

**“If I have 2 read its cool it can b twilight:”
At-Risk Readers and the Power of Choice**

by Hannah Magnan

Background

Like many new teachers, I looked forward to my first year teaching with visions of grandeur. When I had my own class, it would, of course, be composed as follows: a small class of attentive students would sit at desks in a circle, journals open on their desks. A couple would scribble thoughts to save for later, a few would eagerly (but respectfully) lean forward in their seats, anxious to join the dynamic debate about archetypical masculinity in early British literature. At one end of the circle, I would be seated on top of a backwards desk with my feet on a seat, casually conducting the symphony, occasionally offering a question or comment to keep my students delving, exploring. We would all discover. We would all learn. We would all be in love with words.

Then I started teaching, and I encountered reality.

This was not how my classes looked.

My schedule was predominantly filled with “those” classes, the ones with “those” students who entered the classroom with attitudes towards education that were even poorer than their reading skills. Several students missed almost as many classes as they attended, as often for suspensions and behavioral issues left over from other classes as for truancy. Others attended, but would not engage. Several had enormous skill gaps --misunderstanding basic punctuation or capitalization rules, or an inability to sound out minorly challenging words. Personality conflicts led to occasional heated exchanges when these skill deficits became public knowledge. A few students tried to succeed, but were quickly frustrated by the difficulty of the curriculum, the tenor of the class, or both.

Few, if any, of my students had passed their CMTs. The older classes were filled with students who were trying to pass the CAPT for the second or third time. As with many schools under the gun of NCLB, pressure to focus on requirements was high. We dutifully stuck with the curriculum but moved slowly, often focusing on vocabulary and basic comprehension. Due to materials constraints, differentiation possibilities were limited. My classroom reading instruction was often limited to teacher-reading as the students followed along, pausing to check comprehension. The difficulty of the material often prompted students to give up and stop following along, which only exacerbated any problems with reading skill development. Taking turns reading out loud was so cumbersome as to render it almost impossible even in small groups. Silent reading became nap-time for much of the class, and assigned reading outside of the class was out of the question.

To combat this, differentiated reading practice for several students then became reading short, very “young” selections from the materials available through the resource room, which so bored and frustrated them as to provoke them to further withdraw. Even with these shorter selections, I felt pressure to prepare them for

CAPT testing and future classes so much that I often found myself slipping into drilling them with “right” interpretations and “important” literary terms. Discussions were limited; quizzes were poor; comprehension was basic; interest was non-existent. With this choice between inaccessible material that demoralized them and accessible material that bored them, there was no possibility of a dialogue between my students and me that focused on their enjoyment and connection with literature that they read. Additionally, when they weren't reading, their skills were not improving. We all were treading water, and no one was getting left behind; but none of us were learning to swim.

For the purposes of this grant, I chose to work with one class of freshman. Initially this class started as a fourteen-student class, approximately 60% made up of students with IEPs. By the end of the year, my class had nine students due to school out-placement, drop-outs, personality conflicts between students, and movement to a more resource-oriented setting. Each student was at a completely different level. One had severe dysgraphia and dyslexia and read at second grade level. However, he had excellent comprehension and insight. Another read on grade level, but struggled with such severe ADHD as to limit his success in a conventional classroom. Another read at about a fifth grade level, but had such startling skill and knowledge gaps due to missed schooling as to severely limit her comprehension. A fourth clearly had been alienated by failure; his reading skills were low, but his motivation was lower, and he left most assignments blank. Each student came to this class with a history of failure and a well-earned suspicion of all things academic. By telling them again and again what they needed to know in an effort to prepare them, I was without meaning to, perpetuating their failures and their suspicion.

The Power of Choice

Educational research has repeatedly proven that student motivation is often improved by self-direction, specifically in reading contexts:

When students are supported in choosing from a wide selection of texts, sustained reading and measured achievement increase ([Morrow, 1996](#)). Choice is motivating because it affords students with control. Children seek to be in command of their environment, rather than being manipulated by powerful others. This need for self-direction can be met in reading instruction through well-designed choices. (Guthrie n.p.)

The latter part of this statement struck me as particularly applicable in my classroom. Not one of my students had ever participated in a self-selected novel unit, as these units often require a high level of autonomy and/or reading skill to be effective. Each of my students had struggled and failed with the grade-level curriculum and then been funneled into a class that would move more slowly with the same material, focus primarily on skills, or offer them less complex (interesting) materials. Each of my students had been burned by well-meaning teachers telling them what the student needed and what was good for him or her. Each of my students had primarily encountered texts in school that were either

inaccessible or uninteresting, or, in many cases, both.

A Classroom Library

I decided to apply for the mini-grant through the CWP to create a small classroom library full of accessible, high-interest fiction, and to use it to evaluate student motivation, reading engagement, comprehension, and reading and writing skill development using a self-selected novel unit.

My first task after receiving the mini-grant was to establish a baseline of how my students would handle more autonomy using the currently available materials. We were just concluding a unit using Elie Wiesel's *Night* (other students used short alternate texts as necessary), and I spent a few days asking students to engage in sustained silent reading and open-ended journaling (using prompts) about what they read. The results were not encouraging. Some of the stronger readers were able to focus for short periods, but for the most part, even they were distracted by the behavior problems of the students who struggled or were bored. The journal entries were similarly discouraging and brief, especially considering that the class began or concluded with a journal entry almost daily for the course of the year and the students understood the protocol for an appropriate journal entry.

I was not optimistic about the next several weeks, but the check had already arrived from CWP. How could I get my students to improve their reading and writing skills if I couldn't even get them to practice?

The first step in setting up my classroom library was to create a short survey that could be used to help select books for my students. This eight-question survey had questions as obvious as "List topics, subjects, etc. which you might like to read about" and as general as "What is the last movie you really enjoyed? Why?" After I received the surveys, the next step was to start my research. I asked other teachers for suggestions for specific "types" of students. I consulted internet surveys. I scoured YALSA and ALAN award lists.

I came up with a list of, literally, hundreds of books.

Fortunately, the next step, though time consuming, narrowed my list substantially. I researched each book's Lexile level and was able to come up with an approximate reading level for each book. Most of the books on my list were immediately eliminated due to their degree of difficulty. Many of the ranges were too large to be meaningful, and so required extra research or an excerpt perusal. By the time I was finished though, I had a list of seventy books evenly distributed between the second and seventh grade level, several of which I had selected with particular students in mind. As they arrived, each book received a book-plate and a color-coded star on the spine corresponding to its approximate level. Many of them were graphic novels or otherwise illustrated. I was able to find a few inexpensive audio versions to supplement the texts as well. Using the surveys and what I knew about my students' backgrounds and learning styles, I was able to make two or three individual book recommendations for each student. The choice was not mine though; each student could choose any book in his color (or one level higher) that he wanted.

The Best-Laid Plans

“Too often the procedures commonly employed in remedial and corrective reading instruction seem to mitigate against developing reading ability by focusing more on the mastery of isolated skills with relatively little emphasis on or instructional time devoted to reading in context. To become a proficient reader one needs the opportunity to read.” - Richard L. Allington

I wish I could say that my students were unequivocally positive about their books and their journaling, but this was not the case. The early days of the unit were difficult. Admittedly though, the difficulties were for different reasons than they had been before. At first, it was my fault: I wanted to start every few days with a quick discussion about a reading or writing strategy. For example, one day we talked about what we imagine in our heads when we read. I demonstrated with my own book by reading a paragraph and describing what I “saw.” I asked them to read for awhile and then describe the scene they saw in their own heads in their journals. These types of conversations and assignments, I had hoped, would translate into better skills, more engaged readers. They did not. Instead, I had a few diligent but panicking students who would interrupt every few minutes to say things like “Ms. Magnan? Ummm...I’m still not seeing anything....” Other students, emboldened by the noise, would take the opportunity to complain that their book was boring/stupid/awful. I had spent too much emphasis on skill acquisition and too little on enjoyment.

Journaling: Is It Helping?

The next, but related difficulty we encountered as a class was with our journaling. After I realized that skill-based journal prompts were not going to be successful, I struggled to come up with meaningful writing assignments that could be applicable to everyone. How could I help them to become readers who communicate and make connections between their novels, their interests, each other, and the larger world of which they are a part? (Moje 43). I realized, in this incredibly heterogeneous classroom, expecting my students to answer the same questions on the same days would never be successful. Many would not be able to make applicable connections between the prompt and the book, at least not in the ten minutes allotted without serious support, which would distract the rest of the class. To combat this, I made a few different lists of writing prompts (for different students), with general questions that asked them to connect with characters, engage the text, argue with an idea, or even respond creatively. Students were asked to complete a journal prompt daily on Monday through Wednesday, revise at least once for homework, continue to revise with their writing partner on Thursday, and share on Friday.

After initial growing pains, students settled into the schedule, and used their time

effectively. Between twenty-five and thirty minutes were set aside for reading most days of the week. Thursdays, students spent half of the time reading, and half revising collaboratively. After a brief grammar or strategy lesson using their previous journal entries, Fridays were modeled loosely after CWP Summer Institute read-arounds. We sat in a circle and one person would start by reading his or her piece. Sometimes it was about the student's book, other times it was a loose connection to something going on in his or her life. Occasionally it was poetry, or an alternate perspective on the plot. Afterwards, classmates wrote positive comments on sticky notes. We added the opportunity for the speaker to ask for verbal feedback if he/she wanted, but quickly had to limit this feedback to three comments. Perhaps more than any other activity, this Friday afternoon "sharing" that started primarily with plot summaries and "why-I-like-this-book" explanations, unified the class.

But Am I Teaching?

The final difficulty was personal. I spent most of the time sitting in class, reading a book. My principal stopped by repeatedly and found me reading. When my students read, I read. When my students wrote, I wrote. But I wasn't talking! I wasn't giving them strategy instruction. I wasn't grading vocab quizzes. I had to practically hold on to my seat to keep from walking around and asking a student how his book was, or if he was making connections with his own life. All I could hold onto was a quote from Richard Allington's oft-quoted article, "If They Don't Read Much, How They Ever Gonna Get Good?:" "To develop the ability to read fluently requires the opportunity to read --a simple rule of thumb." If I wanted my students to succeed, I needed to let go. I needed to give them time to practice.

And practice, they did. In just five weeks, every student had finished at least one book, most within two days of each other (another benefit of getting everyone books on his or her reading level). It was the fastest unit we had done the entire year, and each of them had read, written, and revised more during this unit than during the entire rest of the year. I had done less skill-drill and CAPT-prep grading, less nagging, less instructing, more reading, more writing, and more connecting with my students personally.

Student Responses and Data: The Bad News

This is the part of the report where I am supposed to say that my students improved dramatically and loved every second of the unit. Unfortunately, I can't do that. My students took a practice CAPT test prior to the unit and following it as part of a grade-wide initiative. Scores in my classes stayed much the same, or rose negligibly (keep in mind, my sample size was nine students). According to the data, my students' ability to read short pieces of non-fiction and answer critical thinking multiple-choice questions stayed steadily sub-par. Their Response to Literature answers were similarly lackluster.

This isn't the end of the bad news. I asked them to talk about the unit when it was over. I asked them if they felt like they were better writers than before the unit. One student said yes. I asked them if they thought they were better readers than before the unit. The same student said yes. Their journals and final projects (again, individual choice projects ranging from creating poetry books from a character's perspective to writing a thesis-based paper), showed many of the same mistakes that had been showing up all year. There weren't many more A's given during this unit than during the others, and I can't honestly say that their skills visibly improved.

And yet...

“What had happened, though, was they had learned they could read and write. They knew that they could get through a text even if they could not read every word. They also found out that they might actually enjoy reading some content. As of matter of course, they were no longer going to avoid reading just because it was reading.” - Rita Muholland

By the end of this unit, my classroom had changed. Instead of a group of high school students trying to please, ignore, pacify, or infuriate their teacher, we had become a community of readers and writers and thinkers. Students who had to be put on opposite sides of the classroom in the beginning of the year were now friends. Several of my students commented that they had never read a whole book on their own before. One mentioned how he “sorta understood the mind-picture thing now.” Others marveled at how much they had written and explained that the journal entries were much easier to do when they understood and liked what they were writing about. Perhaps the best part of this though, was that this very discussion was taking place in class, about how they learn and where they struggle. There were no insults hurled at the kids who shared. This acceptance of each other as learners didn't really solidify until this conversation.

Without exception, every student recommended that I do this unit again.

As mentioned, only one of my students was willing to say she felt like she had better reading and writing skills as a result of this unit, and frankly, I don't really believe her *skills* improved, even though her *motivation* did. What all of my students were willing to admit was, as one student said, that he “didn't mind reading so much when ...[he's] not forced to read and can just read for fun.” I found this ironic because they *were* required to read. If they refused to read or write, they had to leave the classroom. The exciting thing to me was that they didn't encounter the requirement to read as something they were “forced” to do. Giving them books they could choose, and then with which they could find success, took away the stigma of required reading. Several others also echoed the sentiments of one student, who reflected in her journal, “i still don't WANNA read, but if i have 2 read, its cool that it can b twilight. i would of done way better

b4 in LA if we could chose our own books like maybe I wouldn't of wanted to miss so much.” This same student, who reads at about a fourth grade level and had never finished a book, borrowed the second *Twilight* book over the summer.

Clearly, my experience mimics the above quote from Rita Muholland. My students have not changed into amazing students as a result of this unit. They still think of themselves as “the dumb kids,” and they will probably still sleep through, skip, or get tossed out of many of their classes next year. However, maybe the girl who borrowed the second *Twilight* book will read it. And maybe the girl who feels like her skills improved really had felt improvement. Maybe the only thing they learned was that they can call themselves readers and writers, and maybe they'll only call themselves bad ones, but at least they'll know they can have the conversation.

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