

UConn Minigrant Proposal

Hannah Magnan

Bolton High School

Background: Bolton High School's class of 2013 is approximately 25% special education with an average reading level (in the lowest level English classes) of 4th grade. Sadly, BHS is lacking in high-interest reading materials for this level of students, and no attempt has been made to use these materials in conjunction with low-stakes classroom instruction to increase student involvement, despite available research that proves the efficacy of this approach.

Due to materials constraints, my classroom reading instruction is often limited to teacher-reading as the students follow along. Often students give up and stop following along, which only exacerbates the problem. Reading practice for these kids then becomes reading short, very "young" selections, which really frustrate the students and often provoke them to withdraw. So far in my class, there has been no possibility of a dialogue between my students and me that focuses purely on their enjoyment and connection with literature that they have selected and read. Because these classes are so low performing, everything they *do* hand in, I am anxious to grade so I can get *something* into the system. I am also so pressured to prepare them for CAPT testing and future classes, that I find myself drilling them with "right" interpretations and "important" literary terms. Naturally, my approach is not working as far as skill development goes, but, for now, the administration has no complaints.

From my conversations with other teachers, I have learned that with this group of students, independent reading projects are simply not done for two obvious reasons: first, students find the currently available materials impossible to access without support, and few of them have any support outside of school. Additionally, when attempting to utilize library resources, I have found that these students frequently lose books received through inter-library-loan, or, more often, do not read them quickly enough to return them on time, prompting the library to put restrictions on their accounts, etc.

Plan: I would like to explore the effect that independent, self-selected reading materials have on students' attitudes towards reading and writing. To do this, I will first have students complete a survey of attitudes about reading and writing to establish a baseline. Then, I will use this grant to purchase several books, (listed below). This will allow me to create a "mini-library" of high interest materials that reluctant readers will be able to read without support. Alongside their reading, they will complete a series of individualized, low-stakes assignments (ungraded writing

practice with everything from basic comprehension, to connections with the text, to persuasive assignments in which they convince their peers to read their books, etc.). With this, I hope to develop an independent reading and writing model (in addition to the school-mandated class work that we currently do) that will help them break through their hesitance to try to read and write anything, and will help me break through my propensity for literary vivisection and constant grading. At the end of the unit, I will have students reflect on the unit, their books, and their enjoyment of reading independently. I will also ask them for suggestions on how they'd like to practice their reading and writing skills in the future.

Requirements: The books in my “mini-library” must have accessible reading-levels so they won't require much support, and be “controversial” enough to keep them reading. I'd like to purchase two copies of each book so they can read them with a friend if they choose. They will be asked to return the books at the end of the year if possible, so we can start to create a classroom library of high interest, low-level materials. If they cannot return the books though, they will not incur penalties.

So far, my planned library includes the following books (reading levels determined using their Lexile measures):

Bone – 2nd grade

Crackback – 2nd grade

Thirteen Reasons Why – 3rd grade

Notes for a War Story – 3rd grade

American Born Chinese – 3rd grade

Sisterhood of the Traveling pants – 3rd grade

Holes – 3rd grade

Right Behind You – 3rd grade

Twilight series – 4th -6th grade,

Girl with a Pearl Earring – 4th grade

My Name is Asher Lev – 4th grade

Ball Don't Lie – 4th grade

Stop Pretending: What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy – 4th grade

The Giver – 4th grade

Boot Camp – 4th grade

Road of the Dead – 4th grade

Monster – 4th grade

A Wrinkle in time – 4th grade

Speak – 4th grade

The Hunger Games – 4th grade

The Rag and Bone Shop – 4th grade

Gold Dust – 4th grade

The Book Thief – 4th

Uglies – 5th grade

I Love You, Beth Cooper – 5th grade

Sandman series – 5th grade

Kite Runner – 5th grade

Buried Onions – 5th grade

Tree Girl – 5th grade

Bloom – 5th grade

A Thousand Splendid Suns – 5th grade

Running Loose – 5th grade

The Chocolate War – 5th grade

Summer of My German Soldier – 5th grade

Make Lemonade – 5th grade

Homeboyz – 5th grade

Coraline – 5th grade

Harry Potter series - 6th -8th grade

A Long Way Gone – 6th grade

The Pigman – 6th grade

Game – 6th grade

The Golden Compass – 6th grade

Weetzie Bat – 7th grade

Tenderness – 7th grade

Findings: My final report will discuss the differences I see (or hope to see) before, during, and after the independent reading project. I will use qualitative data collected from observing and speaking with the students, as well as the data gleaned from surveys taken before and after the unit to validate a curricular unit based around student choice.

This grant will help me to develop a new way of teaching, one in which I will be forced to relinquish my vice-like grip on “control” over my students’ interpretations, vocabulary growth, reading strategies, and critical analyses, and instead will help them to read a novel like Billy Collins encourages his students to read poetry, by “press[ing] an ear against its hive.”