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RENAISSANCE OF THE HEART:  
BUILDING STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH DIALOGUE  
JOURNALS TO INCREASE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

~Leo F. Buscaglia
Abstract

This qualitative research study documents the observed and reported experiences of a high school special education teacher and twelve of her learning support students when incorporating dialogue journals into the Language Arts classroom. Students and teacher-researcher embarked on a journey through weekly written discourse. What started out as a means to support reading strategies and student engagement, turned to a means to develop relationships of caring and nurturing in the classroom. This study also examined student engagement within the classroom and school in general. The study suggests that students need an outlet for non-academic needs within the school day. When given the opportunity to express themselves, students will respond with honesty about their emotions and experiences. This study also found that when students are given the choice to write about their own topics of interest, student engagement will increase.
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Researcher Stance

Seeds of Change

It is the morning commute; I take the L train from Brooklyn into Manhattan, hoping that there is breathing room and that the person standing next to me isn’t stumbling home from the previous night’s debauchery. It’s like zombies on speed, or I guess it could be the effect of New York coffee, as people execute their trip to work like mindless drones, just at breakneck speed. The familiar sound of the subway doors opening, buunnnngggg-buunnnngggg. It’s Union Square. I have options now, although thought is still not required. I can either take the N to Prince Street or the 6 to Spring Street, whichever arrives first to the platform. I arrive at work and prepare my mind for the minimum workday requirement of 10 hours and try to decide which hat to put on first; it is the morning gamble of what my boss will deem most urgent at that given moment.

The commute home is different. I work so many hours that the evening rush hour has come and gone—I can actually get a seat! The day has left me brain-dead and so exhausted that a social life is out of the question.

I look around to do a little people watching and soak in the surroundings that I am oblivious to in the morning. It is what is to be expected: A group of teenagers speaking the foreign language of urban youth, a homeless man trying to stay warm and get by another day, a man in a suit with his nose to his Blackberry, a handful of hipsters discussing everything trendy-culture-cool, and an array of
other typical characters. I look up to scrutinize the design of the latest
advertisements and artwork when I read, “You remember your third grade
teacher’s name.” I don’t even have to think; I remember scenes from third grade
vividly. In my mind I picture Mrs. Hannselman. She was a short, plump, German
lady with a little round chin. She always had a big smile. She made us memorize
our times tables (which we were tested on regularly) and we did all kinds of fun
group work. When you earned a 100, you got to put your name on a big sheet on
the back bulletin board. Each month, the person with the most perfect scores got a
prize. It didn’t matter that I never was the student with the most perfect scores, it
was the excitement of the possibility. I continue to read, “Who will remember
your name?” Yeah, I thought. Who will remember mine? It was an ad for the New
York City Teaching Fellows.

The Road Less Taken

This was the day my teaching journey began. Since having the pleasure of
being in Mrs. Hannselman’s class, I had decided I was going to be a third grade
teacher when I grew up. This did not change in fourth grade, and in fifth grade I
decided that I was going to be a fifth grade teacher when I grew up, and so on it
went as I continued through my schooling. Despite this goal, I did not attend
college for education. Instead I earned a degree in graphic design and later, a
second degree in fashion design. I found myself miserable, working in SoHo for a
fashion designer for barely a living wage. Maybe it was time I finally grew up.
Maybe it was time for me to become a teacher. I applied to become a New York City Teaching Fellow.

My preparation prior to entering the classroom was quite different from the average teacher. I had no education background other than my own experiences as a student, and most of these experiences were hands-on by nature. After being accepted into the program, I had six weeks of “training” that I like to refer to as teacher boot-camp. I was grouped with other fellows to learn basic survival skills applicable to inner city schools. Due to my lack of academic background in the content areas of need (that is what two art degrees will get you!), I had my choice of teaching elementary school or Special Education at any grade level. For fear of a room full of little ones, I gladly accepted the path leading to the big kids—high school. I got my assignment: Special Education at Bushwick High School in Brooklyn. Day one, first class of the day. There is no one to help, no one to support me or give me an encouraging nod. I am the lone adult faced with a roster of 18 kids, mostly boys and a good portion of these students are tagged with Emotional and Behavioral Disturbance (EBD). Luckily only 10 show up. I am one of the only white people in the entire school standing face-to-face with an urban population who is looking at me like they are being punked. Who the heck is this lady? And what does she think she is doing? (I have translated their thoughts into appropriate and understandable questions, as what was really said and no doubt thought, is not quite what can be included in an
academic paper.) I learned quickly that establishing a rapport is more important than anything else and this must happen before any learning will take place. In Brooklyn, this is a teacher’s priority to ensure the students even bother to show up again after the first week.

Needless to say, I somehow managed to survive that first year intact with many hard lessons learned. The most memorable part was the relationship with each individual student and the relationship of the class as a whole. After my first year, my path took a new turn. Bushwick High School was being phased out and replaced by small charter schools. This was the new wave to save the long-suffering New York City schools. As Bushwick High School phased out, the new schools would phase in. As I thought about this, I got scared. I was one of the last teachers hired, so it didn’t take much to understand I would be one of the first to go as the school got smaller. I wanted to stay in the neighborhood so I applied to all the incoming small schools. I was hired at the Bushwick School for Social Justice, a start up school.

The Roman Years

The next two years of my teaching career were the most difficult, but were hands down the most rewarding. The Bushwick School for Social Justice was like the Romans. We were united and strong. We had staff meetings every morning and talked about kids and teaching! Imagine that, the entire faculty shared triumphs and struggles. Fellow colleagues showed support and offered solutions
for problems, and celebrated the victories and successes. The core of the teaching philosophy was empowering kids to lead active, successful lives through inquiry-based learning. Again, like the Romans, we utilized technology and all that was cutting edge. Our support system and knowledge base were expansive. We were strong and smart, working together to eradicate ineffective teaching. We were paving new roads for our students: Roads that from my experience the year before suggested had not been seen in Bushwick for quite some time. I don’t know if I have ever learned so much in such a short amount of time. And even with all the new instructional approaches I was learning, the heart of the school was advisory—building rapport with kids. We provided the extra that the academic classes did not support. It was an integrated social piece to address issues with kids that could not be addressed in the classroom setting. Then, circumstances changed on my home front, and I had to pull out.

The Dark Ages

At this point, life brought me to a new teaching placement at a high school in eastern Pennsylvania. And thus began the “dark ages” of my career as a teacher. The beauty of past understanding of pedagogy had slipped from my grasp and remained up on the shelf, where it patiently waited to be rediscovered. The Romans were far away and the common language of the people had changed. There was a communication breakdown between myself and the other neighboring kingdoms and some of the other rulers were particularly territorial
and vicious. The warring states of No Child Left Behind and the PSSA tests were continually attacking my borders. My noblemen, knights, craftsmen and laborers seemed to place their trust in the path I had planned for us, but they were completely reliant on me. My kingdom was in a state of decline with the quality of written work abysmal—where any actually existed at all. The subjects were moody, not to mention extremely restless. As the named leader, I struggled to find a way to unite my kingdom, bring them through a Reformation and into the Enlightenment. I knew it was my job to make peace with the attacking states and protect my people from harm. And so the slow upheaval and reorganization of my pedagogy began, leading me on a quest that would take me into the future. Like the Enlightenment, this began an age of optimism with the realistic recognition of the state of my subjects along with the need for major reform in my strategies and thinking. At the heart of my reform was the questioning of my current approaches and the idea to somehow give my subjects the realization of their greater rights.

James A. Michener has said, “An age is called Dark not because the light fails to shine, but because people refuse to see it” (Quotationbooks.com, 2011, p. 21). Upon adjusting to a new home, a new state, and a new school while dealing with a newly formed family, I failed to see the light. Somehow, everything I knew to be true and right about teaching was left on the hood of the car when I left Brooklyn. Starting graduate courses with a focus on reflection gave the jolt
necessary to lift the blinds and once again take steps toward a new golden age in my teaching methodology.

Before I could truly begin to make changes in my classroom, I had to examine many areas. The first: Just who were the young men and women looking at me on a daily basis? As a Learning Support (LS) teacher, my class was already filled with what would be considered non-traditional students. The students who fill my room each year are academically and socially diverse. I tend to have some students who have very high academic skills (as far as special education is concerned) and are testing on level, but do not want to leave the comfort of LS. On the opposite end of the spectrum, I always have students who can barely read and have a limited repertoire of techniques to deal with the high levels of frustration this causes. Each and every one of them has strengths and weaknesses that must be both celebrated and supported. I had not been as good at acknowledging this as I was in the past, which led me to my next area to examine: what was I doing as I taught in my classroom?

What I had been doing in my room was this: I had become consumed with covering material and had allowed the classroom and my teaching to become static. This seems quite obvious now that I have slowed down and reflected on my practices. I do not know how this knowledge had not hit me on the head like a cinder block and knocked me out. My teaching methods had turned my students into baby birds, waiting with open beaks for me to regurgitate knowledge while
they waited comfortably in the nest, fully trusting that I would take care of them if they asked or waited long enough. This is what Paulo Freire equates to “education becoming an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.” There is a communication breakdown and the students do not learn to become productive citizens (2005, p. 72). There is no mother bird flying around the community waiting to read and write for the students when they graduate to ensure they will be happy, healthy and productive. I do not want to set my students up for a false reality of success and the world, or for failure. I realized I was allowing them to be complacent and this was unacceptable. One way to begin a remedy for this was to return to what I had been taught would work—building a rapport with each individual and creating an environment where risk-taking and thinking were encouraged.

**The Enlightenment**

My Enlightenment had just begun. I started to balance the district’s expectations and my own personal teaching philosophy. How could I build a personal relationship with my students while teaching the required curriculum? Dialogue journals would, I suspected, be a venue to allow students to take risks with no penalty. Issues outside of class could quietly be addressed, hopefully solved, or, at the very least, supported through the curriculum. Students would have a voice, thus hopefully increasing engagement in other areas of the class. At the same time I could really get to know my students’ needs and interests to plan
future curriculum that is relevant. In a pilot study, I used journals as a means for student expression and found that student engagement did increase. The journals were a safe place for the students to write, but something still seemed to be lacking. The purpose of this study was to reinforce reading strategies through the use of dialogue journals and at the same time, increase student engagement through the open conversation. Since the nature of the Learning Support Language Arts class is a room full of students that struggle with literacy, I needed to do something to help my students read. And I didn’t just mean fluency or words on the page; I meant reading for meaning. I needed to help my students become literate adults, capable of understanding what they read and thinking critically about it. If I could reinforce reading strategies and get to know my students simultaneously through the use of dialogue journals, it would be a win/win situation. This led to my original research question which lead me on my new journey: What are the effects of dialogue journals on literacy and student engagement?
Methodology

Setting and Participants

I teach at a secondary school in Northeastern Pennsylvania that serves close to 3,000 students in grades nine through twelve. The community the district serves is comprised of predominantly urban and suburban, with a small rural population. My classroom is a Language Arts 11 learning support class. What this means is that all of the students in my class have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). In New York City, this was called a self-contained classroom; the Pennsylvania term is a bit friendlier—supplemental learning support class. What this term really means is there are no students considered to be part of the general education (non-IEP students) in the class—everyone receives special education services. In other words, they are there because they all struggle with literacy.

While my high school has a male to female ratio of 53% to 47%, my learning support classes are 71% male and 29% female. The ethnic breakdown of the student population attending the high school is 62% Caucasian, 18% Black, 16% Hispanic, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander and less than one percent Native American/Alaskan Native, with 29% of the student body eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. My students are 48% Caucasian, 33% Hispanic and 19% Black. Eighty-one percent of my students receive free or reduced lunch. The graduation rate of the school is 96%, while the subgroup of special education has a graduation rate of 76%.
Many of my students have horrifying circumstances which they endure on a daily basis, ranging from a parent or sibling in prison, one or both parents dead, abusive family members, lack of a safe home environment, living with a mentally challenged mother while sleeping on the floor due to having only one bed, to drug addiction and gang activity. Oh, and let’s not forget the moms and dads I teach. One young man already has a second child on the way. This is my daily reality.

Twelve students between my two learning support classes have parental consent to participate in my study. These students struggle with literacy—both reading and writing, and basic math skills. They are generally the kids that spend time in the in-school suspension room, in after school detentions and in Saturday detentions. They do mischievous things like zip-tie other students’ feet or book bags to their desks and dial 911 from the classroom phones. They are also very emotional and have been known to storm out of class because they don’t have the skills to handle their anger. They have an overall tendency to curse as if they have a rare form of Tourette’s syndrome. The boys wear inappropriate t-shirts and belt buckles and their pants are down below their bottoms. The few females I have show up with midriffs exposed, along with other parts of their anatomy that should be covered. Following the school rules is not typically on the kids’ agenda. Many of my students are resistant to reading and writing. The students that do give it their best effort fall short of meeting the state requirements and measurements of proficiency.
It is a constant wonder to me that at this point in their young lives, they even continue to show up for school. Overall, given the extra baggage, my students behave quite well when in my classroom. However, they are frustrated with school and many of their teachers. The fact that they still cannot read above a third to fifth grade level does not help their cause. And then there is writing. I have watched a student stagnate for more than ten minutes because he couldn’t spell a word. Others will just stare at the blank page waiting for something to happen. By that point, the day’s work is lost.

**Research Methods and Data Sources**

The intent of this study was to see if there was a connection between the intervention of dialogue journals with an increase in reading comprehension and student engagement. When I started my study, I explained to my students that I was completing my master’s degree, and that to do so, I needed to choose an aspect of my teaching which I wanted to improve. I also explained that after I conducted my research on the strategy I used in the classroom, I would have to write about it in a thesis. My students were excited about the idea of being part of my writing. I answered a multitude of questions regarding the research study and what I was going to do. I reassured my students I had received all the necessary approvals from my Supervisor of Special Education and the principal (Appendix A), along with the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) from the college (Appendix B). I then distributed consent forms (Appendix C), explaining
that all my students would participate in the dialogue journals, but if no parental consent was given to participate, I could not use those students’ information in my thesis.

On the first day of introducing the dialogue journals, every student received the same letter I wrote (Appendix D). From that point on, I personally responded to what each student wrote and answered any questions he or she asked. The journals were a privately written conversation between myself, the teacher, and that student. My students understood I would not share entries with anyone until I wrote about it in my thesis and used pseudonyms for each student. At this juncture, it was also important for the students to understand that I was a mandated reporter, and I had to report anything that made me suspect that they were in harm’s way or breaking the law. By the second journal response, the students’ conversations took on their own life in directions totally unforeseen.

The data collection instruments I used to measure gains in reading comprehension and engagement were: student artifacts (specifically the dialogue journals), student surveys and Likert scales, participant checks and interviews, and double entry journals of my own observations and reflections, and shadow logs. I contemplated using the Reading 4-Sight assessments but decided against it. I knew my students tended to just “bubble in” any answers, making this an invalid measure of their reading ability.
Student Dialogue Journals

This was the primary source of data from my students. The dialogue journals were the essential ingredient in this research recipe; without them, there would be no study. In addition to monitoring their growth in comprehension, the journals were a good way to informally assess each student’s writing needs and build a rapport. Every Friday was our dialogue journal day where the majority of the 41 minutes was set aside to give students ample time to read my response and then continue the conversation. Students were given the freedom to do a free-write with whatever was on their mind, or choose from a “pool” of prompts posted in the classroom. The pool of prompts was geared towards different levels of comprehension questions to respond to text and different ways for students to make connections to the text. With the dialogue journals I could give feedback in the journals for each student within a short period of time. Students were encouraged to do their best with spelling and to write out words—this isn’t a text message after all—but I let them know there would be no grade for spelling.

Interviews and Participant Checks

Another important method of gathering data was both individual and whole class interviews. I had some questions in my head about engagement and motivation that I wanted to ask the students, as well as more specific questions based on their journal entries. I would make a point to ask students clarifying questions. Since my students lacked confidence in their writing, the oral
interviews gave my students the opportunity to tell me what they thought and felt instead of struggling to write what they wanted to say. This seemed like a relief in the sense that they could just talk. I would often get a lengthier and more in depth response than what my students would take the time to write out. Checking in with my students verbally to find out exactly what they meant by a written comment upon entering the room or at various times added invaluable data to my study.

**Student Surveys and Likert Scale**

The student surveys (Appendix E & F) and Likert scale (Appendix G) were designed to measure student attitudes about reading, English class in general and their overall engagement in school. I gave students the choice to put their name on the surveys, being sure to discretely mark the papers of the participants so I knew which survey results I could use in my study. My intention to do it this way was to encourage honest answers through anonymity. The surveys were designed to the best of my abilities to eliminate bias. With the information gathered from the surveys, I could then formulate some guiding questions for individual interviews with students.

**Field Log and Reflective Memos**

I used Geertz’ (1973) philosophy of *thick and rich*. My plan was to record observations and my own thoughts as much as possible. I made it a point to follow Bogdan and Biklen’s (2002) recommendation and distinguish between
what students actually said and did, and what my reaction or interpretations were.
I also completed shadow logs for individual students to gain a better understanding of the observed behaviors and comments from individual students. By using more snapshots within the narrative, I knew I had a better chance of supporting valid research conclusions. The combination of analyzing all of the data hopefully ensured the trustworthiness of my study.

**Trustworthiness Statement**

I made a pledge to do my best to conduct my study in a responsible and respectable manner: I do solemnly swear that I conducted my research in an ethical manner, following the guidelines set forth by the HSIRB. I recorded my observations accurately and methodically, and triangulated my data. I made a promise to expose my biases and accepted the idea that what I expected to happen may not be the case. I did my best to realistically and truthfully report my findings. I pledged to be a trustworthy researcher. In the field of qualitative research it is important to cross check all of the different forms of data collected and analyzed to ensure credibility. To ensure I was a trustworthy researcher, I used triangulation. Hendricks defines triangulation as “a process in which multiple forms of data are collected and analyzed” (2006, p. 72).

**Validity**

According to The New Oxford American Dictionary, validity is an adjective used to describe when something actually supports an intended point or
claim. MacLean and Mohr (1999) talk about creating validity through the process of cross checking the data from multiple sources from a variety of perspectives to validate the findings of the study. My study needed to be believable. In addition to using multiple sources to ensure my study supported my claims, I needed to consciously adhere to ethical research practices. Before beginning the action research study, I submitted my study proposal to the Human Subjects Internal Review Board (HSIRB) at Moravian College. Once the Board approved my proposal and determined my students would not be placed at risk (Appendix B), consent from my building administrator needed to be obtained using a formal signed consent form (Appendix A). At this point, I could introduce my study to my students. To abide by the ethical guidelines, I distributed a consent letter (Appendix C) explaining the nature of the study. The letter also explained that participation in the study would be voluntary and a student could withdraw at any time without penalty. Students who did not participate were not treated any differently than the students who did participate; their information was just not used in the study. The identity of the participants and all data were kept confidential and students remained anonymous. At the close of the study, the data would be destroyed.

While collecting the data, I adopted with the philosophy of thick and rich data collection (Geertz, 1973). I recorded observations of my students as often as humanly possible and kept a double entry journal of my feelings and reactions to
the observations. The more snapshots I could capture within the narrative, the better chance I had of supporting valid research conclusions. I also used member checks with my students to weigh in with them regarding the accuracy of my observations and interviews. Student artifacts (the dialogue journal itself) were used as part of the data collection along with the Likert scale, student surveys, participant checks and interviews, as well as my own double entry journals with observations, shadow logs and reflections. I also worked with supportive peers to cross check my thoughts and data with them to gain insight into other interpretations and perspectives.

To determine if my conclusions based on the results were trustworthy, I made sure there were no other explanations for the results. To rule out the possibility of other rival explanations, I triangulated the data. I accomplished this by completing participant checks to confirm my interpretations of student responses in the interviews, surveys, and Likert scales. I used multiple sources of data—all of the various data collections instruments—to determine if they all supported the same conclusions. I also searched for any evidence that was contrary to my conclusions.

**Biases**

For the action researcher, Hendricks (2006) breaks down the premise of validity into eleven steps. The two steps of Hendricks that resonated the most with me while conducting my research were to make clear any researcher bias and to
include the negative case analysis. A negative case analysis is the one finding that runs contrary to the data collected. It is the student that is going “up the down staircase.” Human beings by their very nature are story-tellers. It is in our genetic make-up to relate to others in the form of narratives. These stories generate from an individual’s need to communicate and entertain, and are told from each person’s unique experiences and perspectives. It was important to me as a researcher to always keep this in mind. Story-tellers tend to embellish and thrive on emotion. When conducting my research it was imperative to remain factual and separate my feelings from actual events. When my biases presented themselves, I needed to state them. The next step was to ensure I reflected upon this bias and separated it so it would not affect the analysis of my study. When recording my observations, it was vitally important to separate the actual words and facts from my feelings and interpretations. I recognized that though my observations were recorded with an influence of my beliefs and perspective, I did my best to keep my reactions separate in the form of double entry journals.

It is also human nature when telling a story, to leave out anything that does not add to the point that is communicated. In research, this would equate to that one student or scenario which negates the other findings. It was crucial to the integrity of the study to include this negative case analysis and discuss the dilemma it presented.
Literature Review

“Everyone believes that to be a good teacher all you need is to love to teach, but no one believes that to be a good surgeon all you need is to love to cut.”
-Adam Urbanski
Vice President, American Federation of Teachers

Today’s Schools

Wanting to teach and loving to teach is no longer enough to meet society’s demands on a teacher. Today’s education system encounters many problems and is under a great deal of scrutiny. With the mission to “leave no child behind” administrators are pressed to institute massive educational reform. According to the U. S. Department of Education (2006) more than 60% of kindergarten through 12th grade school children are reading below the level needed to comprehend the written materials used in their grade levels. Sixty-nine percent of eighth graders in the United States are below proficient in reading, and by 12th grade only five percent of the below proficient students will make it to the proficient level. The issue of literacy is compounded when looking at minority subgroups and economic factors. Eighty-six percent of African-American students read below grade level while, 89% of Latino students read below grade level (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2005). On average, students who receive free or reduced lunch are approximately two years behind in their learning than the average student ineligible for free or reduced lunch (McKinsey & Company, 2009).
What Will Happen if We Can’t Teach Them?

“The extent to which a society utilizes its human potential is among the chief determinants of its prosperity.”
-McKinsey & Company

“A nation’s greatest asset is its people.”
-Gerald N. Tirozzi

Our nation is in danger. The consequences of not addressing the current literacy problem in America will be devastating to our future. At the core of our democracy is the most basic foundation of knowledge: the ability to read, write, and speak in a way that promotes further learning and advances ideas among diverse people. Currently, our country is failing its citizens by not preparing our children for life in the real world, and this is most apparent with the minority student population. In addition to this, technology is changing rapidly in the 21st century and we are falling behind as a competitive nation. U.S. dominance in the world’s economy is fading (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007). The U.S. Department of Labor (2007) also estimates that 90% of new high growth, high wage jobs will require some postsecondary education compared to prior years when a high school dropout could find a job to support a middle class family lifestyle. This is no longer the case. Many jobs once held by high school dropouts or by individuals with a high school diploma are being automated or going overseas (Amos, 2008). A study on shifting employment demographics concluded that the most successful workers will be those who can engage in critical thinking and problem solving and who can engage in complex communication (Levy &
Murnane, 2004). The skills needed to compete in the job market will be interacting with texts and people, interpreting and explaining information, or persuading others of its implications for action (Amos, 2008). These are the skills lacking in proficient readers, leaving few options for finding gainful employment to support a family. Too many of our high school graduates are ill prepared for the demands of college or for the work force (Kortering and Christenson, 2009).

**What Can Educators Do? Increasing Student Engagement**

*The principle goal of education in the schools should be creating men and women who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done.*

-Jean Piaget

The Office of Special Education report (2006) showed a large gap between graduation rates between general education students and peers identified as having a specific learning disability, behavior or emotional disability, other health impairment, or milder levels of intellectual deficiency. Central to the goal of school completion, specifically for students in the special education population, is engaging students in school and learning. Kortering and Christenson (2009) propose that,

“[w]hen the goal of educators is to promote school completion, the major foci of interventions are strategies that help students acquire skills to meet the demands of the school environment and to create relationships with students to facilitate their active engagement in learning and at school” (p. 7).
Finn and Rock (1997) support this by contending that the best way to help students complete school is to have students graduate with academic and social competence. They go on to state that any intervention which prevents drop-out or student failure should help students become academically resilient and consistent learners. Kortering & Christenson (2009) propose that any successful intervention must go beyond increasing attendance and task completion and help students connect in their relationships with teachers and peers in both the academic and social aspects of school.

The construct of student engagement originates in part from Social Control Theory (Hirshi, 1969). In Social Control Theory, emphasis is placed on individual feelings of attachment and belonging to social institutions. Jeremy Finn (1989) defines engagement by participation and identification at school; identification is a sense of belongingness and whether or not the student perceives value in schooling, and participation has four parts: responsiveness to requirements, participation in class-related initiatives and extracurricular activities, and decision-making. Archambault, Janosz, Fallu and Pagani (2009) adopt the multi-dimensional perspective that student engagement encompasses behavioral, affective and cognitive dimensions. The behavioral dimension involves participation in school related tasks, attendance, compliance with rules and participation in classroom related tasks. The affective domain refers to feelings, interests, perceptions and attitudes towards school. Having a sense of
belonging would fall into this category. The cognitive dimension encompasses student investment in learning and self-regulation strategies. Marzano (2003) speaks about engaging students in terms of motivation. He found extensive research supporting the obvious idea that “[i]f students are not motivated to learn the content, their achievement will likely be limited” (p. 144).

Teacher and student relationships. Marzano (2003) states, “An effective teacher and student relationship may be the keystone that allows the other aspects [of classroom management] to work well” (p. 91). Students come to school with varied life experiences and it is through these individual experiences that determine how ready a child is to learn within the classroom. John Dewey (1938) discusses the significance that experience has on a child’s learning specifically related to the world of schooling. His statement, “… the principle of continuity of experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of what comes after,” is a call for educators to understand the experiences that each student brings with them before learning will take place (p. 35). Understanding student needs, starting with the emotional, is the foundation on which all else will be built. Furrer and Skinner (2003) found that many of the students who drop out report feeling disconnected from the adults who are in charge of their education.

Emotions and brain-based learning. Many students today arrive in the classroom with overwhelming needs (Kozol, 1988; Quint, 1994; Anyon, 1997).
“All kinds of real, pressing needs overwhelm the academic ones… Homelessness, poverty, toothaches, faulty vision, violence, fear of rebuke or mockery, sick or missing parents, and feelings of worthlessness all get in the way of the learning deemed important by school people” (Noddings, 2005, p. 151). Abraham Maslow’s (1943) belief that humans have a hierarchy of needs, which motivate behavior, supports the importance of student engagement in the classroom. The basic needs must be met before an individual can move to the next level. If the basic needs necessary for survival at the base of the pyramid or at the next level (the need for security and safety) are not being met, then learning will not take place. The third level of needs is social needs. These include relationships and the needs for belonging, love and affection. The three bottom levels are considered deficiency needs because these arise due to being deprived of them. If these needs are not met, the highest level of the pyramid, the self-actualizing needs, will not be met. These needs arise not from deprivation, but from a desire to grow and become a better person. To help high school students become life long learners to lead meaningful lives, it is our duty as educators to meet these needs.

Maslow’s idea is supported by current brain-based research. Jensen’s (1995/2000) basic component of brain-based learning is that our emotions influence our ability to learn. The brain is a “parallel processor, meaning the brain performs many tasks simultaneously, including thinking and feeling” (Connell, 2009, p. 30). LeDoux (1996) explains that the emotional neural passageways
influence the neural passageways needed for academic learning. This ties into the research of Caine and Caine where they found “[t]he brain’s/mind’s search for meaning is very personal. The greater the extent to which what we learn is tied to personal meaningful experiences, the greater and deeper our learning will be (1994, p. 96). Wolfe and Brandt (1998) have stated that students need to feel safe in the classroom environment and it should have an emotional climate of respect. Without this, academic learning will not take place. LeDoux (1996) equates the neurological functioning of the brain when a student feels unsafe in the classroom to that of being lost in the wilderness. When the brain views the learning environment as being unsafe, it will essentially shift the blood and oxygen in the brain into a flight or fight mode, making learning content impossible.

The necessity of caring. Noddings (2005a) proposes there should be an ethic of caring in education based upon needs, although she makes the distinction that this does not quite follow the rigidity of Maslow. What she does have in common with Maslow is the belief that “needy children cannot concentrate well enough to learn” (p. 151). In her book, Noddings (2005b) defines a caring relation as, “a connection or encounter between two human beings” (p. 15). She further explains that both parties must contribute and acknowledge each other. Noddings (2005a) asserts that assessing and responding to needs is one of the most difficult tasks teachers face, but should be central to the mission of education. Freire (1970/2000) supports this idea of developing a relationship with students when he
states, “they [teachers] must be partners of the students in their relations with them” (p. 75). He goes on to say, “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn, while being taught, also teaches. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 80). Students feel more connected to their school when they believe that the adults and other students care about them as individuals (The Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009).

It follows rational thought that if disengaged students can feel that someone cares for them, they can develop a sense of belonging and place more value in education. Goodenow (1993) associates this emotional engagement, or sense of belonging with adaptive school behaviors, including persistence with tasks, participation and classroom attendance. Generally, students who feel cared for by their teachers feel connected and report autonomous reasons for engaging in positive school related behaviors (Ryan, Stiller, & Lynch, 1994).

**Building resiliency.** Piaget (1981) asserted that emotions are the *energy source* for intellectual functioning. Mandler (1983) explains that one’s emotional backdrop determines the way in which one will respond to situations. If one’s emotional backdrop has high intensity, then one will respond intensely in an either positive or negative manner. In essence, this reinforces Piaget’s theory. Jensen (2010) cites chronic stress as an issue facing 30-50% of students on a daily basis. This is statistically higher in at-risk and students from poverty and affects
attendance, social skills and cognitive functioning. Jensen proposes teaching better coping skills and building on them as well as the teacher acting as a mentor in the classroom.

**Engaging Students in Literacy**

Unfortunately, according to Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko and Huwitz (1999), there is no quick fix for reading difficulties. The bridge to the divide that is largely supported and adapted is a balanced literacy approach which creates a culture of literacy (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2005). Basic skills can be explicitly taught and are essential since being able to read the words on the page with fluency is necessary to understand the literal level of the text. Students must also be engaged in the classroom to learn critical thinking skills and reading strategies to improve comprehension and deepen understanding of the text. P. David Pearson and colleagues (1992) synthesized years of research on characteristics of proficient readers isolating seven strategies used by successful readers of all ages. The strategies that tie into student engagement are:

- They use existing knowledge to make sense of new information. This would be considered their background knowledge, their experience.
- They ask questions about the text before, during, and after reading. To do this, they must make connections to the text.
- They draw inferences from the text. Students are not going to do this if they are not engaged in the classroom or the reading.
• They determine what is important—purpose. Again, students will not determine what is important if they cannot comprehend the material.

It is obvious that becoming literate involves a great deal of cognition. It is not as simple as being able to pronounce the words on the page. These same strategies have been found to be the best strategies when working with students with learning disabilities (LD) (Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008; Swanson & De La Paz, 1998). Students whose emotional needs are not met and areas of interest are not addressed through the curriculum will not be able to use these strategies to become better readers and support their academic success.

Dialogue Journals

Marzano (2009) proposes the teacher should assist in student motivation and “provide opportunities for students to talk about themselves” (p. 33). Dialogue journals are a forum in which students can do just that. According to Jana Staton, “A dialogue journal is a bound composition book in which each student carries on a private written conversation with the teacher for an extended period of time…that is deeply embedded into the classroom” (1987, para. 2). Historically, the dialogue journal was a teacher-developed practice rather than a research initiated practice (Staton, 1983). This still remains true today with most of the research focusing on journaling, but not specifically the dialogue journal. Dialogue journals have been implemented across various settings, content areas, age groups, and abilities in order to enhance writing, oral communication, reading
comprehension, and critical thinking skills (Bardine, 1995; Kaiser, 2003; Krebs, 2006; Larrotta, 2009; McFarland, 2001; Peyton, 2000; Regan, 2003; Staton, 1987). The common thread is that the dialogue journal is learner centered with the teacher and learner working together. The students’ attempts to communicate are “acknowledged, supported and extended” by the instructor’s response (Staton, 1987, p. 5). Dialogue journals support each individual where he or she is at and fosters his or her growth. This should be applicable to learning any new skill.

Bartscher, Lawler, Ramirez and Schinault (2001) studied the use of journals to improve writing in low achieving middle school students. There was only a slight improvement in students’ writing abilities but a noted improvement in motivation. Motivation was a by-product of the journaling process and one that is extremely necessary to make any gains in academic achievement. Richards (1995) conducted a similar study with third grade students in the hope that dialogue journals would be an effective instructional strategy for reluctant writers. Her results were similar to Bartscher, Lawler, Ramirez and Schinault in that the journals helped develop relationships of trust and caring, fostering positive relationships with her students. She found that the journal conversations led to other sharing in the classroom.

Regan, Mastropieri, and Scruggs (2005) conducted a study using dialogue journals specifically with elementary students with emotional and behavioral disturbances (EBD). The intent of the study was to promote expressive writing
and to encourage positive social skills through individualized written conversations. Contrary to Bartscher, Lawler, Ramirez and Schinault, and Richards’ results, Regan, Mastropieri, and Scruggs’ study showed an improvement in the amount and quality of writing of students with EBD while at the same time giving them an outlet or forum to discuss target behaviors. However, their research could not determine that it was the dialogue journals which led to any improvement in students’ actual social or behavioral functioning.

An important source for guiding teachers’ responses in dialogue journals is a grounded research study conducted by Werderich (2006). This study explored “how middle school literacy teachers used dialogue journals and the processes by which they responded to their students’ written work” (p. 47). First and foremost, this study suggested that using dialogue journals is a means for teachers to support the differing needs of each student. Through my responses and the dialogue that ensues, I can create what Werderich (2006) calls “an effective means of individualizing the literacy development of young learners” (p. 47). By their very nature, special education students have varying needs. Utilizing dialogue journals allows teachers to identify areas of strength and weakness, and enables the teacher to see the unique needs of each student. From this the teacher can provide differentiated support to improve a student’s literacy level and his or her engagement in the class.
Werderich’s study provided the lens through which I could visualize the methodology to be used when implementing the use of dialogue journals (2006). Dialogue journals were a new strategy to my pedagogy which I would try. Since Werderich’s study did not focus on the effects of dialogue journals on the students, but rather the processes the teachers use when implementing them, my methods of implementation were affirmed and strengthened. My original plan was to have the entries or prompts as a means for students to make personal connections to the text. I thought my responses would range from encouraging the student, to working with specific grammar/convention issues, or questioning and strengthening students’ understanding of the text. This way of thinking fell in line with the categories that Werderich noted in her study when examining teachers’ response processes (2006).

In a dialogue journal, the discourse that takes place between the teacher and the student creates an apprenticeship between the experienced partner (the teacher) and the learner (the student) and opens up the inquiry into the cognitive process. Part of Vygotsky’s social development theory is the idea that social learning precedes development. He felt that learning first occurs “through the learner’s cooperative participation in accomplishing tasks with a more experienced partner” (1978, p. 88). With the implementation of dialogue journals, all of these dimensions can be addressed in the hopes of building literacy and engaging otherwise unmotivated students, by “making thinking visible,” a
concept popularized by Flavell (1978). Depending on the conversation between
teacher and student, either participant can become the “more knowledgeable
other” that is integral to development and learning (Vygotsky).

Summary

The disheartening and alarming statistics of all my research was clear.
There are an alarming number of high school students who are functionally
illiterate and deal with crises, which directly impacts both their success in school
and completion of school. If this cannot be remediated in the short time they
attend high school, society and the individual will both be burdened with the
consequences. As educators, we must find ways to capture our students’ attention
long enough to teach them to become literate along with helping students
effectively deal with their social and emotional problems. We must engage our
students in the learning process and create citizens capable of having healthy
relationships. With the implementation of dialogue journals personal relationships
can be nurtured, uniting cognitive, linguistic and emotional development within
the apprenticeship framework. Students have an outlet for expressing thoughts
that are not necessarily part of the curriculum and can participate in a caring, non-
judgemental relationship. When students can be more successful in school, they
become more engaged and active learners. The more educators focus on nurturing
and educating the whole child, the more prosperous our nation and society will be.
My Story

Stones in My Passway

August was coming to a close, marking summer’s end. My in-laws had packed up and headed home, signifying for me that this is the time to switch gears from family travel and daily adventures with my son to preparing to get back to the adventures in the classroom. As a special education teacher, the summers have come to be an important time to regain my sanity and distance myself from the constant worry for my *other kids*, or *Mommy’s big kids* as my son calls them.

Normally I relished the start of the school year. The excitement of trying new strategies that build upon what I learned from the past year’s experience and student response was palpable. I looked forward to meeting my new group of students, and I was ever curious to see how the classroom dynamics and relationships will evolve throughout the year. The unfortunate reality was that my students tend to be downtrodden and resistant, so starting with kindness, good humor and enthusiasm is a must. And herein lay my roadblock.

This year, my summer ended in a state of complete anxiety. I was singin’ the blues, both literally and figuratively. The lyrics to a Robert Johnson song, *Stones in My Passway*, came to mind. The song starts out, “I got stones in my passway, and my road seem dark as night. I’ve got pains in my heart, they have taken my appetite” (Johnson, 1998). This year had me embarking on my eighth year of teaching, and with every year that had passed, I had had a major change in
something: the school that I teach in and/or the state that I teach in, the grade level that I teach or the capacity in which I teach. This was always combined with constant changes within special education procedures and expectations as a special education case manager. I used to think that at some point my teaching career would even out, and maybe it will, but it was certainly not going to be the 2010-2011 school year. The “stones” in my passway were everywhere, in fact, it looked like a landslide. How was I going to put this into perspective and start the year off on a positive note? After all, this was to be a landmark year; the year that I would conduct my research and complete the biggest academic accomplishment in my career.

District morale was at an all time low due to massive lay-offs and multiple changes across departments and in administration. Class sizes were up and the co-teaching wave was now sweeping across all four grades for English. The general education teachers were no longer asked to volunteer for the role and instead were assigned, regardless of whether or not they believed in co-teaching. The special education teacher never had a choice since there were so few of us to begin with.

For the past two years, I had co-taught two to three freshman English 9 sections with a colleague that I worked well with. Our team was broken up due to the shifts in staff and a limited number of “highly qualified” special education English teachers. Once again, my schedule included major changes. I was co-teaching English 11 with a new partner, Sue Hughes. Although I had every
confidence this new partnership would be an amicable and successful one, I was still nervous. A wise old friend once told me, “you are what you teach.” On the literal level, I teach special education. Just like my typical student, I don’t adjust to change of this magnitude without percolating on it for a spell. I felt my first co-teacher and I had reached a great balance between us and had hit our stride. Now I had to start the process of learning how to work with someone all over again.

On top of this, I was displaced from the room I had taught my learning support classes in for the past four years. I had no room to utilize as my home base, no official desk or area to store my caseload information nor a space to safely store my personal belongings. I was assigned to three different classrooms and was wearing four different hats: learning support Language Arts 11 teacher, English 11 co-teacher, resource room teacher and case manager to 24 special needs students in grades 9-12 (only two of which I actually saw on a daily basis in the classroom). I also had to implement my study. I tried to keep an open mind, knowing that most of my colleagues were very supportive and encouraging, and that I wouldn’t be alone walking this path of my crucial year of research and discovery.

After some time for my brain to wrap around the coming changes, I was ready to get focused on what mattered. The stubborn and determined part of me refused to let things that I have no control over waylay me. Think strategy. To say I am competitive is an understatement, and I compete with myself to do the best I
can. If the stones were too big to move, I would find a way over, under or around them. After putting the task ahead of me into perspective, I became excited to start another year with a new group of students. I put myself in the mindset that all of the issues would smooth out and be resolved—I would make it work. After all, it is the kids who are most important facet to my teaching and what happens within the 41 minutes of instruction is essential.

I began the first days of work anticipating learning about my new group of students and how to meet their needs as best as I possibly could while conducting my study. My hopes were high that I would make a marked difference in their reading and writing abilities over the course of the school year utilizing dialogue journals as my key strategy. It was an added bonus that the journals would provide valuable information about my students’ strengths and weaknesses. I began to imagine the faces that would make up the different personalities of the classroom. Who would be the good-natured class clown? Who would be the kind-hearted, shy student who gives it his all but just doesn’t quite get it? Would I have the “smart” kid who just refuses the risk of moving into the on-level class? How many teen mothers or fathers would I have this year? How many would I lose to drop-out or to the juvenile detention center? The possibilities were endless…
Get on the Bus

The days of in-service found me scrambling to prepare for the school year. I was preoccupied with getting set and acclimated so thinking about when and exactly how to start my research was put on the back burner. I had two co-taught English 11 classes, two learning support Language Arts 11 classes, and two periods in the resource room. The original classroom I was slated to be in for the learning support classes was double booked with a teacher that is two years from retirement. Needless to say, it was I who needed to find another classroom for my learning support classes and all of my books and resources remained in boxes. There was not enough time to thoroughly investigate alternate possibilities as I was required to attend department meetings and professional development sessions and was given no time to meet with my co-teacher or organize myself. I was frustrated but continued to move forward, despite the stones continuing to pile up before me. In the end, I taught my learning support classes in a room that was unbelievably small. There was definitely no room for me to have my own desk; there was barely room for the students on my roster! I was not daunted—microscopic rooms come with the territory, but the lack of a desk or home base had not been anticipated and worried me. *Make it work* was becoming my mantra.

Then the first *real* day of school arrived, the day the students return to school. It was hectic to say the least. PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) was sweeping the high school. Homeroom was extended 30 minutes
each day to roll out the rules and expectations associated with PBIS. This meant I
only saw my third period Language Arts class for 21 minutes on the first day.
This was the class period I planned to focus on for my study, as my other group
was sixth period and the first of a four period run. Twenty-one minutes was barely
time to get started with anything. At that point there were 15 students on my
roster for third period. While this may not have seemed like a large number of
students, for a learning support class it is huge! [Especially in a room the size of
an outhouse, which I thought was a fire hazard.] Luckily, only 11 students showed
up, and we were still cramped. I thought to myself, what on earth am I going to
do with the other four, if and when they do show up? Before I even got started
with the lesson, I was met with a battery of questions and verbalized thoughts:
Miss, why are you in this room? Is this history or English? I don’t have an ID! I
hate English, just sayin’. Great. Thanks for sharing. I fielded the questions as best
I could, and I accomplished discussing my expectations of them and their
expectations of me. My initial impression was that they were an easy going group.
Sixth period ran much the same, but I am left with the initial impression they will
be high maintenance and I will have to be on top of my classroom management
game. There are only two girls out of 16 on the roster—in the same small room.

Day two. Day two was a bust. Period three was only 21 minutes long
again, but those 21 minutes were lost to the junior assembly. In period six I was
able to accomplish a little bit of my plan for the class.
Day three. Classes are changing on students’ schedules like the icons on a slot machine. Many students don’t have full schedules and many have two different classes scheduled for the same period. I have two students scheduled for my third period Language Arts class whom I taught last year and already passed my class. They tell me that it’s aiwight! Then there were the students who did not pass their Language Arts 10 class who are on my roster. This was fine with me, but I wonder how this will work out further into the year when PSSA paranoia hits and I was responsible for implementing a 40-day plan. How would the students who didn’t have to take the state exam but were in my class react to that? I was worried. How would I integrate the dialogue journals seamlessly into my instruction when I needed to give up class time to administer 4-sight assessments and deal with so many other district requirements that are minimally related, if at all, with language arts class?

I tried to do some quick assessments to determine student interests, strengths, humor level and needs. I attempted to gain an understanding of students’ writing ability with the first writing assessment of a low stakes assignment where students were to write about what feeds their spirit. What is their passion? Or as I rephrased again, what makes them happy? I thought this would be easy since everyone has something that they love, right? There was an explosion of comments: Wait, what do you want me to write? Miss, I can’t write. A whole paragraph? I can’t do that! Do I have to capitalize ‘i’ like my last
English teacher made me? I don’t have a dream. I don’t have a passion. I don’t like to do anything but sleep... Wow! I didn’t see that coming.

Day four. Students were disappearing without any warning. With the realization I may still lose a few and gain a few more, I tried to keep it light. We did an icebreaker of Truth, Truth, Lie. I wanted my students to get to know me, while at the same time, I wanted to get to know them. I knew I would get nowhere with my study if I didn’t build a rapport with my students. I gave the students index cards and had them write in random order two things about themselves which were true and one thing which was a lie. I collected them and read them out loud to see if we could guess who the person was. I modeled the process with my own statements to see if they could guess the lie: I have a special needs cat that I found on the street named Peg (since she has a deformed leg-pegleg). I have 223 pairs of shoes. I once threw a pair of scissors across the room at my sister because my big brother told me to. The lie was that I do not have 223 pairs of shoes, however, my students easily believed this could be true. No one believed I would have thrown the pair of scissors at my sister. I explained that since I am the youngest of four, with my brother being the oldest, I was told to always listen to my brother when he was in charge. I was only six years old and on this particular night, my brother was in charge. I was sitting on the couch cutting out shapes when my brother told me to throw the scissors. I didn’t question my brother and just did it. Very few of my students seemed to approach this task creatively, and it
turns out to be a very difficult task. Once again, I hadn’t seen it coming.

Interestingly, most of the males put down three statements about sports and favorite teams.

Day five. Today I wanted to do one last assessment before getting down to business. I was more concerned about learning how my students approached the task of reading than about the level they read at. After all, in the learning support class, we read virtually everything together as a group and there is little independent reading that isn’t later reread and discussed. I handed out an article written on a fifth grade reading level about a high school student fulfilling his dream. I also gave students a worksheet with questions to answer. I offered highlighters to those who wanted to mark the text. I told them I would observe and make some notes about what I saw. I encouraged my students to do the best they could without my assistance. Before I even had a chance to record anything, I am drowned with excuses. I tried to reassure them I would not take off points if they didn’t get an answer right, that I was just trying to determine the best way to teach them this year. I wanted to see how they worked. Can you read this to us?

This is too long! The type is too small. What paragraph can I find the answers in? Do the questions go in order? I can’t see the picture. Miss, I can’t read. I can’t do this. What will happen if I don’t do this? Miss, one thing ya gotta know about me is that I can’t learn… As was the norm, I knew I had my work cut out for me. The idea of reading something was daunting to almost every student. Many
students read the questions first and just searched for the answers, avoiding reading for meaning altogether. Others just stared at the page, leaving the questions blank. A few gave it their best effort. It is a good thing we weren’t playing poker because the look on their faces was a tell. They hated this.

What have I learned from my brief assessments? Far more than anticipated, but not exactly what I was anticipating. The comfort level of writing seemed to be copying down notes from the board or giving one word or sentence fragments for original answers. If it was an original answer and more than a small blurb, a large percentage of students didn’t want to do it. Even when given the directive to answer in complete sentences, only a few students would do this. Reading made them uncomfortable. Some were visibly irritated by the task of reading. Excuses came easy, way too easy, and I wondered if this was widely accepted by other teachers. I tried to reinforce the idea that I would accept no excuse without some possible solutions. We needed to find ways to work past the I can’ts, I don’ts, I won’ts and the but Miss. If my students worked as hard at finding a solution as they did protesting and trying to get out of doing activities, we would be moving forward. Instead, I felt like my wheels were spinning.

Settling in. Over the next few weeks, I attempted to follow the directive to keep pace with the on-level curriculum with whatever modifications and adaptations were needed for my students. I worked on building the trust with my students before I introduced my study. I needed to model the reading strategies for
my students and have them practice using them to ensure that when I began the
dialogue journals they would have strategies to return to. I encouraged students to
use the modeled reading comprehension strategies while we continued to read.
This was a battle I was not winning. I photocopied the adapted version of *Beowulf*
so students could mark up the text, physically noting questions and thoughts they
had as we read. I encouraged students to write down the main idea and summary
of the text when we stopped and discussed the meaning. Unfortunately, unless I
wrote something down on the board or directly told them to circle key words,
there would be no marks on the paper. Even just getting verbal answers was like
pulling teeth.

Me (after reading *Beowulf* out loud and discussing key points along the
way): What are some of the words that describe where Grendel lives?

Lost student: Who is Grendel?

Me: Who can help us out and tell us who Grendel is?

After a prolonged silence, one student is willing to break the silence: Uh, ain’t he the evil thing that ate the people?

Me: Yes. Thank you. Now what are words that describe where Grendel
lived?

Random answers that did not come from the text are shouted out by a few
different students. It was difficult to hear this from my students as we had not read
a large piece of information at once. The text was right in front of them, it was
read out loud, but students were refusing to look at the notes, re-read, or even scan for the information. I had to rephrase the question and tell them what lines to look at before a few students actually looked at the text. When they did, random words were picked and thrown out as guesses. My group seemed willing to try, but I began to wonder if I had overestimated their reading ability. Clearly guessing was a learned behavior that had gotten them through previous classes. I couldn’t fault them for trying, but even point blank, in-the-text questions, were difficult for them to answers. Critical thinking questions or questions requiring inferences were really difficult, but I persisted.

Finally, I felt the pressure of time and I knew I must begin my study. My rosters had evened out and there was no time better than the present. I had already had my principal and the supervisor of special education approve my study. I had taught and modeled the reading strategies as best as I could, and if I waited any longer, there would be no study! Carpe diem.

The day I introduced the study was another interesting day with my students. I was reminded that for a large percentage of my students and their families, college in any form is not the norm, nor is it expected. Graduating high school is the major accomplishment that families and students hope to realize. When I told them I was completing my master’s degree, before I could even get anything else out of my mouth, the comments and gasps filled the room. *Wait, what is a Master’s degree? How many years of school is that? Why would you*
want to do that? Miss, you must be really smart. They were even more baffled when they learned this is my second master’s degree. I explained to my students that I actually like to take classes to learn about new ideas and topics. I took them down memory lane with me to some of my own high school experiences with teachers—the good ones and the not-so-good ones. I explained I was always trying to learn new and better ways to help my students learn and interest them in learning. I definitely did not want to be a teacher that fell into the “not-so-good” category. I seized the opportunity to invite them on my journey of being smart with me. They seemed intrigued they could actually be a part of this journey. I wondered to myself if they had ever been given the opportunity to feel a part of someone else’s learning, or had seen themselves in the light that they were capable of helping others learn.

I told my students about the dialogue journals. Every student in my class understood the concept of a journal and had teachers in the past require them to make weekly or daily journal entries. I explained that the dialogue journal was different since their entry would be in the form of a letter written to me, and I would personally write a letter back to each one of them. We would have a written conversation. I told them that it was my intention to help reinforce the meaning of the text and improve their understanding of what we had read together in class. I was surprised at this point by their lack of questions. They nodded and didn’t seem to be overly concerned or stressed out about what was to come.
Next, I distributed the consent forms and explained what they were and why I needed them. Then I read the letter out loud. Again, there were many questions. *This sounds really crazy, Miss. How could we get hurt? I’m 19, can I just sign this? I am on my own, so do I have to have someone else sign this? What if my mom doesn’t sign this?*

I explained that nothing about my teaching would be different between the students who participated and the students who did not participate in the study. Everyone, regardless of participating in the study, would write in the journals and I would write back to each person individually. I explained I would change the names of every participant when I wrote my study to protect their identity. I also explained that anyone could decide to pull out of the study at any time for any reason. I wanted the entire class to participate but there would be no penalty if an individual decided not to be a part of the study. My expectation would be the same for both participants and non-participants. I also reinforced the idea that participants would not receive any special treatment over the non-participants. In my third period class I received consent forms from seven out of the twelve students on my roster. In my sixth period I received five out of fourteen students. I would have preferred to use the information from everyone, but I felt that having more than 50 percent of the students participate would probably be more than I could manage.
The first entry

For the first entry, I wrote only one letter which each student received (Appendix D). In the letter, I explained the difference between the journaling they may have done for past classes and a dialogue journal. I outlined my expectations for each entry. I had a list of sentence starters posted in the classroom in case any student felt they needed help getting started (Appendix H). I encouraged students to write a reaction to the reading or to write about a connection to the reading. When I looked around the room, which had grown silent, I noticed most students were not writing anything. They were staring at the page. At least most of them were still holding on to a writing implement. To help them feel more comfortable, and to encourage them to begin writing, I told them to just write something. At this point my heart was skipping every other beat because I was having visions of my study swirling away in a twister. Oh dear. This was not good.

Me: Start with Dear Ms. Black. (I told them this with the confidence no longer having a blank page would help. However, I was met with stares perceived as confusion.)

Brave student: Miss…I don’t really like what we are reading. Can I write about something else? I don’t have no problem writing for you, it’s just I don’t know what to write about Beowulf.
Think quick, think quick. What do I do? Beads of sweat were forming as I started to feel my study was doomed as images of me failing out of the program danced across my mind.

Me: Yes. Why don’t you write about what you did this weekend. (Did I just say that? Recover. Bring it back to the reading strategies we had been using.) Or, an issue you are having with me, reading, writing, or class in general. Or you could set some goals—what you would like to accomplish in this class? (In my mind I thought this could be a starting point. Once we had something, I could ask questions and get refocused on the reading strategies.)

Student that fancies himself the player: I’ll tell ya what I did this weekend. Ya see, I was chillin’ at a party in da Bronx.

Me, cutting him off before he can get anything else out of his mouth: You all know that I am a mandated reporter, so if the only thing you feel like you can write is something personal about yourself, please keep it appropriate for your teacher to hear. If you write something where you admit to breaking the law, I am mandated, meaning required, to tell someone. Or if you write something and I feel you are in harm’s way, or anyone is in harm’s way, I cannot ignore this. Please understand this before you put anything in writing.

Smart alec student: So I can’t write about my friend Mary? I really love her.
Me: I wasn’t born yesterday. As long as you are not referring to Mary Jane, you’ll be all right. (He laughed but then seemed concerned that I knew what he was talking about.)

*I can do this. Okay, this isn’t so bad. Are you really going to write each one of us back? What if I don’t want to tell you about anything?*

Most of my students began to write. Some reluctantly got to work, and others wrote like their life depended on it, filling the page with their words. As students completed the first entry, they handed in their journals. *Are you going to read this right now? Miss, you should read mine right now! I hope you like mine.* Unbeknownst to me, the twister that had touched down moments before had taken away my original study and had secretly replaced it with an entirely new animal.

**The First Student Responses**

I took the journals home that night so I could sit down in an environment uninterrupted by the constant fires that sprout up during the school day. I couldn’t wait to read them, as my expectations were big. My heart was about to be broken.

**Megan.** *I sure am glad that Miss Black gave me the option to write about something other than what we’ve been reading. I don’t know that I get anything about Beowulf. I don’t know why we have to read that anyway, it makes me feel retarded. I mean, who really cares about England or where ever it is. It’s bad enough that we have to read it and mark up the story anyway. Now my weekend, that I can talk about. I lived it, ya know? Right now I am having a hard time*
because I live with my dad. I don’t really know him. I get to see my mom sometimes on the weekends back in Jersey. It’s cool cause I get to see my old friends too. I got so excited because my ex-boyfriend called me and said he wanted to see me. Then he ended up standing me up with no explanation. It was nice to see my mom and my dogs though.

I didn’t understand why her mom would not have already met her ex-boyfriend, but thought maybe this wasn’t such a serious relationship. I didn’t like Megan using the word *retarded* all the time, especially since this was her category of special education. I wondered if she knew this. I also couldn’t imagine not knowing my dad very well and having to live with someone whom I didn’t really know. I wondered about the circumstances surrounding the decision for Megan to move from living with her mom in New Jersey to living with her dad in another state. There was nothing in her entry I could use to turn the focus back to *Beowulf*. I tried to think of ways that I could help Megan think about the reading, but I was at a loss. At this point I could not even stretch a written point and connect it to the relationship Grendel may have had with his mother, because we are dealing with man-eating monsters spawned from evil. How would I approach writing her back? I decided to take my own advice I had given my students: To understand the reading and make the choice to apply those strategies to understand my students. I would make connections with Megan to better understand her, since I could not help her make connections to the reading at that point. I began to write back. I
started out by acknowledging I had read what she had written and focused on a positive—her relationship with her mom. I asked how often she gets to see her mom and shared with her the fact that at 38 years of age, I am very lucky that my parents are still together. I questioned her about her dogs and shared some information about my own pets. As a last ditch effort to pull the writing connection back to some type of reading strategy, I asked about her independent reading book. I kept my fingers crossed.

**Jen.** What a relief. I don’t have to actually write about the story. I don’t know why I would have to write about it more. What does she think we’ve been doing to our copies? Besides, sometimes it is so hard to concentrate when there is so much going on. Like last night. My brother sent me a message on Facebook telling me he’s sorry for not talking to me for three months. I don’t know why he would think that I care or even want to talk to him. He hurt my feelings and I don’t really want to deal with him. I cut him out of my life. My mother then gets mad at me because I said that he wasn’t my brother anymore. She starts giving me the lecture that he is my brother regardless of whether I like it or not. That I can’t undo that. Well, I don’t think she is right. I loved my brother and he is the one that ruined that, not me. I wanna know what you would do, Miss Black. Am I wrong for not accepting his apology? Do you think I am being really mean to my brother?
Figure 1. Jen: Entry about brother.

My response. My first thought was to wonder what was going on. I had a huge poster in the room with sentence starters all relating to the reading. I’m batting two for two with the very personal responses and questions from two
students. What on earth was going on here? My heart was breaking. I have an older brother and he was my hero when I was young. I could not imagine ever cutting him out of my life or that he would be capable of doing something to hurt my feelings on such a level to merit that type of response. Obviously, I needed to answer the question she asked me, but I was worried about how I should reply. I was not trained in counseling and could only respond based upon my own thoughts and feelings. Was this how my students felt all day long? Did they have the feeling of not being equipped to answer the questions they are constantly asked and expected to know? I also knew that Jen lived with her older sister because her mother was not taking care of her and was in an abusive relationship. This was difficult because it seemed like she was looking for an affirmation that she was doing the right thing, and I did not have enough information to go on. Wow. I worried that I would say the wrong thing so I really thought about my answer before I began to write. I started with the idea that this was a hard question to answer since I did not have much information surrounding the fall-out with her brother. I let her know that her mom was right when she said that he would always be her brother. BUT, that doesn’t mean forgiveness should be automatic or easy, or that his hurtful actions needed to be accepted. I did my best to explain that this was something she would have to work out and that she might need the distance between herself and her brother to work it out. I shared one of my experiences with my older sister and let her know how I dealt with it. I hoped this
would give her some perspective on how to deal with her own emotions and situation.

**Kristen.** I’m gonna talk about my weekend. Why would I talk about school stuff if I can talk about what I did? This weekend was so cool. I got to hang out with my sister, well, she is not really my sister, but she is like one to me. I am there all the time. She has three kids that I love to see and play with. The youngest is only two weeks old and sooo cute. All three of them are my god kids. Jacob is trying to hold his head up. I should bring in a picture for Miss Black to see. I bet she would like that. She showed us pictures of her son. This is all good, but I am worried about my family, boyfriend, school and my god son. My life is so busy. There is not enough time or space in this journal to write it all down. But I definitely need to bring a picture in for Miss Black.

My response. Kristen’s response was generally positive and she did not ask me any questions. I did not see how I could pull this back to the reading. There was an underlying feeling of apprehension that I picked up on in the midst of all the positive comments. In my response I started out the same way that was becoming my pattern. My first statement acknowledged I had read her words, and I found something to praise. I shared my memories of my son, Duke, when he was just so unbelievably tiny as a newborn. I asked why she was so worried. In a desperate attempt to bring this back to the focus of reading, I asked if she had ever
read about characters going through the same experiences that she does. I remained hopeful this could be pulled back to the text.

**Orlando.** What on earth am I going to write? I don’t want her to know about me. There is so much going on where would I even begin? What could she do about it anyway? I should just write about the book. But I don’t know what to write about the story. I wonder what would happen if I just put my head down. I’ll put my head down and think about what to write. I’m so tired. I wish I could get sleep at night. Oh man, that was the bell and I didn’t write anything. I’ll hand my journal in anyway. At least she may not realize that I didn’t write anything until I am out the door.

My thoughts. On the superficial level, it was simple: there was no entry to respond to. On a deeper level, I knew what was going on at home that could probably impact Orlando’s performance at school. His grandfather was living at home with Orlando and his mother. Orlando’s mother was also home on disability. She refers to herself as retired. She was not able to care for her father so much of the responsibility fell to Orlando. Orlando would have to get up in the middle of the night to help his grandfather use the bathroom if needed. He was also responsible for bathing his grandfather and performing general care-giving activities. He also struggles with basic reading and writing skills and was labeled as a student with mental retardation (MR). This is not the typical MR student. There is no physical indication that Orlando should have this label, and with the
new changes in testing and classification of special education, I would bet that he would not receive the same label. My response was short. I questioned why he didn’t write anything. I encouraged him to use the sentence starters or to just write about anything he knew about. At this point, I just wanted him to have the confidence to write something. Anything.

**Valentino.** Hmmm. What should I write about? I don’t write good, not even in Spanish. I have a hard time remembering things, so I don’t really want to write about school or class. I listen to music all the time so I can write about that. I got my hair done this weekend and went out to eat Chinese food. That is what I am interested in and makes me feel happy. Music and friends.
Figure 2. Valentino: Responsibilities.

My thoughts. At least he wrote something. Valentino is a student receiving special education services and ESL services. He is twenty years old and only in my 11th grade class. He grew up in El Salvador and moved here when he was 16 to get away from the poverty, violence and influence of Mara Salvatrucha, better known as MS-13, one of the most violent gangs in existence.

Wilson. Why are we doing this? This is stupid. I’m not going to write anything down. I wasn’t here for most of the reading, so I have nothing to say. I don’t want to write down anything about myself either. Why would I want to share
any of that? I don’t care if this is easy points if I just get something down. It is none of her business. Everyone wants to know what I am thinking and why. I don’t want anyone to know. I am fine. There is no problem. I just don't like to do school work.

My thoughts. Wilson had no entry. He was present in class, but had written nothing down. Wilson lost both parents in early August, just prior to the start of the school year. His attendance was spotty at best and he openly admitted to smoking pot. These were established behaviors that started before the loss of his parents. I often saw him hanging out across the street from my house at a friend’s house. He spent more time there than with his guardians. He was always very polite and respectful when he saw me, inside and outside of school. Wilson has a good sense of humor and the vibe I got from him was that he was an easy going, good-humored young man. Why won’t he write anything? He didn’t have to pour out his heart and tell me his emotions or feelings, but I needed him to write something. A blank page would not do. What could I do to engage him and get him to write something? Anything?!

Donnie and Ricky were absent so I needed to start the conversation with them the next time.

John and Gretchen both wrote about family members. John wrote about watching football with his brother. He was close to his brother and seemed to have a positive relationship with him. John truly wants to be successful and would
always work to his ability. Gretchen wrote about the milestones her baby daughter was making. She had matured since she started high school. She had dropped out of high school during her first pregnancy, but lost the baby at birth. Now, with the birth of her daughter, she made the decision to return to school and get her diploma to be a better mother. I respected Gretchen highly for coming back to school at 20 years old.

Dear Ms. Black, last night was a good night for me and for my brother. Me and my brother watch the NY Giants bet the Chicago Bears for Sunday night game. The score was 17-3 Giants. Everyone said we were going to lose that game cause they were 3-0 and we were 1-2 but we came out on top with ter sack in the first haufan won.

*Figure 3. John: Interests.*

Many of the entries were kept light. A common theme emerged as I read the responses. No one wanted to talk about what we were doing in class. All of the participants and non-participants up to this point had decided to talk about their own topic, which was either sports or their life, specifically what they had
done on the weekend. Based on the first round of entries (or non-entries), I realized that many of my students needed an outlet, or maybe just the opportunity to stray from what they saw as “school.” They needed a forum to vent, or an adult to ask questions. They needed someone to share the small celebrations about what happened over the weekend. And one thing is for sure, my students were certainly not bashful or holding back. My students seemed to have no problem addressing or putting their true thoughts down on paper, things that I would not dream of ever saying or asking my teachers in high school. And the most important lesson I learned was that if given a choice, students would unanimously choose to write about a topic they picked over anything academic. Ricky, Mathew and John did not pour out their hearts, but they did write about topics were they could be an expert.

The Middle Entries

Amber. I don’t like to write. I really don’t like to write—anything. I can barely read, although I hide it really well. I can’t read most of the words in the story, now I have to write about it? I don’t think so. She keeps telling us that she is not going to grade for spelling, but I can’t spell. Last time I tried to keep it to what I know I can do by talking about my weekend. I went to a party in New York. It was fun and there was lots of dancing, people and loud music. What she writes back is that I need to be careful at parties in the city. Miss Black used to live and teach in Brooklyn, so she knows how it can be sometimes. She told me that she
misses living in Brooklyn because of the food. That’s funny. I need to tell her thank you for the advice of being careful. I didn’t just go to a random party, I have family in New York. I am a good kid so I am careful. Miss Black is a good teacher because she is always kind to me and she always be on me to do my work. That can be stressful but I know it’s because she wants me to do my best. I haven’t been to school very much in my past. I grew up on St. Vincents and it was pretty rough. School was not something that I needed to do, so I didn’t go. It was not a very safe place to be so I stayed home most of the time. Three years ago my mom got really sick with cancer. She died and my dad committed suicide shortly after. This is why I moved. First I lived in Brooklyn with family and then my aunt Cindy adopted me, and that is why I came here last year. And then I had to come to school everyday. And they tell me I’m special ed and Ms. Black is my case manager so she helps me with things. She helped get me into CIT in the childcare program. Her son is lucky to have her as a mother. She’s a pain in my a$$ but I need to thank her for it. She asked me questions about my independent reading project. I hate to tell her but I’m not doing one.
My thoughts. Amber was one tough cookie. She put up such a hard front but I didn’t think this was really her. As a teacher, I was challenged in how to best help her. She was reading at about a third grade reading level, and got confused with questions that weren’t taken verbatim from the reading. When she wrote, she
did not use any punctuation marks until the last sentence. She would fill an entire page without the use of end marks or capitalization, and her spelling needed work too. I was anxious about how to best help her improve her reading level and comprehension as a junior in high school. There were so many outside circumstances that needed to be worked through before learning could take place. Amber was easily frustrated and would shut down as soon as this frustration set in. She could navigate a Facebook page with speed and ease, but using the Internet for research or working within a Word document was a foreign concept. Typing was a large part of this. There did not seem to be a program available at the high school to give her the intensive academic remediation and intervention that would benefit her.

**Jen.** Ms. Black was right. I decided to talk to my brother and let him back in my life, but I know not to let him drag me down into all of his gang stuff. The main reason I did this is because my father is sick. It feels good, like the right thing to do. I’m so excited because I got to see a friend that I hadn’t seen since elementary school in Newark. I was so excited to see her. We went out dancing and some old guy kept looking at her and she was getting mad. I stayed with her even when some boy asked me to dance with him.

My thoughts. Again, we were far off from the reading, but Jen was talking about things that were very important to her that she had to deal with on a daily basis. I could not imagine how this weighed on her mind inside and outside of
school. I did my best to acknowledge I heard her and gave her positive encouragement. To let her know that she was not alone, I shared with her that my father was also sick, that he had been diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease.

**Kristen.** Most teachers don’t ask me about why I worry. I worry mostly about my dad because he is getting older and his health isn’t the best. He has lots of problems and is at the doctors all the time. He also misses a lot of work, which makes it hard. I worry about school because I miss a lot of school because of my knee. Sometimes I can barely walk on it and it hurts like nothing else I can compare it to. I can get a new knee, but the doctors aren’t sure that this will last as long as I need it to. I’m not sure what I want to do about it. I just know that it causes me pain and because of this I miss lots of school. At one point I was on homebound because I couldn’t put any weight on it at all. Sometimes it is hard to concentrate at school too.

**Orlando.** Fine. Ms. Black wants me to write something, I’ll write something already. What’s the point though? I just feel so depressed. And tired. Every time I think I’m going to have a good day, something bad ends up happening. Right now something is really bothering me and I don’t want to talk about it or think about it but Ms. Black is asking me to write something. This is the only thing I can think of and I don’t want to write about it. I try to talk to somebody but I can’t. Every morning when I wake up, I have this same feeling of
dread that I have right now. I want to be anywhere but here. I wish that I wasn’t here.

Figure 5. Orlando: Bad feeling.

My thoughts. As I read this, my heart sank yet again for a student. The first thing I did was email his guidance counselor, although I did not think that Orlando was going to hurt himself. He obviously really needed to talk to someone. I also spoke directly to Orlando the next day and let him read my response immediately, instead of waiting until Friday. I recommended that he talk to a friend or family member whom he trusted to listen and help him out. Or as another option, I encouraged him just to write his thoughts in his journal. I told him that if he wrote something and didn’t want me to read it, he could fold the page in half. At least this way, he would get his thoughts out on paper and,
therefore, process them on some level. He asked if he could take the journal with him. Of course I said yes.

Valentino. Valentino has been absent for some time. This was unusual since he had near perfect attendance. After being absent for over a week, I asked the class if they knew what is going on. They told me he was in the hospital because he had been jumped on South Side. My students relay it was pretty bad and that they know he had major head injuries. The first chance I got, I went down to speak to the ESL teachers, knowing they would know the fact and fiction of the situation. It turned out he was jumped and his skull was severely fractured. He had swelling of the brain and when one of his friends went to visit him, it was reported he could barely speak in Spanish, let alone English. I also learned the authorities had tried to deport him twice since he was not here legally. I didn’t understand how that worked since he is registered for school. I worried about how he would be when and if he returned to school.
Figure 6. Valentino: Post hospitalization.

**Wilson.** Another week without an entry. Wilson was absent at least three or four days a week.

**Gretchen.** I really don’t want to be here. It is so hard to leave my daughter everyday. Her father drives me crazy. He doesn’t trust me at all. He is jealous of everything, including the fact that I came back to school after dropping out. It’s like he doesn’t want me to get my diploma. Or like I come to school to find guys to cheat on him with. He’s ridiculous. I’m about to turn 20 years old, it’s not like I’m 15. I don’t have time to deal with that—I need to focus on my daughter.
The Conversation Continues

Jen. The emotional situations Jen experienced over the remainder of my study were constant. Each entry brought a new drama. A good friend was shot and killed, leaving behind a pregnant girlfriend. All of this senseless violence was gang related. Another week, it was her relationship with her brother that caused more problems. Due to the fact he had been in and out of jail because of his criminal activity, he was homeless. Jen tried to get her parents to let him move back home, which caused problems for her. Her mother continued to stay with her father, even though he abused her. Her aunt, who was like a real mother to her, passed away. The most recent drama was a falling out with a friend because Jen was caught stealing, and she felt it was her friend’s fault. This resulted in a trip to
the juvenile detention center and brought some of the drama into the classroom, since her “friend” is in my language arts class as well.

Figure 8. Jen: Violence and gangs.
Megan. Megan’s first few entries were generally upbeat. Then she opened up and shared some of her story with me. One of the reasons she moved in with her dad was that she had many emotional problems at her old school when she lived with her mom. She would cut herself and had tried to kill herself on more than one occasion. At this point I was so overwhelmed with the emotional turmoil and struggles that my students faced on a daily basis that I was beside myself. I asked how she felt now and let her know that if she ever felt like she wanted to hurt herself again, that she needed to talk to someone. Anyone. I also spoke to her guidance counselor and the school psychologist. They were already aware of this since Megan has been seeing the school psychologist to talk about her emotions.
Dear, Ms. Black

Yea I know I have been. It's just that I feel like I live alone. I haven't seen my dad since last week. I don't see him at all 'cuz he goes to work at 5 and he comes home at 7:00. But I don't even see him after school. The only time I do talk to him is when he calls me to see if he's GF is home... That's all he don't even ask how I'm doing. That hurts but I have Zach to talk to & his sister, but now I'm going crazy 'cuz on the 30th of this month I'm goin' to court because my mom want's me back nd all this crazy things... I don't want to go because I don't want to see my mom's face.
Figure 9. Megan: Her past and current drama.

**Wilson.** Although Wilson was present on many of the days that were set aside for writing in the dialogue journals, I still only had one entry from him to date. He stopped attending school, so I never had the chance to sit with him to see what his thoughts were when he wrote it. He talked about how he wished he was paid to come to school so he had money to eat lunch every day and buy school
stuff. And shoes. This way he would get his education and get paid. I don’t know for sure, but I suspected he felt this way because his guardians stopped giving Wilson spending money. They felt he did not spend it on these things, but instead spent it on partying and drugs. Wilson’s attendance had dwindled to the point that I could not say the last time he attended class other than the midterm. It was a surprise when he showed up to take the midterm and I have not seen him since. I had no idea if there was anything I could have done to help him want to come to school.

Figure 10. Wilson: The only entry.
**Kristen.** Kristen had a change in her schedule, so she was no longer in my class. We continued our dialogue for a little while even though she was not my student anymore. Now, she visits me for a few minutes almost daily in the resource room. It is nice to see her and continue our dialogue verbally. I feel that if she ever has anything on her mind that she needs help with or needs to run by an adult, she will not hesitate to do so. She lets me know that she misses my class and I take some consolation in this. I may not have helped her read better, but at least she knows that there is an adult in the building who will listen and give her help in some capacity if she needs it. Shortly after Kristen left class, a student who was on my roster for the entire year but who did not attend after the second day of school finally started to show up. This was Tara.

**Tara.** *This class is different. It usually takes time for me to be comfortable in a class and with a teacher, but I feel pretty good about being here. I am trying so hard to stay clean. My psychiatrist said that he would rather see me addicted to heroine than meth. That’s a really messed up thing to say, don’t you think? My mom doesn’t trust me at all. I just can’t talk to her. When I try she just starts acting like a little kid. Child protective services came to the house and I asked about foster homes, since my mom suggested that before for me. When I asked the question you would think I just shot up in front everyone. Or that I stripped down naked. She acted like it wasn’t her idea to begin with. How am I going to live here until I’m 18? I wish I could just go live with my boyfriend. I’m not allowed to go*
to his house. The last time I tried to stay over, my mom had the cops come and take me home. She says she has no problem with Tyler, my boyfriend, but that his mom is a crack-head pot smoker, so I can’t be around her. What’s funny is that she was the one who told me to get out of the house and leave. How does that make any sense? She tells me I need to listen to her, and when I do, this is what I get.

Figure 11. Tara: Trust and love.

**Donnie.** I can’t believe I actually got out of bed today. I had Ms. Black’s class last year and I didn’t pass. I can do this. This is easy for me. I really just
don’t want to be here. I know I should graduate and it’s important but coming here is getting harder and harder. I have a girlfriend now for the first time in my life and she moved in with me and my mom. She dropped out in late October. I’d rather stay home with her. I don’t know that I can come to school everyday. It is just so hard. Staying home is nice. I don’t have to do anything hard.

Figure 12. Donnie: The only entry.
My thoughts. Unfortunately, this was the one and only entry for Donnie since he usually did not make it to school on Fridays. My experience with him was extensive. I had been his case manager since his freshman year. I worked with another member of our staff to get him clothes for CIT, gym and just for everyday wear. This young man’s mother was labeled as having mental retardation and did not leave the house, drive or work. Upon home visits from my colleague, we realized there was not enough adequate furniture or appliances in the home. If Donnie needed a physical or inoculations, my colleague would take him to the doctor since his mother would not. After the winter break, Donnie did not show up again. The phone numbers I had were all out of service. The two emergency numbers listed had no affiliation with his family. In fact, one was for a business. Eventually, the home school visitor got involved, but Donnie and his mother no longer lived at the listed address and we had no further information. My supervisor dis-enrolled him. I was furious because this was my fear back in October, mainly because my colleague who acted as his mentor had retired. In October, I had a meeting with teachers, the grade level principal and our transition coordinator to prevent this from happening. At that time we determined the home-school visitor needed to be involved and go to the home to see what could be done. She did not go at that time and just had a conversation with Donnie instead. Clearly this was not enough.
**Gretchen.** This is so hard. My life has gotten easier since I broke up with April’s father. That was hard but it wasn’t working. We’re working out how we want to handle visiting arrangements. I have a hard time being away from her for even just the school day, I really don’t know how I will make it through an entire weekend. I don’t trust him to know what to do.

![Image]

Dear Mrs. Black

I am getting through it. I am just taking day by day. We worked out visiting arrangements. He gets her on the weekends overnight. I am happy she got 2 teeth today. I want to leave and go home. The only time that Kealani is really crabby is when she wants to be held.

Figure 13. Gretchen: Getting through it.

**Where are we now?**

For some of my students, the written conversations had ceased. I took a poll just prior to Thanksgiving break and most students wanted to continue with the dialogue journals, but not every week. Megan and Jen were unhappy about this as they had voted were to continue with weekly entries. There were also a few
students who did not want to continue the journals at all. Due to the holiday season, the class time I had to devote to the journals was limited. Then, the start of the New Year brought midterms and eight snow days. After that we were moving swiftly toward PSSA testing with only 28 days in which to implement the 40 day plan. On top of this, I had been told to begin implementing AIMSweb probes starting after the Thanksgiving break. There were two different assessments: One was a three minute probe to test for conventions of language and the other was a one minute probe to assess reading fluency. The latter needed to be administered individually. However, the system had not been set up prior to implementation. The directive for administering the AIMSweb came with no training or support, and the much-needed time to respond to each student individually was no longer available because I was organizing and training myself. The journals, unfortunately, fell by the wayside. By the end of January, the journals had ceased.

Since his original entry, Orlando kept his journal with him at all times and just wrote down typical journal entries. This meant he kept a record of what he did on certain days and how he felt. Sometimes he had five entries for the week and other times he only had one or two. He eventually had a schedule change and my class no longer fit into his schedule. He no longer had language arts but a reading class instead. I took some comfort in the fact that he took his journal with him.
Wilson also disappeared from my roster with no warning or explanation. Again, I asked my students for the word, since they usually know everything. The general consensus was that he had moved, although they were unsure of where. They thought it might be Texas. I was wondering if he dropped out or really did move, or maybe he had moved but would not enroll after he moved. He was 18, so he wouldn’t have to. It turned out that he had moved to a city about an hour away for a short time before he moved back into the district. He did not reenroll.

Valentino returned, but he was not quite the same. He reads on the third grade level. This is decoding, not comprehension. He is able to go back into a passage and find answers, but he forgets things easily. He has trouble completing thoughts and verbalizes that he can’t do some of the things he could before he was jumped. Reading and writing in English has become more of a problem for Valentino than it had prior to the beating. It is unbelievable that he knows the two guys who jumped him. He told me it was over a cell phone and they thought he was someone else. He doesn’t want to turn them in or press charges for fear of retaliation and further violence. Valentino decided to cut his hair recently. His hair was long, all the way down his back, in a low ponytail or braided. Now, with his hair short, you can see his scar. It goes from one ear over the top of his head and then down to his other ear. I find myself in the same place that I often found myself in during this study: a place of sadness and awe for the resiliency of my students.
Tara has chosen to give up writing in the journal altogether and prefers to just talk to me during my prep period or before class. If there is something she wants help with or an issue she is dealing with that needs a sounding board, she will find me. The last entry of sorts that she wrote was on the chalkboard. She wrote: *Ms. Black has the best English class ever and is the best teacher to talk to.* The day after she wrote this I had a meeting and had to get coverage for class. When I returned the following day, my students told me I could not miss class ever again.

Megan went through a period when she missed a lot of school. I’m not really sure what happened, but I was worried. She came into class a few minutes late one day with two black eyes. After class she waited for all the other students to leave so she could tell me what happened. She told me her dad was the one who did this to her the night before. I asked if she had reported it to anyone and she said yes. She said she had already sat with our school psychologist to talk about it. I asked if she went to the nurse or if anyone had taken pictures to document the injuries. She said no one had and that she didn’t need to do that. I wrote her a pass to her next class because she didn’t want to be in the hallway when it was full of people. After she left, of course I had to make a visit to follow up with the psychologist and nurse.

There was a portion of my students who wrote in the journals, asked me general questions and would give me responses. They didn’t spill their hearts out
on the page but were just looking to fulfill the assignment. I don’t know if it is because they have lives free of drama or just really keep their personal lives guarded. Almost every student in this group wrote about sports and the games they had watched that weekend. They were good at giving player statistics and scores. They also liked to predict who they thought would win the upcoming games. I don’t know if the dialogue journal necessarily helped them, but I found the conversations meaningful. I was not only able to see where they were with writing skills (spelling, sentence structure, paragraph structure and grammar), but I was able to make connections to my students by understanding more of their interests.
DATA ANALYSIS

It was my intention for the duration of this study to collect as much data as possible throughout the entire process. It was important to collect data from a variety of sources to expose as many facets as possible. The different data sources I have included are student artifacts, specifically the dialogue journals, student interviews and participant checks, surveys and my field log.

Student Dialogue Journals

This was the primary source of data for my study. In the beginning, when I first introduced the dialogue journals, every Friday was set aside as a journal day. Students would have time to read my response and then write. My responses to the students generally started out acknowledging something that they had written, providing some encouragement or asking questions about something they were knowledgeable about, and sharing my own personal experiences. As we wrote back and forth each week, I photocopied both my letter and the student response to chronicle our journey together. Each student had his or her own section in my binder. I also jotted down my initial responses on post-it notes that adhered directly to the entry it corresponded to. Towards the end of the study, I polled my students to see how they were feeling about continuing on a weekly basis. From that point forward, I set aside every other Friday to write.
**Student Interviews and Participant Checks**

Student interviews and participant checks were another important method to gather data. If I had unanswered questions about something a student wrote about in the journal and left open by not explaining further, I would follow up with that student, seeking further clarification. I would sometimes just ask a student a question on his or her way into the classroom, and at other points I would sit down with a student and take notes on our conversation. Conducting personal interviews and participant checks allowed me to get a much more detailed answer than what the student would tend to write down on the page in a journal entry. The barrier of writing was removed and the student was able to really say what they meant without struggling over their spelling and sentence writing. It was imperative to check in with my students during the study to ensure I was not misinterpreting the meaning or intent of their words. I would jot down notes and capture student responses. Later, when I had a chance to look at my notes on what the student had said, I would record my feelings and thoughts in a double entry journal. I would file this with the journal responses for the student.

**Student Surveys**

I had originally planned to use multiple surveys throughout the study. Once the dialogue journals took on a different life, the reading survey I had planned to give no longer made sense in the context of my study. The student engagement survey I used was designed to measure student attitudes about
reading, English class in general and their overall engagement in school. Students were encouraged to be honest when answering and I gave students the choice to put their name on the surveys or leave it anonymous. I discretely marked the surveys to distinguish between my participants’ responses and my non-participants’ responses. The survey results helped me to formulate specific questions to ask students when interviewing them or to ask more general questions during class.

**Field Log and Reflective Memos**

From the onset of the school year, I attempted to capture as many snapshots of my classroom and students as humanly possible. During class, I would take notes when I could, writing down what my students said and did. I paid specific attention to students’ reactions and behaviors on the days we worked with the dialogue journals. During my prep period, I would look over my notes and write down my reactions and feelings to these recorded observations. These snapshots are what comprised my field log.

**Codes, Bins and Theme Statements**

Just before the halfway point of my study, I began to code everything I had, looking for common categories. Because of the sheer magnitude of information, I needed to begin to analyze the information I had in an attempt to keep organized and recognize some of the changes taking place. I tried to keep in mind the concept that “the process is the product” (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing,
1997, p. 52). I coded the journal entries and my responses, and my field log. I looked for common categories emerging in my study. I kept a running log of my codes and the pages and areas in which they were found. From these codes, I developed bins based upon codes which showed similarities or which could be grouped together. As I continued my study, I continued to code and group the codes, searching for common themes to develop. It is from this process that my theme statements evolved (Ely, Vinz, Anzul, & Downing).
What are the effects of dialogue journals on building student relationships and engagement in an 11th grade learning support classroom?

Figure 14. Student Bins.
What are the effects of dialogue journals on building student relationships and engagement in an 11th grade learning support classroom?

**Teacher Bins**

- Acknowledgement
- Encouragement
- Praise
- Sharing personal stories
- Sharing related experiences
- Identifying with student
- Showing interest in student’s future interests
- Asking questions about interests or that allow student to display knowledge
- Emotional support
- Compliments
- Asking questions about possible solutions
- Guidance
- Advice

*Figure 15. Teacher Bins.*
**Theme Statements**

Students’ needs and interests, as indicated by the topics of the responses in the dialogue journals, are not currently supported by the District’s official curriculum.

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<tr>
<td>When given the opportunity to express themselves freely in dialogue journals, students respond honestly with trust in the teacher and are comfortable discussing their own personal interests and experiences.</td>
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<td>Dialogue journals provide a safe space where students can talk about non-academic issues and be heard on issues or topics of choice that matter to them, including the violence that surrounds them and their feelings.</td>
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<td>Dialogue journals are a forum where the teacher can address student needs that are not usually addressed in the classroom setting to provide guidance, advice, encouragement and support.</td>
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<td>There is evidence to substantiate the idea that dialogue journals in the classroom help support student engagement.</td>
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<td>Overall, female students sought out advice and wanted to “talk out” situations or feelings, while males tended to write about areas where they could be the expert or show their knowledge.</td>
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*Figure 16. Theme Statements.*
Findings

During my study, the main focus was on the written dialogue that took place between myself and each individual student. The written dialogue also spurred questions or thoughts so I conducted student interviews and participant checks to clarify the writer’s intended meaning of the written response. Following are the major themes that emerged.

Students’ needs and interests, as indicated by the topics of the responses in the dialogue journals, are not currently supported by the District’s official curriculum.

During students’ junior year at the high school, English class focuses on British literature. All of the standards and essential questions are to be taught using key pieces of British literature found in what is called the minimum course of study. Teachers are given the freedom to choose various British literature texts to focus on for the novel unit and short story unit, as long as the key concepts are at the core of the lessons. When it comes to the supplemental learning support classroom, I am to follow the minimum course of study, making adaptations and modifications based upon my students’ individual needs defined within their IEP’s. This is to give my students access to the general education curriculum. The only resource provided for my use is the Holt Adapted Reader, which does not include very many of the key poems, stories and drama pieces that the general education students are exposed to. Or, if they are included, only a tiny part of the
over all text is printed. Over the years, I have found various adapted versions of
the translations that are on a more accessible reading level for my struggling
readers in the supplemental classes.

As early as the first journal entry written by my students, it was clear that
the last thing they wanted to write about was their response and thoughts on the
British literature text we were reading in class. This isn’t to say that my students
didn’t like Beowulf; they would just rather write about other topics. It was
difficult for my students to connect their own lives to mythical creatures and epic
heroes as evidenced by their responses. Not one student began writing when I
initially started the journals. This was despite the fact I had photocopied Beowulf
so each student could mark up the text using the Reading Apprenticeship
strategies. If they were stuck, they could go back to the passages and the remarks
in the margins for inspiration. But alas, this was not to be. As soon as I allowed
students to write about what they know best, what they considered themselves to
be an expert at or what is important to them, most students got to work
immediately.

Finn (1999) believes that literacy is a social right for every student and
students need to be educated in their own self-interest. He examines the
differences in attitudes between different social class structures and advocates for
empowering students by making the curriculum relevant to their lives and their
futures. The dialogue journals are a small step in helping to educate students by
understanding what their interests are and then catering the curriculum to these interests. Smith and Wilhelm (2006) approach teaching literacy from a similar angle saying that students need to have a “flow experience.” Again, this is working with the students from the perspective of their individual strengths and interests, and nurturing this, making the curriculum matter to the student.

I expected at the start of the study, that my students’ main needs were in basic reading comprehension skills and basic writing skills. While the need to improve basic writing skills was clearly apparent in the written responses, and the need to improve basic reading comprehension was perceptible based upon classroom assessments and discussion, there were more pressing needs that trumped those academic deficiencies. It was clear many of my students were not in a strong enough emotional state to learn. The emotional needs needed to be met before the academic needs could be addressed. Based upon the topics students chose to write about (sports, what they did this weekend, family and friends) I began to understand why they were having difficulty making connections to Beowulf.

When given the opportunity to express themselves freely in dialogue journals, students respond honestly with trust in the teacher and are comfortable discussing their own personal interests and experiences.

Since I recognized the need to allow my students a choice in what to write about in the dialogue journals from day one, I kept an open mind and remained
flexible as the study moved forward. I realized it would be difficult to switch gears and force students to write about the text, so I decided the best approach would be to let this experience unfold naturally without allowing my original intent to impose itself.

Although I had not intended to focus on improving writing skills in the dialogue journals, I had hoped that improved writing skills would be an outcome. Since my students knew I was not assigning a grade for spelling and grammar, they were free of this pressure, which allowed them to focus on communicating their meaning. I had understood we would need to address writing needs, just not in this forum. This helped to provide safety in the response. By wiping out one of the road blocks in writing, students felt more comfortable writing in the journals.

As evidenced by the first responses, every one of the participants gave me an honest entry. Each participant wrote about his or her weekend. Megan wrote about getting to see her mother. She had lived with her mother up until this year, so this was obviously something on her mind. Jen wrote about a pressing issue complicating her relationship with her brother. Kristen also wrote about her weekend and getting to spend time with her god-children. Gretchen wrote about her relationship with her baby and the baby’s father. Wilson and Orlando both wrote nothing. Valentino, Ricky and John kept it light, but they all still talked about their weekends and what they like to do. Donnie was absent.
Dialogue journals provide a safe space where students can talk about non-academic issues and be heard on issues or topics of choice that matter to them, including the violence that surrounds them and their feelings.

I was shocked by the brutal honesty and raw emotion that poured out on the page by my students who were dealing with emotional issues. For my students who kept it light, I was pleased with their willingness to share things that were important to them. This showed me my students trusted me. At no point did the conversations in the journals turn towards academics. The closest the conversations ever came to the academic were setting some goals or expressing goals for the future.

I let my students know from the first day that I was a mandated reporter. Despite this warning that I had to report any sign of abuse or harm, my students still openly shared experiences and situations. Several times I was forced to talk to our guidance counselors and school psychologist to ensure students were getting help. The students whom I did this for were well aware I was the one that initiated the visit, but none of them showed any resentment toward me for doing so. I believe some of my students deliberately shared information to receive help for themselves, and were not concerned where that help came from. Looking back post-study, this was a necessary stepping-stone to help my students become their own advocates and seek out an adult they felt they could trust.
Dialogue journals are a forum where the teacher can address student needs that are not usually addressed in the classroom setting to provide guidance, advice, encouragement and support.

For those students who expressed a desire for help in their journal, I had the opportunity to address social needs and help students develop coping skills by sharing my personal experiences to guide my students in dealing with their immediate circumstances. As stated by numerous researchers, students arrive in the classroom with overwhelming emotional needs that take precedence over their academic needs (Kozol, 1988, Quint, 1994, Anyon, 1997, Noddings, 2005a). Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, supported by Jensen’s brain-based research, shows that emotions influence our ability to learn. My students were definitely lacking the positive relationships. I tried to follow the pattern of teacher response that Werderich (2006) proposed. I did not tell students what to do, but instead offered a similar situation that I personally had had to deal with. By explaining my individual circumstance, how I got through it and what I was feeling at the time, I tried to give my students the support to make their own decision. This goes back to Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of social development of working with a more knowledgeable other and also connects to Freire’s take on education. Freire states, “It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours” (1970, p. 96).
For those students who expressed their interests, but not a need for advice, at the very least, I was able to acknowledge those students’ voices were being heard. To help create a sense of belonging, also part of Maslow’s (1943) social needs level of the pyramid, I asked guiding questions to permit students the opportunity to become the expert and share their knowledge. In a sense, the school day does not allow for the expression of social issues, which in a sense is a very mild form of oppression. Freire (1970) discussed the thought patterns of the oppressed. One characteristic he identifies is self-depreciation, which is the idea that the oppressed feel as if they know nothing and believe themselves to be ignorant. He said,

Almost never do they realize that they, too, *know things* they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men. Given the circumstances which have produced their duality, it is only natural that they distrust themselves (p. 63).

It was my hope that by encouraging the students to show me what they know, the student would feel smart. I was trying to adhere to creating an environment of caring set forth by Noddings (2005b) and create student/teacher relationships by understanding the experiences that students bring with them before learning can take place (Dewey, 1938). Since one major reason stated for dropping out is a feeling of disconnectness from teachers, I felt the student responses were a good sign my students and I were connecting (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).
There is evidence to substantiate the idea that using dialogue journals in the classroom help support student engagement.

It is important to make the distinction between student engagement and academic achievement. Student engagement is defined as participation and identification at school—identification and a sense of belongingness (Finn, 1989). This clearly deals with the idea that students feel they have a reason to come to school, whether it is because it is a safe space or that they know there are caring people there who will listen to them, fulfilling Maslow’s (1943) security needs and social needs. Academic achievement is defined as students’ academic success (Marzano, 2006). Engaging students is the first step in helping them achieve academically, but it is not an automatic, given the fact that the presence of one is an indicator of the other.

With the support for the young ladies I was able to establish through the dialogue journals, the emotional climate of respect that Wolfe and Brandt (1998) hold necessary for the classroom was in place. When students’ basic needs are met, learning can now take place. Tara admitted that the main reason she came to school was because it wasn’t home. Coming to school had become her escape from the emotional and physical abuse she experienced at home. She knew if she asked her math teacher if she could do her work in the resource room that he would approve, and she could sit with me and do her work. If she needed to talk
she knew when my prep period was along with the times I am in the resource room. Megan does not track me down, but she lets me know at the start or end of class if she needs to talk to someone or if she needs to talk to me about something. If need be, she has even come and found me for help when I was teaching. With these relationships and sense of security, students are no longer feeling what LeDoux (1996) equates to being lost in the wilderness. Students may still feel they are in the woods, but they are not alone and there is hope. 

*Overall, female students sought out advice and wanted to “talk out” situations or feelings while males tended to write about areas where they could be the expert or show their knowledge.*

Of the six males who participated in my study, none of them actively sought out advice. I only had a single entry from Donnie, and he ended up dropping out. I had a single entry from Wilson before he transferred. After Orlando’s first entry in which he shared his feelings of depression, his entries chronicled his daily life. Ricky’s entries and Valentino’s entries were always upbeat and despite much of the outside issues that were occurring, they never mentioned this in their dialogue. John’s topics were always about sports and video games.

Of the six females, however, all of them at different points wrote about their emotions and feelings towards different topics and situations. Jen continually shared her personal struggles and emotional turmoil and asked for advice. Megan
opened a window into her past to help me to better understand and assist her current situation. Kristen generally kept it light but talked about family relationships and health concerns. Tara talked about her family dynamics and asked me to answer questions from a mother’s perspective. Gretchen, on the other hand, wrote from a mother’s perspective and talked about her relationship with her daughter and her daughter’s father. Amber talked a lot about how she wasn’t what she really seemed to be and thanked me for staying on her to do her work.
Summary of Findings

Having the opportunity to record my observations and reflect on my findings, I realize that had I not been conducting action research for my thesis, I may have abandoned ship. If I had implemented the dialogue journals with the intent of reinforcing reading strategies for my students and we got off track so quickly, I honestly do not know if I would have stuck with it. The idea of letting the study evolve helped me to allow the experience to be organic and not forced. With the reassurance and understanding that action research can take on a life of its own, I stayed the course and allowed the dialogue to unfold, hence the title of my study, “Renaissance of the Heart.”

My study was definitely not successful in reinforcing reading strategies. That was apparent from the start. However, it was very successful in providing support for some students struggling with relationships and the violence that surrounds them. Since December, many of my students have now become advocates for themselves. When something happens which they cannot handle on their own or have an experience that they need to put into perspective, they either find me or someone else to talk to. They now understand to look for that caring person who will not take sides and will help them out.

After conducting this study, I would definitely recommend utilizing dialogue journals in the classroom if the possibility presents itself. I would like to utilize dialogue journals in my future classes, but I would set them up differently.
Time is a huge consideration and the time I spent responding to students’ journals added up to countless hours of writing each week. It was utterly exhausting. To compensate for this I would give students multiple choices. I would most likely set up stations with various choices: one choice of writing in the dialogue journal where a response is requested, another choice of the option to just write about a topic without an expected response, and a third choice where there would be a variety of prompts available that students could just free write about. This way, the students who really needed help could ask for it, while at the same time, all students would be responsible for writing.
What’s Next?

So where do I go from here? It is clear that a large portion of the teenagers in the learning support classroom are struggling with more than academics. As far as the second half of the year, I have already altered my plans. Instead of going into the drama unit and reading *Macbeth*, I created a unit on school violence and bullying. We began with examining bullying in all its forms and we are now reading *Shooter* by Walter Dean Myers about a school shooting. My students are able to connect with the characters and identify situations in the book that they feel the characters should have handled differently. So far, my students are remembering what we read and are able to demonstrate this understanding in discussions when we read new sections of the story.

I think next year it would be wise to start out the year with this unit and integrate strategies to really identify student needs, both emotionally and academically. The idea of giving students a choice about whether or not to write in a dialogue journal or just do a journal write without an expected response, would be most beneficial. This would help to create a rapport with students and help me to understand my students’ interests better. Once a safe environment with a foundation of trust is established, then I feel that the concepts and themes in the British Literature curriculum would be much more accessible. I am hoping I can read the selected text for the minimum course of study and integrate young adult
fiction they can relate to more and has similar themes which tie into students’ interests.
References


Council for Exceptional Children (2000). *Bright futures for exceptional learners: An action agenda to achieve quality conditions for teaching and learning.*


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Appendixes

Appendix A

Principal and Supervisor Consent Form

September 22, 2010

Dear ***. *********,

I am in the process of earning my Master’s Degree at Moravian College in Curriculum and Instruction. The program at Moravian is centered on action research, which has at its heart, teacher inquiry and reflection. One requirement of my current course, “Reflective Practice Seminar,” is to conduct an action research study in my classroom. I have chosen to integrate dialogue journals and plan to gather data that will examine what happens when students have this honest and personal dialogue with the teacher. I hope to observe an improved attitude towards reading and their academics.

I will be collecting data from August to December, 2010. During this time we will be reading the British Literature curriculum and keeping the dialogue journals as we read. The class will follow the normal routine, they will just have the opportunity to communicate with me personally through the dialogue journals.

I am hoping that this study will be beneficial to both myself and my students. I want to help my students become better readers, become critical thinkers, and to be more engaged in their learning. I want to help my students understand that reading is not just for school; it is a skill that will be needed throughout life.

I will be using observations, student surveys, interviews and work samples as data to support my study. I will only use information to support my study collected from students who have permission to participate. There is no penalty for a student that does not participate. All of the students’ names will be kept confidential as well as all of the teachers and staff, and the school name. Any information that may reveal a student’s identity will be altered to protect anonymity. No names will be included on the work samples or in any reports of my study. Any child may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If a child is withdrawn, I will not use any information pertaining to him or her in my study.
If you have any questions or concerns regarding my study, please feel free to contact me via e-mail at *************** or by phone at 610-250-2481. My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian College by e-mail at jshosh@morvian.edu or by phone at 610-861-1482.

Best regards,

Lauren Black

I attest that I am the principal of the teacher conducting this research study, that I have read and understand this consent form, and that I have a copy. Ms. Lauren Black has my permission to conduct this study.

Principal’s Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________
Appendix B

HSIRB Form

MORAVIAN COLLEGE

June 4, 2010

Lauren Black
24 North 8th Street
Easton, PA 18042

Re: HSIRB proposal by Lauren Black for Richard Grove

Dear Lauren Black:

The Moravian College Human Subjects Internal Review Board has reviewed your proposal: “How dialogue journals affect high school learning support students.” Although the committee cannot give its complete approval at this time, your research is conditionally approved, pending the following revisions.

1. In Part IV, item 7, please clarify by responding to the question, including a list of the instruments to be used.

2. If the set of instruments included with the proposal is incomplete, please include a copy of each one.

3. In your Informed Consent form, please clarify by including contact information for persons or offices participants can approach in the event of physical, psychological, or other injury.

Please note that if you intend to venture into topics other than those indicated in your proposal, you must inform the HSIRB.

Should any other aspect of your research change or extend past one year of the date of this letter, you must file those changes or extensions with the HSIRB before implementation.

This letter has been sent to you through U.S. Mail and e-mail. Please do not hesitate to contact me by telephone (610-861-1379) or through e-mail (browerg@moravian.edu) with any questions about the committee’s requests.

George Brower
Chair, Human Subjects Internal Review Board
Moravian College
610-861-1379
Appendix C

Parent Consent Form

Dear Parent(s) or Guardian(s),

I am in the process of earning my Master’s Degree at Moravian College in Curriculum and Instruction. The program at Moravian is centered on action research, which has at its heart, teacher inquiry and reflection. One requirement of my current course, “Reflective Practice Seminar,” is to conduct an action research study in my classroom. I have chosen to integrate dialogue journals and plan to gather data that will examine what happens when students have this honest and personal dialogue with the teacher. I hope to observe an improved attitude towards reading and their academics.

I will be collecting data from August to December, 2010. During this time we will be reading selected British Literature pieces and keeping the dialogue journals as we read. The class will follow the normal routine, they will just have the opportunity to communicate with me personally through the dialogue journals.

I am hoping that this study will be beneficial to both myself and my students. I want to help my students become better readers, become critical thinkers, and to be more engaged in their learning. I want to help my students understand that reading is not just for school; it is a skill that will be needed throughout life.

I will be using observations, student surveys, interviews and work samples as data to support my study. I will only use information to support my study collected from students who have permission to participate. There is no penalty for a student that does not participate. All of the students’ names will be kept confidential as well as all of the teachers and staff, and the school name. Any information that may reveal a student’s identity will be altered to protect anonymity. No names will be included on the work samples or in any reports of my study. Any child may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If a child is withdrawn, I will not use any information pertaining to him or her in my study.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding my study, please feel free to contact me via e-mail at ************* or by phone at 610-250-2481. My faculty sponsor is Dr. Joseph Shosh. He can be contacted at Moravian College by e-mail at jshosh@morvian.edu or by phone at 610-861-1482. My supervisor of Special Education and my building principal have approved this study. In the event that a student feels harmed or injured in any way, you may contact my supervisor by email at ************* or by phone at 610-250-2481.
If you grant approval for your child to be a participant in my teacher research, please check and sign the appropriate section and return this letter with your child. Thank you very much for your assistance and consideration.

Best regards,

Ms. Lauren Black

________ I understand that Ms. Black will be observing and collecting data as part of her teacher research on improving student engagement and reading comprehension. My child has permission to be a participant in the study.

Student Name: ______________________________

Student Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________

Parent (guardian) signature: ___________________________ Date: __________

________ I do not wish for my child to be a participant in the study.

Student Name: ______________________________

Student Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________

Parent (guardian) signature: ___________________________ Date: __________

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Appendix D

First Letter of the Dialogue Journals

Dear class,

Hello! Today is the day we begin our dialogue journals. As we discussed previously in class, a dialogue journal is a journal entry written in the form of a letter. We have been reading Beowulf and using reading apprenticeship strategies as we read. We have been marking the text and discussing what we read aloud. You may write about any thoughts, ideas or connections that you have made to the text. If you would like to talk about any of your thoughts, ideas or connections to your independent reading you may do this too.

Everything you write will be confidential. I will not share your personal information with the class or your case manager. The only time that I will share your information with anyone is if I feel you are putting yourself or someone else in harm’s way.

If you feel like you don’t know what to write, refer to the sentence starter poster. If you have any questions, I will do my best to help you along with your first entry. This is the only letter you will receive from me that is not personalized to you specifically. From here on out, I will be writing to each one of you individually.

My expectation is you write in letter format and do the best you can with spelling and grammar. I will not be taking points off for this, but I do not want to see lower case “I” or text message language.

Thanks,

Ms. Black
Appendix E

Student engagement survey

Directions: To what extent do the following behaviors, thoughts, and feelings describe you, in this course. Please rate each of them on the following scale:

5=very characteristic of me
4=characteristic of me
3=moderately characteristic of me
2=not really characteristic of me
1=not at all characteristic of me

______ 1. Raising my hand in class
______ 2. Participating actively in small group discussions
______ 3. Asking questions when I don’t understand the instructor
______ 4. Doing all the homework assignments
______ 5. Coming to class everyday

______ 6. Working with the teacher outside of class (during study halls or after school)
______ 7. Thinking about this class outside of school
______ 8. Finding ways to make class interesting to me
______ 9. Taking good notes in class
______ 10. Looking over class notes between classes to make sure I understand the material or what we read

______ 11. Really desiring to learn the material
______ 12. Being confident that I can learn and do well in the class
______ 13. Putting effort into class
______ 14. Being organized
______ 15. Getting a good grade
16. Doing well on quizzes and tests
17. Keeping up with class work
18. Having fun in class
19. Helping fellow students
20. Making sure to study on a regular basis

21. Finding ways to make the course material relevant to my life
22. Applying concepts learned in this class to my life
23. Listening carefully in class
Appendix F

Simplified School Survey

Initials: ______________________________

Please read the statements and rate them on the following scale:

1=Strongly agree
2=Agree
3=No opinion/neither agree or disagree
4=Disagree
5=Strongly disagree

1. I come to school for an education.
2. I come to school because my parents make me.
3. My favorite part of the day is:
   _____ Math
   _____ English
   _____ Science
   _____ Lunch
   _____ Study Hall
   _____ Other: ____________________
   _____ History
4. Teachers at ***** ***** High School show me respect.
5. There are adults in the building I can trust if I need help.
6. I feel safe at school.
7. My teachers really know the subject that they teach.
8. My teachers make school interesting.
9. I like coming to school everyday.
10. If I was allowed to stay home from school, I would.
Appendix G

Student Survey

Put it Out There!!

Initials: __________________

Please answer the following questions. Be honest—don’t be afraid to put it out there. This is not going to be graded and I am NOT looking to judge you. I promise not to take anything you say personally.

1. If you could customize the perfect teacher, what qualities and traits would they have? Think about it as if you were in charge of hiring your teachers. What would you be looking for?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. What kind of questions do you wish teachers would ask the students?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3. What questions do you want to ask your teachers that you don’t normally get to ask?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4. How do you want teachers to grade you?

________________________________________________________________________
5. Why do you come to school?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

6. What is the best part of your school day? Explain.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

7. What is the worst part of your school day? Explain.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

8. Where do you see yourself in 10 years from now?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Appendix H

Possible journal sentence starters:

- the connections to my life that I made are …
- So far my favorite character in the story is…..because…..
- So far my least favorite character in the story is… because…..
- _______ in the story reminds me of something from my own life because…..
- I predict that ________________ will happen next because….
- I am confused about……but I’m guessing that…..
- The character’s conflict is……and the best way I think he/she should resolve it would be to…. because…
- Some symbolism I’m noticing is……
- I like/dislike the author’s style because….
- I like/dislike the beginning/ending because….
- I was surprised when….because I was expecting…..
- I have to tell/ask ______________ about this because…
- The author’s attitude toward the subject, characters, and story can be described as ______________ because…

Closing Prompts

- Today I learned….  
  Tomorrow I need (to)….  
- The most important thing I learned today was…  
  An example of this is…
- The first thing I will share with my parents tonight is…
- If today’s lesson were a song, the title would be…because…
- If I had to come up with a difficult test question for today’s lesson, it would be…
- Something important that I learned today was…
- An English term I learned or remembered today was…. 