The Play's The Thing: Staging for Success in Reading Comprehension and Fluency with Theatre Infused Curriculum

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Boston College

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The Play’s The Thing: Staging for Success
in Reading Comprehension and Fluency with Theatre Infused Curriculum

Dissertation

By

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Students’ with moderate special needs learning difficulties often manifest as reading struggles. These students commonly struggle with decoding words because of weak phonics skills, limited automatic recognition of high frequency words and/or limited vocabulary. A further challenge for the struggling readers is to focus on comprehension while decoding. Given that these students reading comprehension and fluency generally do not improve commensurate with reading demands as they move through school, exploring other possibilities such as the use of theatre arts techniques to teach English/Language Arts may identify an alternative intervention that builds comprehension and fluency in academic reading. Through my experience as a teacher I have used theatre in the classroom as a teaching and motivational tool. This study was conducted using a multiple case study design accompanied by the teacher researcher’s perspective on the impact of the theatre infused curriculum. This dissertation focuses on the effect of a reading comprehension and fluency curriculum infused with theatre techniques on students’ with moderate special needs literacy engagement, fluency, and comprehension. Informing this study is empirical research on teaching reading comprehension and fluency to students with moderate disabilities, as well as empirical research on the use of theatre techniques in curriculum. Data included reading performances and outcomes, observations of students, a teacher reflection journal, and student interviews. Thematic analysis was used to develop codes to inform the study’s major themes. The study has four main findings: study participants who put in the most effort increased their comprehension score, all study participants, regardless of their reading levels or reading rates on the pre-test, made improvements on both by the end of the nine week study, writing assignments in the character analysis and skit writing activities require
longer periods of exposure for the study participants to master them, and performing builds
certainty over time, in a supportive environment.
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This dissertation is dedicated to my ancestors who frame my past, in loving memory of my father and mother, Ezekiel Hughes, Jr. and Dorothy Etta Brown Hughes, who sacrificed that I may accomplish my dreams in the present and to my grandchildren who represent all future blessings:

    Christian, Dynasia, Morgan, Adam, and Justin.
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Chapter 1

The Play’s The Thing: Staging for Success in Reading Comprehension and Fluency with Theatre Infused Curriculum

Problem Statement

Students with moderate special needs often struggle with reading comprehension and fluency. This struggle can manifest in a lack of academic progress across subject areas. Current established instruction and interventions show slow progress for many of these students. “Although reading researchers have paid much attention to comprehension instruction in recent years elementary school teachers, in America, still seem unsure about how to teach reading comprehension” (Andreassen & Braten, 2011, p. 520). This limited progress demonstrates a need for additional instruction and interventions that address reading comprehension and fluency and work in conjunction with those currently in use. There is no set program that has eliminated the reading struggles of students with moderate special needs therefore it is important to develop instruction and interventions that can partner with systems already in place.

The consequences of students not receiving interventions that lead to their becoming fully literate are experienced in the classroom, in the wider community, and by students personally. Of the approximately 6.5 million students with disabilities served in America’s public schools, 44.64% of them are diagnosed with a learning disability in reading (LD), representing the largest disability category (in special education) (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Of this number, almost half are of elementary-school age (ages 6–11) (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The specific population- of struggling readers offers many challenges to classroom instruction, as these students are not making gains dictated by district benchmarks. In Boston Public Schools the maximum class size for a general education, K-3 classroom is 25. Given this
number of students in a classroom it is difficult to meet the needs of students who fall behind. In this age of accountability, test scores measure student, teacher, and school achievement, creating pressure for all involved. This pressure does not seem to manifest in student improvement as the population of students with moderate special needs continues to be substantial. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) proclaimed that standardized testing would level the playing field for all students. School districts across the nation embraced NCLB and completely changed the direction of classrooms and schools with their eye on having 100% of students on grade level by 2014. Furthermore, “accountability and surveillance have also intensified, in part to satisfy No Child left Behind legislation mandating that high stakes standardized tests at every grade level” (Lipman, 2004, p.67). Although, this is a worthwhile pursuit, it is paired with the wrong method. NCLB was designed to help the very students it has harmed, including students with special needs. The increase in standardized test has merely lead to more testing and less time for instruction “in a drive to raise test scores in math and reading, the curriculum has moved away from. . .more advanced mathematical and literacy skills” (Rothstien, 2004, p.7). In BPS, schools moved from standardized test three times a year to standardized test every six weeks during the 2013/14 school year. This adversely affects the education students with special needs receive as the testing takes up 2 days of instruction every six weeks not to mention the days needed to review the skills being tested, and the time spent on test taking skills.

There is also a cost to the wider community in failing to help students become literate adults. Students who continue to struggle with reading comprehension and fluency may be referred for special education services. “Of the more than 3million students nationwide age 6–21 with an LD, 40% receive special education services outside of the general education class for 21% to 60% of the school day, presumably in the resource-room setting (i.e., separate classroom
setting where students with disabilities receive individualized instruction)” (Swanson & Vaughn, 2010, p. 481). These services come with additional financial costs due to additional staffing and materials.

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) each student with special needs is to receive a “Free appropriate public education or FAPE which means special education and related services that are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge” (IDEA 2004, 2006, §300.17). The public pays for this education with tax dollars. Boston Public Schools budgeted “$171,560,724 (BPS Program Summary, General Fund 2013-2014)” during the 2013-2014 school year. Whether state or federal, funding originates in the paychecks of public citizens, if this financial cost does not result in improved literacy for our students, there are personal consequences for these students as well. “Those who are low in literacy are paid less, are more often out of work, are less likely to vote, are less informed about civic affairs, are less able to meet the health-care needs of their families, and are more likely to have trouble with the law or to become ensnared in other socially harmful activities” (Shanahan, 2009, p. xiii).

Currently, in Massachusetts if a student does not pass the MCAS in high school, the student does not receive a high school diploma but rather a certificate of attendance, if the student attends all four years. Without a diploma the possibility of college is derailed, thereby decreasing job opportunities and limiting potential earnings. In this century our economy is driven by intellectual and technological capital. Additionally, companies and industries are no longer solely responsible to or effected by the American economy. Students are entering a global job market that is part of a global economy. Being ill prepared for the new expectations of the global job market decreases the chances of the students’ finding positions that will allow
them to support themselves. “Global economic expansion and the shift from manufacturing to a service, recreation, and consumption economy in advanced industrial countries have led to a dramatic recomposition of the U.S. labor force. This has had profound implications for economic inequality and for education policies. . .In the informational economy, knowledge is central, and one’s education is a key determinant of whether one will be a high-paid knowledge worker or part of the down-graded sector of labor” (Lipman, 2004, p. 9-11).

One factor that has significant impact on the literacy development of students with moderate special needs is instruction. Students with moderate special needs, benefit from instruction that motivates as well as challenges. Instruction has to have as its goal the development of students as readers, writers, communicators, and thinkers in order to help them overcome learning obstacles.

The academic struggles faced by students with special needs vary in complexity and variety. For these students and the educators working with them, this struggle can be daunting. Increasing academic gaps for many students with special needs demand a need for new and more effective instruction. Effective instruction can be the difference between students with special needs finding success in school verse failure, as children who read on grade level by the end of third grade are more successful in school, work, and in life (Rudinicki, 2010, p. 1).

The test-taking era has moved many schools away from teaching students to be fully literate. Paulo Freire’s explanation of literacy provides another lens through which to understand why this issue remains at the forefront of the discourse around American education. For the students in the United States becoming literate is to, as Freire states, bring about “self-transformation” in order for American students to rise above the family and societal obstacles.
they face, they must so take hold of literacy that they become empowered to improve their lives and lives of those around them.

To acquire literacy is more than to psychologically and mechanically dominate reading and writing techniques. It is to dominate these techniques in terms of consciousness; to understand what one reads and to write what one understands; it is to “communicate” graphically. Acquiring literacy does not involve memorizing sentences, words, or syllables—lifeless objects unconnected to an existential universe—but rather an attitude of creation and recreation, a self-transformation producing a stance of intervention in one’s context. (Freire, 1970, pg 48)

The personal cost grows as the student moves through school and is unable to obtain this level of literacy. It may start as an embarrassment because the student does not read as well as peers. The stigma of being pulled out of the classroom may cause the student to become unmotivated. There are also long-term consequences if the student becomes an adult still struggling with reading comprehension and fluency, as the job market is limited and available jobs require the ability to read and comprehend effectively. These ongoing consequences demand improvements in the instruction that students with moderate special needs receive. “Engaging students with learning disabilities to take an active and sustained role in reading experiences is an important step in the development of literate students” (O’Connor & Garrett, 2010, p. 13).

For students with moderate special needs, difficulties in reading affect reading comprehension and fluency and as the difficulty of curriculum increases “students with learning disabilities are likely to demonstrate difficulties with decoding, fluency and vocabulary. Difficulty in any of these three areas will interfere with reading comprehension” (Boardman, Klingner, & Vaughn, 2007, p. 5). For students with reading difficulties “the deficit is persistent, and enduring—74 percent of children who are reading disabled in the third grade are still
disabled in the 10th grade” (Hall & Moats, 1999, p. 278). Thus additional instruction matched to students’ learning needs is imperative.

**Key Terms**

Three terms appear most frequently throughout this research, reading comprehension, fluency, and theatre arts techniques. Reading comprehension is the process of decoding text as well as understanding the meaning being conveyed by the text: “Reading comprehension is a multi-component, highly complex process that involves many interactions between readers and what they bring to the text (prior knowledge, strategy use)” (Boardman et al, 2007, p. 8). This research defines reading comprehension as the ability to read proficiently enough to assemble and extract meaning from the text “reading is about creating and gaining meaning from text” (Avalos, Chavez, Placensia, & Rascon, 2007, p. 318). Reading comprehension is a complex process that involves the synthesis of decoding and prior knowledge. Reading is a continuous process of combining within the brain and a synthesis of knowledge at the individual word level, sentence level, and ongoing throughout the paragraph and eventually the entire text.

Processing the text involves decoding the text, some higher-level linguistic and semantic processing, and self-monitoring for comprehension—all of which depend on the reader’s capabilities as well as on the various features of the text. In the course of reading, the reader constructs various representations of the text that are important for comprehension. Those representations include the surface code (the exact wording of the text), the text base (idea units representing the meaning of the text), and the mental models (the way in which information is processed for meaning) that are embedded in the text. (Rand Reading Study Group, 2002, p. 2).
For students with moderate special needs this can be a daunting process leading to the necessity for teachers to understand the reading process and can cultivate reading experiences that help students develop the skill of synthesis “teachers who are aware of the many elements that contribute to comprehension are more likely to consider these when assessing students’ reading comprehension difficulties and implementing targeted instruction” (Boardman, et al., 2007, p. 6). Chapter 2 delves into the complex process of reading comprehension that involves decoding, fluency, and comprehension.

Fluency is reading comprehension’s co-maker of meaning. Fluency is reading at a proficiency rate appropriate to the level of text being read. To read fluently the reader must read with automaticity, accuracy, and proper expression for the text. Fluency and reading comprehension have a reciprocal relationship, fluency helps students access the meaning in text because they decode at a rate that allows them concentrate on making meaning as they move through the text. Similarly the more words they identify the more fluently they will read. “When we read fluently, we read more, understand more, and build our vocabulary. Simultaneously, we read fluently when we have more word knowledge. This is the reciprocal relationship between reading fluency and vocabulary/comprehension” (Allor & Chard, 2011, p. 4).

Students with moderate special needs may struggle with fluency and decoding. This struggle may cause students’ task persistence to decrease. Students with moderate special needs can benefit from instruction that incorporates fluency work

Planning effective fluency instruction involves building automaticity with a variety of underlying skills, as well as building fluency with connected text. It is key that students not only learn the sounds of letters (e.g., they must identify these sounds automatically without great effort and then use these sounds quickly to learn new words), but also new words must then become automatic and applied within sentences and passages. (Allor & Chard, 2011, p. 4).
Theatre techniques are the processes used in creating a performance. For the purpose of this study, theatre techniques are narrowed to four that can be connected to the development of reading comprehension and fluency: theatre games, improvisation, skit writing and character analysis. As mentioned previously, fluency is a co-maker to reading comprehension. Similarly these theatre techniques (theatre games, improvisation, skit writing and character analysis), are used in this study as partners with reading comprehension to develop students skills in the latter “using dramatic techniques as a teaching method . . . is informal and focuses on the process of dramatic enactment for the sake of the learner . . . learning through drama” (Robbins, 1988, p. 1). This study focuses on how learning and using theatre techniques such as theatre games, improvisation, skit writing, and character analysis influences the development of reading comprehension.

Theatre Techniques are the methods and combined efforts of those on stage and behind the scenes bringing a piece of text to life “A play, which is the actor’s material, is the story of a selected group of characters, their relationships and intimacies, their conversations and deeds. It is a story that may be read in privacy or in public; but its primary purpose is for presentation to an audience” (Battye & White, 1985, p. 13). Being on stage or behind the scenes requires the student to be well versed in script which requires multiple readings, analyze and discussion of character relationships and intention. The repeated examination of the script helps build comprehension.

The theatre techniques examined in this study can be part of a student with moderate special needs development of reading comprehension and fluency skills. Theatre games can be used to enhance word identification skills as well as help students clarify meanings for new words. Theatre games help with the development of memory and concentration both essential to
developing word identification skills. Creating an improvisation scene requires thinking creatively and flexibly in order to imagining ideas and problems from different perspectives. Through development of improvisational skills students can learn to hold multiple thoughts during reading and self correct misinterpretations as they go along. Skit writing can bring together the accuracy expected of a retelling and the interpretive nature of open response questions. One way to access understanding is through skit writing. When students can accurately recreate the events of the story, capture what is conveyed through the dialogue as well as the text understanding is established. Lastly analysis of characters aids students understanding and helps them to create more accurate improvisations and skits. Teaching students to build a character analysis requires them to return to the text multiple times. These opportunities to reread the text, gives students multiple opportunities to clarify their understanding of what they have read.

The problematic reading of students with moderate special needs should be addressed from as many angles as possible. The use of theatre techniques as a part of the curriculum is becoming a viable option to address difficulties in reading comprehension and fluency.

**Significance of Study**

In order to help students with moderate special needs make the progress needed to become successful readers it is critical to understand their struggle with reading comprehension and fluency. This understanding requires an examination of assessments, instruction, and strategies to educate these students in ways responsive to their learning needs. Along with understanding the specific learning needs of students with moderate special needs in the areas of
reading comprehension and fluency, it is important to examine alternative options for developing skills and processes in these areas.

Given that reading comprehension and fluency generally do not improve and may worsen as these students move through school, exploring other possibilities such as the use of theatre arts techniques to teach English/Language Arts may offer an alternative intervention that builds comprehension and fluency in academic subjects. This method is not a new endeavor, but is one that is under developed and underutilized. In recent years the use of theatre arts techniques in English/Language Arts classes has increased and has shown some success as an option for developing reading comprehension. “The use of creative drama with fifth-grade remedial reading students to act out stories read in class enables them to better understand what they read and also helps them better understand reading they do not act out such as reading exercises found in standardized tests” (Deasy 2002, p. 22). Most research focuses on Readers Theatre as a process of transforming a piece of literature or non-fiction text into a script, then taking the students through the process of repeated reading where the teacher also models and critiques the reading through discussions of the script, plot and characters. “Readers Theatre is a performance of a written script that demands repeated and assisted reading that is focused on delivering meaning to an audience” (Rasinski & Young, 2009, p. 4).

Additionally, the Champion report (1999) supports the use of theatre in classrooms to increase reading skills as “High level of involvement in theater co-related to high levels of achievement in reading proficiency. [And,] Low socio-economic status (SES) students highly involved in theater outscored the low SES students who were not involved in theater in reading proficiency” (Fiske, 1999, p. 14).
This dissertation will examine the effect of theatre arts techniques on improving reading comprehension and fluency of students with moderate special needs and will explore and observe how students with moderate special needs engage in and are impacted by reading comprehension and fluency curriculum infused with theatre arts techniques.

How students see themselves as readers also plays a role in development of reading comprehension and fluency. A theatre arts program can help students develop skills that affect students socially and academically. Theatre time provides a space in which students can excel no matter how they perform in other subjects. Unsworth writes that, “many of these young men, whose reading levels are minimal, catch on quickly to the basic skills of poetry and music” (1990, p. 14). A theatre arts program provides students with a creative outlet that can supplement and enhance subject matter. Theatre can impact self esteem and learning, and “many texts on theatre in educational settings focus on the social benefit received by students as they participate in the theatre arts, including exercises in cooperative group work, positive self-esteem, fluency in oral communication, and the use of imagination . . . other justifications historically have supported the use of theatre as a vehicle for the teaching and the learning of other subjects” (Woodson, 2004, p. 25). As students begin to feel better about their abilities through the theatre experience, they may be able to use their increased self esteem as well as the skills learned in theatre to help them work through challenges in subject matter reading.

This research will examine the following questions:

- Does curriculum infused with theatre arts techniques improve reading comprehension and fluency of students with moderate special needs? If so to what degree?
- Do students participate in the theatre activities, and if so what does participation look like?
How do students see themselves as readers, and does it affect how they engage in reading activities?

What impact do student’s perceptions of theatre activities and their level of participation in theatre activities have on their reading?

To what degree are students’ achievement scores in reading comprehension and fluency impacted by participation in theatre activities?

**Organization of Dissertation**

This dissertation is arranged into seven chapters. Chapter one identifies the research problem and the questions being explored in this study. The primary focus of the study is to determine if and to what degree students with moderate special needs’ reading comprehension of grade level text and fluency are improved through the use of theatre infused curriculum. The study will focus on observing how the use of curriculum infused with theatre techniques impacts special needs student’s fluency and reading comprehension development. The secondary focus of the study examines the relationship between how students with moderate special needs view themselves as readers and their reading comprehension. Additional aspects of the research will focus on how students’ perceptions of themselves as readers change over time.

Chapter two reviews the literature, which reveals the impact of current curriculum on students with moderate special needs who struggle with reading comprehension. The review of the literature addresses three relevant, empirical bodies of literature: (1) reading comprehension; (2) fluency; and (3) theatre techniques. Fluency is the partner of reading comprehension, supporting the reader in their quest for understanding.
addresses the use of theatre techniques such as Reader’s Theatre to develop reading comprehension.

This chapter also documented that slow progress for students with moderate special needs and the inadequacy of the theatre research leaves an opening for innovative research that grow out of student and teachers interacting with the curriculum.

Using theatre in the classroom is not new, but it remains underutilized; although in recent years its use is more prominent “The use of creative drama with fifth-grade remedial reading students to act out stories read in class enables them to better understand what they read and also help them better understand reading they do not act out, such as reading exercises found in standardized tests” (Deasy, 2002, p. 22). Additionally, the Champion report supports the use of theatre in classrooms to increase reading skills: “high level of involvement in theater co-related to high levels of achievement in reading proficiency. Low socio-economic status (SES) students highly involved in theater outscored the low SES students who were not involved in theater in reading proficiency” (Champions of Change, 1999, p. 14).

Many of the articles found during this research on arts infused curriculum serve as how to manuals, rather than empirical research. There has been a long-standing call for empirical research in the area of theatre arts. In the 60’s Davis issued the call Davis asserted that “It is evident . . . that much more experimental research is needed on which to found the creative studies of the future” (Davis, 1961, p. 274). Klein reissued the call at the end of the 80’s. “Theatre educators must focus their attention on in-depth research that presents concrete evidence to support their claims about the educational benefits of theatre in order to institute drama and theatre in the schools” (Klein, 1989, p. 27). There still remains much work to be done in this area. Empirical research in this field is more available, with a strong focus on Readers’
The current need necessitates empirical research that examines the broader connection between the use of theatre techniques as part of classroom curriculum that may impact reading comprehension and fluency in all students and more specifically students with moderate special needs.

Chapter Three presents the research design of the study. The study is placed in the context of multiple case study design, accompanied by the teacher researcher’s perspective. This type of investigation lends itself to the use of multiple case study design because the researcher is looking for trends across cases to identify how students are impacted by the curriculum. For this study a segment of a classroom population using theatre techniques will be observed closely. The use of a teacher researcher design is also presented. Teacher research is appropriate for this study, as the researcher will be working in her classroom to study the effects of self-developed and implemented curriculum on her students. The population and setting are delineated, and the chapter culminates with descriptions of the data collection and methods of analysis.

Chapter four, five, and six will discuss the findings of the research. Chapter four will include a description of classroom environments and class demographics. Case studies will be a part of chapter four as well; each study will include description of student demographics, physical and social emotional development, education and theatre experiences, unique personality traits, and individual student progress. Descriptions of curriculum procedures and student perspectives on how the curriculum impacted them will be included.

Chapter five discusses the experience of the teacher researcher as both implementer of the curriculum and observer, it will include challenges of addressing the varying needs of the students, and a description of how the curriculum was correspondingly implemented and modified throughout the study.
Chapter six will report data from the observation checklist of student engagement in theatre activities and assessments of reading comprehension and fluency as well as a summary of the study and the overall findings of the study.

Chapter seven discusses the implications of the study for the classroom, research, and policy and considers the potential implications for students with special needs, teachers, schools, and policy.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature: Script Selection

Overview. Reading comprehension can be seen as the foundation of academic learning. For the purpose of this research reading comprehension is defined as reading at a proficiency level that allows one to construct and derive meaning from text “reading is about creating and gaining meaning from text” (Avalos, Chavez, Placensia, & Rascon, 2007, p. 318). It is the synthesis of the skills involved in recognizing and understanding words, combined with knowledge of the world around us. “Reading comprehension is a multi-component, highly complex process that involves many interactions between readers and what they bring to the text (prior knowledge, strategy use)” (Boardman et al, 2007, p. 8).

Synthesis is the combination of the brain decoding and assigning meaning to each individual word and determining the meaning the word groupings (sentences) are imparting. “Reading comprehension (is) the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. Reading comprehension consists of three elements: the reader, the text, and the activity of reading” (Rand Reading Study Group, 2002). First the brain recognizes that the individual characters are put together to form words and that it has a prior knowledge of the meaning of these words. Once the brain is clear that it can make meaning of the words individually, it begins to search for the meaning made by the string of words coming together to make sentences.

Processing the text involves decoding the text, some higher-level linguistic and semantic processing, and self-monitoring for comprehension—all of which depend on the reader’s capabilities as well as on the various features of the text . . . In the course of reading, the reader constructs various representations of the text that are important for comprehension. Those representations include the surface code (the exact wording of the text), the text base (idea units representing the meaning of the text), and the mental models (the way in
which information is processed for meaning) that are embedded in the text (Rand Reading Study Group, 2002, p. 2).

The brain draws on its prior experience with the subject matter or similar subject matter as well as its understanding of the text structure to help it receive the message the new material is trying to convey.

Comprehension extends beyond reading and understanding the first paragraph. It is an ongoing process of checking, rechecking and sometimes correcting the message received from the material as the reader continues through the text. Prado (2004) brings together how research explains this process as “schema theory, individuals organize their world knowledge into categories and systems that make retrieval easier. When a key word or concept is encountered, readers are able to access this information system, pulling forth the ideas that will help them make connections with the text so they can create meaning. Schema theory involves the storage of various kinds of information in long-term memory . . . When a key word or concept is presented to the reader . . . some of this stored information is brought forward and temporarily placed in short-term memory so that the reader can return to it quickly as he or she reads. Short-term memory has limited capacity, and often the information pulled from long-term memory prior to or during reading is only available for a short time and then is placed back in long-term memory” (p.273).

For students with moderate special needs this synthesis does not always occur naturally, they are limited by their processing struggles, “many students with learning disabilities have problems in more than one area that influence their text comprehension” (Boardman, et al., 2007, p. 6). Teachers knowledgeable in how comprehension occurs are necessary conduits to help students with moderate special needs overcome their challenges, “teachers who are aware of the
many elements that contribute to comprehension are more likely to consider these when assessing students’ reading comprehension difficulties and implementing targeted instruction” (Boardman, et al., 2007, p. 6).

**Teaching Reading Comprehension**

Effective response to the challenges reading comprehension presents to students with moderate special needs includes assessments, instructional approaches, and specific strategies.

**Assessment.** Using assessments to guide instruction is an important part of planning instruction for students with moderate special needs. When teachers analyze assessments such as running records and standardized tests, and combine results with their observations of how a student approaches assignments in the classroom, weaknesses in the reading process can be identified. McKenna and Stahl (2003) call comprehension the “bottom line” of reading, and state that, “measuring it provides an indicator of how well all of the sub-processes of reading are working together” (p. 167).

Research on reading comprehension supports using assessments to determine a course of action for students with moderate special needs. “Performance assessments offer a variety of ways for students to demonstrate what they know about content, as well as elucidate students’ additional skills sets within the classroom . . . When performance assessments are added to teachers’ current repertoires of assessment tools, they help refine teachers’ knowledge of their students so they can create robust, motivating lessons attuned to their students’ strengths and needs” (Oberg, 2010, p. 2). When assessments are strong and varied they can provide a clear understanding of where a student is experiencing breakdowns in the reading process.

“Information useful in planning reading instruction does not always come in the form of test results . . . the products of written class assignments can provide important clues to a
student’s literacy development. Such products include compositions, journal entries, worksheets, class notes . . . classroom observations, parent input, and portfolios” (McKenna & Stahl, 2003, pp. 36-37). When teachers use class assignments as assessment tools to inform instruction it becomes a reciprocal process between student performance and instruction. Teachers can notice that all, some, or just one student is missing the concepts being taught. They can make decisions regarding groupings, providing additional focus on a concept, reviewing or re-teaching the concept to the whole group or providing instruction to a small group. This can be important for development of students with moderate special needs, as it helps address students’ needs; instead of their doing poorly on an assignment and being seen as unprepared, it indicates that some adjustment in instruction needed.

In this context of assessment, nearly any interaction between student, teacher, and curriculum becomes assessment. According to Boardman et al, (2007) curriculum-based, assessments, observations, retellings, and think alouds are all forms of assessments that are appropriate for determining how instruction should be adjusted for students with moderate special needs.

Having identified weaknesses in reading comprehension students with moderate special needs present, instruction should be tailored to the student’s needs with the goal of strengthening the student’s reading processes. When students receive appropriate instruction they can become stronger readers, leading to enhanced comprehension (Gersten et al, 2001).

**Instruction.** Instruction is a combination of several components: the learning environment/community, objectives, presentation of content, practice with fluency and comprehension, and feedback, review and assessment, and re-teaching. For students with moderate special needs, varied ways to present content offer more opportunities for success,
especially when “reading comprehension is supported by integrating a variety of instructional practices into your teaching routines” (Boardman et al, 2007, p. 102).

Whole and small group instruction can be used to maximize the learning experience of students’ with moderate special needs. Whole group instruction provides the teacher the opportunity to help students activate the background knowledge (schema) needed for the specific reading topic. “Accessing appropriate schema influences both understanding and memory” (Boardman et al, 2007, p. 103) as is determining the goal for the reading for “readers who struggle may need help in setting the purpose for reading” (Boardman et al, 2007, p. 104).

Allowing students to observe the teacher modeling appropriate use of reading skills and ways to glean understanding from the text “provides students with visible overt examples of how reading skills and strategies are used successfully” (Coyne, Ruby, & Zipoli, 2006, p. 164).

Small group instruction can be used as a time when students receive coaching and practice in specific areas of weakness that they may share with some but not all peers. Small group instruction can be tailored to the needs of the students, giving them opportunities to practice skills they struggle with, while receiving support from the teacher. “This approach to reading instruction provides teachers the opportunity to explicitly teach children the skills and comprehension strategies students need, thus facilitating the acquisition of reading proficiency” (Avalos, Chavez, Placensia, & Rascon, 2007, p. 318).

Research suggests that reading comprehension instruction should offer a balance between explicit/teacher-and implicit/student-centered activities and instruction. Explicit instruction is the direct teaching of strategies related to reading comprehension; it includes discussions, modeling and read aloud. “Explicit instruction in comprehension strategies requires that teachers move beyond a mere ‘content approach’, encouraging students to attend to text ideas and build a
mental representation without considering specific mental processes, employ[ing] a ‘strategies approach’, where students’ mental processes are directly targeted” (Andreassen & Braten, 2011, p. 521).

Implicit instruction, includes the many opportunities provided for readers to build skills through authentic practice, including writing and discussing text, independent reading and writing, projects, literacy circles and worksheets (Connor, Morrison, & Petrella, 2004; Duke & Pearson 2002). The combination of explicit and implicit instruction mirrors the cognitive processes involved in attaining comprehension; students are first taught a strategy then given multiple opportunities to work on their own using the new strategy until they become a part of the working memory.

Research also finds that the strategies a student brings to reading dictate the type of instruction that will be most effective with that student (Connor, et al, 2004). It is important to meet students with moderate special needs at their ability level and move them up to more challenging tasks. “Teachers should introduce reading concepts and skills systematically, beginning with easier tasks and progressing to more difficult tasks over time” (Coyne, Ruby, & Zipoli, 2006, p. 164). Additionally, Allor and Chard (2011) lay out Tallal, Merzenich, Jenkins, and Millers five principles for guiding instruction for students with special needs

1. The student must attend closely to features of the sensory-Task. This suggests that both visual and auditory communication must be clear and unambiguous for the student.
2. The student must maintain attention to be able to perform the task at a high level of accuracy (if the task is too difficult, learning cannot be achieved). It is important to ensure that the student (e.g., blending sounds to make a word) is likely to be successful at the task by teaching all of the prerequisite skills.
3. The student's behavior (i.e., skills associated with
emergent and early reading) must be reinforced in a highly consistent and rewarding manner to maintain motivation and drive learning through corrective feedback. Students who struggle to learn to read require intense amounts of practice; therefore, special care must be taken to ensure that motivation is maintained.  
4. Highly consistent, repetitive input must be given over an intense period of time so that consistent patterns of neuronal activation occur repetitively, building specific stimulation patterns to "represent" the input from the environment in the brain. This principle seems to suggest that accurate practice is particularly important to develop automaticity within the word identification box in the Perfetti model.  
5. Once a behavior is established (i.e., the response is accurate and consistent), learning can be driven most effectively by systematically increasing the difficulty of the task as performance improves. As a student demonstrates increasing proficiency with a skill or set of skills, it is important to integrate those skills into more difficult tasks (p. 3-4)  

These principals illuminate the process of learning reading comprehension; showing the partnership between the student and the teacher. Principles 1 and 2 introduce us to the student’s role as attendee, focusing on the task as well as the skills involved in the task of reading. Principles 3 and 4 point to the teacher’s role as guide to the student’s development by reinforcing what they are learning by continually providing accessible assignments and giving timely feedback and re-teaching as needed to help move students towards mastery. Similarly, Principle 5 completes the process by continuing the teacher’s role as guide, and identifies the importance of increasing the difficulty of instructional materials as students establish their ability at a lower level, as “learning can be most effectively driven by systematically increasing the difficulty of the task as performance improves” (Allal et al., as cited in Allor & Chard, 2011). As a student demonstrates increasing proficiency with a skill or set of skills, it is important to integrate those
skills in to more challenging tasks” (Allor & Chard, 2011, p. 4). In this way the student’s development, needs, and abilities continue to dictate instruction.

Reading Comprehension develops at three levels: literal, inferential, and synthesis. “We conventionally speak of three levels (of questions) . . . literal questions recall a specific fact that has been explicitly stated in the reading selection . . . inferential questions have factual answers. However the answers cannot be located in the selection . . . the reader must make logical connections in order to answer . . . critical questions students form value judgments about the selection” (McKenna & Stahl, 2003, p. 168). Each of these levels of comprehension develops over time and through interaction with reading materials. Each can also be explicitly taught during instruction. One way that this can be achieved is by teaching students to ask and answer questions at the three levels.

For students with moderate special needs, explicit instruction is invaluable. Literal questions, those whose answers can be found right in the text, are the simplest to ask and give students their first experiences with how comprehension works, but are not deep enough to help students develop more sophisticated levels of comprehension “Literal questions . . . are easy to ask and answer, but they may reflect a very superficial understanding of content” (McKenna & Stahl, 2003, p. 168). Nonetheless the literal level of questioning can be developed in a way that provides the student more fact based information on which higher levels of comprehension can be derived.

It is also important that literal questions be asked in ways that require students to read the text in order to respond accurately. Asking direct questions such as “What color is the pen Nick knocks out of Janet’s hand” in the book Frindle will not require students to use as much comprehension as asking “Name one or two things that helps Nick decide to call Janet’s pen a
Frindel when he returns it to her”. Both types of questions can be derived from the text, but the latter requires the student to read the text and locate evidence in the text to support their answer. All questioning should lead students to exercise their comprehension skills and provide teachers with information about how effectively the student comprehends the text. “Questions that can be answered without having adequately comprehended a selection fail to assess reading comprehension . . . comprehension questions should target information that lies within the passage but that is not likely to lie within the student’s prior knowledge” (McKenna & Stahl, 2003, pp. 169-170).

The levels of comprehension that are best taught explicitly to special needs students are inference and synthesis. As these two levels of comprehension rely on reading between the lines and thinking beyond the text, these are areas with which students with moderate special needs struggle. For students with special needs inference and synthesis levels of comprehension should be taught explicitly as a part of reading comprehension instruction (Boardman et al, 2007).

Explicit instruction includes modeling making inferences when answering questions during whole or small group instruction. When the teacher talks to students about reading between the lines and then demonstrates how to go back to the text to find evidence that supports the conclusions the student is making about the text, it can be a powerful experience for the students. Following the demonstration with students practicing supporting the inferences they make with the group and on their own helps solidify these skills for students with moderate special needs. Through direct instruction and practice Bragg, Deshler, Fritschmann, Salima, and Schumaker determined that “students with disabilities can learn to use a strategy to answer a variety of inferential questions” (2007, p. 245).
According to Kolligian and Sternberg (1987) the important instruction areas of reading comprehension include text structure (narrative and expository), vocabulary, use of background knowledge while reading to aid with understanding what is read, including making inferences, fluency, and task persistence. Similarly Boardman et al, (2007) suggest directing instruction towards teaching strategies that “ask students to (1) consider their background knowledge on the topic they are reading, (2) summarize key ideas, and (3) self-question while they read” (p. 4). Students with moderate special needs, benefit from explicit instruction and implicit experiences in all these instructional areas. Students need to learn, practice, and master strategies that they can draw on when reading independently.

**Strategies.** Comprehension is a back and forth process, where active memory is taking in the text, followed by relating active memory to general world knowledge (sometimes accurately and sometimes inaccurately). As more of the text is read, active memory and general world knowledge work together to clear up inconsistencies and clarify meaning. Finally, comprehension is achieved when synthesis occurs through “a passive, convergence mechanism” or “a more active process of evaluation” (Lea & Long, 2005, p. 293). For strong readers these strategies develop over time and occur with minimal, visible effort from the reader. For students with moderate special needs these actions seem to develop at a slower rate and or are interrupted, keeping these students from developing automatic use of strategies that lead to comprehension. Lea and Long describe such breakdowns “when readers encounter a coherence gap and the knowledge necessary to bridge the gap is not readily available in memory” (2005, p. 295). This scaffolding makes the explicit teaching of strategies necessary and efficient for students moderate with special needs.
Strategies are used to help students achieve comprehension using a specific type of text structure, or can be applied to all text structures that are encountered. As with most skills students with moderate special needs acquire, strategies must be explicitly taught and revisited often. “Research also shows that comprehension strategies can and should be taught explicitly and directly to students. This means, explaining why and when strategies should be used, and how to apply them. Explicit instruction includes direct explanation, modeling, guided practice, and application of a strategy” (Sedita, 2001, p. 5).

In addition to instruction in the applying of reading strategies, it is vital that students with moderate special needs receive instruction and practice in fluency. Reading fluently allows the brain the space and time to focus on comprehension. The coupling of having reading strategies to draw on and reading fluency will make comprehension a more accessible task for students with moderate special needs.

**Fluency.** It is important to note that without comprehension reading is not taking place “Reading is a process of constructing meaning from written text, using the gradually acquired skill of interrelating information gained through decoding symbols and information stored in memory” (Anderson et al, 1985, p. 1). Accordingly, reading is comprehension; and comprehension is aided by fluency. “When we read fluently, we read more, understand more, and build our vocabulary. Simultaneously, we read fluently when we have more word knowledge. This is the reciprocal relationship between reading fluency and vocabulary/comprehension” (Allor & Chard, 2011, p. 4). Fluent reading aids comprehension because decoding occurs at a rate that allows the reader to focus more attention on understanding the meaning of the material, rather than on determining what the words say.
Reading with strong fluency frees up the reader to focus on comprehension, “put(ting) extra mental energy into decoding the words, that energy or focus will not be available for comprehension” (McKenna & Stahl, 2003, p. 72). Therefore being able to decode words is only the beginning of the process towards becoming a fluent reader. Students need to reach automaticity with high frequency words so that they are not expending energy decoding words that appear repeatedly in reading, and “all high-frequency words must eventually become sight words if a reader is to be fluent” (McKenna & Stahl, 2003, p. 111). Fluency involves automatic recognition of words and reading at a rate that allows the student to keep track of the events occurring in the text while continuing to read. When a student struggles with fluency comprehension is hindered; “if a child reads accurately but has to sound out or stumble over every word, his or her comprehension also will suffer” (McKenna & Stahl, 2003, p. 72). Improving fluency automaticity, accuracy, and inflection helps students to read for comprehension.

**Teaching fluency.** Fluency is a learned skill developed by hearing fluent readers and practicing fluent reading with material at the Reader’s reading level. For students with moderate special needs it is important for them to receive positive critiques of reading and to reread material. “Passage reading that targets fluency development typically includes some combination of modeling by a skilled reader, providing feedback, reading short passages or books, and rereading” (Allor & Chard, 2011, p. 11). The increase in reading fluency can give students an opportunity to focus more on understanding what they are reading.

Just as reading strategies that aid comprehension must be explicitly taught and practiced, so must fluency. Students with moderate special needs benefit from having fluent reading modeled by teachers and peers as well as opportunities to practice fluent reading at their reading
Repeated reading is shown to be an effective instruction and practice tool for improving fluency. Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, and Baker in their synthesis on “Teaching Reading Comprehension Strategies to Students with Learning Disabilities” confirm that repeated reading is effective in improving “both reading rate and recall” (2001, p. 286). Boardman et al, (2007) also point out that pre-teaching proper nouns, teaching students to monitor and track their reading rate, rereading, and having peers read aloud are good practices to help students improve fluency.

Students with moderate special needs “are likely to demonstrate difficulties with decoding, fluency (reading words quickly and accurately), and vocabulary” (Boardman et al, 2007, p. 5). These struggles deem it important that fluency development incorporate instruction in word parts, whole words and the reading of sentences and passages.

Planning effective fluency instruction involves building automaticity with a variety of underlying skills, as well as building fluency with connected text. It is key that students not only learn the sounds of letters (e.g., they must identify these sounds automatically without great effort and then use these sounds quickly to learn new words), but also new words must then become automatic and applied within sentences and passages. (Allor & Chard, 2011, p. 4).

Struggles with fluency, decoding, and vocabulary may cause students to give up quickly as “no one voluntarily engages in an activity that is frustrating. Nonfluent reading, with all of its natural frustrations, can be a barrier to positive attitudes” (McKenna & Stahl, 2003, p. 208).

Research supports fluency instruction and practice that includes “modeling fluent reading for students, assisted reading, and repeated readings” (Rasinski & Young, 2009, p. 4). The following are two examples of instructional practices that incorporate modeling fluent reading
for students, assisted reading, and repeated readings. Partner reading uses modeling fluent reading and assisted reading, and Readers’ Theatre uses assisted reading and repeated readings.

Partner reading allows the less fluent reader to hear fluent reading modeled and to receive assistance when reading. “During a PR session, a more capable, fluent reader (Partner 1) is typically paired with a less capable peer (Partner 2). Partner 1 reads the material first to provide a model of fluent reading for Partner 2. Partner 2 subsequently reads the text. While one student reads, the listening partner provides feedback and alerts the reader when an error has been made. Thus, the poor Readers’ common practice of skipping unknown words is no longer possible, as the listening partner prompts the reader to reread the sentence, and provides the troublesome word if the reader cannot read it in 4 seconds” (Bryant, Chard, Coleman, Kouzakanani, Thompson, & Tyler, 2000, p. 326).

Readers’ Theatre is an opportunity to turn any literature or content topic into a script to help students practice fluency by practicing the script to be performed for an audience. The teacher acts as director and leads discussions to help student understand the character intent, critiques the rehearsal readings, and model reading. Students read the script multiple times in order to gain fluency in their reading. Fredricks (2011) defines Readers’ Theatre as “fluency in action! It is reading with a purpose and reading that is motivational and productive. Students have multiple opportunities to hear fluent reading in a variety of contexts; so too are students able to interpret and read texts with expression and with comprehension. Most importantly, students have authentic opportunities to hear and practice fluent reading in a rich and supportive environment” (p. 43-44). Readers Theatre provides the reader purpose and motivation for reading.

Theatre Arts Techniques: An Alternative Instruction Method
As indicated by the research on reading comprehension and fluency improving fluency aids the development of comprehension. For students with moderate special needs, the traditional methods of instruction in these areas do not render the same results as they do for general education students. Automatic word recognition plays a large part in the development of fluency. General education students, as a result of on-level progress, have a store of word knowledge and reading experience to draw on, where as students with moderate special needs who struggle with reading are hindered by their lack of automaticity. “For the nonfluent reader, poor word recognition slows down the reading process and takes up valuable cognitive resources necessary for meaning making . . . proficient readers bring a wealth of word knowledge that enables them to construct meaning across a variety of texts” (Harmon, Keehn, & Shoho, 2008, pp. 337-338). It is important to address problematic reading of students with moderate special needs from as many angles as possible. The use of theatre techniques as a part of the curriculum is becoming a viable option to address difficulties in reading comprehension and fluency. How theatre techniques and how they can be used to support the development of the reading process is important to examine in the context of improving reading comprehension and fluency in students with moderate special needs. Incorporating theatre techniques into instruction can also be viewed through the lens of assessment, instruction and strategies.

**Theatre techniques.** Theatre techniques are the methods or procedures used in producing a work of art: the work of those on stage and behind the scenes working together to bring a script off the page. “A play, which is the actor’s material, is the story of a selected group of characters, their relationships and intimacies, their conversations and deeds. It is a story that may be read in privacy or in public; but its primary purpose is for presentation to an audience” (Batty & White,
Those who work in both areas rely on the script as their guide, reading the script to analyze the plot and discuss the intent and the relationships between and among the characters.

A theatre arts program imparts special skills that can impact students socially and academically. Learning in the theatre arts is both a social and academic event. Students interact with one another and teachers to learn new concepts. In the right environment students can feel safe enough to take the necessary risks to grow academically. It is also an area in which students can excel in irrespective of how they perform in other academic areas. Unsworth writes that, “many of these young men, whose reading levels are minimal, catch on quickly to the basic skills of poetry and music” (1990, p. 14). A theatre arts program provides students with a creative outlet that can supplement and enhance subject matter. Theatre is empowering and this impacts self esteem and learning, and “many texts on theatre in educational settings focus on the social benefit received by students as they participate in the theatre arts, including exercises in cooperative group work, positive self-esteem, fluency in oral communication, and the use of imagination . . . other justifications historically have supported the use of theatre as a vehicle for the teaching and the learning of other subjects” (Woodson, 2004, p. 25).

Teaching using theatre techniques is not the same as teaching theatre. Teaching using theatre techniques is “using dramatic techniques as a teaching method . . . is informal and focuses on the process of dramatic enactment for the sake of the learner . . . learning through drama” (Robbins, 1988, p. 1). The use of theatre techniques makes the skills of theatre available to all students in classes, giving them the opportunity to improve across the board. The use of theatre techniques brings the material to life for students and helps them solidify what they are learning. The American Alliance for Theatre and Education purports that the use of theatre in the classroom “improves reading comprehension and both verbal and non-verbal communication
skills” as well as “improves skills and academic performance in children and youth with learning disabilities” (www.AATE American Alliance for Theatre Education.mht, p. 1). When students become invested in different aspects of theatre arts their academic skills may improve. As previously established, reading comprehension instruction should balance explicit and implicit activities and instruction. Teaching using theatre offers an excellent way to achieve this balance. Theatre techniques are initially taught explicitly, then through gradual release the students take ownership and run activities on their own.

There continues to be a need to balance the use of the arts within the structure and expectations of the school setting. “With an increasing emphasis on creativity and innovation in the twenty-first century, teachers need to be creative professionals just as students must learn to be creative. And yet, schools are institutions with many important structures and guidelines that teachers must follow. Effective creative teaching strikes a delicate balance between structure and improvisation” (Sawyer, 2011, p. 2). The integration of theatre techniques into all reading comprehension assignments is a novel concept that has only been minimally explored. Reviewing the alignment of theatre techniques with reading comprehension and fluency skills is a starting point for (see Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2).

The theatre techniques games, improvisation, character analysis and skit writing can be used to develop reading comprehension and fluency skills. Theatre games can be used to enhance word identification skills as well as help students clarify meanings for new words. Theatre games help with the development of memory and concentration, both essential to developing word identification skills. The theatre games also help students learn to reflect on what they are doing in order to improve in future games, they learn to anticipate consequences that arise from their choices within the game and problem solve as they go along. Development
of these abilities may aid in helping students garner meaning of new words from the text using context clues. Using context clues involves reflection on what is being read as well as anticipating what new words may mean based on the words the student knows in the reading. Additionally context clues draws on a student’s problem solving skills; requiring them to break the code of the text to get at the meaning of the word as it is used in the text.

Improvisation involves the student believing they can understand the text and that they can convey that understanding to others. Creating an improve scene requires thinking creatively and flexibly in order to imagining ideas and problems from different perspectives. Through development of improvisational skills students can learn to hold multiple thoughts during reading and self correct misinterpretations as the go along “Taking imaginative leaps and layering one thought upon another as part of a process of problem solving” (Ables, Burton, & Horowitz, 1999, p. 36).

Figure 2.1 Alignment of Theatre, Reading Comprehension and Fluency I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theatre Activities</th>
<th>Reading Comprehension Skills</th>
<th>How They Align</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theatre Games</td>
<td>Word Identification and Meaning Retrieval</td>
<td>Memory</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Concentration</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reflectivity</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Anticipation of Consequences</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvisation</td>
<td>Believing in your ability to comprehend the reading.</td>
<td>Thinking creatively and flexibly Imagining ideas and problems from different perspectives. Taking imaginative leaps and layering one thought upon another as part of a process of problem solving” (Ables, Burton, &amp; Horowitz, 1999, pg 36).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Skit writing can bring together the accuracy expected of a retelling and the interpretive nature of open response questions. Does the student remember the events of the story? Once it is established that the student can recall the events through a retelling activity, the next step is to determine the level of understanding of how the events fit together to convey the message of the story. One way to access understanding is through skit writing. When students can accurately recreate the events of the story, capturing what is conveyed through the dialogue as well as the text understanding is established.

Analysis of characters aids students’ understanding and helps them to create more accurate improvisations and skits. Knowing a character’s traits and ways to analyze them can help students recognize what connects characters and identify the underlying themes and plot of a story. Teaching students to build a character analysis requires them to return to the text multiple times. These opportunities to reread the text give students multiple opportunities to clarify their understanding of what they have read.

Character analysis includes looking for evidence of the characters’ physical and emotional traits, social and familial connections, likes and dislikes, and wants and needs. The more the student can identify and understand about the characters the better the student can write about and convey the characters intentions through performance; “The more you know about the character, the more textured your performance will be” (Tanner p. 91). Adding more detail to their performances requires students to pay closer attention to detail when reading the text.
Figure 2.2 Alignment of Theatre, Reading Comprehension and Fluency II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theatre Activities</th>
<th>Reading Comprehension Skills</th>
<th>How They Align</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Character Analysis | Understanding Theme and Plot | Knowing a character’s traits and ways to analyze them can help students recognize what connects characters and identify the underlying themes and plot of a story.  
“The more you know about the Character, the more textured your performance will be” (Tanner pg. 91) |
| Skit Writing       | Retellings and Open Responses| Skit writing can bring together Accuracy expected of a retelling and the interpretive nature of open response questions.  
Skit writing requires a through Understanding of the text read. |

Flynn and Kelner (2006) explain that drama and reading comprehension “share a multitude of authentic connections, including meaning making and interpretation. Each subject complements the other, leading, ideally, to increased abilities in both” (p. 1). Flynn and Kelner’s book serves as a “How To” for teachers with little experience integrating theatre into their curriculum. Many of the articles on arts integration are more “how to” than empirical research.

Creto and Brinda (2011) write about a partnership between a local theatre company and a middle school class to help the students bring three novels to life on stage. The study showed “how artistic and dramatic instructional strategies are pathways to comprehension, engagement, and enjoyment . . . The authors urge educators to include art and theater in conjunction with literature study in language arts classrooms” (p. 22).
These examples of how theatre can be used in conjunction with the classroom curriculum to engage students in the study of literature are also too isolated. In the same way support for arts programs in schools and the classroom seem too isolated. The advocates for Arts programs assert that these programs are not valued in the same manner as other academic programs. With educational success being defined as an ability to pass a state-mandated test, the arts have a hard time finding a place to fit. Lipman quote’s the principal at the Westview School as defining educational success: “when our children are able to read, write, do math, and also able to think critically. And when all this is done at the 50th percentile, I think our children are successful” (Interview, December 1998)” (2004, p. 81). With this definition the arts are not taken seriously unless they can area proven link to improving achievement in other academic subject matter. Advocates such as Woodson (2004) believe they should be valued in and of themselves and not only if they have therapeutic or educational significance. “Specifically, theatre has been received through the use of language promoting the theatre arts as a socializing force, either stressing its therapeutic benefits or its educational ones--that is, art as utility” (p 26). Many arts educators believe that “making sense out of our lives has long been the purview of the arts though and educational theatre is uniquely positioned to meet this need--to explore the lived experience of being young” (p 26).

This research will examine the use of theatre as a curriculum collaborator with subject matter to teach reading comprehension and fluency to students with moderate special needs. Creating a theatre infused curriculum that works to meet the academic goals of the subject matter standards with the “jump off the page” qualities of theatre. Theatre techniques, theatre games, improvisation, character analysis, and skit writing will be investigated in the context of instructional areas, of assessment, instruction, and strategies.
Assessment. The reading assessment that most directly supports the use of theatre techniques is reading rate, which tests the words read correctly per minute (WCPM). “Speed of reading is an indicator of students’ ability to read the words in a text at an automatic level” (Rasinski & Young, 2009, p. 5). Research demonstrates that when students are able to read more words correctly comprehension is positively impacted. “This method of assessment has been validated through a number of studies (Rasinski, 2004) that have shown substantial and significant correlations between reading rate (automaticity) and reading comprehension as well as overall reading achievement” (Rasinski & Young, 2009, p. 5).

Fluency encompasses accuracy, automaticity, and prosody; the development of all three can result in an increase in comprehension. When students with moderate special needs can increase their accurate recognition of words, and can read them without decoding orally they should be able to do the same silently. When readers can read expressively in oral reading, they have that same expressive voice when they read silently. Research shows that “students who read with expression when reading orally tend to have good comprehension when reading silently. Conversely, students who read with little or inappropriate expression during oral reading are more likely to have poor comprehension when reading silently” (Rasinski & Young, 2009, p. 4). Readers’ Theatre provides students with opportunities to practice these skills.

Instruction. Research primarily focuses on Readers’ Theatre as the instructional method for using theatre to develop fluency and comprehension. Research defines Readers’ Theatre as “the teacher actively ‘coach(ing)’ and provid(ing) direction for expressiveness during rehearsals. Readers’ Theater also offers the modeling that is important to fluency development. While students practice reading in repertory groups, the teacher actively listens to the oral reading and coaches students in expressiveness and phrasing. This feedback is important to students’ fluency
growth” (Harmon et al, 2008, p. 339). This process mirrors the process that occurs in rehearsals for professional theatre. It is an intimate and generally passionate interaction between the text (script), the reader (actor), and the teacher (director). The results are a fluent reading of the text, increased understanding of the text, and a motivation to read more material. “As a classroom teacher, it was amazing to see the student’s desire to entertain audiences with their prosodic reading. Because of their motivation to practice, refine, and perform texts, an academic avenue was created to increase reading fluency, read multiple text types, and include every student—striving or thriving” (Rasinski & Young, 2009, p. 12).

Readers’ Theatre is limited in its scope, excluding a full production of a script. Readers’ Theatre focuses on helping students gain fluency and comprehension, therefore the trappings and time that go into a full production are not needed. This time can be used to work on other Readers’ Theatre pieces. “Readers’ Theater is a minimal theatrical production requiring students to express meaning through fluent and prosodic readings of scripted stories, poems, chants, and rhymes. It does not involve the use of props, costumes, or scenery. Staging and movement is kept to a minimum. Students’ voices are the only tool used to communicate meaning or to bring characters to life; a motivational way to encourage repeated readings . . .” (Casey & Chamberlin, 2006, p. 18). The repeated reading and discussions that occur during Readers’ Theatre help students improve their fluency and reading comprehension (Fredrick, 2011; Harmon et al 2008; Sedita, 2008). The discussions that occur around the scripts allow students to practice their inferential and synthesis skills; thus “readers’ theatre . . . facilitates the development of critical and creative thinking” (Fredricks, 2011, p. 42).

Currently there is no set format for Readers’ Theatre beyond the stipulation that it is not centered on the development of a full production. “The flexibility of Readers’ Theater allows
teachers to adapt this method to their own individual circumstances. Appropriate at any grade level and across programs, there is no single way to implement Readers’ Theater. Teachers can adapt this technique to fit the needs of their students, and it works equally as well in content area classes as in remedial and special education classes” (Casey & Chamberlin, 2006, p. 18).

Despite the fact that traditional Readers’ Theatre does not include props and staging, theatre techniques can also be incorporated into reading instruction through the use of props and staging to enhance the experience for both the participants and the audience. “The students rehearse . . . and . . . have used small props and simple costumes to enhance the performance . . . they present their scripts to one another for a performance review by their peers” (Clements, 2011, p. 22). The sharing seems to be an important motivator for students, creating an additional purpose for their reading and an outcome they are willing to work towards. “Students are more likely to practice or rehearse (assisted and repeated readings) if they know that they will be performing a reading for an audience” (Rasinski & Young, 2009, p. 5).

**Strategy.** Repeated reading is the primary strategy students are introduced to in order to achieve fluency with the text. In Rasinski and Young’s (2009) study a second grade class participates in a yearlong Readers’ Theatre curriculum, centered around repeated reading, the results of the study showed a significant increase in students’ reading rates and comprehension. As a group, their WCPM increased by 64.9 points and the DRA reading level increased by 11.8 points. The student’s motivation to read and confidence also improved.

When Readers’ Theatre uses the repeated reading strategy an important part of the teaching is modeling and giving feedback that directs students in how to add expressiveness to their reading. The instruction in expressiveness or prosody sets Readers’ Theatre apart from other strategies that include repeated reading such as close reading, as “repeated readings (have)
created automaticity in their reading, and teacher/peer coaching had prepared them for a fluent performance. They practiced . . . while reading accurately and prosodically” (Rasinski & Young, 2009, p. 12).

The use of theatre techniques in the classroom is not a new endeavor, but is one that is under developed and underutilized. In recent years the use of theatre arts techniques in English/Language Arts classes has increased and has shown some success as an option for developing reading comprehension and fluency. “The use of creative drama with fifth-grade remedial reading students to act out stories read in class enables them to better understand what they read and also help them better understand reading they do not act out, such as reading exercises found in standardized tests” (Deasy, 2002, p. 22). Additionally, the Champion report supports the use of theatre in classrooms to increase reading skills: “high level of involvement in theater co-related to high levels of achievement in reading proficiency. Low socio-economic status (SES) students highly involved in theater outscored the low SES students who were not involved in theater in reading proficiency” (Champions of Change, 1999, p. 14).

An Eric search produced a list of 56 articles using the key words reading comprehension and theatre arts, and 30/56 of the articles were related to Readers’ Theatre, and 6 were related to arts standards in Arizona. The remaining 20 articles were related to the general use of theatre and other arts programs in the classroom. Of the 20 articles 16 were focused on the how to of integrating arts into the classroom. The articles on theatre arts based on empirical research have been discussed in this review of the literature. There has been a long standing call for empirical research in the area of theatre arts. In the early ‘60’s Davis (1961) called for empirical research and Klein did so again in 1989. “Theatre educators must focus their attention on in-depth research that presents concrete evidence to support their claims about the educational benefits of
theatre in order to institute drama and theatre in the schools” (Klein, 1989, p. 27). This call has not been fully answered. Davis asserted that “It is evident . . . that much more experimental research is needed on which to found the creative studies of the future” (Davis, 1961, p. 274). To further legitimize the use of theatre in schools the connection between reading comprehension, fluency, and theatre techniques is a logical launching point. Empirical research in this field has increased, primarily with a focus on Readers’ Theatre. The need for empirical research that touches the broader connection between the use of theatre techniques as part of classroom curriculum that may impact reading comprehension and fluency in students with moderate special needs strongly persists. This study will explore the impact of reading comprehension and fluency curriculum integrated with theatre techniques on elementary school students’ with moderate special needs.
Chapter 3

Research Design: Table Read

This study on the impact of the theatre-infused curriculum was conducted using a multiple case study design informed by the teacher research perspective. This case study design was used to explore and observe how students with moderate special needs engaged in and was impacted in reading comprehension and fluency by curriculum infused with theatre arts techniques.

A case study methodology was selected for this research because the teacher researcher looked at assessment, instruction and strategies involved in implementing a curriculum in a classroom for a specific segment of the classroom population. In such research “the case study is preferred in examining contemporary events . . . [as] the case study’s unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence—documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations” (Yin, 1989, p 19-20).

A multiple case study design was used so that the unique experiences and outcomes of similar profile students could be compared. In multiple case study design “each case must be carefully selected so that it either (a) predicts similar results (a literal replication) or (b) predicts contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons (a theoretical replication) . . . Across cases.” (Yin, 2003, pg 54-56). This study looked at how students within a single setting are impacted by a curriculum implemented in that setting. Students in this classroom identified as having moderate special needs were the focus of the research. These students were taught in an inclusion setting where some of their peers were general education students. The general education students were not the focus of the study.
Teacher research is defined as “systematic and intentional inquiry about teaching, learning, and schooling carried out by teachers in their own school and classroom settings” (Williams & Vogt, 2011, p 259). Teacher research was appropriate for this study as the researcher worked in her classroom to study the effects of a self-developed and implemented curriculum on her students. The purpose of the research was to (a) observe student participation in the forms of their engagement with others and the instructor, levels of participation reluctance, disruption, or refusal, (b) assess their reading fluency and comprehension progress, and (c) reflect on teacher implementation, including teacher adherence to planned lessons, appropriate timing and length of intervention, and that she enacted necessary modifications to subsequent lessons, in order to understand if and what impact the infused curriculum had, from the teacher-researcher perspective.

Case Selection

The study population consisted of four students, three male and one female, ranging in age from 10-12 years of age, enrolled in the teacher researcher’s 5th grade classroom (see Table 1). The students in the study represented a cross section of Boston citizens (African, African American, and Latino). Their socio-economic statuses ranged from low to first generation middle class, living in the sub-cities of Boston. All students receive free and reduced lunch. All study participants were categorized as having mild/moderate cognitive disabilities. They had Boston Public School Individual Education Plan’s (IEP) with a diagnosis of Specific Learning Disability, Attention Deficit Hyper-Activity Disorder, Developmental Delay and/or Communication Impairment. Additionally, the students in this study scored between the 2nd and 4th grade levels on the Reading Street Baseline test, and the students’ reading levels fell between the first grade, Level F (reading instruction level) and the fourth grade, level S (reading
instruction level) on a pre-test using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment. Finally, while some students’ first language was English, some spoke a second language at home. Boston is a diverse population and many students have families who speak a second language at home. From interacting with the students it was determined that the classroom population for this study represented families who speak English, Spanish, and Tigrina; one of each was dominant in the home for each of the participants.

Table 3.1 Case Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Dominant Language</th>
<th>Diagnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>African/Tigrina</td>
<td>Communication Impairment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>African-American/English</td>
<td>ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>African-American/English</td>
<td>Specific Learning Disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Latino/ Spanish</td>
<td>Communication Impairment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All receive free and reduced lunch.*

To select the study participants the teacher researcher began by observing all students with IEP’s in the 5th grade inclusion classroom during the first week of the study. By the end of second week of the study, when the intervention began, a maximum of three students representing the low, medium, and high scorers of all students with moderate special needs on the baseline test and Fountas and Pinnell’s pre-test were identified as the subjects of the case study. The three were selected in this way so that the teacher researcher could observe representatives of the range of the population served, and thereby gain a wider perspective on how the intervention affects the varying achievement levels represented in the inclusion population. To protect against participant mortality an alternate student who most closely resembled an original participant was identified for each of the three, for example, in case any of
the original three could not complete the study for reasons such as excessive absence or a parent dropped a student from the study for any reason. Even though the original plan was to only three students to represent the high, medium, and low scoring students would be used for the in-depth case studies, all data were collected for every student with moderate special needs in the classroom; however the teacher researcher ultimately used the data for four of the case study participants for analysis. The fourth case study participant was chosen because he was an outlier within the study participants, he represented students with special needs whose challenges were less academic and more social or behavioral. Permission was obtained from all parents prior to beginning the study, with the understanding that the students may be a study participant or an alternate in case a student is removed from the study.

Students were assigned to the teacher researcher’s classroom by school administration. The parents were made aware of the curriculum style of the classroom. Parents were given an opportunity to decide if they would like their child to be a part of the case study, and all parents agreed to have their child participate. Parents signed a consent form, agreeing to allow their child to participate. Students were also given an assent form that explains the study; all students signed giving their agreement to participate. The participants’ identities remained anonymous to all except the teacher researcher.

**Ethical consideration.** There are no identifiable risks in participating in this study. Consideration was given to how students with special needs might feel about being singled out. The students’ status as participants in the study was protected. Consideration was also given to the possibility that the students will feel that they must answer the teacher researchers questions during the interview process. Students were informed that they can answer or not answer
without fear of it affecting them in anyway. Every precaution possible was taken to ensure that all participants felt safe, comfortable, and had the freedom to participate or not.

**Teacher Research**

William and Vogt (2011) use a diagram from Cochran-Smith and Lytle that describes four types of teacher research. This study was conducted using Type 3 “Classroom/School Studies Teachers explorations of practice-based issues using data based on observation, interview, and document collection stems from, or generates, questions, individual or collaborative work” (Williams & Vogt, 2011, p 259). Type 3 best fits the research design developed by this researcher. The design used pre- and post-assessments, observation, and reflection throughout the intervention and a post interview with the participants. The teacher researcher was focused on the workings of her classroom and how the curriculum she develops and implements impacts the reading comprehension and fluency of the students in the classroom. Through this research, the researcher hoped to gain insights that would improve her practice and the experience of her students.

**Background of Teacher Researcher**

The teacher researcher’s personal and professional background is very close to the subject of this research, having been introduced to Theatre Arts in the seventh grade and finding that it was a place in which to thrive. From there on in every school attended I sought out any theatre experience I could find; public speaking, debate, or poetry interpretation.

When I became a teacher I naturally began to incorporate theatre experiences into my teaching. I started out with simple activities such as teaching first graders to count by 2, 5, and 10 by making drums out of tin cans and beating out a rhythm while we counted. As I continued to develop as a teacher I introduced improvisation to my students to act out vocabulary words. I
also wrote skits and plays for my students to perform on reading and social studies content my classes were studying, to help the students retain the information. When I began to teach middle school I worked with students to develop their own content focused skits. This empowered the students to read for understanding and explore the content repeatedly to write accurate skits. Over the years I have crafted several themes that I use to help students with their reading, involving the use of theatre training. The themes are based on novels the students read; including guided lessons, graphic organizers that help students analyze the text and characters, as well as guide them in creating, rehearsing and performing original skits.

I am also an active member of Boston’s theatre community as a production manager, stage manager, and actor. The theatre companies I work for allow me to mentor my students in learning the ins and outs of backstage work by acting as a crew person on our shows. I am committed to sharing the theatre experience with my students in all the ways possible.

**Context**

The study took place in the teacher researcher’s 5th grade inclusion classroom. Maximum class size for inclusion classes, including students with moderate special needs was 20. In this class 6/17 (35%) of the students had moderate special needs. The room was set up with tables positioned in four groups, with “center” areas around the periphery. Centers included word study, social studies, maps, computer, writing workshop, math, puzzles, guided reading/math, and the meeting/theatre area. The meeting/theatre area was in the front corner of the classroom. It incorporated the student’s coat closet and the teacher’s closet. The walls and closet doors were painted black. This area was used as a place to sit and meet or staged for plays, like a small black box theatre.
The classroom was center-based, where theatre arts were infused into the curriculum. There was a strong focus on students working independently and in groups with the teacher researcher facilitating and assisting. Group responsibility was gradually released to students. Students were not enabled to seek their minimum potential but fostered on their journey towards maximizing their potential! The high expectations of the teacher researcher and the theatre activities helped to give students more to look forward to. Students were taught leadership skills and through gradual release, assumed responsibility for leadership of theatre activities and worked to take ownership for their own learning.

**Materials.** The primary materials that were used for this intervention were the Reading Street story selections from the 5th grade *Reading Street* text (2008) (stories were read in their full version.) and the Boston Public Schools Social Studies curriculum. They were used in conjunction with theatre games, improvisation activities, character analysis, and skit writing. Theatre games were used for transitions and as activities to help students practice reading strategies. Improvisation was an ongoing activity to help students practice and demonstrate their comprehension of the text. Character analysis was used to help students further understand the text and to enhance improvisation. Skit writing was an activity for practicing reading comprehension as well as an assessment to demonstrate understanding of characters and comprehension of the text. The teacher researcher selected passages from the reading that were developed into scenes and skits. The teacher and students generated improvisation scenarios based on the stories and reference materials read. Students also wrote their own skits based on the stories and reference materials read, using the gradual release method. The teacher and the students gathered props and create scenery to enhance performances.

**Data Sources**
The assessment instruments that were used for this study fell into four categories: reading performance and outcomes, observations of engagement, student social satisfaction, and teacher fidelity. These categories worked to ensure that all aspects of the research question were addressed. They also worked together to ensure the fidelity of the study.

**Reading performance and outcomes.** The four types of assessments used to assess reading were: (a) tests for reading fluency and comprehension, pre, during, and post interventions; (b) fluency and comprehension checks; (c) end of story comprehension tests, and (d) a unit comprehension test (see Table 2). The Reading Street Baseline test and the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment served as pre-tests. The Reading Street baseline test consists of a set of three short stories each followed by eight multiple choice comprehension questions, culminating with an open response question comparing two stories. Scores from this test were analyzed. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment is a running record that includes comprehension questions. Students read a story aloud while the teacher marked a copy for errors, omissions, and self corrects. Following the running record students answered four comprehension questions. The purpose of testing was to set a baseline for each student. The testing took place over the course of the first three days of school.
### Table 3.2 Reading Performance Assessments and Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administered</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>What Assessed</th>
<th>Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Baseline</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Reading Street benches</td>
<td>Vocabulary: choosing the appropriate word to complete the sentence. Reading:</td>
<td>Beginning groupings for each student based on % correct. Later to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>Literal, Evaluative, Inferential</td>
<td>be compared to Unit Test to determine progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fountas and Pinnell</td>
<td>Measure the level of difficulty at which a student is able to read fiction</td>
<td>Beginning reading level based on *WCPM &amp; response to comprehension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benchmark</td>
<td>and nonfiction texts. Comprehension within, beyond, about the text and</td>
<td>and questions. Later to be compared to the Fountas and Pinnell post-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>fluency.</td>
<td>test to determine ending reading level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intervention</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 3-8</td>
<td>Fresh Reads</td>
<td>Measure ongoing progress in fluency and comprehension.</td>
<td>Weekly reading level For each student based on* WCPM &amp; response to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>comprehension questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading Street Selection</td>
<td>Vocabulary choosing the definition appropriate to how the word is used in the</td>
<td>Performance patterns for re-teaching throughout the intervention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Test (Administer every 2-3</td>
<td>sentence. Reading: Literal, Evaluative, Inferential</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>weeks)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Unit Test</td>
<td>Vocabulary choosing the definition appropriate to how the word was used in</td>
<td>Percentage to be compared to baseline test percentage to demonstrate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Reading Street Posttest)</td>
<td>the sentence. Reading: Literal, Evaluative, Inferential</td>
<td>progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Posttest</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Post Test/Fountas and</td>
<td>Measure the level of difficulty at which a student is able to read fiction</td>
<td>Ending reading level based on WCPM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pinnell Benchmark Assessment</td>
<td>and nonfiction texts. Comprehension within, beyond, and about the text and</td>
<td>Compare to Week 1 F&amp;P pre-test to demonstrate progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fluency.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*WCPM = Words Correct Per Minute*
During the intervention ongoing assessments were administered. Fresh Reads were fluency and comprehension checks connected to each Reading Street story covered during the intervention. They are timed running records. Students were asked to read as much of the article as they could in 1 minute while the teacher recorded errors, omissions, and self corrections. Fresh reads were administered 6 times during the study to chart progress over time.

Reading Street selection and end of unit tests were administered during the intervention. This assessment tested students’ understanding of the vocabulary and comprehension by making connections and inferences about the story. The selection assessments consisted of multiple-choice questions on vocabulary (number of questions varies depending on the number of vocabulary words presented for each story.), story comprehension (number of questions varies depending on the number of vocabulary questions on each test.), and three short answer comprehension questions, for a total of twenty questions per selection assessment. These were administered at the end of each story covered. The end of unit assessment consisted of two reading passages each with eleven comprehension questions, ten vocabulary questions and eight grammar questions (all questions on the test were multiple choice). The end of unit assessment was administered when unit one was complete; it constituted the first posttest of reading comprehension. The end of story and end of unit tests were used to chart students’ ongoing progress as well. This test mirrors the Reading Street baseline in that it had vocabulary questions, and reading passages followed by multiple-choice questions.

The students were given the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment as a reading post-test. The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment was administered using
stories different than those used in the pre test. This test was administered the last week of the intervention. The post test was used to gauge if any and to what extent progress had been made. All performance and outcome assessments were administered according to their published guidelines (Pearson Education, Inc, 2006; Heinemann, 2009).

**Participant Observation**

As a participant observer, the teacher researcher conducted observations of students. The teacher researcher observed the study participants for the following behaviors: following instructions, participating in discussions and activities, and working productively in their groups. The observations took place throughout the 8-week intervention. Observations consisted of observing students during the interventions for engagement and quality of participation; in addition, the teacher researcher reflected on the intervention sessions for each of the four study participants.

**Engagement.** Engagement and student social satisfaction assessments each were assessed using instrument, centered on the quality of student participation and their perspectives. The engagement instrument—(see appendix A) was a participant observation checklist that the teacher checked off during and directly after activities. This instrument asked if students participated in warm up, the activity, and the game.

As a measure of the quality of participation, if individual students participated a check was placed; if they did not participate an x was placed; and if they participated part of the time or not full out, a dash was placed. The instrument also asked if the student was engaged with others, or the instructor, and if the student was disruptive or reluctant. This instrument was used to demonstrate the level and quality of participation of each student and to later compare engagement level to the level of progress each student experienced. Level and quality of
engagement was based on the number of checks verses dashes and x’s. Level and quality of engagement was compared to student progress on testing to gauge the effect of engagement on learning.

**Social satisfaction.** The student social satisfaction instrument (see appendix B) was a student interview that was conducted following the post test. The interview was used to give students an opportunity to reflect on their experience of the theater-infused curriculum. They were also able to discuss any benefits they received from the curriculum or insufficiencies that were experienced in the curriculum. The interview format was one on one with the teacher researcher, during the school day. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. The interviews assessed the students’ experience during the intervention, how they feel they were impacted academically (impact on reading comprehension and fluency), and socially (impact on connections to peers and teacher researcher), and whether they would like to participate in the same curriculum again or do it differently (see appendix B).

**Teacher fidelity.** Teacher fidelity was evaluated using journaling (see appendix C). Journaling occurred during the planning period after each theatre-infused lesson, or after dismissal if there was no planning period that day. The purpose of the journaling was to record the teacher’s perspective; on how the lesson had gone, identify what students should have gained from the lesson, and reflect on adjustments for future lessons in areas such as; group size and make up, modeling and practice time, and difficulty of activity.

These instruments in totality were used to gather the data used to answer the research question of this study. The fidelity of the study was dependent upon proper implementation of the assessment instruments and observations.
Procedures

In preparation for the study, and prior to the beginning of the school year, the teacher researcher designed the theatre-infused curriculum around the English Language Arts and Social Studies themes for Boston Public Schools 5th grade. The literature and Social Studies themes were aligned and the theatre exercises were modeled from those themes (See Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Reading Street/Young Nation Theme Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E/LA Themes</th>
<th>Social Studies</th>
<th>Months Implemented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1 Meeting Challenges</td>
<td>Americans &amp; Our Environment</td>
<td>Sept/Oct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2 Doing the Right Thing</td>
<td>Culture West and East</td>
<td>Oct/Nov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3 Inventors &amp; Artists</td>
<td>Contact &amp; Exploration</td>
<td>Nov/Dec</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the last week of October, the teacher researcher administered the Reading Street Baseline test to the students as a group and gave the pre-test individually using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment (See Figure 3.2). These assessments were used to determine each student’s baseline fluency rate and reading comprehension level. The tests were scored and analyzed the same week to determine the level of difficulty at which the theatre-infused curriculum would begin and at what rate it would be implemented. Reading groups were formed based on the levels determined by the pre test for all students in the class; the range of reading level groups were formed for below level, on level, and advanced. In previous school years there have been two or three below level reading groups in the classroom, one or two on level reading groups, and none or one advanced reading group. For this study there were one below level reading group that included two students in the study as members, two on level reading groups
with two students in the study as members, and one advanced reading group with one student in
the study as a member. The intervention was implemented using the Reading Street materials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 28-November</td>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Reading Street Baseline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fountas and Pinnell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Benchmark Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Score &amp; Analyze Pretest to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Guide Theatre Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 25</td>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Begin Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2</td>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Administer first selection test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2</td>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Continue Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 9</td>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Continue Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Administer selection test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 16</td>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Administer Unit Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Continue Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 6-17</td>
<td>Week 6-7</td>
<td>End Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 20</td>
<td>Week 8</td>
<td>Story Test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Post Test/ Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 27</td>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Student Interviews</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the last week of November the teacher researcher began implementation of the
curriculum. Each exercise was modeled for two weeks, gradually increasing difficulty and
releasing control (See Figure 2). For the first few days after introducing a new theatre technique
the teacher modeled the routine and activities. By the third or fourth day students led the
routines and activities with the teacher researcher’s assistance. In the second week students led
the routines and activities independently, while the teacher researcher acted as a participant
and/or floated and consulted with groups. When the next theatre technique was introduced the
process began again. The goal was to help students build towards working on the four theatre
techniques (Theatre Games, Improvisation, Skit Writing, Character Analysis) taught during this
intervention independently.

Figure 3.3 Implementation Timeline for Theatre Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>How Often</th>
<th>When</th>
<th>Lead By</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theatre Games</td>
<td>4/5 times a week</td>
<td>transitions, end of school day, during</td>
<td>teacher/student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>theatre time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvisation</td>
<td>2 times a week</td>
<td>during an academic subject and theatre</td>
<td>teacher/student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skit Writing</td>
<td>2/3 times a semester</td>
<td>during an academic subject and theatre</td>
<td>teacher/student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character Analysis</td>
<td>2/3 times a semester</td>
<td>during an academic subject and theatre</td>
<td>teacher/student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implementation
The intervention integrated the Reading Street and social studies themes shown in Figure 1 and the theatre techniques learned through theatre games (cooperation, following directions, memory, and peer relations), improvisation (subject matter situations acted out with or without dialogue, props and minimal costuming and set), skit writing (student creating short skits about subject matter), and character analysis activities (development of deductive, inferential and analytical skills).

Theatre games. Theatre games are a part of the warm up process for beginning or ending a rehearsal. Games are generally associated with play but can be vital opportunities for learning. According to Warren, “Memory, concentration, reflectivity, anticipation of consequences and problem-solving can be developed through drama games” (1996, p. 50). The development of the previously mentioned skills can contribute to the development of a readiness to work on reading comprehension. Some games that can be linked to skills needed in reading comprehension are described in Table 3.3.
Table 3.3 Theatre Games and Their Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Zip, Zap, Zop</strong></td>
<td>The group stands in a circle. The player who starts points across the circle to another player, makes eye contact, and says, ‘Zip’. The receiving player points to another person, makes eye contact, and says, ‘Zap’. The new receiving player points across the circle and says, ‘Zop’. The game continues with the words passed in this order. This can also be played as an elimination game (i.e., if receiver speaks incorrectly, he/she is out of the game) (p. 69).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Twizzle</strong></td>
<td>The group walks in a circle while one person outside the circle calls orders that the group must collectively follow. If one fails to follow the orders he/she is eliminated. The game starts with the caller calling one order at a time. As the game goes on the caller calls 3 to 5 orders at once that must be followed in sequence. The caller has five orders at his/her disposal: sizzle (waving both hands in the center of the circle), twizzle (making a 360 degree turn while jumping in the air), turn (a 180 degree turn), stop, and go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Going on a trip</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story Telling I</strong></td>
<td>With players in a circle, the facilitator calls out the title for a story. The players in the circle tell that story, with each player saying one word at a time as the story travels around the circle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story Telling II</strong></td>
<td>Proceed as above, only a player tells the story up to a certain point and passes it to the player to the right, who continues the story until passing it again.” (p. 69).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These games are intended to develop memory and force quick recall and reflectivity. Memory and quick recall are invaluable skills for reading comprehension: “children must come to readily identify words and encode their relevant meaning into the mental representation that they are constructing . . . comprehension cannot be successful without the identification of words and the retrieval of their meanings” (Landi, Oakhill, & Perfetti, 2004, p. 230). When reading for meaning students must be able to hold multiple pieces of information in working memory at one time and relate them to one another.

When playing “going on a trip” students must hold the context of the trip, recall all the items taken by those who had a turn before them, in sequential order, and relate the item they
take to the trip to the last item added. Through this game students begin to train their brains to hold and relate many pieces of information. Once mastered, the game’s challenge can be increased by having students create a story about their trip.

The physically active games Zip, Zap, Zop and Twizzle develop concentration, anticipation of consequences, and problem solving. When students are reading challenging material, especially non-fiction such as science and social studies, these skills are critical. These materials have expository text structures, which are more unfamiliar and challenging for students to grasp. When students read expository text and approach a challenging word or passage they need to be able to anticipate the challenge ahead and concentrate in order to focus on words that may help them understand the unknown word or passage. This is both problem anticipation and problem solving: “skills and strategies that good readers use include . . . making predictions about what will happen, checking them as they go along, and revising and evaluating them as needed” (Boardman et al, 2007, p. 3). Readers struggling with comprehension need to be explicitly taught this skill. The use of Zip, Zap, Zop and Twizzle gives students an opportunity to practice and hone these skills outside the context of reading. As students master the games a connecting dialogue can be developed to help them think about how to anticipate and solve problems that arise when reading with the skills they have developed in the games. This was done in this study by having students work in small groups to read a challenging passage. Students stand in a circle as they complete the game. They listen and follow along as the first reader reads; that person stops after two sentences and passes to someone randomly selected in the group. That new person explains what has been read and then starts up the reading where it was left off, reading the next two sentences. The last person should be able to explain the entire
passage. Other students must be focused in order to confirm that each explanation is accurate and glean meaning from the next sentences that are read.

These games build on each other in terms of difficulty and level of concentration and background knowledge needed to participate successfully. As students become comfortable with the games more challenging theatre techniques, such as improvisation, can be introduced.

**Improvisation.** One area of theatre that relates directly to students’ improving their reading comprehension is improvisation. Improvisation can be defined as “make(ing) up the words in the dialogue and the action while playing out a scene. No lines to learn, no planned movement just you (and your fellow actors) going wherever your imagination leads you” (Tanner, 2004, p. 32).

When students learn to use the techniques of theatre their attitude toward themselves and their work improves. They become invested in the work. “Pupils in arts-intensive settings were also strong in their abilities to express thoughts and ideas, exercise their imaginations and take risks in learning. In addition, they were described by their teachers as more cooperative and willing to display their learning publicly” (Ables, Burton, & Horowitz, 1999, p. 36). Students with moderate special needs struggle with personal perceptions of their ability and work, which can cause them to disinvest in their studies if successes are few and far between. “Motivation and persistence affect performance in all academic areas and are clearly related to students developing a sense of failure and frustration in the presence of academic tasks” (Baker et al, 2001, p 287). The confidence that can be developed during curriculum driven improvisation can help students reinvest in their learning.

Students need to read carefully in order to use what they learn in theatre to create effective scenes. As they begin to develop confidence in their work and themselves they learn
comprehension and analytical skills. These skills can be transferred to any academic reading. “Teachers of non-arts subjects, such as science, math, and language, frequently speak of what they see as the extended effects of arts learning on learning in the disciplines. They comment on abilities such as thinking creatively and flexibly, imagining ideas and problems from different perspectives, taking imaginative leaps, and layering one thought upon another as part of a process of problem solving.” (Ables, Burton, & Horowitz, 1999, p. 36).

Students with moderate special needs often struggle with comprehending text from only reading because, “when children do not view connected text as meaningful, they do not consider context . . . they may lose sight of the importance of textual meaning and reading becomes nothing more than a rote exercise” (McKenna & Stahl, 2003, p. 11). Learning to create scenes and watching scenes that peers have created helps students begin to visualize what they have read as well as adjust their thinking when they have been confused or misunderstood something they read. As they begin to master improvisation students can be directed to visualize and begin to “see” the events in the text as they read.

Improvisation can be used in two ways in the classroom. Introducing established improvisation activities such as “Giving Scene Events: Two players are asked to improvise a scene and are given a relationship, conflict, location, and time of day. They can also be given an ‘event’. By adding an event, the scene takes on added urgency [because the players are forced to focus on the details of the event and create scenes that convey those events]. Using Three Words The players divide into pairs, the facilitator calls out three words or phrases (e.g., tree, rice, and school books). Player A has to tell Player B a story using all three words. After the first round, the facilitator calls out three more words, and it is Player B’s turn to tell a story, and so on” (Family Health International/YouthNet, 2005, pp. 71-72). The second way is by using
curriculum-driven improvisation activities. Playing “Giving Scene Events” using events from the literature being read or the social studies lesson, or doing ‘Three Words” using the vocabulary words the class is studying are examples.

The role of the teacher is to act as facilitator rather than imparter of knowledge. The teacher is there to help students uncover meaning and understanding by helping them build a community within the classroom, so that the students feel safe expressing themselves, trying and failing, and trying again. “The teacher has many roles, such as: assisting the actor in the effective expression and communication of what is in her or his imagination” (Family Health International/YouthNet, 2005, p. 11). The teacher is also responsible for setting the goals which will focus each improvisation lesson, as “the educational objectives should be clearly identified prior to working on a scene. . . well-focused, educational objectives serve as guides for creating scenes” (p. 11). By doing so they help students to focus on what they are trying to learn and stick to the task at hand. “The student also plays a role in a classroom where theatre techniques are used. They are expected to be active learners, but must make attempts at tapping into their imaginations and the imaginations of their peers in order to uncover personal meanings and understanding . . . keeping the scene moving towards the agreed-upon ending looking for ways to do the unexpected rather than the predictable . . . letting the focus be on the story and message rather than comedy” (p. 11).

**Character analysis.** Strategies are procedures for performing skills that are taught to help students perform parts of a larger operation (Pressley, 1991). Having an understanding of when to use strategies helps students master the larger operation (Flavel, 1996). Reading comprehension is a large operation of which character analysis is a small part. It is important for students to decipher the internal and external traits and “mental characteristics, spiritual qualities,
emotional characteristics, posture, movement and gestures, mannerism, voice, and mode of
dress” (Tanner, 2004, p. 92-93) that make up a character in a story. It is also important for them
to understand the ways to analyze a character’s “motivation, obstacles, conflicts, outcomes, and
stakes” (p. 92). Knowing a character’s traits and ways to analyze them can help students
understand why characters act or react the way they do in a story, recognize what connects
characters, and identify the underlying themes and plot of a story. “To be an effective onstage
presence you will need to know hundreds of things about your character . . . the more you know
about the character, the more textured your performance will be” (p. 91).

This strategy can be used in conjunction with improvisation. When students have a scene
they are working on for improvisation, creating a character analysis for each character can add
richness to their improvisation and make the ideas their scenes are conveying more vivid. This
can result in a clearer and more lasting understanding of the literature being presented.

**Skit writing.** “The most traditional method of testing comprehension is by asking
questions” (McKenna & Stahl, 2003, p.167). The traditional ways of assessing reading
comprehension include retellings, open response questions, key questions, and multiple choice
questions. Skit writing presents an alternative assessment. Skit writing can bring together the
accuracy expected of a retelling and the interpretive nature of open response questions. Skit
writing requires a thorough understanding of the text read, as well as an ability to make
inferences about what is unsaid. Students can be directed to write a skit in response to an open
response question. Because the question is answered through the characters’ dialogue all the
minutiae of essay writing are stripped away and the student must be very explicit in responding
to the question.
Skit writing can also be used to connect themes across the curriculum. There are many connections between literature and social studies. Having students write and perform skits that connect these two subjects helps to deepen students’ understanding of the curriculum.

These techniques were infused into the culture of the classroom, allowing students to be comfortable with the new experience because they encounter the theatre techniques throughout the day. These encounters were the key to this intervention; the teacher researcher has found continual exposure to the theatre experience helps students to integrate the techniques into their learning lexicon, so that they were readily available for them to draw on.

After the first two weeks the teacher researcher continued facilitating all exercises but allowed students more control; students assisted and eventually ran activities, while working closely with groups and individuals to move them towards mastery. From the beginning of the study, during, and the period directly following theatre activities, the teacher researcher tracked the implementation, student participation, and levels of participation using the participant observation checklist.

**Data Collection**

Prior to the beginning of the study the teacher researcher conducted a typical classroom, assigning seats, distributing and organizing material, administering and scoring Reading Street baseline assessment and the Fountas and Pinnell benchmark assessments, and facilitating academic and community building get to know you activities. The baseline test was administered to the whole class, and the benchmark assessment was administered one on one with the teacher researcher. The timer was set for one minute and the student read orally while the teacher listened and wrote down miscues, errors and self-corrections. When the minute was up the
student was prompted to finish reading the story orally and then responded to the reading comprehension questions.

During the second week of the study the intervention began. The teacher researcher began by introducing a theatre game during a transition, the students were taught the theatre game zip, zap, zop as a transition game between the end of a lesson and lining up for lunch. The teacher planned two improvisation lessons during the week. The first was an introduction to improvisation so that the students learned the expectations for this activity. Once improvisation was introduced, the students developed short improvisation pieces to show what the classroom rules look like in action. The second lesson was directly related to the reading being done in class. Students were broken into groups and given scenarios from the reading *Frindle* which the class read in its entity; they developed and performed the improvisations for their class.

Engagement and reflective data were taken from the first day of the intervention, until the last day of the intervention. The teacher researcher used the engagement instrument to track participation during the theatre games and improvisation activities (see Appendix A). Following each of the activities the teacher researcher reflected on the activities using the teacher researcher journal (see Appendix C).

During the third week of the study character analysis was introduced. Students were led in a discussion of a character in *Frindle*. Students were asked to brainstorm on paper, and then volunteered to verbally and physically present personality traits of the character. Once the brainstorm list was developed the teacher researcher had pairs pick two traits to find evidence of in the text. The teacher researcher demonstrated what evidence from the text looks like by showing the students a statement in the text that supports one of the traits on the list. After students found and wrote down their evidence the class discussed at least one of the traits each
group looked up. Next, pairs were asked to show what the trait looks like with some type of movement. The teacher researcher began by showing a movement for the trait she found evidence for earlier. The engagement instrument, and reflections were completed in conjunction with each weekly lesson.

When the first reading story (*Frindle*) was completed the academic progress data began to be collected. Thus at the end of the third week of the study, students were given a story test. The assessments were administered to the entire class simultaneously. The students had a 40-minute reading block in which to complete the test. These assessments were given at the end of each of the eight stories the class read during the study. Performances on the selection test scores were tracked to determine student progress over time.

During the fourth week of the study skit writing was introduced as a part of writing workshop. The teacher researcher led the group in exploring what is involved in a skit by reading and labeling a published skit. The teacher researcher then led the group in writing a skit about a scene from the week’s story, *Thunder Rose*. During a separate lesson the class broke into groups to write skits for different scenes. The scenes were rehearsed and performed for the class and then the following week, rehearsed again and performed for the classes 2nd grade reading buddies.

Throughout the study students learned new theatre games every two weeks and worked on mastering playing them without adult supervision. The students also continued to develop their use of improvisation and skit writing by developing character analysis outlines, adding props and costumes, and stage directions. Each month the class performed skits they had written based on the stories they read in Reading Street or a topic in social studies for one another and visiting classes.
When the first unit of Reading Street was completed, a unit test was given. The test was administered to the entire class simultaneously. Unit tests are untimed but it is suggested that students be given a 60-minute reading block to complete the test. If students are not done at this time, additional time will be provided, not to exceed the day on which the test is given. Although the intervention period was not concluded, Reading Street guidelines called for this test to be administered immediately following the final Reading Street story in the unit, and so it was. This assessment served as a posttest and was compared to each student’s score on the baseline test to determine progress.

When the theatre arts intervention culminated, students completed their last story and story test for the intervention period. The students also did a class performance of skits they combined based on *Ch’I Lin Purse*, one of the stories they had worked on during the intervention. The skits showcased what the students learned about reading comprehension and theatre arts. Their written skits were scored by the teacher researcher to determine if they had captured the theme and message of the story. The performances were scored using the participation observation checklist (see appendix A). Students were expected to perform with their group and to be attentive when other groups were performing. They received a check, x, or dash to indicate their level of participation.

At the end of the research period, the teacher researcher administered a posttest using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment. The test was administered in the same way it was done in the pre assessment phase: one on one with the teacher researcher. The timer was set for one minute and the student read orally while the teacher listened and wrote down miscues, errors, and self-corrections. When the minute was up the student was prompted to finish reading the story orally and then responded to the reading comprehension questions. The scoring of the
assessment took place the same week. Finally, the last of the data was collected through student interviews to glean how students viewed their experiences during the intervention.

The assessments, observations, and interviews were examined to gage the impact the intervention had on reading comprehension and fluency. It was expected that greater participation quality level would translate into improvements in reading comprehension and fluency, as evidenced by an increase in the assessment scores. Conversely, lower participation levels were expected to result in low or stagnant assessment scores.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted consistent with the multiple case study design used during the study. Multiple case study design allows the researcher an opportunity to look at several students representing a range of ability levels within the classroom. The analysis of these cases resulted in a stronger perspective about the varied student’s experiences in reading comprehension as a result of participation in the intervention. Additionally, the multiple case study design, or collective case study, investigates several cases to gain insight into a central phenomenon (Yin, 2003), which in this study would be generalized insights about students with moderate disabilities.

Prior to analysis the teacher researcher transcribed all interviews, observations, and journal entries. The files were password protected in an unmarked folder on the researcher’s laptop. The laptop was kept in a locked closet when not in use.

The reading assessment data and participation data were analyzed by thematic analysis case by case, followed by a cross case analysis. Thematic analysis was used because it “provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p 5).
Thematic analysis “is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clark, 2006, p 6). The six phases to conducting thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clark are:

1. Familiarizing yourself with data
   a. Transcribing of verbal data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing Themes
5. Defining and Naming Themes
6. Producing the Report

These phases were used to move systematically through the data.

The teacher researcher reviewed and transcribed all data (typed all written notes and tally sheets; created line plots and graphs for tallied data) to familiarize herself with the data collected over the preceding 9-week intervention. The reading assessment scores were plotted on separate line graphs for each of the group of study participants in order to see and compare scores. The line graphs were then transferred to separate bar graphs for each study participant individually for ease of reporting. The engagement instruments were plotted on line graphs. The initial tallies helped to focus the teacher researcher’s review of the data, which lead to indicators of the structure of the data, routines (warm up, activities, games).

The line graphs were transferred to bar graphs so that they can be compared to the reading assessment bar graphs. The initial codes that emerged from the comparison were typed into a separate file; this resulted in an initial 31 codes, such as routine, warm up, activities, and games, engagement, participation, and from the graphed scores, assessment outcomes, reading comprehension, and fluency. The teacher researcher’s journals and the student interviews were
typed and coded using the codes assigned to the reading assessment and engagement instrument comparisons; this coding resulted in 44 additional codes, for a total of 75 codes.

After the data were transcribed the teacher researcher reviewed all data and developed a coding system. The teacher researcher typed and printed all codes and cut the list of codes into stripes. The teacher researcher began grouping stripes that connected to one another. This review of the coding system revealed relationships between codes, leading to a re-categorizing of codes which reduced the total number to 24 codes.

A separate case was produced for each of the three students. Each student case study was organized beginning with a rich description of the student. A general description of the student’s demographic information was given, followed by a description of the student’s strengths, weaknesses, likes, and dislikes, because the goal is to “engage [my] reader in a conversation about [each] case. This means that [I] need to make us care about [each student]. Who is [my student] as a person?” (Yin, 2004, p. 17).

A description of each student’s results on the reading pre, during, and post assessments was written and changes in reading comprehension or fluency levels described based on those results. Next a description of the student’s participation data was written and described based on participation levels, and how the level of participation connected to the reading assessment results. The reading assessment and participation data were compared in each individual case to identify categories that emerged. The emerged categories were defined and named. The data was coded starting with the comparisons of the reading assessments and the engagement instruments. The codes were reviewed to find patterns. “These patterns, which should reflect something interesting and related to the research question, are made up of recurring items in the data . . . You collect similar patterns into categories” (Boudah, 2011, p. 230). Codes that fall
along a continuum (patterns) were placed into categories, and then a criterion for inclusion in each category was determined. The new set of codes fell into seven initial categories: 

*Assessment Outcomes, Routine, Warm-up, Activities, Rehearsal, Performances, and Personal Perspectives.*

The 24 codes that emerge from the initial coding were applied to the teacher researcher journals and student interviews. These codes are “both natural and deliberate – natural because there are mostly repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in human affairs, and deliberate because one of the coder’s primary goals is to find these repetitive patterns of action and consistencies in human affairs as documented in the data” (Saldana, 2008, p. 5).

Finally conclusions about each student’s progress relevant to the intervention were stated and the categories were combined into themes, “Once you have described your categories completely . . . you can begin to integrate the categories into themes that respond directly to the research question” (Boudah, 2011, p. 231). The seven previously mentioned categories were narrowed into the following four conceptual categories: *Assessment Outcomes (Pre, During, Post), Routine/Activities (Warm up, Visualizations, Improvisation, Theatre Games, Character Analysis, Skit Writing, Fresh Reads, and Choral Reads), Performances (Rehearsals, Spooky Skits, Museum Curators, Turkey Song, Poem Paul Revere, Wings for Kings) and Personal Perspective.*

Yin (2003) “maintains that data analysis consists of "examining, categorizing, tabulating, testing, or otherwise recombining both quantitative and qualitative evidence to address the initial propositions of a study” (p.109). The teacher researcher examined the data to discover what was occurring for students when they were taught reading comprehension and fluency using theatre arts; the flexibility of thematic analysis lends itself to this type of discovery. Using thematic
analysis the data analysis and themes from each case were examined side by side to determine
where cases overlapped and where they diverged. Through this final stage the four conceptual
categories were reduced to three. *Performance* was collapsed into *Routine/Activity* because
performances are also activities and are a part of the theatre routine. The final three conceptual
categories were *Assessment, Routines/Activities, and Personal Perspective*.

**Thematic Analysis**

All emergent themes were used for the cross case analysis. Evidence for themes that run
across cases as well as outliers were reported on. The researcher looked for generalizations
across cases to determine the overall results of the intervention on the participants.
Generalizations were also used to make conclusions about teaching reading comprehension and
fluency using theatre techniques to all students with moderate special needs.

The teacher researcher recognized that the themes supported by the data, illuminated
changes over time for the study participants. The teacher researcher chose to present the themes
through the following lenses: all study participants, teacher researcher, and four selected students
who represent the High, Medium and Low performance categories and one outlier that
represented students with multiple challenges.

The findings chapters, Chapter five and six are organized using the aforementioned
lenses. Beginning with all study participants to show how the student performance categories
were established. The participant section is followed by the teacher researcher perspective which
gives a bird’s eye view into the experience of implementing and modifying the curriculum in the
classroom, rationale for decisions made and the challenges and successes of the study. The
findings chapters are concluded with an examination of the four study representatives. The
students’ development or stagnation in their reading comprehension and fluency are discussed, as well as their personal perspectives on the theatre experience in the classroom.

**Validation strategies.** This study’s credibility was achieved through triangulation and rich description. “Triangulation may be across data sources or within data sources . . . an attempt to get more than one perspective on a situation” (Boudah, 2011, p 79). The data was triangulated using the different forms of data collection (reading assessments, observations, reflections, and interviews). As previously mentioned, rich description was achieved by providing a detailed description of each participant; additionally each participant was discussed in connection to each emergent theme. Triangulation and rich description was used to develop the collective cases that emanates from the three individual cases.
Chapter 4

Case Studies: The Actors

Findings Description of Classroom Environments and Class Demographics

The culture of a classroom is like the development of a performance which is made up of the students as the actors, teacher(s) as the director, and curriculum as the script coming together. The teacher sets the tone, but over time the personalities, interests, and, needs of the students shift and morph the atmosphere until routines and traditions settle in.

Theatre techniques are additional strategies that students must understand, adjust to and accept in order for the teacher’s agenda to move forward. Theatre infused curriculum requires that students not be passive learners, but learners who are actively creating their own learning experiences. Through this effort it is hoped that they will become lifelong learners.

Case Studies

In Chapter three the curriculum, classroom environment, and basic demographic information of the students are provided; these make up the behind the scenes development of the performance; the setting of the stage.

Regular Education Students: Descriptions

In this chapter general information will be given for the regular education students. Descriptions of the regular education students help provide a fuller picture of the classroom environment. The study participants will be described in individual case studies. Descriptions of students in the study help set the stage for explaining the conditions of the study.

Part 1 family history. There are 11/17 general education students in the class. Three of those seventeen are English as a Second Language (ESL), students. The home language of all three is Spanish, and all of them are bilingual. All ESL students in this class are male and have
siblings. One student lives with both parents and three siblings, one with his mom and one sibling, and one with his grandmother. There are three other students (one female and two males) who are of Latino descent, but do not have an ESL label. The female is an only child who lives with her mother; one male is an only child and lives with both parents; and one male lives with both parents and his one sibling) There are four African-American students (one female and three males). The female is an only child who lives with her mother and grandmother; one male is an only child who lives with his mother; and one male lives with his parents and one sibling. The seventeenth student is a Caucasian female who lives with her mother and one sibling.

**Part 2 physical & motor development.** The majority of the regular education students are of average height and weight. With exception of one African-American male who is taller than his peers and one Latino male and the one Caucasian female who are heavier than their peers. Out of the 11 regular education students, one of them struggles with fine motor development. His pencil grasp and letter formations are very juvenile for a fifth grade student. He types many of his assignments. The other students have age appropriate motor development

**Part 3 cognition, vocabulary, and reasoning.** Three of the regular education students are below grade level. Three are above grade level and the remaining five are on grade level. This group enjoys discussions and works well together. They enjoy reading and reading projects. Math is harder for this group but they have learned to return to their notes to help them when they struggle with a concept that has been taught.

**Part 4 emotional development/part 5 social development.** The majority of the regular education students take school work seriously. The male students struggle with maintaining focus, but take redirection well. The Caucasian female is the most distracted of the group and requires more redirection than any other student in the class. All of the students are motivated by
healthy competitions such as being in the top three to finish morning work, or having the first
table quiet and ready for transitions, lunch or dismissal. Three of the eleven regular education
students see counselors once a week.

**Part 6 reading/theatre descriptors/part 7 assessment progress.** The regular education
students participated fully in the theatre intervention activities. These students received the same
lessons, assignments, and guidance from the teacher researcher. The regular education students
embraced the curriculum and fully participated.

The regular education students experience progress on reading comprehension scores and
reading levels. They had a collective average improvement from the Baseline pre-test (70.09%) to
the Unit post-test (73%), of 2.91 percentage points. All 11 regular education students moved
up on average 1 reading level on the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment.

**Study Participants Case Studies**

In this chapter the study participants are profiled. Each case study provides demographic,
family, developmental, and educational background information.

Each case study examines the student’s individual progress based on the ongoing
assessments. Fresh Reads are short articles in the range of the students’ reading level. The
students read them to determine reading rate. Selection tests were used to track reading
comprehension for the Reading Street Stories read during the study. A total of three selection
tests were administered. The Fountas & Pinnell reading test assess words read correctly per
minute (WCPM), a fluency as well as reading level measure. This test is completed one-on-one;
the student reads a fiction or non-fiction text while the teacher researcher records miscues. To
test reading comprehension progress students were given the Reading Street baseline test as a
pre-test and the Reading Street Unit 1 test as a post test.
Case Study 1: D1

Part 1 family history. D1 is a 12 year-old African male who was born in 2002 in Eritrea, Africa. He has two older siblings. D1 lives with his mother and father and siblings. Tigrigna is spoken in the home, but D1 speaks only English. Being that the home is bi-lingual D1 is labeled as an ESL student and has an English Language Development level of 4.

D1 reads as needed. If he does not see the importance in an assignment or class, he resists participating. For example, D1 is an excellent swimmer and is on the swim team, but often forgets or refuses to swim during swim specialty. He argues that the grade does not count and he already knows how to swim. Only after his father was upset at the low grade in the class bringing his average down did D1 relent and come prepared for class.

Part 2 physical & motor development. D1 is of average height and underweight for his age. He is labeled as a L3 (Learning Disability with a neurological and communication impairment) on his Individual Education Plan. D1 is very athletic. He likes playing basketball, tag, and kickball during recess. He enjoys socializing with peers and is well liked by the boys in the classroom. He has excellent penmanship but struggles with organization and impulse control. When instructions are given D1 often has no idea what he has been asked to do.

D1 struggles with keeping track of assignments and completing work. He often misplaces materials and resists implementing the established organization protocols for the classroom, (placing materials in the appropriate places in his AVID binder, and writing assignments in his agenda) although he sees time after time that he is missing materials that others have.

Part 3 cognition, vocabulary, reasoning. D1 is a strong reader who struggles with retaining what he has read. He has low to average reading comprehension skills and average
math skills. His reading and verbal vocabulary are strong, he decodes well but struggles with recall and responding to reading comprehension questions. In math he understands the standard algorithm for all operations (addition, multiplication, subtraction, division). He makes adjustments quickly when mistakes are pointed out to him, but struggles with finding his own mistakes. Word problems also pose a problem for him.

**Part 4 emotional development.** D1 sees himself as superior to others. He does not always recognize his role in situations. He is distracted and often misses directions and expects someone to tell him what he should be doing. He wants papers replaced that he has lost. He also blames his mother for losing materials he has left home.

When associating with adults and peers he often makes demands instead of requests and that ruffles the feathers of those around him. Adults and students complain about the way he speaks to them. Slowly, he is getting the message that manners get him further than demands.

**Part 5 social development.** D1 is a serious student once he begins working. He gets along well with students when working in groups. When D1 is distracted students become upset with him. During lunch and recess he is very popular and gets along with his peers. If he feels an infraction has been committed by a peer he is quick to anger and argue. Once his temper cools he can usual listen to reason, but often needs an adult to intervene before he can calm down.

**Part 6 reading/theatre descriptors.** D1 was tested using the Fountas and Pinnell reading level test at the beginning of the study. His reading vocabulary was level Q, which correlates to beginning 4th grade. His reading rate was 60.6 words per minute with a fluency level of 1. His instructional reading level was Q, beginning of 4th grade and his Independent reading level was P, end of year 3rd grade level. D1 responded to the oral reading comprehension questions by returning to the text to look for the answer.
D1 had some prior experience with theatre when he was younger and went to a school in a suburban town. When the study began D1 tried hard to participate, but was easily distracted, which kept him slightly behind the group during theatre games and activities. D1 participated in all activities, but found it challenging to focus.

While rehearsing for the first full class production, D1 was engaged and took direction well. When given nuances to play he felt self conscious about trying them, but when he got positive feedback during dress rehearsal he became more confident. D1 learned his lines and took his role seriously. Overtime D1 became the student who reminded others to focus and pay attention.

**Part 7 assessment progress.** D1’s pre-test scores were in the middle of the study participant’s scores. His scores placed him below, but approaching grade level. Figure 4.1 -4.5 show the changes in D1’s reading comprehension and fluency during the nine week intervention, and pre to post. What the scores do not show are the changes in D1. He moved from being nonchalant and scattered to being fully invested in the theatre activities and his class work.

Figure 4.1 D1’s Fresh Reads Progress
D1 has a competitive spirit and during the fresh reads time he wanted to know what his peers in his reading group scored on Words Correct Per Minute. He was motivated to read with more fluency than his peers. D1’s Fresh Reads scores varied from week to week. His score never dipped below 100 WCPM. On his Fountas and Pinnell pre-test his reading rate was 60.6 WCPM. D1’s score stayed above this rate throughout the study.

Before each selection test the class would play the game “Story Telling” and retell the story, or do improvisations of scenes from the story, followed by the class guessing which scene was presented. D1 was invested in both of these activities, wanting things to go just right during his improvisation scenes and anticipated his turn during story telling. He also wanted to supply parts of the story when others were slow to come up with their part. D1’s selection test scores varied throughout the study, beginning with a level 3 score of 85%, his scores dropped on each subsequent selection test ending with a high level 2 score of 70%.

![Figure 4.2 D1’s Selection Test Progress](image)

D1’s reading rate, as assessed on the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment, increased from 60.6 WCPM to 122.5 WCPM. D1’s reading rate is approaching 140 WCPM,
which is the goal for end of 5th grade. Additionally his reading level increase by three reading levels from Independent P–S and Instructional Q-T.

Table 4.1 D1’s Fountas and Pinnell Reading Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Rate</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WCPM(^a)</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>122.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Words correct per minute.

Table 4.2 D1’s Pre and Post Fountas and Pinnell Reading Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Level</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Instruct</td>
<td>Instruct</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D1 showed progress from the pre to the post test. D1’s beginning score was a low level 2 score of 56.86% and his end score was a high level 2 score of 68.75%. His reading comprehension score increased by 11.89 percentage points.

Figure 4.3 D1’s Reading Comprehension Progress
Over the course of the study D1 became more focused. He was motivated by the theatre activities. His reading comprehension, reading level and reading rate increased.

**Case Study 2: J1**

**Part 1 family history.** J1 is an 11 year-old African-American male who was born in 2003 in Boston, Massachusetts. He has two siblings, an older sister and a younger sister. J1 is in foster care and has lived with the same family since he was two years old. In his foster home he lives with his foster mother and foster grandfather. Only his younger sister lives with his birth mother. J1 has contact with his birth family, on weekends, occasionally.

J1 desires to be with his birth family more; he exhibits behavior outbursts at home and in school, when he returns from visits. By court order he is not allowed to live with his birth family because of past issues with the family.

J1 is an avid reader who enjoys myths and legends. Reading is a form of escape for him. He also enjoys socializing with his peers. He recently began playing basketball.

**Part 2 physical & motor development.** J1 is of average height and weight. He is coded as a Q3 on his Individual Education Plan. He struggles with neatness, organization, and impulse control.
J1 struggles with keeping his handwriting legible. He has to be redirected to erase and rewrite before he produces a readable assignment. Similarly, he often misplaces materials and fails to implement the established organization protocols for the classroom. When redirected he corrects these mistakes.

**Part 3 cognition, vocabulary, reasoning.** J1 is an average student with strong decoding skills, low to average reading comprehension skills and average math skills. He has a strong reading and verbal vocabulary. He reads quickly and sometimes misses details. Similarly, in math he wants to guess the answer and has to be sent back to follow the steps that lead to the correct answer. His instincts are good but he needs to develop strategies that help him focus on the details.

**Part 4 emotional development.** J1 has ADHD and takes medication to manage his hyperactivity and temper. He takes one medication before school and one during school, at noon. J1 is generally in a good mood, bordering on silly.

He struggles with taking responsibility for his actions. He often talks back to adults and denies his actions when called on infractions. With consistency he has adjusted his behavior with his classroom teacher, but has serious negative interactions with staff outside the classroom.

Through a uniform response to J1’s infractions throughout the school community, in the after school program, and at home, J1 has settled down and has less trouble accepting consequences, and infractions have decreased, but not disappeared.

**Part 5 social development.** He carries himself in a slightly immature manner with his peers, playing practical jokes, chasing, and hitting. His peers enjoy his easy-going ways but become annoyed when he disturbs their work. Additionally, J1 has an issue with taking things that do not belong to him and then lashing out when confronted. This also strains his
friendships. His peers make it clear to him that he is losing their trust. Although J1’s instances of stealing in the classroom deceased, he has not resisted the temptation to steal in the wider community or at home. He is getting a consistent message about trust, relationships, and community that has worked in the classroom, in hopes that he will be able to generalize resisting this destructive behavior in the wider community. For J1 this preoccupation with hoarding items distracts him from his work and keeps him disconnected from those important to him, both having an adverse effect on his school experience.

**Part 6 reading/theatre descriptors.** J1 was tested using the Fountas and Pinnell reading level test at the beginning of the study. His reading vocabulary was level S, which correlates to beginning 5th grade. His reading rate was 104.5 words per minute with a fluency level of 3. His instructional reading level was U and his Independent reading level was T, both mid -year 5th grade levels. J1 was able to respond to the oral reading comprehension questions with general information but his answers were vague and lacked detail.

J1 had minimal prior experience with theatre when the study began. His initial interactions reflected his typical playful demeanor. J1 participated in all activities, but was most focused during theatre games. When working in small groups he found it challenging to stay on task, although he showed enthusiasm for the creative process. He wanted to present his groups improves but found it challenging to control his body when presenting.

During rehearsals for the first full class production it was clear J1 was struggling with self-control. He had to be given an additional duty as light technician to settle him down during scenes he was not involved in.

**Part 7 assessment progress.** J1’s pre-test scores were high for the study participant’s scores. His scores placed him on grade level. Figures 4.4-4.6 shows the changes in J1’s reading
performance pre to post-test scores. They also showed some changes in his level of impulse control and his approach to work. Over the course of the study J1 settled into the classroom community and decreased his time off task, he began to value the work he was doing and increased his effort.

J1’s Fresh reads showed varying levels of progress, mostly upward with one slight dip on week four. During the week four fresh read session J1 was being observed by a behavior specialist and the office mistakenly announced over the classroom speaker that the specialist was coming specifically to observe him. J1 was more wound up than usual and displayed behaviors that had been absent since week two. Weeks five and six his progress returned and continued to increase. Through out the study J1 continued to have a WCPM score higher than his pre-test score and in weeks five and six his WCPM score went above 200 WCPM.

Figure 4.4 J1’s Fresh Reads Progress

J1 presents as a strong reader, he has a broad vocabulary and knows most words in 5th grade reading material automatically. He struggled with answering comprehension questions, often retelling verses answering the question that was asked. J1’s selection test scores
varied, beginning with a solid level 3 score of 80%. His score went up approaching a Level 4 score of 85% and then dropped back to a Level 2 score of 70%.

**Figure 4.5 J1’s Selection Test Progress**

![J1’s Selection Test Progress](image)

J1’s Fountas and Pinnell reading rate began at 104.5 WCPM, by the end of the study his reading rate increased to 177.33 WCPM. He stayed solidly above 140 WCPM, the end of fifth grade goal, throughout the study. Additionally J1 increased his independent reading level from T to U and his instructional reading level from U to V.

**Table 4.3 J1’s Pre and Post Fountas and Pinnell Reading Rate**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Rate</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCPM(^a)</td>
<td>104.5</td>
<td>177.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Words correct per minute.
Table 4.4 J1’s Pre and Post Fountas and Pinnell Reading Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Level</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent T</td>
<td></td>
<td>Independent I</td>
<td></td>
<td>Instruct V</td>
<td>Instruct I</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U</td>
<td></td>
<td>I</td>
<td></td>
<td>U</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

J1 showed a significant decrease in his reading comprehension score. His baseline score was a level 3 score of 84.31%, and decreased to a level 3 score of 78.12%. The decrease was approximately 6.19 percentage points.

J1 struggled with managing his behavior and focus. He started off with the highest reading comprehension score, reading rate, and reading level. On the post test his reading comprehension score decreased and his reading level and rate increased.
Case Study 3: J2


J2’s family speaks English at home. J2’s mother is concerned about her anxiety worsening as she goes to middle school and the possibility of her being bullied because she is quiet and somewhat withdrawn.

Although J2 is quiet she can be social, even playful with peers and adults she is comfortable with. She also enjoys unstructured art time.

Part 2 physical & motor development. J2 is taller than her peers and is of average weight. She is coded as a B3 (Emotional Impairment) on her Individual Education Plan. She has solid motor skills but struggles with organizing her work on paper. Otherwise J2 is fairly organized and finds materials when she needs them.

Part 3 cognitive, vocabulary, and reasoning. J2 is an average reader with average decoding skills, low to average reading comprehension skills and low math skills. She will skip over words she does not know or use substitutions based on the first letter, and has to be redirected to sound them out. J2 has to be prompted to take the directions apart to understand each step before proceeding. If she is not prompted she will sit not knowing what to do and not seek help. J2 also struggles with math. She understands how to follow the steps for the four operations (addition, multiplication, subtraction, and division) but forgets the steps and makes simple mistakes in computation. She is becoming more comfortable with seeking help from the teacher researcher.
Over the course of the study J2 has become very comfortable with the teacher researcher. She seeks help right away and has learned to ask clarifying questions rather than sitting without knowing what to do. Her responses to comprehension questions have transitioned from her copying the book to her using her own words. Similarly, she is making fewer mistakes in math and can self-correct with little direction, although division continues to be a challenge.

**Part 4 emotional development.** J2 is a quiet and withdrawn student who has multiple anxiety triggers. She has made progress in the last few years. She has gone from being unable to go to specialty class because her anxiety was so high when she had to leave her homeroom, to only resisting occasionally. She carries herself in a mature away around most of her responsibilities, but can revert to avoidance when assignments feel too overwhelming to her or she is sent back to make corrections on work she feels is complete.

**Part 5 social development.** J2 enjoys social time with her friends. She has two close friends in the class whom she leans on for assistance with her work. This connection can limit J2’s need to think for herself so the time that this group is allowed to work together has been limited. J2 does not like to stay in the cafeteria for lunch or go outside for recess. In addition to these spaces acting as anxiety triggers for her she has severe asthma and cannot be outside if it is too cold or hot.

**Part 6 reading/theatre descriptors.** J2 was tested using the Fountas and Pinnell reading level test at the beginning of the study. Her reading vocabulary was level O which correlates to mid-year 3rd grade. Her reading rate was 42.6 words per minute with a fluency level of 1. Her instructional reading level is P, end of year 3rd grade and her Independent reading level is O, a mid-year 3rd grade level. In order to answer the oral reading comprehension questions J2 needed to return to the text.
J2 had no prior experience with theatre at the beginning of the study. J2 was watchful and withdrawn during warm ups and games. J2 also mostly took non-speaking roles during small group improvisation; she also gravitated to her usual group verses working with anyone outside her comfort zone.

When we rehearsed for the first full class production J2 volunteered for very small roles and was a part of the ASM (assistant stage management) crew. When a main character was absent on a day we had performances J2 stepped in and read all her parts and mad all the cues on time for both roles. As the weeks went by she became withdrawn during theatre activities during class. She reported to her counselor that she no longer wanted to participate in them.

**Part 7 assessment progress.** J2’s pre-test scores were medium to low for the study participants’ scores. Her scores placed her well below grade level. Figure 4.7-4.9 shows the changes in J2’s during and pre to post-test scores. J2 also showed some changes in her anxiety level and her ability to work independently. J2 pushed past her feelings of anxiety when she could and performed with her peers. J2 also began to take owner ship for her work when working in groups and independently.
J2’s fresh reads scores went up and down then steadily increased from week four to six. All of J2’s fresh reads scores had WCPM higher than 100. She increased from a reading rate of 42.6 WCPM on her pre-test. She became comfortable with her group and asserted herself when her group needed to settle down and focus on the reading.

J2’s selection test scores also varied, increasing then decreasing from test 1-3. J2 struggled with vocabulary and reading comprehension questions. She had a habit of copying the text in response to any question and struggled with inferring answers that were not explicitly stated in the text or that required her to synthesize information from two places in the text.
J2’s Fountas and Pinnell independent reading rate began very low with a score of 42.6 WCPM. When testing one-on-one her reading was very choppy and labored. J2’s independent reading rate increased to 99.6 WCPM on the post-test. Her reading rate is still slightly low but has more than doubled from the pre-test. Additionally, J2 increased her independent reading level by two reading levels from O-Q and her instructional reading level from P-R. During the post-test, J2 read smoothly and at a steady rate. She still labored over words that challenged her, but was able to make a choice on pronunciation and kept reading, thus decreasing her choppy reading to almost zero.
Table 4.5 J2’s Pre and Post Fountas and Pinnell Reading Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Rate</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WCPM<sup>a</sup> 42.6 99.6

<sup>a</sup>Words correct per minute.

Table 4.6 J2’s Pre and Post Fountas and Pinnell Reading Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Level</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Q</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

J2’s reading comprehension score increased by approximately 9.62 percentage points. She scored a level 1 score of 37.25% on the pre-test and increased to a high level 1 score of 46.87%. Although she remained at a level one her score increased.

Figure 4.9 J2’s Reading Comprehension Progress
J1 worked hard to get past her anxiety and participate in Theatre activities. J2 tried all the theatre techniques that were asked of her. Her reading comprehension, reading level and reading rate increased.
Case Study 4: M1

**Part 1 family history.** M1 is a 10 year-old Hispanic male born in 2003 in Boston, Massachusetts. He has one younger sibling, a brother. M1 lives with his father, mother and sibling.

M1’s family speaks Spanish at home. According to his mother, M1 is exposed to some Spanish at home but does not speak Spanish. M1’s mother is concerned about his retention of information. His father and mother both report having had trouble with reading and understanding directions when in school and worry that M1 has the same struggles.

M1 is bouncy and polite. He enjoys school and is eager to greet everyone. He always has a story for his teacher in the morning and is eager to please. M1 is serious about his work but is also very playful. He has one table mate that he socializes with the most and it interferes with both of their productivity. M1 also enjoys playing outside with peers and his little brother, he also enjoys math, computer, and swimming.

**Part 2 physical & motor development.** M1 is below average height and slightly overweight. He is coded as a L3 (Specific Learning Disability and Communication Impairment) on his Individual Education Plan. He has solid motor skills and good penmanship, neat although slightly large.

M1 struggles with keeping up with his assignments. He spends a great deal of time looking for material. He often has to restart assignments because he has misplaced them. When he works in a notebook his work is organized, but he struggles when given work that he needs to place in the correct folder to work independently.

**Part 3 cognition, vocabulary, and reasoning.** M1 reads in chunks and is working on how to connect the chunks to make meaning. He has low to average reading comprehension
skills and above average math skills for his grade. M1 struggles with completing comprehension work connected to his reading. M1 feels more comfortable with math; he understands how to follow the steps for the four operations (addition, multiplication, subtraction, and division) and has a very high accuracy rate for computations. He sometimes struggles with word problems.

**Part 4 emotional development.** M1 is friendly and even-tempered. Yet, he acts younger than his age. He is able to take responsibility for his actions and find solutions to most of his problems on his own. He is self-motivated and learns from his mistakes.

**Part 5 social development.** M1 enjoys social interactions with peers but sometimes is social when he should be working. He also enjoys peer interactions during recess he is active and likes to play tag and kick ball. He rarely has disputes with other students, and when he does he finds an adult to help him deal with the situation. M1 is kind and generous with his peers.

**Part 6 reading/theatre descriptors.** M1 was tested using the Fountas and Pinnell reading level test at the beginning of the study. His reading vocabulary was level O, which correlates to mid-year 3rd grade. His reading rate was 74 words per minute with a fluency level of 2. His instructional reading level is N, beginning 3rd grade and his Independent reading level is M, an end of year 2nd grade level. Some of M1’s responses to the oral reading comprehension questions were accurate.

At the beginning of the study M1 had no prior experience with theatre. M2 was interested and engaged with the theatre activities. M1 always participated but was not always able to recall stories during theatre games. He always worked in small groups to create improvisations and contributed to the productivity of his group.
When we rehearsed for the first full class production M1 understood the seriousness it took to make the production a success. He learned his lines and was an excellent member of the ensemble.

**Part 7 assessment progress** M1’s pre-test scores were the lowest for the study participants’ scores. His scores placed him well below grade level. Figure 4.10-4.12 shows the changes in M1’s reading achievement during and pre to post intervention. M1 was comfortable in the classroom community although he remained quiet. He often talked with the teacher researcher one on one.

M1’s Fresh Reads scores went up and down slightly from week 2-4. All three weeks were between 120 and 140 WCPM. M1 was absent during the fresh reads session week 5, and his WCPM score decreased to 60 week 6.

![Figure 4.10 M1’s Fresh Reads Progress](image)

M1’s selection test scores dipped and rose over the course of the study. He began with a Level 2 score of 55% and dropped to a Level 1 score of 30%. On the third test he made a significant increase in his score to 72.5%.
M1’s reading rate began at 74 WCPM and increased to 111.77 WCPM by the post-test. When he did the post-test it was clear that his prosody had improved. His reading was more animated and rhythmic. Additionally, M1’s independent reading level increased by two levels, from M-O, and his instructional reading level increased from N-P.

Table 4.7 M1’s Pre and Post Fountas and Pinnell Reading Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Rate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WCPM&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>111.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Words correct per minute.

Table 4.8 M1’s Pre and Post Fountas and Pinnell Reading Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Levels</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
M1’s reading comprehension score increased by approximately 26.48 percentage points. M1’s beginning score on the Reading Street baseline test was 23.52%. On the Unit test, at the end of the study, his reading comprehension score increased to 50%.

Figure 4.12 M1’s Reading Comprehension Progress

M1 was quiet but fully engaged in the theatre activities. M1’s reading rate and reading level increased. His comprehension score increased more than any other study participant.

Summary

“All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages” (As You Like It, Jaques in Act II Scene VII, William Shakespeare).

The study participants were the players upon the stage of their classroom. They created their performances a-new each day. There were differences among the players, different family make ups, home languages, emotional and maturity levels, and disability categories. As well, there were similarities among the players, they all participated to the best of their abilities, and
they all experienced growth in some academic area. The study participants are in the second age of their lives (whining schoolboy/girl) and are deserving of a foundation that will enhance their experience in the remaining five ages.
Chapter 5

Teacher Perspective: The Director, Rehearsal and Performance Process

The beginning of this study was the culmination of a long journey. Throughout my career as an educator I used theatre as a way to create purpose and motivation for my students with special needs, many of whom had given up hope that they were capable of being successful in school. Through my work with the population of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities in Boston Public Schools I taught many students who struggled academically because of, or in addition to their emotional and behavioral struggles. The use of performance gave them a purpose for reading. The pride they felt in performing motivated them to want to perform again and led to more reading and discussions to bring the stories to life. As I took this journey with my students year after year I noticed that their reading levels increased from September to June. While addressing their emotional and behavioral difficulties, I was also crafting teaching methods and curricula that my students responded to. My gut feeling was that the teaching methods were helping them improve their reading; what I was missing was documented evidence.

Through my work as a doctoral student I came to understand how I could prove or disprove my theory. This chapter will discuss my teacher researcher experience, as both implementer of the curriculum and observer. In chapter four the study participants were introduced. In this chapter the teacher researcher will describe the curriculum, as well as the role of both teacher researcher and study participants in the rehearsal and performance process.

As a teacher researcher, I maintained a journal throughout all phases of the theatre curriculum intervention and my research. Through analysis of my teacher researcher’s journal categories of Assessments Warm-up, Activities, Rehearsal, Performances, and student experience
and teacher researcher experience emerged that correlated with those that emerged from analysis of the engagement measures and reading assessment data. Seven initial categories were identified: Assessment Outcomes, Routine, Warm-up, Activities, Rehearsal, Performances, and Personal Perspectives. Those were later narrowed to the following conceptual categories: Assessment Outcomes (Pre, During, Post), Routine/Activities (Warm up, Visualizations, Improvisation, Theatre Games, Character Analysis, Skit Writing, Fresh Reads, and Choral Reads, Performances (Rehearsals, Spooky Skits, Museum Curators, Turkey Song, Poem Paul Revere, Wings for Kings) ) and Personal Perspective.

Repeating content from my teacher researcher journal, I present descriptions of each stage of the research process, including rich descriptions of the students’ experiences and my perceptions of their reactions to the activities. This information reveals my perspectives on the case study students presented in chapter four and their experiences. It serves a similar purpose to the background of the teacher researcher presented in chapter three, namely to inform the reader of my positionality, which is relevant to how I analyzed the data and drew conclusion. The descriptions of each stage of the study are presented in the order the events occurred, however the student selection process is described first so the reader may understand why those four students are described in detail, even though selection was not the first activity in the research.

**Study Participant Selection**

The two pre-assessment scores and my observations of the students with special needs during this first theatre time helped me to narrow my focus to four of the six students, M1, J1, J2, and D1. They represented a range of scores from level 1 (23.52% correct), between Level 2-3 (37.25%, 56.86% correct), and Level 4 (84.31% correct) on the Reading Street Benchmark Assessment; reading level M (2nd grade), Level O (3rd grade), Level P (4th grade), and reading
level T (5th grade). During theatre time they represent the range from reluctant to enthused, to participating.

A1 and M2 were both in the level 1 range. M2 was struggling with his mother’s illness and it overshadowed his school life as well. He spent a great deal of time with his counselor and was not consistently present in the classroom. A1 was missing school and or tardy and quit often, as well. This left M1 as the most consistently present of the students that scored in the low range. Therefore he was selected to represent that group.

Table 5.1 Pre Assessment Scores for all IEP Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Reading Street (Comprehension)</th>
<th>Fountas and Pinnell Baseline</th>
<th>Reading Level</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Reading Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>52.94%</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Pre-test Independent</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>56.86%</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J1</td>
<td>84.31%</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>104.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J2</td>
<td>37.25%</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1</td>
<td>23.52%</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2</td>
<td>8.33%</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pre-Assessment Outcomes

At the beginning of the study students were given assessments. These assessments helped to determine how students should be grouped. The assessment scores also informed the
teacher researcher at what level the curriculum should be implemented based on where most of the students fell, below grade level, on grade level, or above grade level.

**Reading Street Baseline, Fountas and Pinnell.** The study began with the administration of the Reading Street Baseline test and the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessments. The administration of these assessments allowed me to determine my students’ reading levels and observe their reading process at the start of the study. During the whole class assessment using Reading Street all the students were focused and seemed intent on doing their best. Students’ with special needs reading scores on the Reading Street Baseline test ranged from Level1-8.33% correct to Level 4-84.31% correct; their reading levels on the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment ranged from reading level L (2nd grade) to reading level T (5th grade). One of the IEP students, M2 finished far ahead of the rest and it was clear that he had merely bubbled in the answers. I asked M2 to go back and check his work. M2 was reluctant to do so and I watched as he looked back over the test without reading anything, just turning the pages. I hoped the one on one test would reveal what was going on with him. The results of the Fountas and Pinnell Assessment placed M2 at a reading level three years below grade level, which helped me understand why he behaved as he did during the whole class assessment. This was the first indicator that I would have to have a wide range of assignments, groupings and modifications in order to accommodate his needs.

**Routine/Activities**

**Warm up.** On the first day the class did theatre activities, I taught the class the theatre time routine. The full routine was done once a week and consisted of a warm up (physical and vocal), an activity, and a theatre game. The first day the warm up was stretching and the vocal warm up was the articulation chant “red leather, yellow leather.” The students laughed during
the warm up and some felt self-conscious but everyone tried to participate. The activity was the name game, where the students would say their name and do a movement that represented something about themselves. The group repeated their name and movement. The object of the activity is to help everyone learn all the group members’ names (It’s really for the teacher researcher as many of the students know each other from being in school together since K2) and something of each others’ personality through the movements. Interestingly all five girls did some type of dance movement and the eleven boys did a sports move or mimicked playing a video game.

M2 was reluctant each time his turn came around, and acted surprised that he needed to go. He tried to place himself on the outskirts of the group and stepped back from the circle, but stayed in place. Although he appeared reluctant he took his turn each time. M2 seemed to be showing me his learning style; he seemed interested in learning, but embarrassed to show his interested. He seemed to be protecting his reputation from fourth grade as “Cool” and non-cooperative.

J2 also had a hard time with this activity; she positioned herself close to me in the circle and was one of the last to have a turn. She couldn’t think of a movement and needed me to help her come up with one. This was an indicator that J2’s anxiety disorder would hinder her during theatre activities.

D1 participated but was often distracted. He was distracted, not by his peers, but by something internal. I was not sure if it was that he was thinking or just staring blankly. He seemed to come to life when the group repeated each person’s name and movement, and to go blank again if there was any wait time for the next person to think about what they wanted their movement to be. D1 also had to be prompted that it was his turn. D1 was a mystery at this
point. It was unclear if he was uninterested or unable to focus. More time observing him was needed to determine what was needed to help him attend to the task at hand.

M1 was very young for his age and had an innocent air about him. He was quiet and soft spoken. He readily participated and followed along with the group. A1 is even quieter than M1 and he blends in, and even gets a bit lost in the big group. When it was A1’s turn he did his movement but it was hard to hear him say his name. It was important to help both these students see that what they had to share was valuable and important and that their contributions were wanted.

J1 was the most active of all the students with special needs and of all the students in the classroom. His excitement about participating was clear as he tried to engage students in looking at his movement choice before it was his turn. His enthusiasm was also distracting for students who are easily distracted, and the mother hens of the group kept asking him to “stooop”. J1 was going to need to work on determining what he wanted out of a situation: centering, focus and self-control.

**Theatre game.** The game was Zip, Zap, Zop. It took a few tries for the group to understand how to play, which is very typical in my experience. The students had the most trouble with the unfamiliar words.

It took about an hour to complete the routine, which consisted of the warm-up, activity, and the theatre game. Most students were excited to start doing theatre in the classroom. They talked about having come to my classroom when they were in lower grades to see my class put on a show for their classes or having done theatre with me during our schools February academy. I was pleased with the groups’ general stamina. Most of the students stayed focused on the activities during the routine. I noted that some extra prompting or pre-warning was necessary for
M2 and J2, D1, M1, and J1 needed redirection in different forms, and that A1 and M1 where shy but willing.

All in all, the initial introduction of the class into the use of theatre techniques in the class resulted in full participation with some reluctance. The first routine is too early to determine the direction the group will go in as the students are still becoming familiar with the new theatre techniques.

**Improvisation.** I was careful not to limit the students’ theatre activities to theatre time. During the reading of *Frindel* by Andrew Clements the students were introduced to improvisation and character analysis. Half way through the book the students were introduced to improvisation. I picked a scene from the book and began acting it out for the class, after an entrance and a few lines I invited someone else to join me in the scene. After two students joined in and we completed the action in the scene, other students guessed the scene we presented. None of the students being observed participated in the scene but D1 and M1 took a turn at guessing the scene. D1 was distracted and forgot what he wanted to say when he was called up. M1 knew what he wanted to say but struggled to get his response out, but eventually found the words.

Next the students were put into groups according to the table where they sat and were given index cards with scenes on them. The students were instructed to act out the scene on the card using what they remembered from the story. Each group met for a few minutes; then everyone reconvened in the theatre area. D1 was actively involved in his group’s planning and execution of their improvisations. J2 let the others in her group make all the decisions and followed their lead during the improvisation. M1 talked with his group about the plan but shied
away from participating in the improvisation. He stood in the stage area with them but had to be repeatedly reminded of what his role was in the action.

Through observing these early interactions I could see that the case study students would require varying levels of support. D1 and J1 needed help staying on task but both were clearly interested in the theatre activities. J2 was not willing to assert herself but was not completely closed off to participation. M1 would require longer wait time and some prompting notes during improvisation.

When the class finished *Frindle* the group developed a character sketch of the main character, Nick. The students then made a character sketch of the antagonist Ms Granger. This activity did not reveal the same stamina in the study participants as the first theatre time. The study participants found it challenging to return to the text to look for character traits. D1 and J2 worked quickly but copied from the book and going back and putting things into their own words took a lot of scaffolding. M1 was slow to begin the assignment and needed the directions broken down for him before he was able to begin. J1 was distracted and took extra time to complete the assignment, his writing was illegible and he had to rewrite the assignment, which he was reluctant to do.

**Visualization Thunder Rose.** During partner reading we read *Thunder Rose* by Jerdine Nolen, after a discussion on tall tales and exaggerations. The students took turns reading the picture book and writing down the instances of exaggerations they noticed. The next day we talked about visualization. I ask all to close their eyes and think about the story. Students were then instructed to call out what they could see in their mind when they thought of the story using one or two words. As they called out I wrote the words or phrases on the board. D1 and J1 easily called out what they saw. J1’s comments were well connected to the story but often he
went on tangents and had to be reminded to stick to 1 or 2 words. D1’s comments were somewhat connected, but not directly tied to the story. J2 was silent the entire time, never calling out. M1 called out twice with appropriate comments, said quietly. The whole class did a good job, not talking over one another and not peeking.

Next, each table was given an object that represented something from the story (Table 1 rope, Table 2 tall grass, Table 3 straw hat, Table 4 a picture of lighting). The students had their reading notebooks on the tables and were instructed to create two column notes on their paper. One side was for descriptions of the objects, and the other side for story events that they visualize when they see the object. The teacher researcher rotated the objects through the tables until each table had time to observe and write about each object. Following the rotations we shared out the story visualizations; then played the game story telling. We went around the room and retold the story of Thunder Rose.

Each of the students with special needs was able to recall a portion of the story. J2 was more comfortable responding during this time, when we were at our tables and she knew her turn was coming. She also sat at the table with all girls and they enabled her and provided her with answers. I noted that when we moved tables she needed to be away from the other girls and have some leadership role to help build her confidence. M1 still needed wait time when it was his turn and D1 had to try three times before he added the right event in the right sequence to the story because he wasn’t paying attention as it approached his turn. J1 was aware it was his turn and what he added fit with the sequence of the story. J1 had to be stopped because he wanted to tell the whole story and had to be reminded to respect that others wanted to share also.
The group did a fair job with the retelling. In the future I planned to practice the game telling a story without having previously read a story to help the students practice letting the story flow as well as knowing how much to tell before passing on to the next person.

**Character analysis poem: Life Doesn’t Frighten Me At All.** As part of a Theatre Routine session we worked on the poem *Life Doesn’t Frighten Me At All* by Maya Angelou. The poem is a great way to continue character analysis because it has so many characters that open up the imagination and allow the students to use prior knowledge to discuss them. For example “Bad Dogs barking Loud, Big Ghost in a cloud, Life doesn’t frighten me at all” the students discussed the characteristics of a bad dog verses a good dog, and what it meant for the ghost to be in a cloud. We also discussed what the character might be feeling when the line “life doesn’t frighten me at all” was said if the character were a boy and if the character were a girl.

Following the discussion the students were able to choose the lines of the poem they wanted to perform. I read back each pairing of lines as the poem is written in couplets joined by a refrain. D1, J1 and M1 eagerly raised their hands for the parts they wanted. By the time we had only two stanzas and one refrain remaining J2 had not raised her hand for any parts. Conveying my excitement about the project was easy and I enthusiastically invited J2 to do the last two lines before the whole class did the final refrain as a chorus. She accepted but showed no excitement. I hoped she would be able to handle her part, although small it was very important to the close of the poem. As we say in theatre, “there are no small parts only small actors”.

**Skit writing.** To go along with the poem we picked up on the theme of exaggeration and wrote some spooky skits that included exaggerations. I introduced skit writing by talking about the parts of a play that make it different from an improvisation; dialogue and stage direction. I
modeled writing a scene using dialogue and stage directions. The students copied the skit into their writing workshop note book for reference. The students picked their own topics and wrote their skits for homework. All the students with special needs wrote a skit. J2’s skit was written as a paragraph and had been copied from a book she had at home. M1 & J1 had written skits that used some dialogue but not much stage direction. Through one-on-one conferences, these issues were resolved by the end of the writing block. D1 had written a lengthy skit but it was filled with inappropriate activity and excessive violence, and we could not use it for class.

The students read their skits aloud at their tables and then voted on one skit to use to create a performance piece. The skits and the poems were intermingled and students choose parts in the skits. D1 & J1 choose a part in two skits, J2 choose a non speaking role in 1 skit, and M1 had no parts in the skit but had parts in the poem.

Performance

Rehearsal. The rehearsal process went on for several days, beginning with the class learning blocking by going over positions on the stage, upstage, downstage, center, right, left, etc. It is always interesting to watch as the students adjust from the audience left and right, to stage left and right. The students struggled with going to “places.” I explained that places meant the side of the stage where you have your first entrance and that you must be silent and still. J1 struggled with silent and still, not realizing that the curtains did not block me from knowing he was moving or hearing his voice. J2 was excellent at staying silent and still but she often did so, on the wrong side of the stage. D1 and M1 were usually on the right side of the stage but they both continued to miss their cues to enter.

During subsequent rehearsals I made a point to revisit blocking, have the students/actors highlight their blocking, and rehearse going to and staying in places. On the day of the dress
rehearsal J2 stepped up. She had no speaking parts in the skits and two lines in the last part of the poem, but on the day we did our dress rehearsal another female student, who had multiple parts and lines, was absent. J2 volunteered to play her parts. We were performing after lunch and she asked to come up at lunch time to practice her new parts. She did a great job in her new roles. The next day the student who had been absent returned, and J2 seemed disappointed to give up parts.

Performing did not become real to them until our second grade reading buddies came to see our dress rehearsal and we had a talk back. One of our reading buddies commented that it was hard to hear sometimes because the people behind the curtain were too loud. One of the reading buddies also commented that “someone said shut up when the left they were walking off.” They were referring to J1. J1 was especially struggling with being appropriate when he was not in a scene.

When the reading buddies left I asked the group what they had learned from the dress rehearsal and what we should do differently. M1 raised his hand and said “We need to be quiet when we go behind the curtains.” Others agreed and we discussed how to make that happen; be responsible for being silent yourself, remind others who are talking to stop with a non verbal signal. I asked J1 if he would help me with lighting when he wasn’t in a scene. He was happy to have this important responsibility. Following our discussion we practiced going to places and the group was able to be silent and J1 remembered to come to the back of the room to do lighting when his scenes were over. Having the job of doing lighting kept him grounded between his scenes.

**Spooky skits.** The group voted on which classes to invite to see their performance. They performed for 5 classes and did one performance for their families. The comfortableness with
performance and the confidence of the students/actors increased with each performance and talk back.

I had reminded everyone repeatedly to memorize their lines and blocking during the rehearsal process. M1 repeatedly said, “I can’t remember my lines.” He kept missing his cue as narrator of the last skit and everyone had to wait for him to before the ski could start, and when he read the lines he mispronounce words. On the day of the first full performance M1 again missed his cue. In rehearsals we had worked on covering for each other if someone went up on their lines (‘going up on your lines’ means forgetting lines, skipping lines, or missing your cue all together). When M1 did not step into his light and introduce the skit as narrator, D1, who was also in this skit, stepped into his spot and said M1’s lines word for word and the show went on. The next day M1 came to class and announced, “I know all my lines.” When we did our second performance and in all subsequent performances M1 made all cues and knew all his lines.

This marked a point of change in M1 and in the class. The class commented on the improvement in M1 and began to work harder on their parts as well. Students began to see what they could actually do. The excuse making decreased and productivity picked up. After the last talk back and during the classes debrief the students echoed each other asking when we would do another play. I assured them that would not be their last performance. The vision of the class doing theatre all year was shifting from being mine alone, from my telling them what we would do next, to the students contributing ideas on what they wanted to do next.

Days after the shows were completed J2’s counselor approached me and said that, “J2 wanted her to tell me she didn’t want to do anymore theatre.” I was caught off guard and told the counselor how well J2 had done. She agreed J2 seemed to be enjoying the work, but had changed her mind about being active. I asked if J2 wanted to be out of the study, and the
counselor said, “That’s the funny part she doesn’t want to be out of the study or out of the class. Her anxiety is just getting the best of her.” After that I noticed J2 would ask to go to the nurse when it was time for a theatre activity or if she couldn’t leave the room she would sit in a corner outside the group trying not to be seen.

**Turkey song.** Our second grade, reading buddies asked us to practice and perform a fun Thanksgiving song, “Albuquerque Turkey” with them. By this point the class was comfortable with rehearsing, and was able to help their reading buddies focus and learn the song. For the first rehearsal we went to the buddy room and learned the song. We practiced on our own in the room and divided up the verses to create groups that would sing each verse along with their reading buddies.

For the next rehearsal the reading buddies joined us in our room. Once we had the groups set up and began to rehearse the song, it was clear that in a short time our class was able to sing louder and knew the words better. This made for a good opportunity for our class to mentor the reading buddies and help them improve their performance by sharing with and modeling for them how to focus. D1 and M1 were engaged in the activity and worked well with their reading buddies. M1 was shy but showed his reading buddy the appropriate way to rehearse. J1 struggled to stay quiet when we weren’t singing. When there was any down time he would engage his reading buddy in off topic conversation, but when we began to sing again, after a reminder that he was the example, J1 was able to settle down. J2 was absent due to an asthma flare up. The teacher researcher made a note to have J1 and his reading buddy stand close to her when the group performed.

A week later we performed in the reading buddies’ classroom for a small group of parents, students, and teachers. J2 was again absent. The other students with special needs were
present and the teacher researcher made sure to position J1 near her without drawing attention to doing so. The song was quick and J1 was able to maintain his composure. The fact that the performers were decorating gingerbread cookies afterwards was motivation enough for J1 to manage his behavior on that day. D1 and M1 blended in with the rest of the group and performed the song with everyone else.

**Routine/Activity**

**Vocabulary improvisation.** During Social Studies we studied the Ancient Civilizations of the Maya, Aztec, Inca, and Anasazi. We connected social studies and reading through creation stories from each culture. Some of the vocabulary was above the reading level of much of the class. In order to help everyone access the text we did repeated readings and used a graphic organized to break the words apart and create images to bring life to the words through improvisation. Students were asked to define the words, write sentences that made the meaning clear, draw pictures that represented the meaning of the words, and come up with ways to present the words using improvisation.

After working on the vocabulary and the text as a whole group, in small groups and individually, we came back together in our theatre space and by volunteering presented the vocabulary words through improvisation. After each improvisation the students guessed which word was being acted out. M1 and D1 volunteered to present words. J1 readily and accurately guessed vocabulary words. J2 seemed to be disengaged sitting in the back of the room, but when called on randomly she was able to guess the correct word. It seems that J2 wants to appear disengaged to avoid being the center of attention, but in actuality is paying attention.

Improvisation was fast becoming a favorite for the group. They preferred it to the games and were invested in doing the work that precedes improvisation sessions. Students reminded
me when we hadn’t done improvisation for a few days, and asked for activities that they
recognized had lead to improvisation. In the past, classes had been more partial to games and
were invested in completing assignments in order to earn theatre games. This class was
motivated by Improvisation time and worked in order to get to this activity. The common factor
was motivation. As the students became more motivated they worked harder and for longer
sustained periods of time.

**Choral reading.** The study of North and South American Ancient Civilizations lead to
a short focus on folktales from cultures around the world so the students could further understand
the story structure of folktales and name the themes and lessons the folktales were teaching.
Students did choral readings for these folktales. The use of choral readings was to help students
focus on their reading rate and fluency. The students were paired up by reading level: one
stronger reader and one weaker reader. It was explained to them as being like a chorus or choir
where everyone sings a song together. For choral reading the reader who reads faster has to slow
their rate and the reader who reads slower has to increase their rate so that they are reading at the
same pace. The students were given the words accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. The class
discussed what these words mean and we took time for the students to share examples until there
was group understanding for the words. “Accuracy” was accessed the easiest as we used the
same word in our math talks. “Automaticity” was easily connected to our use of the word
efficiency in math. We talked about how picking the most efficient strategy has to become
automatic in the same way that looking at most words and knowing them has to be automatic and
if you come to a word that is unknown picking the right strategy to decode it has to be automatic.

As “prosody” was a new word for the group a different, lengthier, approach was used.
Prosody was demonstrated by the teacher researcher reading passages with prosody. Then the
group discussed what they heard, followed by students demonstrating prosody by reading a passage from a previously read story. Once the group had worked out an understanding of the word the teacher researcher gave a definition. When doing choral reading and during other times the words accuracy, automaticity, and prosody were used to increase familiarity and usability for students.

After the first choral reading session the group discussed what went well and what the challenges were. J1, who is a fast reader and has good prosody commented “My partner reads too slow.” I asked “What can he do to help things go better next time?” J1 reluctantly replied, “I can try to read slower so he can keep up.” As each person responded with a comment about their partner whether positive or negative, the teacher researcher steered them to think about what their role was in the partnership. The goal was to keep them focused on their reading verses comparing themselves to their partner.

The following day the pairs choral read the same folk tale again and planned an improvisation to share with the group. When all pairs were ready we came back together in the theatre area and presented their improvisations, one pair at a time. The other pairs served as the audience and when each scene was over guessed what the scene was about and what lesson the folktale was trying to convey. All students being observed participated in the improvisation scenes. J2 had to be given a non speaking role and the teacher researcher stood in for J2’s speaking part as she did not feel able to speak in front of the group that day. She was able to act out her part; this was an improvement from the shutdown she had experienced after our first show. J2 has struggled with anxiety for much of her school career. She was placed in an inclusion class in 2nd grade and spent most of that year in the hall. Through her consistent work
with the same counselor she became more comfortable in her school environment, although she still struggles with anxiety.

**Performance**

**Museum curators.** As a culmination to our North and South American Ancient Civilization unit, the class put together a museum to display the work, artifact recreations, and artwork the students had done. The museum was divided into four sections: Maps and Facts, Timeline and Name plaques, Poems/Ancient language stories and Food/Dolls, and Crafts and Games. The students chose classes to invite to visit the museum and practice to be curators. They took turns giving each other tours of a section of the museum.

D1, J1, and M1 readily volunteered by raising and waving their hands. J2 stayed at the back of the group and did not try the role of curator. D1 was a natural! J1 was too excited it was interesting he had a hard time taking curator on as a role, he couldn’t let go of his hyperactivity and was inappropriate during his presentation, but still managed to keep the students engaged and talked about everything in his section.

Each of the students in the study was assigned to present as curators to different classes on different days. J2 would not present on her day, two days later, after a great amount of encouragement, she was able to stand with another student while they presented. D1 and M1 were able to present to the classes they were assigned and volunteered to present to other classes when a presenter was absent. J1 had one turn as a curator, again this presented as a challenge for him behaviorally, but he was able to complete the task.

As we continued the study it was clear that J1 and J2 would need more, small controlled performances before they would be ready for a full-scale performance again. For J2 especially the performances would not be called performances, but made to blend in with everyday events.
Although the experience of theatre is a collective one, attention to individual details and needs was extremely important to the success of the production.

**Activity**

**Skit writing.** During the social studies unit the class also read many of the books in the Reading Street text book. We had the advantage of having the actual text for most of the stories, allowing the students to read the complete story verses the excerpts that are in the Reading Street Text. One such story was the Chinese folktale *Ch’I-Lin Purse* by Linda Fang. The class read this folktale using our choral reading routine. At this point the pairs were able to follow this routine without much intervention from the teacher researcher. They worked with their usual pairs and read half of the folk tale one day and discussed what they read. The next day the pairs finished the folk tale and were assigned a scene to develop an improvisation around.

As the teacher researcher walked around to facilitate the pairs work it was clear that the students were engaged and needed little redirection or support around what to do. This is one of the moments the teacher researcher works for, to see students work independently and successfully and to see them embrace their own learning. Once the pairs were ready the class came together in the theatre area and presented the improvisations. D1 and M1 are partners and they struggle a little with their improvisation, M1 not quit remembering all the things they have planned. D1 was upset because his vision was not being presented as he saw it and he kept gesturing for M1 to go here or go there. This was unusual behavior for D1 as he is usually the one who forgets what he is supposed to be doing all day long. He was so invested in the activity that he was more present than he had been since the beginning of the school year. J1 was also more settled during this activity, more invested in guessing what scene had been presented, and, when it was his turn to present his improvisation scene with his partner J1, was able to do his...
scene without being inappropriate. J1 was serious when calling on students to guess his scene and was looking for accuracy in their responses. J2 was again absent on this day.

It was clear to the teacher researcher that this was no longer a routine she needed to teach. The students owned the choral reading and improvisation routines. It was time to move them forward and have them write skits from their improvisations. During writing workshop each student was assigned a scene to write a skit about. The students were asked what needed to be included in a skit before they were sent off to begin. Many students’ hands went up, including the students with special needs. More and more, the students with special needs were blending in with the rest of the class. With so many opportunities for everyone to shine beyond paper and pencil tasks the confidence level in the room is rising and students are feeling ok struggling with work that they find challenging, verses quickly giving up by being distracted or shutting down.

D1 was able to write a more appropriate skit this time. He stayed connected to the material and found the appropriate voice for the characters, voices that conveyed the events in the folktale. For example:

Ch’I Lin Purse Skit

“Hsiang-Ling: Hi mother

Mrs. Hsueh: Oh, Hi Hsueh-Ling I have some good news.

Hsiangh-Ling: What is it mother?

Mrs. Hsueh: Okay, now that you are 16 you’ll be getting married.

Hsiang-Ling: Yes, Thank you mother.

Narrator: During a few day Mrs. Hsueh ordered a ch’i lin purse for her daughter’s wedding, and the servent will have to be bringing it back . . .” (D1’s Writing Workshop Notebook).
M1 & J1 wrote short skits but both had dialogue and stage directions, where as the first time they wrote skits they wrote paragraphs despite the instructions and examples they had been given. J2 was in school on the day we began writing and had read the story during choral reading. J2 was able to write her skit without copying every word from the text; most of her writing was original, for example “Ch'I Lin Purse Skit “Narrator: I am delighted to see you get married even though I will miss you terribly” (J2’s Writing Workshop Notebook). J2 gave this line to the narrator, it would be more appropriate as a line for the mother, Mrs. Hsueh, but this was an improvement from how J2 usually responded to literature. She had cultivated a habit of copying books word for word for all her responses and struggled with writing original thoughts.

**During Intervention Assessment Outcomes**

**Fresh reads.** The students were introduced to fresh reads as a way to check on their fluency development that they practiced during choral reading and performance rehearsals. Students understood that they were not competing with each other, but looking to improve their reading rate. Reading rate was explained as how well they read material, without mistakes, for a certain amount of time. Each week, the class broke up into reading groups, and chose partners within the group. The group leader passed out the fresh read stories and partners decided who would read first and who would listen first. The teacher researcher set the timer for one minute and all the readers began simultaneously, and read at a volume only the listener can hear. The listener followed along and marked where the reader stopped after one minute. After everyone read, the teacher researcher recorded the number of words read for each student. The students tried to improve their reading rate each time. We used the terms *efficient* and *accurate* in discussing how to pick a strategy to solve a math problem. So we transferred those terms to our conversations about reading rate. The familiar terms helped students to understand that when
they come to a word that they need to decode they need to have strategies and they need to choose the most efficient strategy to help them read the word quickly and correctly.

**Story test.** A story test was given at the end of each story. Preceding each test we reviewed the story by playing the game telling a story where one person starts the story and each additional person adds on to the story until they reach the end.

**Performance**

**Poem: Paul Revere.** When the class came to the poem *Midnight Ride of Paul Revere* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in the Reading Street text book, each student was assigned a stanza to read. The class gathered at the rug in the theatre area and each person read their stanza. This was followed by a discussion of the poem. This class enjoyed discussions everyone wanted to share and had some analogy they could make to help them understand the text. D1 knew that the war in the poem was either the Civil War or the Revolutionary War. The class discussed how we could tell the difference using the text and what we knew about the wars. Someone pointed out what it said in the second stanza “If the British march by land . . .” The class knew that the Revolutionary War was fought against the British so we concluded it was the Revolutionary War. The discussion continued in this way until we had a beginning understanding of the poem. M1 was absent on this day and J2 stayed to the back of the group and was not assigned a stanza. When J2 stayed outside of the group it was a sign that her anxiety was preventing her from participating. During times like that the teacher researcher found it better to wait until a later time to help J2 become a part of the performance.

The students were sent home to read their stanza to three people at home and to write down what their stanza was about. The repeated reading served as a practice for the challenging language in the poem. Writing down what they understood about their stanza helped the students
and the teacher researcher check the students’ comprehension. The students’ writings became
the basis for the next day’s discussion of the poem, because they had written their thoughts down
they didn’t have to feel put on the spot during the discussion and were ready with at least one
contribution to the discussion. From hearing what students had written the teacher researcher
could determine who had clear understanding and who needed help. For example M1’s comment
was clear about what the language meant, but contributed it to the wrong person “In page 239
Paul felt fearless. ‘By the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread, to the belfry overhead. . .” (M1’s
Reading Notebook). Through the discussion, the teacher researcher was able to clarify for M1
that the character was acting fearlessly, but that it wasn’t Paul Revere, it was his friend who was
to put up the warning signal for how the British were traveling.

The class gathered again and everyone presented their understanding of their stanza and
we built and clarified our comprehension of the poem as we went. Then, we went around and
read the poem again. M1 was in school that day and the teacher researcher split the last stanza,
which she read in his absence, with J2. The teacher made no mention of any plan to perform the
poem and J2 read when her turn came around.

The students chose four or five words to emphasize in their reading and did a turn and
talk to explain the words they had selected and why they had chosen them. Then the pairs
practiced reading their stanzas using emphasis. We set the chairs up for a staged reading and
practiced with each student standing when they read their stanza. The readings were getting
better each time, and all the students with special needs were able to read their stanza fluently.
Later that day we performed the poem for our reading buddies. The teacher researcher was
careful to keep the chairs in place after the rehearsal and to rehearse close to the time that the
reading buddies were to arrive in hopes that this would make the performance seem like another
read through and ease J2’s anxiety and limit J1’s behavior. This plan had the desired effect and both read their stanza without incident.

The teacher of the reading buddy classroom commented on how fluent the students’ reading was. She had several of the students when they were in second grade, and she was pleased to hear how well they read. Her class had gone on a field trip to the Paul Revere House earlier in the year and many of the students made comments about connections between the trip and the poem.

**Routine/Activity**

**Wings for the King table reads.** *Wings for the King* by Anne Sroda, was the last reading done during the study. It was a short two act play. The students were able to show case how much they had learned while working on this play. On the first day we worked on the play we did table reads. The students were divided into three groups. Each group had enough people so that everyone had a part to read. The groups were told to choose parts and read the play, including the stage directions. All three groups completed their table read without any redirection from the teacher researcher. Following the table reads the students were asked to name the theme of the play. The students were able to accurately determine that the theme was traveling or flying through reading books.

The students’ homework assignment was to pick a part they wanted to audition for and review the page of the script they wanted to use for their audition. After working with the script a few more days in class, the students were broken up into groups again for a second table read and review of the assigned vocabulary; this was followed by the story test. During the first and second table reads J2 took a part and read when her turn came around. M1, J1, D1 and other students mentioned the parts that they wanted to audition for, but J2 was silent on this matter.
The teacher researcher anticipated that J2 would struggle with participating in auditions, despite her compliance during table reads.

On the day of auditions the class gathered in the theatre area with their chairs set up as an audience. J2 stayed at her table and had to be called over. She sat in the back away from the group. The teacher researcher informed the class that they could audition for as many parts as they want, each character was called and students raised their hands if they wanted to audition for that part. As the list was filling up, the teacher researcher tried to help J2 choose a part she is willing to audition for. She keeps her head down and refuses all the parts offered to her. At this point the teacher researcher decided it was best not to push J2 any further as her anxiety was clear.

Once the list was otherwise complete the teacher researcher explained that when the student’s name was called she/he was to let the teacher researcher know which page they would be reading from. The student would read or recite if they had memorized the part they were auditioning for and the teacher researcher would do all other parts on the page. The students were judged on volume, memorization, and prosody. The tally marks were used to remind the teacher researcher how each student did when it was time to assign roles. D1 auditioned for almost all parts, J1 and M1 auditioned for two parts each, and J2 kept her head down throughout the auditions.

Following the auditions the teacher researcher decided to have two casts. One cast would act out the play one day and the other cast would act as their crew, and vise versa on the following day. The teacher also developed a non-speaking role for J2 in case she reached a point again where she felt she was able to participate. Once rehearsals began and J2 was put into the first scene and given the option to pretend to play the fanfare on a horn or announce the kings
contest, and she chose to do the announcement. The teacher researcher feed her the lines and J2 rehearsed them each time the cast went over the first scene. The teacher researcher wrote J2 into several other scenes and she accepted the parts. It is unclear, but it seems that the audition process was the cause of anxiety, but given the option to perform, J2 chose to perform.

**Post Assessment Outcomes**

**Unit Test.** The timing of the post assessments was during preparations for BPS mid-term exams. The format of the Unit Test is similar to that of the mid-term exam: multiple choice and open response questions. The Unit Test was used as a practice test for the mid-term. All the students took the test seriously and worked on it consistently. For this research study, and to inform the teacher researcher as a classroom teacher this test was compared to the Reading Street Baseline test given at the beginning of the study.

**Fountas and Pinnell.** The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessments were given to the students one on one during a research period in the library. This gave the students taking the assessment space to read aloud to the teacher researcher without being overheard. It created a more personal and comfortable environment for the students. The assessments were scored after the reader left the table and before the next student was called over. All students, including the students with special needs, increased their reading level. The study participants pre and post assessment scores were as follows: M1’s pre reading level M (2nd grade) post reading level O (3rd grade); J2’s pre reading level O (3rd grade) post reading level Q (4th grade), D1’s pre reading level P (4th grade) post reading level S (5th grade), and J1’s pre reading level T (5th grade) post reading level U (end of 5th grade).
Table 5.2 Pre and Post Fountas and Pinnell Reading Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Pre-Test Independent</th>
<th>Post Test Independent</th>
<th>Growth Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>P 4th gr.</td>
<td>S 5th gr.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J1</td>
<td>T 5th gr.</td>
<td>U 5th gr.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J2</td>
<td>O 3rd gr.</td>
<td>Q 4th gr.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1</td>
<td>M 2nd gr.</td>
<td>O 3rd gr.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The average for the whole class, excluding the study participants was

**Interviews.** The interviews marked the culmination of the study. Each student in the study came up to the classroom after getting their lunch and was interviewed individually. Each interview took about 15 or 20 minutes. The teacher researcher was able to interview two students per day and finished the interviews on the second day.

None of the students were shy with the teacher researcher during the interview and asked for questions to be repeated if they did not understand the first time. They took their time and thought about their answers before answering. The students knew the interviews meant the study was ending, but were happy that we would continue to use theatre in the classroom. Surprisingly, J2 was also pleased to know that we would continue our theatre work. From the interviews it was clear that the study participants believed the theatre techniques helped improve their reading. The study participants made direct connects to the areas of reading the intervention was expected to develop, reading rate, reading level, and reading comprehension. All study participants were able to name things that they would like to stay the same about the theatre work the class did.

The study participants went through many phases of learning the curriculum. They progressed from learners exploring new roles to experience performers owning the curriculum.
Along the way there were breakdowns and breakthroughs for all of them, which the teacher researcher had to work in conjunction with the class to navigate for the best possible outcome. Nonetheless the study is not the end, rather it is the beginning of the next journey to be dissected and analyzed to lay the foundation for improved theatre curriculum implementation process the next time.
Chapter 6

Results: The Playbill

Case studies of the students with special needs are presented in Chapter Four to describe their individual characteristics, them as students, and their interactions with the theatre infused curriculum and assessment activities of this study. Reading across the cases gives a picture of the diversity among the study participants. Chapter Five describes the enactment of the curriculum and observations of study participants in the theatre infused curriculum and assessment activities from the teacher researcher’s perspective. Changes over time are discussed for the four study participants. The teacher researcher’s field journal was the primary data source for Chapter 5.

Summary of Chapter 5

Although all of the students showed growth in one aspect of the study or another, D1 was the most invested and showed the most growth over time. D1 increased three reading levels and developed self-regulation skills that improved his ability to focus. J1 demonstrated advancements in his self-regulation and comprehension; this was evidenced by a decrease in redirections and improvements in the quality of his responses to comprehension questions. J2 showed the second greatest amount of growth overtime. Although she faced a major setback due to her anxiety, J2 went up two reading levels and found her voice and courage to perform. M1 went up two reading levels and increased his comprehension and vocabulary, M1 also seemed to enjoy his theatre experience.

This chapter presents the results of the study using the conceptual categories Assessment Outcomes, Routine/Activities, and Personal Perspective. The results of the theatre infused curriculum intervention for the four study participants—who represent the range of students with
special needs in the class will, be examined closely. The chapter will conclude with study participants’ personal perspectives on how the curriculum affected them. In this teacher researcher’s experience a study participant’s perspective can be one of the strongest indicators of whether progress will continue beyond the intervention period. Krakovsky (2007) explains Dweck’s thoughts on motivation noting

the determination to master new things and surmount challenges—lay in people’s beliefs about why they had failed. People who attributed their failures to lack of ability, would become discouraged even in areas where they were capable. Those who thought they simply hadn’t tried hard enough, on the other hand, would be fueled by setbacks (p. 1).

Theatre has the potential to help students think about failures in terms of solutions. Theatre also has the potential to motivate students to work harder when faced with a challenge. When a challenge is met in a scene, students learn to return to the script to find out what they should do or help each other find a solution. The practice of returning to the text to support acting choices also helps students practice returning to the text to make inferences about events in the text. Learning theatre techniques gives students some tools to help them experience long term success.

This section of the study presents the study participants and the outcomes of their experience during the study. The results of the assessments are presented first. Assessments will be presented in three sections, pre, during and post. The study participants’ pre and post performances will be presented for the formal reading assessments, Reading Street Baseline Test and Unit Test, and the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment. The study participant’s performances on Selection Test and Fresh Reads formal reading assessments throughout the intervention will also be presented. This will be followed by a plot summary of the performance which presents the routine and activities that made up the main components of the theatre
infused curriculum. The engagement scores from the engagement instrument will be presented as each routine or activity connects to reading comprehension and fluency. This chapter concludes with the personal perspective of the study participants on how they were impacted by the theatre infused curriculum.

**Assessment Outcomes**

**Baseline/Unit Test.** The Reading Street Baseline Test and Unit Test were administered to the whole class at once, at the beginning and end of the study respectively. Both test reading comprehension and vocabulary. The students read story adaptations of varying genres on the 5th grade reading level and responded to multiple choice comprehension questions related to theme, author’s purpose, sequence, compare and contrast, and inference. They also responded to multiple choice vocabulary questions related to vocabulary from the story adaptations. The vocabulary questions test word meaning based on context and part of speech.

D1 and J2 showed improvement of 11.89 percentage points on their reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge as measured by the Reading Street assessments (see Figure 6.1). At the beginning of the study, D1 scored 56.86% on the Reading Street Baseline test, and at the end of the study 68.75% on the Unit Test. J2 scored 37.25% on the Reading Street Baseline test and 46.87% on the Unit Test at the end of the study. M1, the lowest reader of the study participants at baseline, improved by about 26.48 percentage points. M1 began the study with a score of 23.52% on the Reading Street and ended the study with a score of 50% on the Unit test. M1 showed the most improvement over the course of the study. J1 who was the strongest reader among the study participants at both baseline and posttest scored 83.31% on the Reading Street Baseline test, and scored 78.12% on the Unit Test at the end of the study.
The average for the study participants’ classmates on the pre-test was 70.09% and on the post-test was 73% (see figure 6.1). Thus, the classmates, on average, followed the same pattern of progress as study participants D1, J2, and M1, however, the average percentage points increased achievement only minimally from the pre to the post-test 2.91 percentage points.

Three of the study participants, regardless of where they began, showed improvements; ranging from 11.89 percentage points to 26.48 percentage points. J1 was the exception he started the study with the highest reading comprehension score, including higher than the average of all classmates, and his score decreased by 5.19 percentage points. The study participant, who began with the lowest reading comprehension level, M1, made the greatest amount of progress, and surpassed that of one of the middle scorers on the original test. The two study participants who represented the middle of the group at baseline made similar progress, increasing their scores by about 10 percentage points. D1 had the highest participation rate at the start of the study, his comprehension was approaching level 3 with just 11.89 percentage point increase he ended even closer to a level 3. J2’s comprehension started lower, approaching level
2 score. She had the lowest instance of participation, and with a 9.62 percentage points gain stayed in level 1, but was placed closer to a level 2 score. The highest comprehension scorer on the original test was J1 who transitioned from disruptive to participant during the course of the study, his comprehension was at a solid level 3 at both times. J1 had a slight decrease in his score of about 6.91 percentage points. The majority of the study participants increase their reading comprehension score and the class reading comprehension average increased as well.

The results of the comparison of the Reading Street Baseline pre test and the Reading Street Unit post-test show that three of the four study participants increased their comprehension scores. The study participants with the lowest scores made the greatest progress. Additionally the study participant with the highest comprehension score experienced a slight decrease in his score. Improvements in reading comprehension may be connected to the immersion of the students in theatre activities that helped students visualize the story, and return to the text to make inferences about characters and events.

**Selection tests.** The Selection tests for the Reading Street stories the class read were administered after the completion of all assignments related to each story. The assignments that preceded the tests varied; assignments included learning and practicing reading skills such as sequencing, comparing and contrasting, and identifying author’s purpose, to reading strategies such as monitoring and fixing up, questioning, and using context clues, and theatre activities such as telling a story, improvisation, character analysis, and skit writing. Selection tests were given to the whole class, and the scores were charted over time. A total of three selection tests were given.

Overall, the study participants’ scores across the three selection tests trended up and down (see figure 6.2) in very different patterns. D1 scored 85% on the first Selection test and his
score went down 5 percentage points on the next test, and then 5 more percentage points on the third selection test. J1 started with 80% on the first selection test went up 5 percentage points on test two and down 15 percentage points on test three. J2 scored 35% on test 1 went up 20 percentage points on test two, and back down by 30 percentage points on test three. M1 scored 55% on test one and went down 15 percentage points on selection test two, and up 42.5 percentage points on test three. Looking at these scores it seems that progress for the study participants varied. Three of the study participants experienced some increase and some decrease between tests.

The study participants’ classmates’ averages on selection tests varied across the three tests administered. From test one to test two the average increased, and then decreased slightly on test three. Their classmate’s average variation matched the variations in J1, and J2’s scores on selection test. Notably, three of the study participants, D1, J1, and M1, achieved higher than their classmates’ average on both selection test one and three.
The results show that three study participants, regardless of their beginning comprehension and fluency levels, experienced progress and set backs on selection tests; the fourth student, D1, consistently decreased in performance across these tests, why this occurred for D1 is unclear as he had high participation. One possible explanation would be his test taking demeanor, which the teacher researcher witnessed across subjects. D1 works quickly when testing and finishes very early, he does very little rereading when checking, and misses simple mistakes he has made. A subsequent result is that the work leading up to and the fluctuation on selection test preceded three of the study participants ultimately making progress on the Unit test, this includes D1 whose achievement as measured by the selection tests decreased across study lessons. Similarly the general class scores fluctuated and there was progress for them as well on the Unit test.

Learning is not linear for students with special needs, it requires multiple instances of re-teaching with ongoing practice. “Teachers explain strategies and model their use. They scaffold student’s efforts to apply strategies by providing hints and additional explanations as needed” (Boardman et. al., 2007, pp. 138). Students with special needs may show progress on one assessment and seem to have forgotten what they were taught on the next. The selection test results seem to show this pattern. By the end of the study, however, the study participants showed progress on the Unit Test as compared to the baseline, demonstrating that through their continued practice and re-teaching progress was made. The two tests may have measured related but distinct reading constructs, however. Selection tests require the study participants to remember the story they have been studying, whereas the unit test includes the story which study participants can refer to when answering questions. Thus, a difference between selection and unit tests that should be noted is the role that memory plays.
**Fountas and Pinnell pre and post test.** The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment were given individually at the beginning and at the end of the study. The Fountas and Pinnell tests assess the reading level and rate for students. This is an assessment used school-wide from third to fifth grade; therefore, it is a familiar process for the students. J2 and M1 have been given this assessment since third grade. D1 and J1 transferred to the school in fourth grade and were administered the assessment during that year.

When the study participants were administered the test at the beginning of the study, they were tested at the reading level provided in their cumulative records from the previous year. Thus, at that time all study participants reading levels matched the level from the end of the previous year. Accordingly, at the beginning of the study only J1 was reading on 5th grade level (level T), D1 was reading on a end of 4th grade reading level (level P), J2 was reading two reading levels below grade level, 3rd grade (level O), and M1 was reading three years below grade level, 2nd grade (level M). After participation in the study the study participants, on average, moved up two reading levels (see figure 6.3).

**Table 6.1 Fountas and Pinnell Reading Level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
<th>Growth</th>
<th>Pre-Test</th>
<th>Post Test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Instruct</td>
<td>Instruct</td>
<td>Indepen</td>
<td>Indepen</td>
<td>Indepen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>P 4th gr.</td>
<td>S 5th gr.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Q 4th gr.</td>
<td>T 5th gr.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>122.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J1</td>
<td>T 5th gr.</td>
<td>U 5th gr.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>U 5th gr.</td>
<td>V 5th gr.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>104.5</td>
<td>177.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J2</td>
<td>O 3rd gr.</td>
<td>Q 4th gr.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>P 4th gr.</td>
<td>R 4th gr.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>99.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M1</td>
<td>M 2nd gr.</td>
<td>O 3rd gr.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N 3rd gr.</td>
<td>P 4th gr.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>111.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

J1 began the study reading on grade level, he was the exception in the group. He had a strong vocabulary, decoding strategies, and prosody. J1 was also a fast reader, with a reading
rate of 104.5 words per minute. He read to complete the task, but struggled with responding to the literature.

During the assessment D1 was an inattentive reader; he was distracted and had a very low reading rate of 60.6 words per minute. He had a high level of occurrences for needing to decode, but decoded accurately.

M1’s reading rate of 74 words per minute was the second highest of the study participants. He was familiar with the test procedure and took the test comfortably. M1’s reading was labored as was his speech in conversations. He often seemed to be searching for the word he wanted to say when reading and speaking.

J2’s reading rate of 42.6 words per minute was the lowest of all the study participants. J2 appeared nervous and uncomfortable when it was her time to do the reading test with the teacher researcher. This was J2’s first experience working one on one with the teacher researcher. She spoke in a very soft voice and did not make eye contact.

The results of the study participant’s pre and post Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessments show that reading rates of three of the study participants improved to within the range expected of a fifth grader at this point in the school year, “Grade 5, Unit 1, Reading Rate (WCPM) 105 - 110” (Scott Foresman, 2008, pg. x) (see figure 6.4). J2 was the exception; she increased her reading rate by 57 WCPM to 99.6, but did not reach the expected 105, although she is well on her way. Additionally, all study participants’ Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment reading levels increased from one to three reading levels.
Overall, three of the study participants D1, J2, and M1 increased their reading comprehension, reading level and reading rate as evidence by their scores on the pre to post Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment (see figure 6.3) and the scores on the Reading Street Baseline test to the Unit test (see figure 6.1). J1 was the only study participant whose score decreased from the Reading Street Baseline test to the Unit test. Nonetheless J1 did increase his reading level and his reading rate. J2 was the only study participant who increased her reading rate, but did not reach the expected reading rate for fifth grade students at the end of Unit 1. The class was taught the components of fluency (accuracy, automaticity, and prosody) during choral reading lessons. Fluency was practiced during choral reading, fresh reads, rehearsals and performances. These fluency building activities being a part of the students class routine may have impacted the study participants increased reading levels and rates.

The classmates Fountas and Pinnell reading level growth showed the majority of the regular education students (seven students) improved by one reading level and three of the regular education students improved by two reading levels (see Figure 6.5). One regular
education student did not increase his reading level, although he could read fluently at the next reading level, he was unable to respond accurately to comprehension questions that followed the reading. In comparison the majority of the study participants increase their reading level by two levels, one increased by one reading level, and one increased by three reading levels. The study participants have more levels to increase to reach grade level than most of the regular education students, and more study participants increased reading levels by two or more levels than did regular education students.

Table 6.2 Fountas and Pinnell Reading Level Growth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cl Ave</th>
<th>Growth</th>
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**Routine/Activities**

The Routines and Activities are the main components of the study. The routines and activities were described in detail in Chapter five. The results of the activities are connected to study participants engagement as demonstrated by the tallies of their engagement scores from the engagement instruments (see Figures 6.6 – 6.9). Additionally, engagement in activities is connected to assessment results. This section will discuss the connections that were revealed through the data analysis.

**Reading Comprehension**

The focus of this study has been the development of reading comprehension in students with special needs through curriculum infused with theatre techniques. Students’ with special needs struggle with reading comprehension have been well documented and the challenge of
identifying effective ways to address their struggles continues. Research findings do indicate that for students with special needs reading comprehension strategies needs to be explicitly taught “students with learning disabilities can improve their reading comprehension if teachers . . teach students strategies that prompt them to monitor and reflect before, during, and after reading” (Boardman et al, 2007, pg. 4). During this study reading comprehension was taught through visualization, improvisation, character analysis, and skit writing. Warm ups and theatre games gave study participants, additional opportunities to develop skills that impacted reading comprehension and fluency. These activities may have impacted the study participants’ performance on the Unit test. The activities were the vehicles through which reading comprehension was taught and how study participants demonstrated their comprehension of the text. Each activity was connected to one or more of the stories throughout the intervention. The routine and activities that will be analyzed are warm up and theatre games, visualization and improvisation, character analysis and skit writing, choral reading and fresh reads, and performance and rehearsals. As each routine or activity connects to reading comprehension and fluency, the engagement scores from the engagement instrument will be discussed.

**Warm up and theatre games.** The purpose of both warm ups and theatre games is to help build focus. Students learn to concentrate on their breathing, control their movements, their voices, and their levels of concentration. Warm ups and theatre games help students learn to remain focused in any work situation, including testing. When students are able to draw on their breathing and physical warm up techniques especially, they can redirect themselves during testing when they become unfocused, overwhelmed or overly fatigued. The more students participated during warm ups and theatre games made it more likely they would take ownership
of the warm up and theatre games process. When students own the process the greater the possibility they are to use the process during testing.

**Figure 6.4 Frequency of Engagement In Warm ups and Theatre Games**

The class participated in warm ups and theatre games once a week for seven weeks and played theatre games three additional times. M1 was the most consistent during warm ups and theatre games. He engaged with the instructor during warm ups and theatre games and participated in all warm up and theatre game sessions. Warm ups and theatre games fit very well with M1’s personality; he was calm, playful, and soft spoken. During the reading comprehension pre-test M1 was calm but did not have the stamina to stay as focused as needed during testing. He had to be redirected to check his test after finishing quickly. During the post-test M1 was able to stay focused and complete the Unit test in a timely manner and returned to the test to recheck without having to be redirected to do so. M1 increased his comprehension score on the Unit test and his reading level increase by two reading levels. M1’s full participation in warm ups and theatre games may have contributed to his improved concentration by the Unit test.
J2 was present for five of the seven warm ups and ten of the theatre game sessions, but showed reluctance during three of the five warm ups and one of the theatre games, by asking to go to the nurse or placing herself outside the circle. When J2 participated fully she was relaxed and able to complete the session. During the written comprehension test J2 finished early and was unable to check her work with patience. During the oral fluency test J2 was much more comfortable with the teacher researcher. The teacher researcher’s trust had been gained and the fluency test proceeded smoother. J2 had a smaller increase in her comprehension test, but increased two reading levels on the Fountas and Pinnell Assessment.

J1 participated in all warm up and theatre game sessions, but intermittently during three of the warm ups and four of the theatre games he was engaged with his peers in an inappropriate way, both his reluctance to participate with his peers and his actions were disruptive to the students who were focused on the warm up and theatre games process. J1 has ADHD and struggles with focus and control in most situations. During testing J1 was usually the first one finished and refused to recheck his work. During the oral reading test J1 was talkative and wanted to point out connections he was making while he read. J1 was the most unfocused during warm ups and the only study participant to decrease his comprehension score, although slightly. J1 was also the only study participant who only went up one level on the reading benchmark. J1 took the longest to settle into the class routine and was the least focused of all the study participants; he was unfocused during much of the intervention and during the Unit test. J1 was also the closest to grade level at the beginning of the study, as with the regular education students who were closer to grade level, the increase in reading rate was smaller.

D1 participated in all warm ups and theatre games as well. He struggled with being disruptive by engaging peers away from the activity through the first two warm up sessions.
After that he became consistently more invested in all warm ups, theatre games and subsequent activities. During the pre-test D1 finished quickly and flipped pages without really checking anything when redirected to check his test. During the post-test D1 finished early, but was able to settle down and check by rereading the stories and questions when redirected by the teacher researcher. When working individually with the teacher researcher on the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment pre-test D1’s reading was labored and he was concerned that others in the room could hear him. During the post-test D1 was attentive and read carefully but fluently. D1 increased his comprehension score on the Unit test slightly, but went up three levels on the fluency test.

The results of the warm ups and theatre games on all assessments suggest that study participants who were more invested in the warm up and theatre game process were more relaxed during testing and better able to return to the test to recheck their work. Those study participants also saw increases in their scores. The study participant who was least invested, to the point of disruption, was also distracted during testing and the pre-post change in his reading comprehension scores was negative.

**Visualization:** Although visualization was a one-time activity, it had an impact on the study participants. Visualization was linked to comprehension through retelling. The students were guided through the experience of visualizing a story through associations with objects. The visualization activity was followed by a class retelling of the story that had been read originally.

Visualization became a part of the dialogue in the classroom when presenting improvisations and retelling, and before testing. In a similar way as warm ups, visualization acts as an overarching strategy that can impact comprehension. According to Boardman et. al. “students construct mental images that represent text content. . .teach students to visualize the
content in a passage or imagine what is happening” (2007, p.140). Students were also instructed to use visualization in creating and presenting improvisations. Students practiced visualizing the text and then bringing it to life through improvisation.

M1, J1, and D1 were fully invested in this activity and participated with their table mates during the visualizing and the wider class during the retelling (see figure 6.7). J1 maintained high marks on the selection and the Unit tests. M1 and D1 improved their comprehension scores over time on selection and Unit tests.

Figure 6.5 Frequency of Engagement In Visualization and Improvisation

J2 participated fully in the visualization activity with her table-mates. J2 felt reluctant during the retelling to speak out during the wider conversation with the whole class. With prompting from the teacher researcher she was able to contribute accurately with short responses during the retelling. J2 also showed improvement overtime on her selection and Unit tests.

Visualization became a part of the fabric of the curriculum; following the visualization activity students were directed to visualize the scene they were creating during improvisation. Study participants were aided in the development of their comprehension strategies by the
visualization activity; the class also discussed how to visualize what was occurring in a story while reading. Visualizing became a go-to skill for much of the class’ reading comprehension work. Visualization may have impacted students’ ability to do improvisation, which is one of the ways the class demonstrated reading comprehension knowledge. “Improvisations provide a special service for experiences in narrative; they translate what happened back to what is happening and promote a sense of immediacy which might otherwise be lacking. This approach becomes quite important for those students who find it difficult to deal with the abstractions” (Duke, 1975, pp. 89).

Improvisation. Improvisation was the staple activity for this study. Visualization is woven into the teaching of improvisation. Students are taught to bring the words to life, by first visualizing the story themselves, then creating an improvisation so that others can see what they are visualizing. The class participated in an improvisation activity twice a week for the duration of the study. Students requested this activity and were more invested in assignments that lead to improvisation.

Improvisation was an activity that everyone could be successful in regardless of reading ability. The concept of ensemble helped the students learn to support each other in the reading work as well as the improvisation work. The study participants had varying levels of participation during improvisation sessions (see Figure 6.5), the more invested students were in presenting and observing improvisation the more practice they had visualizing.

D1 had the highest participation rate for improvisation. He had three instances of disruption in the beginning of the study then settled into understanding how to participate in improvisation. He became very serious about his scenes being done correctly. D1’s selection
test showed improvement over his baseline test and this improvement continued through to his Unit test.

J1 continued to struggle with maintaining his behavior during class. He had four instances of disruption that resulted in the teacher researcher having to intervene in his groups to help redirect him. J1’s selection and Unit all stayed within the level 3 range. He maintained his comprehension levels but did not demonstrate the improvements the others showed.

J2 participated in most of the improvisation sessions. She was absent for two of the sessions. She was also reluctant at different times during the study. These times required the teacher researcher to intervene and find ways to help J2 participate despite her anxiety. On both of those occasions J2 was able to take on non-speaking roles and was still able to participate. J2 showed slow progress, over time she improved in her participation in improvisation and improved on both her selection and her Unit test.

M1 participated fully during the ten improvisation sessions he was present for. He was absent during four of the sessions. M1 was shy and quiet but did his best to understand the readings and to present the improvisations. M1 experienced the highest percentage of improvement of all the study participants.

Improvisation, which built on the visualization experience, may have impacted study participants’ ability to respond to comprehension question on the selection and Unit tests. Selection tests were opportunities for students to practice the use of visualization because the stories are not attached to the test. The study participants had to use recall techniques to answer the comprehension questions. For example on the “Ch’I-lin Purse” selection test one of the questions asks “Why did Hsiang-ling give the Ch’i-lin purse to a stranger?” The class had done improvisations and a retelling of this selection before the test. The study participants could
visualize the event in the story when the purse is given away to choose the right answer. All study participants selected the correct answer for this question. The study participants D1, J2, and M1 improved over time on the selection and Unit tests, and J1 maintained his reading comprehension at level 3, although his score decreased by 6.19 percentage points.

**Character analysis and skit writing.** Character analysis and skit writing are extension activities to improvisation. Creating character analyses and skits teaches students to dig into the text for details in order to write accurate descriptions and accounts. They also develop the use of the text to clarify and correct misconceptions. Returning to the text is a skill that is often needed to help students’ comprehension of text that is read. Therefore, character analysis and skit writing demonstrate a student’s comprehension of the text.

By the point in the study when character analysis and skit writing were introduced students had settled into the routine of having theatre activities throughout the day. All study participants fully participated in all character analysis activities and two of the four study participants completed all three skit writing activities (see Figure 6.6).

**Figure 6.6 Frequency of Engagement In Character Analysis and Skit Writing**
D1 worked diligently on character analysis and skit writing. He had to be directed to return to the text to find more detailed descriptions for character analysis. He also wrote an inappropriate skit on the first assignment, which was not directly connected to any story the class had read. On the next two skits D1 worked with the teacher researcher and his group to use the text to write accurate and interesting skits. D1’s improvements on the selection and Unit tests were impacted by his dedication to learning how to return to the text. D1 was the most engaged study participant; he was invested in his improvisation characters betraying the stories correctly, and worked to write accurate skits by returning to the text.

J1 actively participated in character analysis. He enjoyed the process of discussing the text and writing descriptions of the characters. He struggled more with skit writing as he avoided the writing process in all areas of the curriculum. When the writing and group work became challenging for him he acted out behaviorally. Most of J1’s scores were in the level 3, range (70% - 85%) on the selection and Unit tests.

J2 struggled with writing character analysis and skit writing because writing was a struggle for her. When responding to open response comprehension questions J2 struggled not to exclusively copy the text. It took great effort on the part of J2 and the teacher researcher to help her find her own voice. There was some reluctance on J2’s part to let go of her strategy of copying the book, to try something unfamiliar. Some of J2’s improvements on the selection tests, and on the Unit test, were attributed to her hard work and risk taking during character analysis and skit writing. J2’s work developing her own thoughts about the text helped her to think about what the text was saying in order to find the traits of characters and write her skits without copying. When J2 was in the habit of copying she struggled with responding to comprehension questions because she was writing words without understanding them. As she
worked with the teacher researcher to break this habit, she began to understand the text and respond accurately during discussions and on written assignments.

M1 also struggled with the writing assignments. He found it difficult to add details to character analysis beyond physical and demographic information. When it came to identifying character emotions and intentions, M1 took more time and expended more effort. M1 wrote two of the three skits and he struggled with adding detail and working in a group, but persisted nonetheless. M1’s progress in the selection and Unit test was contributed to by the effort he put into character analysis and skit writing.

Character analysis and skit writing were the most challenging of the theatre activities. The study participants required the most assistance and had to expend the most effort on this activity. This effort may have increased their stamina during assessments.

**Fluency**

Fluency is a skill that contributes to comprehension. In order to understand the text a reader must read fluently with accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. A lack of fluency hinders comprehension. “Reading slowly is a problem for two reasons: (1) It keeps students from reading enough text to keep up with class expectations; and (2) it prevents students from adequately remembering what they read (Broadman et al, 2007, p. 7-8). During this study modeling and practice opportunities were presented through fresh reads, choral reading, performances and rehearsals. These activities impacted the study participants’ performance on the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment post-test. All study participants reading level increased by one, two, or three levels and all study participants’ reading rates increased. Three of the four increased their rate to within the expected rate for 5th grade, post unit 1 of Reading Street (105-
110), and the study participant who began with the lowest score, J2, doubled her reading rate (42.6 - 99.6).

**Fresh reads and choral reading.** During the third week of the study the class began using choral reading and fresh reads. Choral reading was introduced as an activity to help improve the students’ fluency and reading rate. Fresh reads was introduced to track their progress on their reading rate towards developing fluency and comprehension. During choral readings stronger and weaker readers are paired and they read a short story, folktale, or story excerpt simultaneously. The class was aware that the goal was to improve reading rate for all students. The class discussed the pros and cons of their choral reading experience and made adjustments to improve the experience each session. Over the course of the study the class became experts at choral reading, and students were able to read longer and longer passages together.

For fresh reads, the students worked in their high, medium, and low reading groups, created based on the pre test Fountas and Pinnell scores. The groups were given passages slightly above their reading levels and in pairs they read the passage for a minute. As a student read the listener marked words read incorrectly. When the minute was over the words read correctly were counted and the reading rate recorded. Then the pairs took turns reading the entire passage to one another before taking a comprehension quiz.

The instruction section of the Fresh Read’s teacher’s manual states that “according to published norms for oral reading fluency, students at the end of Grade 5 should be reading fluently at 140 words correct per minute in text that is on grade level” (2008, p. x). All of the study participants began the study with WCPM lower than 140 according to the Fountas and Pinnell reading rate.
The classmates’ average on fresh reads also fluctuated. Their average began and stayed above 140 WCPM which is the goal for readers at the end of fifth grade. The classmates’ average was slightly above J2 and M1 most weeks, and behind J1 all weeks.

Over the course of the study D1 became more and more engaged in the theatre activities the class was doing. He was very focused during choral reading and fresh reads (see Figure 6.7). During fresh reads the reading rate was recorded after each session. D1’s reading rates over time showed significant improvements and that D1 and J1 both surpassed 140 in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} week of the study. All of his reading rates during the study were over 100 words per minute ranging from 133 - 265 words per minute (see Figure 6.8).
At the end of the study D1’s Fountas and Pinnell reading level increased by three reading levels from a level P, middle 4th grade to a level S, beginning 5th grade. D1’s reading rate was 60.6 WCPM and improved to 122.5 WCPM. His improved reading rate was reflective of the effort he put into choral reading and fresh reads.

J1 became more engaged in the theatre activities the class was doing, but still struggled with his behavior. He was focused during choral reading and fresh reads, but struggled during many of the other activities. D1’s reading rates over time showed significant improvements. All of his reading rates during the study were over 100 words per minute ranging from 179 – 256 words per minute (see figure 6.8).

At the end of the study, J1’s Fountas and Pinnell reading level increased by one reading level from a level T, 5th grade to a level U, middle of 5th grade. J1’s reading rate was 104.5 and improved to 177.33. His improved reading rate was reflective of the effort he put into choral
reading and fresh reads. The class average on the Fountas and Pinnell pre test was 136.01 WCPM. On the post test the class average was 141.07 WCPM.

Despite J2’s struggles with anxiety she interacted more freely by the end of the study. She engaged with her partner during choral reading and fresh reads, but often struggled during the improvisation that followed. J2’s reading rates over time showed significant improvements. All of her reading rates during the study were over 100 words per minute ranging from 108 - 143 words per minute (see figure 6.8).

At the end of the study J2’s Fountas and Pinnell reading level increased by two reading levels from a level O, beginning 4th grade to a level Q, middle of 4th grade. J2’s reading rate was 42.9, and improved to 99.6. The improvement in her reading rate was reflective of the effort she put into choral reading and fresh reads, these activities were the least public of the theatre activities and the least taxing on J2. She was able to fully participate during these activities in which the skills needed to improve reading rate and level were practiced.

M1 was quietly engaged in the theatre activities the class was doing. He was focused during fresh reads but struggled to connect with his partner when doing choral reading. M1’s reading rates over time showed significant improvements. All of his reading rates during the study were over 100 words per minute ranging from 62 -137 words per minute (see figure 6.8).

At the end of the study M1’s Fountas and Pinnell reading level increased by one reading levels from a level M, middle of 3rd grade to a level O, beginning of 4th grade. M1’s reading rate was 74, an improved to 111.77. His new reading rate was reflective of the effort he put into choral reading and fresh reads.

Study participants were motivated to learn the routines participate for choral reading and fresh reads. All study participants increased their reading rate. Three of the four study
participants increased their reading rate to within the range expected of 5th graders at the point in the year when the study ended, 105-120 WCPM.

**Performances.** The class was able to complete four performances (Spooky Skits, Museum Curators, Turkey Song, Poem Paul Revere) during the study, and held auditions for a fifth performance (Wings for Kings). The performances are a way for the class to showcase what they have learned. The students are motivated to different degrees by other classes seeing them perform. Three of study participants were continually motivated to perform. The fourth study participant was intermittently motivated to perform, but was more determined to be included by the end of the study.

**Theatre techniques.** The rehearsal process brings together the theatre techniques the class learned during the study. The students use the focus and memory skills developed during warm ups and theatre games, they bring the story to life with their voice and movements developed during visualization and improvisation, and add details to their characters and understand how to use the script to enhance their performances using the analytical skills learned in character analysis and skit writing. Rehearsals also continue the development of fluency through repeated readings of the script. The students work on accuracy, automaticity and prosody through the repeated readings and ultimately memorizing the lines.

From the introduction of the first performance opportunity D1 was hooked. He took direction well and wanted to perform well. His usual persona of not knowing what was going on quickly drifted away. D1 had parts in all the performances and auditioned for the performance the class was working on at the conclusion of the study.

J1 showed interest in performing on stage as well as working behind the scenes. J1 had a hard time managing his behavior during rehearsals and performances. He needed to be close to
the teacher researcher to help him manage his choices. He had parts in all performances, and managed to get through auditions for the performance beginning at the end of the study without incident.

J2 had strong participation during the class’s first performance, but became anxious afterwards. She struggled with theatre times for a few weeks. Through support from the teacher researcher she was able to return to participating and performed when the whole class presented the Paul Revere poem together. J2 was unable to audition in front of her peers, but accepted the narrator part offered to her by the teacher researcher.

M1 was the quietest of the study participants. He struggled some with cues and entrances during the first performance rehearsals, but soon caught on. M1 participated in all subsequent performances and was much more attentive. M1 also auditioned for the performance the class was planning at the end of the study.

The results of the performance portion of the study and its impact on fluency are that performing builds fluency through repeated readings. Performing also builds confidence over time, in a supportive environment. Additionally, the results indicate that students need the time and space to grow at their own pace in order to perform well.

**Personal Perspectives**

It is vital to keep in mind that conclusions based on research are simply generalization. Although they adequately describe large populations of children and can guide our thinking as we plan instruction and form broad expectations, the attitudes and interests of an individual child may differ from the norm. This is why it is always important to assess children and not merely assume that they conform to stereotypical patterns” (Mc Kenna and Stahl, 2003, p. 205).

This section will discuss the study participant’s personal perspectives on the theatre infused curriculum and its impact on them. The teacher researcher wanted to ensure that student
voice was a part of the study because their individual experience is as important as any data that could be presented.

**Study participant D1**

D1’s positive attitude towards the theatre activities was evident in the teacher researcher’s observation data as well as in the teacher researcher’s reflective journal reported on in Chapter five. The observation data showed D1 as participating 100% of the time. Additionally the data revealed he started the study disruptive but within a short time his disruptions had decreased to one within a class period, then down to zero by the class.

D1’s engagement and positive outlook were also evident during the student interview:
Figure 6.9 D1’s Interview

What was your reading level in September?
R or T
Has it improved? What is it now?
I do feel like I’ve improved my reading. Not sure
Have you participated in theatre before this class?
No
Have you done any theatre activities in your 3rd or 4th grade class?
No
What did you like about doing theatre during reading and social studies this year?
How it was so efficient. How we talked perfectly and not like a robot. And how we had no hesitation.
What didn’t you like?
When there is a lot of speaking in the background when we’re trying to rehearse our play
Do you think that the theatre activities helped improve your reading?
It did yeah.
Why?
I actually do not know
How?
I think it helped because by saying without your lines helps you read better cause it makes you read clearly.
What is something you learned from the theatre activities?
To read clearly that’s what I learned to do
How can you use what you learned to help you when you read on your own?
To better, read clearly and don’t miss any words
(Student Satisfaction Interview, D1, 1/27/2014)

D1 captured one of the purposes of the theatre work he was involved in, improving fluency. Two of his responses went right to the essence of what was being taught through the theatre experience “How it was so efficient. How we talked perfectly and not like a robot. And how we had no hesitation” (Student Satisfaction Interview, D1, 1/27/2014). Through the theatre experience D1 and his peers learned to read and speak their lines using the fluency developed during choral reading, fresh reads, rehearsals and performances.

Fluent reading impacted D1’s reading level, but also influenced how he saw himself as a reader “I do feel like I’ve improved my reading . . . I think it helped because by saying without
"your lines helps you read better cause it makes you read clearly" (Student Satisfaction Interview, D1, 1/27/2014). As D1’s reading improved, his attitude towards his work also improved. He went from the boy described at the beginning of the teacher reflection journal as distracted and unfocused to the boy who is aware of his own improvements and how he got there. During the last week of the study D1 surprised the class by knowing every routine, helping others who had not been listening and quoting the teacher researcher to another student “you have to be a part of your own learning and pay attention.” The class froze looking at him, and then everyone laughed and gave him a spontaneous round of applause. D1’s participation and periods on task increased to 100%. His engagement and effort contributed to the improvements in his reading. His reading development and engagement had a reciprocal effect.

**Study Participant J1**

J1 had a very positive experience with theatre, as he states in his interview “What did you like about doing theatre during reading and social studies this year? I love it. It’s so fun. I like doing the play with the stories and stuff. What didn’t you like? I liked them all” (Student Satisfaction Interview, J1, 1/27/2014). Although J1 had instances of disruption, mostly clustered at the beginning of the study, he was redirected with activities that gave him a positive alternative to the disruptive behavior that grew out of excitement. In theatre there is room for his energy level and opportunities to learn how to channel that energy.

For J1 the purpose of the theatre activities was for his enjoyment “I love it. It’s so fun. I like doing the play with the stories and stuff” (Student Satisfaction Interview, J1, 1/27/2014). By learning through enjoyable activities the study participants were motivated to work at challenging assignments in order to get to the ones they enjoy, as was pointed out in Chapter five. Although his focus was on the fun parts of theatre, he was able to identify one of the
purposes of the intervention in his interview. In response to the question “Do you think that the theatre activities helped improve your reading? Why?” J1 responded “I think they did help. . . Because I love doing theatre and I always participate in it and it helps me learn more things and learn what the play is about” (Student Satisfaction Interview, J1, 1/27/2014). J1 understood that reading had a purpose and he transferred that understanding to the theatre work and recognized that this work helping him learn what his reading was about. Towards the middle of the study J1 became more focused. His improved participation helped him to understand the purpose of the theatre work. Nonetheless, his inconsistent participation at the beginning of the study may have lead to his decrease in comprehension score.

J1 continued to focus on comprehension in his comments when he responded to the question “how” theatre helped improve reading. J1 responded, “Because it mentions what people like and it also lets me know what they like doing and who they are” (Student Satisfaction Interview, J1, 1/27/2014). Without having the technical language J1 referred to the theatre infused curriculum as helping him understand the characters in the story. Understanding the characters in the story helps you understand the story. J1 also referred to how theatre helped him with fluency “How can you use what you learned to help you when you read on your own? I can like learn like pronounce most words.” (Student Satisfaction Interview, J1, 1/27/2014). Automatic and accurate pronunciation of words was introduced to the students as two of the three ways to develop fluency.
Figure 6.10 J1’s Interview

Did your reading level improve?
Yes W (J1 thought his level improved to W)
What was your reading level in September?
No (J1 did not know what his reading level was in September)
Has it improved? What is it now?
Yes
Have you participated in theatre before this class?
No not that I remember
Have you done any theatre activities in your 3rd or 4th grade class?
3rd grade we did a play on Paul Revere on Valentine’s Day
What did you like about doing theatre during reading and social studies this year?
I love it. It’s so fun. I like doing the play with the stories and stuff.
What didn’t you like?
I liked them all
Do you think that the theatre activities helped improve your reading?
I think they did help
Why?
Because I love doing theatre and I always participate in it and it helps me learn more things and learn what the play is about.
How?
Because it mentions what people like and it also lets me know what they like doing and who they are.
What is something you learned from the theatre activities?
That my friend is funny.
How can you use what you learned to help you when you read on your own?
I can learn to pronounce most words.
What would you change about the theatre activities?
I would change to not have dangerous weapons in them. Because one made me have bad dreams
What would you keep the same?
Have the skit really long.
(Student Satisfaction Interview, J1, 1/27/2014).

Study Participant J2

J2’s response to the questions about the theatre activities was surprising. She seemed to be struggling a great deal with this experience. J2’s response to the question “Do you think that the theatre activities helped improve your reading? Why?” was “Yes. Because I like when I’m learning how to do it. And you have to be able to read to know what you are doing”. (Student
Satisfaction Interview, J2, 1/27/2014) was surprising because her anxiety had affected her off and on during the study. It seems that despite the anxiety challenges she enjoyed learning the theatre techniques.

J2 also caught on to how reading was connected to the theatre experience “And you have to be able to read to know what you are doing” (Student Satisfaction Interview, J2, 1/27/2014). J2’s reading progress over the course of the study fluctuated; it seemed as though she was making progress and then she would have a setback. J2 had a silent determination and every time she could she would put all her effort into the theatre activities.

Her reading level and fluency ultimately showed the greatest improvements and it appears from her comments that she was focused on her reading, so that she could do the theatre activities correctly “Like when you have to read a script so you know how to do it and when you act it out. What is something you learned from the theatre activities? How you act it out.”

(Student Satisfaction Interview, J2, 1/27/2014).

**Figure 6.11 J2’s Interview**

Do you know your reading level from last year?  
*J or S*  
Did your reading level improve?  
*Yes.*  
What was your reading level in September?  
*No. (J2 did not know her reading level in September)*  
Has it improved? What is it now?  
*Yes, Q.*  
Have you participated in theatre before this class?  
*No.*  
Have you done any theatre activities in your 3rd or 4th grade class?  
*No.*  
What did you like about doing theatre during reading and social studies this year?  
*Getting to do it and learning what theatre is like*  
What didn’t you like?  
*Nothing.*  
Do you think that the theatre activities helped improve your reading?
Yes.
Why?
*Because I like when I’m learning how to do it. And you have to be able to read to know what you are doing.*
How?
*Like when you have to read a script so you know how to do it and when you act it out.*
What is something you learned from the theatre activities?
*How you act it out.*
How can you use what you learned to help you when you read on your own?
*By reading it over.*
What would you change about the theatre activities?
*Nothing.*
What would you keep the same?
*Acting out and reading the same thing in order to act it out.*
(Student Satisfaction Interview, J2, 1/27/2014).

J2 had intermittent participation because of her anxiety, but was always attentive to what was going on around her. Through the discussions about and execution of the theatre activities, J2 came to recognize the importance of rereading material. J2 learned to return to the text to clarify her thinking and understand characters and their relationships. J2 also worked closely with the teacher researcher to learn to respond to questions and write skits in her own words, instead of copying from the text. J2’s hard work resulted in improves reading comprehension scores.

**Study Participant M1**

M1 was consistent throughout the study, only missing activities due to absence. M1’s response to “What did you like about doing theatre during reading and social studies this year? Was the longest response of all of the study participants “*I like when you can perform. I like about it when it’s like performing an actress. When people stared in the book, characters were talking and we got to do their talking*” (Student Satisfaction Interview, M1, 1/27/2014). This is significant for M1 as his communication disorder presents as a word finding issue when trying to
communicate his thoughts to others. Often when called on he would respond “Never mind” because he couldn’t say what he needed to say. During the interview M1 was excited to respond to the questions and it was important to him to respond. M1 stayed with his responses until he got out what he had to say. He enjoyed acting out the stories during class performances the most and once he was serious about it he kept working on it.

M1 also focused on improving his reading level, “Do you think that the theatre activities helped improve your reading? Why? Yes. You can get better grades and reading levels.” He also understood that this required practice “How? Yes by practice and practice. How can you use what you learned to help you when you read on your own? Say that one more time. Oh. Like when teacher reads with other students you can try it by yourself, and once you do it by yourself you’ll get ready.” (Student Satisfaction Interview, M1, 1/27/2014). M1’s practice was evident when he read for his one on one reading assessment and read fluently and with great expression. (Student Satisfaction Interview, M1, 1/27/2014).

**Figure 6.12 M1’s Interview**

Did your reading level improve?
*Yes.*

What was your reading level in September?
*K.*

Has it improved? What is it now?
*No, not yet.*

Have you participated in theatre before this class?
*No.*

Have you done any theatre activities in your 3rd or 4th grade class?
*No.*

What did you like about doing theatre during reading and social studies this year?
*I like when you can perform. I like about it when it’s like performing and actress When people stared in the book, characters were talking and we got to do their talking.*

What didn’t you like?
*No. (M1 meant there wasn’t anything he didn’t like)*

Do you think that the theatre activities helped improve your reading?
*Yes.*
Why?
You can get better grades and reading levels.
How?
Yes by practice and practice.
What is something you learned from the theatre activities?
That you can do, I learned that theatre is more important to your life.
How can you use what you learned to help you when you read on your own?
Say that one more time. Oh. Like when teacher reads with other students you can try it by yourself, and once you do it by yourself you’ll get ready.
What would you change about the theatre activities?
No. (M1 wouldn’t change anything about the activities)
What would you keep the same?
You can do the moves that the people do in the story. Reading and doing the performance.
(Student Satisfaction Interview, M1, 1/27/2014).

Summary

All study participants had positive responses to their theatre experience. Without prompting all study participants referenced some element of the study focus and the theatre experience in their responses. All were able to name ways that they had benefited from the theatre infused curriculum. As they articulated the study participants’ engagement with the curriculum helped them understand what they were learning and they became participants in that learning. The study participants who were the most engaged showed the greatest progress. The study participants who were the least engaged showed the least amount of progress.

Just as the study participants self-reported in their interviews, the reading assessment data indicate that they benefitted from the theatre infused curriculum. Overall the study participants showed growth in some aspect of their reading. Three of the study participants and the regular education students showed progress in similar ways. All regular education students increased their comprehension, reading level, and reading rates. Study participants with the highest amount of engagement showed the most growth and the study participant with the lowest
engagement showed the least growth. Specific components of the theatre curriculum appear to have positively influenced different aspects of the students’ reading performances. For example, the study participants required the most assistance and had to expend the most effort on the character analysis and skit writing activities, and this effort contributed to their stamina during assessments. The study participants entered with little theatre experience, but were engaged by the theatre infused reading and social studies curriculum and grew into more experienced actors able to draw on the theatre techniques they learned throughout the day. In addition to enjoying the experience, they perceived it as being beneficial to their reading performance, which the assessment data and teacher researcher reflections support.
Chapter 7

Findings and Implications for Future Research: The Review

This dissertation was designed to observe the effect of curriculum infused with theatre arts techniques on the reading comprehension and fluency of students with moderate special needs. I have argued that the use of theatre arts infused curriculum will have a positive impact on the students’ reading comprehension and fluency as well as on how they view themselves as readers.

The students were immersed in the theatre experience; the purpose of the study was to report on the students’ experiences and academic growth and the teacher researcher’s perspective. This study presents the results of the experimental intervention, the perspective of the teacher researcher on student engagement and those results, as well as those of the study participants, who represent the range of students with special needs in their class. The classroom environment created a theatre atmosphere; the students became comfortable setting up the stage and the chairs for the audience. The class looked forward to theatre activities and was motivated to complete their work to get to those activities. I purport that this immersion impacted all components of the study. The curriculum impacted the teacher researcher and the students, the students impacted the teacher researcher and the curriculum, and the teacher researcher impacted the students and the curriculum. This chapter focuses on what the teacher researcher learned by examining my own practice as well as the implications for my future teaching and the wider community of educators. To begin, I review the findings, followed by my perspective on the study’s implications on future research.
Discussion

The findings will be reported under the three conceptual categories discussed in chapter 6, Assessment Outcomes, Routines/Activities, and Personal Perspectives. The study has four main findings: a) study participants who put in the most effort increased their comprehension score, b) all study participants, regardless of their reading levels or reading rates on the pre-test, made improvements on both by the end of the nine-week study, c) writing assignments in the character analysis and skit writing activities require longer periods of exposure for the study participants to master them; and d) performing builds confidence over time, in a supportive environment.

Assessment Outcomes

The assessments formed the basis by which reading comprehension and fluency progress were determined. There were pre-, post- and during intervention assessments. The pre-assessments (Baseline/Unit Test and Fountas and Pinnell) were used to set baselines for each study participant. I theorized that the students participation in the theatre infused reading and social studies curriculum would result in progress in reading comprehension and fluency. During the study ongoing assessments were given to track progress (selection test and fresh reads). The study culminated with two post-assessments to determine progress from the beginning to the end of the study (Unit test and Fountas and Pinnell). The Baseline and Unit test include vocabulary multiple choice questions, stories and related multiple choice questions. Similarly, the selection test has vocabulary multiple choice questions and, multiple choice comprehension questions about a story. The noteworthy difference is that Baseline and Unit test include the story and study participants could return to the text when answering questions,
whereas the Selection tests do not include the story, and study participants had to recall the story when answering questions.

**Baseline/Unit Test.** A comparison of the Reading Street Baseline pre-test and the Reading Street Unit post-test show that three of the four study participants increased comprehension and had high participation. The study participant with the lowest pre-test score made the greatest progress. M1, although quiet, participated throughout the study. His high level of participation contributed to his high level of improvement. Additionally the study participant with the highest comprehension score experienced a slight decrease to his score, notably, he struggled early on with appropriate participation.

**Selection Test and Fresh Reads.** The eight tests given during the intervention phase show that all study participants, regardless of beginning comprehension and fluency levels, experienced progress and setbacks in the vocabulary and comprehension across the tests. Regardless of fluctuation on selection tests and fresh reads, ultimately study participants made progress according to the Unit test and/or the Fountas and Pinnell Posttest Assessment.

Variations on selection test and fresh reads scores seem to demonstrate that learning is not linear. Students with special needs who struggle with reading often “demonstrate multiple problems associated with low comprehension, including poor decoding, fluency, and comprehension” (Boardman, 2007, pg 4). With multiple factors contributing to their reading difficulty it is not likely that students with special needs will show the same level of progress from activity to activity or from assessment to assessment, but academic development is possible with direct instruction. “Direct instruction approaches have been associated with improved outcomes in reading comprehension for students with learning disabilities” (Boardman, 2007, pg. 3). The fluctuations in growth demonstrate, that examining incremental growth is as important
as looking at the final outcome, otherwise defined as Progress monitoring by Boardman et al “systematic assessments of students’ academic performance that is used to determine what students have learned and to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction” (2007, pg. 153). This held true for the class average as well. The class also fluctuated on the tests given during the study, and showed an increase in the class average on the Unit test and the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment at the end of the study.

**Fountas and Pinnell pre and post test.** All reading work was done using reading comprehension and fluency curriculum infused with theatre techniques and all study participants’ reading rate and reading level on the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessments increased from pre to post test; showing that the study participants were positively impacted by the curriculum. All study participants regardless of where their levels fell on the pre-test, made improvements by the end of the nine week study. Study participants who read slowly or choppy on the pre-test increased their reading rate and read more smoothly and with more expression during the post test. Therefore the repeated reading activities such as choral reading, fresh reads, rehearsals and performances, done during the study had a positive impact.

**Routine/Activities**

The theatre routine included warm ups, activities, and theatre games. The full routine was done once a week during theatre times. The routine was done in parts throughout the week, integrated into the reading and social studies curriculum. The warm ups were used to help students focus on their breathing and staying calm. The students were taught and practiced reading comprehension and fluency skills through the activities and theatre games. The study participants engaged in the routine and activities throughout the study, and all experienced improvement in at least two of the areas of reading addressed in the study.
Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension was the main focus of this study. Three of the study participants began the study with comprehension scores below grade level. These study participants also began the study with fluency reading rates below 100WCPM, which is below grade level for 5th grade. According to McKenna and Stahl’s Table 4.4 Curriculum-Based Norms in Oral Reading Fluency for grade 2-5 “grade 5 Fall WCPM, 126” (2003, pg 75). As explained in Chapter two, reading comprehension and fluency are interconnected. The study participants’ low reading rates make it challenging for them to keep track of the events of the text while working to decode the text, which hinders their comprehension. The activities and theatre games were used to help students develop reading comprehension strategies and fluency.

Warm up and theatre games. Warm ups and theatre games were designed to help study participants learn how to focus and self regulate. According to Vygotsky “A child’s greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action.” (1966, p. 40). Focus and self-regulation are very important to success for academic learning and testing situations “Self-regulated learning is a process that assists students in managing their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions in order to successfully navigate their learning experiences. This process occurs when purposeful actions and processes are directed towards the acquisition of information or skills” (Zumbrun, 2011, pg 4). Focus and self-regulation have a major impact on a student’s ability to learn and demonstrate what they have learned through their performance on assessments. In accordance with the results, it can be concluded that the more
engaged a study participants is during the warm up and theatre games process the more likely she/he is to benefit from the techniques learned during warm ups and theatre games to testing situations. Additionally, even if a study participant began the process of learning warm up techniques unsettled, and later settles into being able to use the focus techniques, she/he will see improvements in testing demeanor. Finally the student who remains unsettled may have lower instances of improvement in focus and test taking demeanor. J1, who was the least focused during the study showed the least increase in his score, but was more settled during the post test than he was during the pre-test.

Visualization and improvisation. Visualization and Improvisation were used to help students discuss and clarify their understandings of a text. Visualizations became a part of the fabric of the curriculum and became interwoven with the students’ understanding of how to execute improvisation. The development of comprehension strategies using visualization and improvisation resulted in maintaining or increasing comprehension scores.

Character analysis and skit writing. Character analysis and skit writing were the most challenging of the theatre techniques. It is clear that the writing assignments require longer periods of exposure to master. The study participants had to labor and revisit these activities more than others. The study participants and the class in general put forth the effort needed because they were motivated by the opportunities to perform. Character analysis and skit writing activities built stamina in study participants because they both require returning to the text multiple times to find evidence and accurate reporting of events. This work of returning to the text helped study participants practice this skill. Over the course of a school year students would
continue to build on these initial experiences and have the chance to become more successful at using this strategy.

**Fluency**

Fluency is defined as a co-maker of meaning with reading comprehension in chapter 2. Fluency is the rate at which a reader reads accurately, automatically and with prosody. When readers read fluently they have room to make sense of and correct their thinking about what they are reading. During this study fluency was practiced during choral reading, fresh reads, rehearsals and performances. All of the theatre activities interacted to develop the study participants’ fluency and reading comprehension. Choral reading was taught and conducted to help students develop their reading rate through simultaneous and repeated readings. Improvisation, a comprehension activity, followed choral reading. Fresh reads were used to track the development of students’ reading fluency throughout the study. Many of the texts that were choral read and used for improvisation became scripts that the class rehearsed and performed. All of these activities gave study participants multiple opportunities to develop fluency through purpose driven repeated readings. Choral reading and Improvisation were the class’ preferred activities, students experienced success in both of these activities because there are no right or wrong answers.

**Fresh reads and choral reading.** Choral reading was the most requested activity after improvisation. Study participants were motivated to learn the routines and participate in choral reading and fresh reads. During choral reading and fresh reads appropriate reading rate and prosody are modeled and practiced. At the end of the study all study participants increased their
reading rate. Three of the four study participants increased their reading rate to within the range expected of 5th graders at the point in the year when the study ended, 105-120 WCPM.

**Performances/Rehearsals.** Towards the beginning of the study the students were somewhat nervous about performing and had little understanding of how rehearsals were run. Study participants present with disabilities, such as ADHD and anxiety that affected focus and attentiveness. Throughout the study the participants’ abilities to attend improved, but remained a challenge to be faced. After getting mixed feedback from a few audiences, it was as though they could finally understand the importance of rehearsing and staying quiet and focused during performances. The students needed feedback, and time and space to grow at their own pace in order to perform well. Through the rehearsal and performance portion of the study participants build fluency by repeated readings. Performing also built confidence over time, in a supportive environment.

**Personal Perspectives**

How one person feels about an experience may be different from that of another. How we approach things is affected by how we see ourselves “intrinsic motivation and volition guide the level of effort and persistence used in completing the assignment and use of self-regulation strategies” (Zumbrunn, 2011, pg 8). The study participants were taught to be a part of their own learning, so it was important to include their thoughts about how the intervention impacted them in the study. The study participants were interviewed one on one at the end of the study. Their interviews were discussed in depth in chapter six.

The teacher researcher was also a very active part of the study, as developer, implementer, and modifier of the curriculum. Her perspective was the window through which
the study is viewed. The teacher researcher kept a journal and it was examined in depth in chapter five.

**Student perspective.** The study participants entered the class with some prior knowledge of how their new class was run because the fourth and fifth grade classes are in the same area of the building, or they had come to the class in a previous year as an audience member to see other students perform. From the interviews there was only one study participant who had minor theatre experience in the past. At the conclusion of the study all of the all study participants reported having had positive responses to their theatre experience. The study participants were aware of what they should be learning and, when asked, without prompting all study participants referenced some element of the study focus and the theatre experience in their responses.

All study participants’ perspective of their reading development was that they had improved their reading and believed that theatre had helped them achieve their improvement. All the study participants perceived improvement matched their actual improvement. All study participants were able to name ways that they had benefited from the theatre infused curriculum. These perceived benefits matched benefits pointed out by the teacher researcher as well.

The study participants differed in the theatre activities they wanted to keep the same, but all of them readily came up with things that should remain. Similarly, they had no negative responses to things they want to change. Three out of the four study participants could not come up with anything they wanted to change, and the fourth study participant wanted longer plays. The study participants all reported having positive theatre experiences and looked forward to continuing to do theatre in the classroom.
Teacher perspective. Having worked in the field of education for over twenty years I understand how a teacher sets the tone for the classroom experience. Similarly, having worked in the theatre community for about the same amount of time I also know how a director guides the trajectory of a performance. In my role of teacher researcher I brought both these skills sets to bear. When I am excited and confident my students are also, when I am compassionate and thoughtful my students are also. When I am relentless and refuse to give up my students will often, dig in and display those qualities themselves. I have a belief, developed in me from the time I attended my mother’s home kindergarten and learned to read, that there is nothing I cannot do. I bring this belief to my work in the classroom and believe fully in my students and I will them to believe in themselves!

I am honest with my students, celebrating every victory no matter how small, chiding them to drop their excuses when they come to me with their “why not’s” and “how come I can’t’s”, and explaining to them when and why they have failed at something, then nudging them towards finding ways to be successful the next time. My motto is “Students are not enabled to seek their minimum potential but fostered on their journey towards maximizing their potential!” I am not satisfied with doing the minimum amount of work and I do not stand still and let them think the minimum is acceptable from them.

I was acutely aware of my effect on my students during this study. I questioned if they were enthusiastic because I was or if they had their own “fire in the belly” for theatre. I think it may start off that they are feeding off of my energy, but there is a point where this shifts for them and they begin to own their own development. Examples of this shift were explained in chapter five, including when D1 shifted from being unfocused and became the focused student who was directing his own improvisation scenes and reminding others to pay attention. Also J2’s
determination, despite her struggles with anxiety, to come back to perform time and time again, when there was no pressure from the teacher researcher or her peers. Her mother informed me that she talks about the theatre work she does in class and feels proud of herself. These are moments of ownership for my students and the more we work together my belief in them becomes their belief in themselves. I give them the script through a thought out curriculum that uses theatre as a vehicle to teach them what they are required to learn, I give them experiences that are motivating and offer them opportunities for success. I help them set the stage, but they must put on the show.

**Implications**

This study has two implications, for future research and, further development and examination of the implementation of curriculum infused with theatre arts for students with special needs and general education students and a need for a yearlong study to demonstrate the effects of this curriculum over time.

**Limitations**

Along with implications for future study, there are limitations to replicating the theatre arts curriculum that are important to note. Although the curriculum used the stories in the 5th grade Reading Street book and some pieces of Reading Street curriculum, the majority of what was used was adapted by and/or developed by the teacher researcher. Not having a pre-packaged curriculum leaves more for the teacher to do. Teachers must incorporate theatre techniques into their current curriculum and this requires more time and gathering of resources. This is a limitation but can be a positive as well, freeing teachers up to tailor curriculum to the needs and levels of the students in their classroom. Additionally, because the curriculum is not established, the teacher may need to discuss with and gain support of administration before implementation.
A second limitation is teacher knowledge, skill, and dedication to the curriculum. These are essential to the success of implementation. The teacher researcher was highly trained and conducted extensive research in both reading and theatre arts. The teacher who takes on this curriculum needs to have subject matter knowledge as well as knowledge of how to incorporate theatre into her or his teaching. This is in addition to understanding how to teach theatre to children. These limitations are also opportunities to make improvements in teacher training in higher education programs and in schools.

**Further Research**

The field of education is currently data driven, therefore to support the recommendation of any type of curriculum, it is important to have empirical research to support its use. The call for empirical research in the area of theatre arts began in the 60’s. Davis asserted that “It is evident . . . that much more experimental research is needed on which to found the creative studies of the future” (1961, pg. 274). Such experimental research could be qualitative or quantitative, with the goal being to create a body of research that appeals to schools, and districts.

Should theatre be taught as a separate subject or as an integral component of the curriculum, where theatre techniques are used to teach the subject matter? In the 70’s Duke questioned what the role of theatre should be in education “the status of creative dramatics in the school centers on whether the art should be taught as a separate subject, or integrated with other subject matter” (1975, pg. 55). The question of how the arts should be used in schools is not a new one, but one that remains unanswered. School districts are quick to drop arts programs when budgets are squeezed. The development of a body of empirical research is needed, that
shows, not just how, but why, for whom, and to what extent theatre infused curriculum can be beneficial.

Currently, most of the research involving theatre and education is “how to” and/or focuses on readers theatre. Therefore the need for empirical research persists. Klein reissued the call at the end of the 80’s. “Theatre educators must focus their attention on in-depth research that presents concrete evidence to support their claims about the educational benefits of theatre in order to institute drama and theatre in the schools” (Klein, 1989, p. 27). There still remains much work to be done in this area. As indicated through the present study which showed significant impact for students with special needs and their classmates, the current need necessitates empirical research that examines the broader connection between the use of theatre techniques as part of classroom curriculum that may impact reading comprehension and fluency in all students and particularly students with moderate special needs.

**Longitudinal Study**

This study constitutes a beginning, significantly more research along the same lines needs to be done to legitimize this intervention. During this nine week study three of the four students with special needs made progress with their reading comprehension and all four students with their reading level and reading rate. It would be interesting to explore how a longer study would impact progress. Being that three of the study participants made progress in all areas, it is fair to predict that additional progress would occur.

The goal for a longer study would be for it to take place over the course of a school year. A study of this length could reveal clearer connects between the theatre techniques and the reading comprehension and fluency progress of the students. It could also demonstrate how much growth could occur during a yearlong study.
Final Thoughts

"I hold the world but as the world,
A stage where every man must play a part
The Merchant of Venice, Act I, Scene I, William Shakespeare

The process of developing, implementing, and analyzing this study generated knowledge about the impact of theatre infused curriculum on the reading comprehension of students with moderate special needs. There is more to be learned. I hope that on the small scale my students have learned that they can, that they have their part to play, and that they are capable. On a larger scale I hope that other educators will be compelled to do similar research and continue to add to the body of knowledge that will help students become lifelong learners.
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IDEA 2004, 2006, §300.17


Shakespeare, W. *The Merchant of Venice*.


## Appendix A

### Engagement Instrument

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</tbody>
</table>

6. Student name ________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>warm-up</th>
<th>activity</th>
<th>game</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>engaged with others</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engaged with instructor</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participated</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disruptive</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reluctant</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>did not participate</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
<td>______</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Student Social Satisfaction Instrument

Interview Questions:

Have you had other theatre experiences before this year?
If so where and what was that like?
Do you know your reading level from last year?
Did your reading level improve?
What was your reading level in September?
Has it improved? What is it now?
Have you participated in theatre before this class?
Have you done any theatre activities in your 3rd or 4th grade class?
What did you like about doing theatre during reading and social studies this year?
What didn’t you like?
Do you think that the theatre activities helped improve your reading?
Why?
How?
What is something you learned from the theatre activities?
How can you use what you learned to help you when you read on your own?
What would you change about the theatre activities?

What would you keep the same?
Appendix C

Teacher Researcher Journal

How did the lesson progress?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Lesson Objective
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Which students fulfilled the objective and why?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Which students did not fulfilled the objective and why?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Adjustments for future lessons:

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Appendix D

Parental Informed Consent Form

Reading Comprehension and Fluency Curriculum Infused with Theatre Techniques and Its Effects on Students with Special Needs

June 26, 2013

Dear Parents:

You are invited to permit your child to participate in a research study that will attempt to understand the impact of reading comprehension and fluency curriculum taught using theatre techniques on students with special needs. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not to allow your child to participate. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. Your child is eligible to participate in this study because he/she has been assigned to Hennigan School room 313 as an Inclusion Student.

Project: Reading Comprehension and Fluency Curriculum Infused with Theatre Techniques and Its Effects on Students with Special Needs

Purpose of the Project: This study will investigate the impact of reading comprehension and fluency curriculum taught using theatre techniques on students with special needs.

Procedures: Your child will be observed while he/she participates in class and an interview will be conducted by the teacher researcher. The interview will take approximately thirty minutes to one hour of your child’s time; the interviewer will take notes on your child’s responses. During this interview your child will be asked a series of questions. These questions are designed to allow your child/ to share his/her experiences in the classroom.

During Reading and Social Studies, as a part of the curriculum, your child will participate in lessons that incorporate theatre games, improvisation, character analysis and skit writing/performing.

The study will begin on September 5, 2013 and End Dec 13, 2013.

Risks and/or Discomforts: There are no risks or discomforts associated with this research.

Benefits: The information gained from this study may help us to better understand the impact of reading comprehension and fluency curriculum taught using theatre techniques on students with special needs.

Confidentiality: During the observations and interview, your child will be asked to provide a pseudonym to insure that your child’s identity will not be revealed. The note taking and observation sheet will not identify your child. The note taking and observation sheets will only have the pseudonym that your child picked during the interview. Once all note taking and
observation sheets are entered in a database, they will be destroyed. The information obtained during this study may be published or presented at education meetings but the data will be prepared as aggregated data.

**Compensation:** Your child will not receive any type of compensation for participating in this study.

**Opportunity to Ask Questions:** You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or during the study. You may call Valencia Hughes-Imani at any time, (617) 233-5836 or email hughesim@bc.edu. If you have questions concerning your child’s rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or report any concerns about the study, you may contact the Boston College Institutional Review Board, telephone (617) 552-4778.

**Freedom to Withdraw:** You are free to decide not to enroll your child in this study or to withdraw your child at any time without adversely affecting their or your relationship with the teacher researcher or Hennigan School.

**Consent:** If you permit your child to participate in this study, your child will be observed and interviewed at school.

You are voluntary making a decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to allow your child to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

__________________________________________
Signature of Parent                      Date

In my judgment the parent/legal guardian is voluntary and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

__________________________________________
Signature of Teacher Researcher          Date

Valencia Hughes-Imani: (617) 233-5836
Lynch School of Education
Hennigan Elementary School
200 Heath Street
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

Or
Boston College
Lynch School of Education
Administrator Informed Consent Form

Reading Comprehension and Fluency Curriculum Infused with Theatre Techniques and Its Effects on Students with Special Needs

June 28, 2013

Dear Principal Hennigan Elementary:

I am writing to request your permission to conduct a research study in my 5th grade classroom, that will attempt to understand the impact of reading comprehension and fluency curriculum taught using theatre techniques on students with special needs. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not to allow this research study to be done here at the Hennigan. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. The students are eligible to participate in this study because they have been assigned to the Hennigan School room 313 as an Inclusion Student.

Project: Reading Comprehension and Fluency Curriculum Infused with Theatre Techniques and Its Effects on Students with Special Needs

Purpose of the Project: This study will investigate the impact of reading comprehension and fluency curriculum taught using theatre techniques on students with special needs.

Procedures: The students will be asked to participate in an interview, and allow the researcher to observe them while they participate in class. The interview will take approximately thirty minutes to one hour of your child’s time. The interviewer will take notes on your child’s responses. During this interview each student will be asked a series of questions. These questions are designed to allow you’re the students to share their experiences in the classroom.

Risks and/or Discomforts: There are no risks or discomforts associated with this research.

Benefits: The information gained from this study may help us to better understand the impact of reading comprehension and fluency curriculum taught using theatre techniques on students with special needs.

Confidentiality: During the observations and interview, each student will be asked to provide a pseudonym to insure that their identity will not be revealed. The note taking and observation sheet will not identify any student. The note taking and observation sheets will only have the pseudonym that your child picked during the interview. Once all note taking and observation sheets are entered in a database, they will be destroyed. The information obtained during this study maybe published or presented at education meetings but the data will be prepared as aggregated data.

Compensation: The students will not receive any type of compensation for participating in this study.
**Opportunity to Ask Questions:** You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate or during the study. You may call Valencia Hughes-Imani at any time, (617) 233-5836 or email hughesim@bc.edu. If you have questions concerning the student’s rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or report any concerns about the study, you may contact the Boston College Institutional Review Board, telephone (617) 552-4778.

**Freedom to Withdraw:** You are free to decide not to allow this research study at the Hennigan School.

**Consent:** If you permit this study at the Hennigan, the students will be observed and interviewed at school.

You are voluntary making a decision whether or not to allow this research study to take place. Your signature certifies that you have decided to allow the research study having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

______________________________
Maria Cordon, Principal Hennigan Elementary School                     Date

In my judgment the administrator is voluntary and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

______________________________
Signature of Teacher Researcher                     Date
Valencia Hughes: (617) 233 - 5836
Lynch School of Education
Hennigan Elementary School
200 Heath Street
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

Or

Boston College
Lynch School of Education
Campion Hall, Room 101
140 Commonwealth Avenue
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467