that I would do just that. But
I learned that wrestling with the students’ unacceptable behaviors, being honest and
personable regarding my disappointment and offense at their decisions, and speaking
truthfully, and bluntly did more to change behavior and win the long-term respect of
each student. Was there a cost to this? Absolutely, time and time again I effectively
stopped class to redirect one student at the cost of the activity at hand. Time and time
again I injected my personal feelings into the discussion and let my guard down so that
students could see how their behavior affected me. I spent a good bit of my free time in
the evening texting students to reinforce good behavior, discuss unacceptable behavior
and workshop assignments that were not completed in class.

A Relaxed Class Is Not a Lax Class

The term, relaxed, repeatedly appeared in the focus groups I conducted as both a
desired trait in an Intensive Reading teacher and as a positive attribute of our classroom
environment. Students also contrasted this environment with other strict and overly
stressful Intensive Reading courses they had taken in the past. One student stated, “I hate it when the reading teacher makes it seem as though if we don’t pass this test, it is the end of the world. Teachers need to tell their students that they are just taking a test and they can always retake it.” Another student remarked, “In this class we are learning what we need to learn and we are relaxed while we are doing it so we are not stressing out because the FCAT is coming.” Another student when discussing classroom management remarked, “I like this class because it’s real relaxed. You don’t put a lot of pressure on doing the FCAT. I like the fact that the rules are relaxed and you treat us like adults.”

Intentionally, I adopted some rules that were unusual in a high school classroom. For example, any student who needed to use the rest room was able to walk out of class and go-- no permission was needed. Also, students were able to use their MP3 players and headphones while working individually whereas the campus wide rule was that student’s personal electronic equipment was not to be seen before the end of the academic school day or it could be confiscated by a teacher. Nevertheless, each day, most children arrived to school with this equipment in tow and partially visible.

I chose these rules for several reasons. I did not want to stop class anytime each child needed to use the restroom in order to give assent, which I was always going to give. With regard to music, I found that a majority of students in my course had a high musical intelligence based on an online version of Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence test that that I administered in the first month of the course and I wanted to capitalize on that. Lastly, as a principle, I wanted to place the responsibility for their behavior and learning squarely in their hands.
Due to the stressful nature of the FCAT itself, I sought to create a space for learning where we could enjoy each other's company while we mastered the content necessary, one student remarked,

I think that when there is something serious to do in here, we know that it's serious but when it's playful we know that too. We know your strong points and your weak point. We know when not to go past you.

This notion of a relaxed class extended beyond classroom management style into content for me. I found myself often in the role of an understanding ally rather than a representative of the establishment. My students seemed to need someone to validate their perception that what they were learning was often boring, irrelevant to their out of class life, and that the weight put on this test as a predictor of their reading competence and proficiency on the whole was unfair. I provided this for them while still pushing them to achieve. From my journal, January 12, 2010,

Today was rough for all of us. No real behavioral problems to speak of but we’ve had several days off in a row so it is hard for everyone to focus when we don’t want to be here. I wish I could have provided the students with some of ancillary lesson that ties into our subject matter and would not be as demanding, but instead I really needed to finish up the lesson that they are doing on Main Idea so that we can move on to another FCAT strand. So I spent the day being a cheerleader and an understanding shoulder. ‘I know this is boring, but keep at it. Write notes in the margin to remember what you’ve just read because it is very easy to forget when you are not interested in the subject.’

This example and others like it taught me that students needed an environment that honored their truths as people, in this case, as older high school students near to graduation. They needed to feel as though this learning experience was tailored to their individual learning styles and that their lack of intrinsic interest in the subject matter was understood and respected for what it was. By honoring this and allowing them to co-
create a space that was communally comfortable and welcoming we were able to spend most of our time on the content at hand.

**Non Formal Learning Contexts Can Bolster Instruction**

Early on in the school year, I provided students with a questionnaire regarding their reading habits, likes and dislikes. I encouraged students to be as honest and descriptive as possible with regard to what they read, when and how they accomplished reading. Overwhelmingly, the top ranked reading material for my students were text messages received on their mobile phones, for some students this was the only material that they listed as reading. Every student except one had a mobile phone and was able to receive and send text messages at will. Therefore, I chose to incorporate text messages as a method of communication, and teaching within the course.

I frequently sent messages en masse to my classes when assignment due dates were approaching. On average, I would have approximately a 75% rate of completion for any assignment that I texted about. Prior to beginning this practice, I would have approximately a 30% rate of completion on any given assignment, with the same students completing their homework each time. Not only did sending texts as a reminder increase students’ rate of homework completion but it also provided an open door for students to communicate their questions and concerns with regard to the content of the assignment. A series of texts between a student and me are reprinted here:

Me: Your Homework is due tomorrow, don’t forget!

Student: OK. But I don't remember what a metaphor is…

Me: Do you have the notes from class today?

Student: Yes Ma’am but I don’t get it.
Me: Remember the song I used in class—She loves me like a rock. Then think about “She IS a rock.” Does that help?

Student: Kinda, I’ll try….

Me: Okay, text back if you are still struggling later.

Utilizing text messages to reinforce deadlines and concepts and open communication with my students provided me with much more of an individualized insight into students’ needs and weaknesses. Repeatedly throughout the year, I was able to call a student at home to help them complete an assignment that they needed support with. Had I not begun this practice, I am not sure that students would either have emailed me at my professional address or felt comfortable calling me if in fact I had given them a home number. Text messaging became a standard method of communication for my students and I outside of class and although it was unorthodox, proved to be beneficial academically.

As a practitioner researching the particular context of my classroom these findings were essential to the development of a living, thriving curriculum and classroom environment. Using the tenet of culturally responsive pedagogy which calls for educators to learn about the traditions and worldview of the students I was able to access their thinking about aspects of pedagogy that was not addressed in the literature per se such as the effect of sustained failure on engagement and self efficacy for students in intensive reading courses. Repeatedly, my students proved to be the best source of knowledge with respect to their understanding of themselves, their academic needs and what it would take to support their learning goals. Executing the inquiry in this fashion allowed me to take the role of learner and transcriber as well as instructor and then blend the roles to create an informed learning experience for all involved.
CHAPTER 6
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this study was to answer the wondering, what happens when I draw on students’ academic histories, interests, and culture to teach struggling readers more responsively. In answering that question, several conclusions emerged as key components of this inquiry. With respect to academic achievement I found that the curriculum I developed using the review of literature was widely effective in helping students attain academic success, particularly with respect to the FCAT test which held so much of their future in balance. I also concluded that students themselves were rich repositories of knowledge that could be used to shape instruction and reflect on practice. Lastly, I found that undertaking the position of a practitioner inquirer is hugely beneficial to the cycle of planning, instruction, assessment and re-planning that is commonplace for all teachers.

I was hired by P.K. Yonge to teach students in intensive reading with the aim of making sure that they were successful in passing the 10th Grade Reading FCAT exam. Students knew that this was the ultimate goal of our course and each student wanted to meet that goal for him/herself. Thus the test held more significant weight than any grade attained in the course or assignment completed. My success as a teacher was inextricably tied to their performance on this test and my ability to help them pass. At the end of the first retake in the fall 40% of students taking the test passed. While this is a fairly low ratio of students overall, it was an encouraging sign that the curriculum I designed using the bodies of research in culturally responsive pedagogy, effective English instruction and strategies for reading was proving effective because I had been working with the students for only two months at the point when they took the test.
Moreover, 86% of all students taking the test increased their score from their last test
date in the spring of 2009. Clearly I was on the right path.

This midyear conclusion allowed me to continue to stay on course and utilize the
process of inquiry I charted to continue to augment and refine the curriculum and work
for gains in the spring FCAT exam. Student performance at that second test date was
remarkable. Seventy-two (72) percent of students taking the exam passed. Thus over
the course of the year, 87 percent of students who needed to retake the 10th Grade
reading FCAT exam passed with a score of a level 2 or higher. Additionally,
anecdotally, one administrator at P.K. Yonge informed me that this success rate was
the highest of the five previous years in the school. Students’ themselves seemed
surprised and pleased at the large number who would no longer need to be in intensive
reading and could now apply for graduation.

While the FCAT test proved to be the ultimate criterion for success, what emerged
as the ultimate condition for a successful practice and curriculum was the feedback and
thinking of the students. Careful reflection on what the students were telling me during
informal conversations, in written assignments, in formal focus groups and through
everyday classroom interactions proved to be the key in creating a learning experience
that was as close as fit as possible to the cultural and social identity of my students and
would meet their academic needs. I found that they were eager to share their keen
insights. They provided me with data and knowledge that I would not have inferred on
my own. We became collaborators in a way that I had never envisioned before and this
significantly benefitted my pedagogy.
Of particular interest was how my students viewed the responsibility and purpose of a teacher. They held within their historical memory a surprisingly clear notion of what was and what was not good teaching with respect to their individual experiences. Accessing this knowledge helped me to circumvent what could have been a resistance to learning based on their perception of my teaching style and intentions. In essence I was able to adapt to what they said they needed quickly and easily based on the wealth of information they gave. Thus, I believe they were more open to internalizing the skills and content because they developed a degree of trust in my capabilities as a teacher.

Teachers have options. I could have chosen or been directed by administration to choose a reading textbook with a set scope, sequence and pacing guide to teach this course, or I could have used one of the many all inclusive programs designed for struggling readers that flood the markets and are in use by districts across the state. Instead I chose to craft the curriculum myself making use of relevant literature and the process of practitioner inquiry to assess the benefits of the curriculum and hold myself accountable for my students’ achievement.

As this is a complicated endeavor, there were many times during the academic year where I could have easily gotten lost and off track due to the number of assignments I had to grade, the planning that needed to occur and my anxiety about my students’ performance but situating my practice within the context of inquiry changed my conceptualization about the information that I was receiving in the classroom and helped me to organize it systematically and strategically. Beyond this, I was able to use tools within the discipline of practitioner inquiry that I would not have ordinarily used in my practice such as the coding of data and the use of focus groups to collect feedback.
Moreover the practice of keeping a teacher journal was key to organizing my lessons and observations over time.

The conclusions and findings within chapters five and six of this study are consistent with the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, effective English instruction and strategies in reading. As noted in Chapter two, culturally responsive pedagogy highlights the importance of care and respect, warm demanding and providing instruction in such a way to support cultural congruence. I found that my students who were primarily African-American resonated with these aspects of pedagogy and viewed them as desirable traits for a teacher. My practice with respect to classroom management and instruction reflected the set of skills that are considered to be “warm demanding” within the literature and the effect of this skill set as proposed by culturally responsive pedagogy theory was a classroom environment that was unified, smooth and purposeful.

I also found that student achievement and attention to instruction increased as I increased my understanding of students’ cultural history and incorporated that specific knowledge into the course content. In essence, the more I utilized culturally responsive pedagogy as the lens to frame instruction in effective English practice and reading strategies for my students’, the more their comprehension of literature and their ability to read critically grew and their understanding of skills and strategies became clearer.

Furthermore, using CRP allowed me to instruct students in using effective English practices and strategies for reading with a fluency and depth that I suspect I would not have been able to achieve without this background. The literature on effective English instruction suggests that thorough exploration of all types of texts, from multiple
perspectives using different formats for instruction is key. I was able to achieve this level of variation and breath in a manner that was transmissible thus provide students with repeated exposure to scientifically proven strategies for reading instruction throughout the scope of a well developed curriculum. As CRP became the lens by which I viewed instruction, effective English instruction became the method that I used to chart out the scope of my curriculum. Within that scope I utilized the strategies suggested for reading and specifically for struggling readers effectively to support students’ metacognition and comprehension of texts.

**Personal Lessons Learned From This Inquiry**

It is my hope that I can use this thesis to further the practice of educating students who are considered at risk in such a way as to both value their experiences and also to provide an exemplar of a successful educational experience. What struck me is that my students felt as though they had not received such an experience for most of their schooling and I wanted to find out how we as professionals could honor that standard for them.

Cochran and Lytle (2009) make the point that inquiry can serve as a valuable tool for professional development both for the inquirer and for the educational profession at large. As a process, this inquiry has been beneficial in teaching me how to access research, articulate my assumptions and beliefs, and chart the process by which I direct my practice thereby fine tuning it. I don’t think I would have been as intentional about the choices I made this year as an instructor had I not pursued this inquiry. Nor do I feel as though my practice would have been as intentional. However, I do think that I intuitively would have followed a similar course of instruction and would have arrived at the same understanding regarding my students’ needs and issues despite having not
approached their learning in such a formalized manner with the aid of focus groups, interviews, and my teacher journal.

Lastly, I wanted to find out if my beliefs about the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy for African American students were valid. I wanted to find out if there were strategies to combat the disenchantment and range of negative emotions that I have encountered repeatedly while dealing with students over the last couple of years. I also wanted to find out if beyond making the classroom a comfortable and happy space, I could simultaneously make it a space of learning where my students would achieve results that were valued and necessary within the larger context of schooling in America today.

**Lessons for the Educational Community**

With respect to the larger community of educational professions, my hope is to share the lessons and findings within this thesis widely through whatever avenues present themselves. Practitioner inquiry is in part a solution to the problem of localization; my findings therefore can perhaps spur another professional to pursue his/her own wondering or assist in surmounting some of the challenges faced within practice. As I learned of the essential need to access, for yourself, the body of research that is specific to your context and particular context I hope this study will convey the importance of that search to others.

As teachers, we are often limited in our agency and make choices about instruction based on the latest professional development workshops we have attended or directives given by administration and coaches. This inquiry might serve as an example of potentially untapped practices that were proven successful within a limited context. Thus teachers could both use this as an example of a process by which to
research their own practice and context in order to generate for themselves another option; one that is personally authentic and pedagogically congruent with the teacher’s view of their professional self. Furthermore, teachers within the fields of reading or English at the secondary level could utilize the study directly as an applicable body of knowledge able to be used in its entirety. My hope is that by demonstrating another pathway to excellence in the classroom, teachers will feel freed to act in a manner consistent with their intuition and best knowledge instead of deferring to those in authority who may simply be unfamiliar with a different way; but when confronted with scientifically based research, will yield.

Often I perceive that CRP is viewed as a nebulous set of ideas that is in some way ethnocentric or counter cultural. My hope is that other teachers can utilize this study to inform their understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy, its benefits for all students and to glean a real world portrayal of how it can be put in practice in the classroom.

In the future, I would hope to see more portrayals of warm demanding within the literature on culturally responsive pedagogy. Since this set of skills can be displayed with such variety and ingenuity I feel as though this aspect of the theory warrants further exploration and description. Having more examples from which to pattern practice and draw conclusions could provide teachers unfamiliar with this culturally derived notion of teaching the foundation they need to establish sound practice.

A second area of further study is the overlap between culturally responsive pedagogy and any discipline specific body of research. As I developed my curriculum I questioned whether or not there were set patterns as to how teachers sequenced and infused culturally responsive pedagogy in their curriculum and how they navigated the
space between CRP and the research in their specific area. Compiling this type of research could ultimately provide teachers who are reticent to embrace CRP with a template or roadmap within their field that they can utilize to reframe instruction and beliefs. Having a set of these types of roadmaps could spur change at the school level thus creating synergy and momentum within a school and a district.

Ultimately, my hope is that sharing ideas across disciplines and frameworks will become commonplace and the practice of teaching will reflect our best knowledge about diverse students, how they learn and how we can create systems to support them. In doing this we will rightfully place students in the center of the system of education and their best interest will become our guiding principal. I hope that this study can serve as one small model pointing in that direction.
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<td>Complete sentence Varied sentence structure Conventions are generally correct</td>
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APPENDIX B
GENERAL FCAT SCORING RUBRIC

Grade 10

2 points The response indicates that the student has a complete understanding of the reading concept embodied in the task. The student has provided a response that is accurate, complete, and fulfills all the requirements of the task. Necessary support and/or examples are included, and the information given is clearly text-based.

1 point The response indicates that the student has a partial understanding of the reading concept embodied in the task. The student has provided a response that includes information that is essentially correct and text-based, but the information is too general or too simplistic. Some of the support and/or examples may be incomplete or omitted.

0 points The response indicates that the student does not demonstrate an understanding of the reading concept embodied in the task. The student has provided a response that is inaccurate; the response has an insufficient amount of information to determine the student’s understanding of the task; or the student has failed to respond to the task.

General Scoring Rubric for Extended-Response (ER) Questions

Grade 10

4 points The response indicates that the student has a thorough understanding of the reading concept embodied in the task. The student has provided a response that is accurate, complete, and fulfills all the requirements of the task. Necessary support and/or examples are included, and the information is clearly text-based.

3 points The response indicates that the student has an understanding of the reading concept embodied in the task. The student has provided a response that is accurate and fulfills all the requirements of the task, but the required support and/or details are not complete or clearly text-based.

2 points The response indicates that the student has a partial understanding of the reading concept embodied in the task. The student has provided a response that includes information that is essentially correct and text-based, but the information is too general or too simplistic. Some of the support and/or examples and requirements of the task may be incomplete or omitted.

1 point The response indicates that the student has very limited understanding of the reading concept embodied in the task. The response is incomplete, may exhibit many flaws, and may not address all requirements of the task.

0 points The response indicates that the student does not demonstrate an understanding of the reading concept embodied in the task. The student has provided a response that is inaccurate; the response has an insufficient amount of information to determine the student’s understanding of the task; or the student has failed to respond to the task.
APPENDIX C
CRITICAL READING GUIDE

1) What is the main idea of this text? What is the argument being made or the central topic being addressed?

2) Write a sentence that the author would most likely agree with.

3) Write a statement that the author would most likely disagree with.

4) Why did the author write this piece?

5) How is the information in this article organized?
   - Compare/Contrast
   - Cause/Effect
   - Chronological Order
   - Argument/Support
   - Lists

6) What is the tone of the piece? Use descriptive words

7) What is your response to the article? Must be detailed, opinion based and at least four sentences.
## Rubric for Immigration Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effort</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very little effort. Question not answered at all.</td>
<td>0-13</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question begins to be answered. This is a rough draft. Student does the bare minimum.</td>
<td>14-21</td>
<td>High F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This has not been proofread. Question not answered thoroughly. Too little effort. Writing is unclear. What are you trying to say?</td>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>D/Low C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work has some grammatical or spelling errors. Question has been answered thoroughly through information on wiki and packet. Writing is clear and understandable. Answer could still use some explaining and details.</td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>C/B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little or no grammatical or spelling errors. Student went above and beyond just answering the question through the use of the wiki and packet. Writing is clear, understandable and mature.</td>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>B+/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

Intervention Reading
D.Houchen

How did you feel when you found out you were in Intensive Reading? (allow student to write?)

What do you think we should call success in this class? What is our goal?

What do we need to do to get everyone engaged in this class?

So far, how do you feel about classroom management? Do you feel as though the class is disciplined?

What would you suggest?

What has been your best academic experience?

What do you think you need to do to succeed in this class? How likely are you to do it?
APPENDIX F
INSIDE/OUTSIDE CIRCLE

Awesome (19-20 points)
The student demonstrates a deep understanding of the text, showing evidence of thoughtful listening and critical thinking in their interpretations. The student supports his or her opinions by quoting the text, citing page/paragraph numbers, summarizing, and paraphrasing. The student includes others in the discussion by respecting each participant as an individual, addressing the entire group, inviting others to speak, listening, asking for clarification, challenging faulty reasoning, making eye contact, and supporting a good answer.

Admirable (16-18 points)
The student demonstrates a clear understanding of the text, showing evidence of having listened to others and thought about his or her response. The student supports his or her opinions by quoting the text, summarizing, and paraphrasing. The student includes others in the discussion by respecting each participant as an individual, listening, questioning other student's responses, and supporting a good answer.

Acceptable (14-15 points)
The student demonstrates an understanding of the text, showing evidence of some listening and thought. The student supports his or her opinions by summarizing and paraphrasing. The student includes others in the discussion by respecting each participant as an individual, listening, and supporting a good answer.

Amateur (13 points and below)
The student demonstrates a vague understanding of the text, states but does not support his or her opinions adequately, and does not include others in the discussion.
APPENDIX G
TAKE A STAND ACTIVITY

- Most Americans know where their forefathers immigrated from.
- Having legal immigrants in America helps our economy.
- It is easy for an illegal immigrant to get medical care.
- Immigration means people leaving one place and moving to another.
- Illegal immigrants should not be able to work in the United States.
- Most legal immigrants come from Mexico.
- Illegal immigration is one of the top three problems facing the United States.
- We should have more than one national language.
- It should be easier for people to become U.S. Citizens.
LIST OF REFERENCES


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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Diedre Houchen was born in Brooklyn, New York to Jamaican parents. In early childhood she lived in Queens, New York then moved to Gainesville, Florida at the age of nine. After graduating High School in Gainesville, she spent some time traveling and eventually returned to Brooklyn and worked as a Youth Development Coordinator with a passion for working with youth of color to provide opportunities for leadership and out of school time education in Crown Heights, Brooklyn.

In 2000, she returned to Gainesville to attain a Bachelor’s degree in Family, Youth and Community Sciences and continued to work with communities of color as a Program Director of a Youth Entrepreneurial Farm. In 2005, she began teaching reading in public schools while working to attain her Master of Arts in Education. She will be continuing her studies at the University of Florida in pursuit of a Ph.D. in Education.