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Connecting Reading to Writing: At-Risk Readers' Comprehension Acquisition via Discussion Groups With Active Readers.

Jane Ann Medver

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

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CONNECTING READING TO WRITING:
AT-RISK READERS' COMPREHENSION ACQUISITION VIA
DISCUSSION GROUPS WITH ACTIVE READERS

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

by
Jane A. Medver
B.A., University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1982
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1991
Education Specialist, Reading,
Louisiana State University, 1993
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents,
Thomas and Ronnie Medver,
who taught me to always believe in myself, to strive
for the top, and to take chances against all odds.

I would like to thank them for reminding me
of how far I had already gone,
not how far I still had to go.
I LOVE YOU !!!
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore an alternative method of comprehension acquisition for at-risk readers. This study examined the following aspects of a classroom reading program as it pertained to the at-risk reader: (a) an overview of at-risk behaviors, (b) the reading/writing connection, (c) reading methods and philosophies, (d) grouping techniques, and (e) comprehension acquisition. The focus of the study was to investigate the actions of four at-risk readers as they interacted with active readers (peers) in flexible, heterogenous groups in order to discuss and comprehend text. By providing in-depth descriptions of the four at-risk readers, this study presented valuable insights into an alternative reading method that benefited at-risk readers in both comprehension and writing.
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

According to Dowhower and Spidel (1989) the definition of reading is that "reading is comprehension and readers must actively construct meaning from written text." While this definition of reading suggests that comprehension is the ultimate goal for readers, it is not always the primary focus in reading instruction. Many reading programs focus on skills or phonics instruction and place little importance on comprehension acquisition, especially in programs for at-risk readers. When comprehension instruction is included in a lesson, it is normally after the fact; teachers frequently teach comprehension skills after students have read, and perhaps misunderstood a story (Duffy & Roehler, 1984).

The purpose of this study was to investigate an alternative method of comprehension acquisition for at-risk readers. The specific areas that were examined with reference to at-risk readers and comprehension were: (a) peer group discussions, (b) flexible grouping techniques, and (c) the reading/writing connection. The study was specifically directed at the at-risk readers as they interacted in discussion groups. These group discussions focused on stories read during reading classes in addition to their written paragraphs, essays, and reports. One of my primary objectives was to provide a view of at-risk
readers as "equals" in a classroom by demonstrating that this group of students could potentially be responsible for their own comprehension through interactions and discussions with classmates who are considered to be active readers.

Value of the Project

This project was significant for several reasons. First, it focused on a group of students that is often considered to be a "problem" in a regular classroom, the at-risk readers. These students have great difficulties dealing with daily reading lessons, yet are still expected to do so. Special programs are usually in place in most schools and are available to at-risk readers. However, these programs serve to segregate the at-risk student from the regular classroom (Allington, 1994). Another method used to exclude at-risk readers from their classmates is ability grouping. At-risk readers are usually placed in low reading groups where they encounter fewer opportunities to read, less comprehension instruction, and fewer beneficial instructional activities (Allington, 1983; Hiebert, 1983; and Shannon, 1985). In this study the at-risk readers were given opportunities to function as equals in the discussion groups. They were asked to participate in group discussions and complete the same activities as their peers in order to receive the same instruction and advantages as the active readers.
Second, all at-risk students were allowed to read, discuss, take notes, and reread the stories with at least three or four active readers. This activity served to make the at-risk readers directly responsible for their own reading and comprehension. A primary problem for the at-risk readers' was their limited background knowledge and language abilities, hence deterring comprehension of stories (Moser and Perez, 1992). The concentrated group discussions gave the at-risk readers ample opportunities to discuss the required readings. This allowed for the at-risk readers to have an opportunity to benefit from their group members' background knowledge and personal input. The discussions allowed for the activation of background knowledge which is crucial to comprehension (Yopp & Dreher, 1994).

Third, this study allowed at-risk readers to adequately review and discuss the story through writing. As Pierpont (1990) noted, the more opportunities that students are given to read and to write about books, the deeper their responses to literature will be, and the more likely the chance that students and teachers will become partners in learning. The students were able to retell the actions in a story along with sharing their own thoughts and ideas, making their reviews more personal, and adding opinions about the stories.
Research and Comprehension Acquisition

In examining the topic of comprehension acquisition, educational researchers have noted many areas worthy of exploration. Some notable areas of research are: (a) whole language and literature-based instruction (e.g., Calkins and Harwayne, 1991; Goodman, 1986), (b) grouping techniques (e.g., Wiggins, 1994; Robinson and Good, 1987), (c) activating background knowledge (e.g., Gagne, 1985; Straw, Craven, Sadowy, and Baardman, 1993), and (d) collaboration (Reither and Vipond, 1989; Danielson, 1992).

Considering the diversity of the topics in the area of comprehension, it is safe to conclude that the research completed in comprehension is just as vast and diverse. Therefore, the focus of this study was narrowed in order to clearly state the intended areas of study.

Discussions will be the primary area of focus. At-risk readers were placed in small, flexible groups and given opportunities to discuss and review stories they had read. During these discussions the at-risk readers' participation was noted. Their ability to transfer background information and direct information from the discussions to their writing was observed. Finally, their written reviews were examined to see if they developed their own opinions about the stories or if they borrowed the opinions of their group members. Specifically, I searched for a direct link between group discussions and
the at-risk readers' comprehension of the stories as evidenced in their writings.

To obtain an observational advantage while viewing group discussions, it was necessary to become a member of the discussion groups as a participant observer. Participant observers are able "to experience the world of daily life as an insider" (Jorgensen, 1989, p.63). As a participant observer, my primary focus was to interact with discussion groups that included at least one at-risk reader and two or three active readers. My interaction with the discussion group members, specifically the at-risk readers, was an attempt to observe how the at-risk readers constructed meaning of text, as they clarified their current values, beliefs, and understandings through the discussions (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Qualitative researchers try to relate the "piece" of the world they are viewing to the "whole" world. However, they must typically narrow their view in order to make the subject matter more manageable. This view, however, must still reflect a naturally existing unit worthy of a more in-depth look (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). In this study, the broadest view was that of comprehension acquisition. The view was then narrowed in the following manner: (a) comprehension was viewed through the reading/writing connection, (b) comprehension was noted through the group discussions that led to written reviews of stories, and (c)
at-risk readers were observed in the above comprehension activities, their behaviors were chronicled, and their achievements in both the discussion groups and comprehension acquisition were noted. Such "real world" experiences are the primary focus of qualitative research and participant observation. By becoming a part of the discussion group, I was able to cross over the student/teacher boundary to become a participant observer.

**Need for the Study**

The need for this study emerged as I was completing a pilot study focusing on alternative grouping techniques. This study noted how various flexible grouping techniques could be beneficial in an elementary reading classroom. During this pilot study, I observed how students interacted during peer group discussions. I also began to realize that at-risk students seemed to take a more active role when they participated with stronger or active readers. Linking the discussion groups with the reading to writing connection gave me a new perspective on teaching and gaining optimum student comprehension. These reflections were critical in the process that motivated me to investigate the following question:

**Did collaborative discussion groups assist at-risk readers in comprehending text and transferring the gathered information into writing?**

By focusing on at-risk readers I was able to conduct
an indepth investigation of a group of students who have
been at the center of varying opinions in the area of
reading education. It has been noted that these students
often receive instruction that is inferior to that of their
active reading classmates (Kirk, 1994). Also, they are
often excluded from regular classroom instruction due to
grouping techniques and special reading programs

Placing these students in peer discussion groups with
active readers served many purposes. The at-risk
readers were given opportunities to function as equals
during reading activities. They received more individual
attention by way of peer interaction. They were allowed
to remain on the same reading level with their peers;
therefore, their reading instruction was equivalent to
their peers. They were given the opportunity to gain
background knowledge and insights from their peers.
The at-risk readers were given opportunities to become
more responsible and skilled readers and writers.

The need for this study stemmed from an ongoing desire
to give all students equal opportunities during classroom
reading instruction. The discussion groups served as a
motivating force for the at-risk readers, since they
usually lack self-esteem and have little motivation to
learn (Danielson and Tighe, 1994). While focusing on the
interaction between the at-risk and the active readers
during these discussion groups, I intended to observe the progress made in the area of comprehension acquisition and writing.

**Definition of terms**

The following terms were defined because of their significance in this study. They were used in reference to the school and classroom used in this study or in reference to the study itself.

1. **Active Readers** - Students who have few or no problems with reading as evidenced by their classroom behaviors and test scores.

2. **At-risk Readers** - Students who have had various social and academic difficulties that have caused them to have problems with reading. These students remain in a regular classroom reading program and receive no special assistance.

3. **California Achievement Test** - An achievement test given annually to students beginning in kindergarten in order to measure growth in reading and content areas.

4. **Discussion Groups** - Groups of four or five students who work together to read assigned stories; talk about the stories; share ideas, information, and opinions about the stories; take notes on the stories; and assist one another with writing and editing of written reviews of the stories.

5. **Gesell Kindergarten Assessment** - An assessment of
developmental readiness administered to students prior to beginning kindergarten.

6. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich Reading Series - The reading program that has been used as the regular reading program in the focus school in this study since 1994.

7. Houghton-Mifflin Reading Series - A skills-based reading program that was used as the regular classroom reading program in the focus school in this study from 1983-1994.

8. Literature-based Instruction - Reading instruction that focuses on quality literature, writing, comprehension, and skills integration.

9. Outside Observer - The person who chronicled the action of the at-risk readers by observing from a point away from the group. She did not participate in any group activities.

10. Participant Observer - The person who chronicled the actions of the at-risk readers as she participated in the discussion group activities with the active readers and the at-risk readers.

11. Project Read - A kinesthetic, tactile approach to reading that focuses on speech sounds and written symbols in the school used in this study as an alternative reading program for students unable to learn by the standard reading program.
12. Reading/Writing Connection - The link between these two processes exhibits each individual student's ability to read and to comprehend materials, then report on these materials in order to demonstrate comprehension of them.

13. Skills-based Instruction - Reading instruction that focuses on quality literature, writing, comprehension, and skills integration.

14. Written Reviews - A written report that details a story read during classroom reading and exhibits proof of each student's individual ability to comprehend the stories read.

**Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to bring at-risk students into mainstream the of reading instruction. It also investigated an alternative method in which students are able to comprehend. This investigation was conducted using the methodology of the participant observer. My field notes and reflections were joined together with the field notes and reflections of my student teacher (from the stance of outside observer), the notes and opinions of the key informants, and student background information and test scores. A description and analysis of the data will be offered in Chapter III.

Teachers actively promote the notion that the main goal of learning to read is the understanding of text
which, ironically, presents a difficult hurdle for the at-risk reader. Also, this area is usually omitted from the reading instruction given to the at-risk group. As noted earlier, Dowhower and Speidel (1989, p. 52) defined reading in this manner, "reading is comprehension and readers must actively construct meaning from written text." One aspect of this study was to develop comprehension and writing skills for at-risk readers by including them as equals in peer discussion groups.

Chapter II will present a review of pertinent literature pertaining to at-risk readers, the reading/writing connection, reading instruction and comprehension, discussion groups, and other grouping techniques. Chapter III describes the participants, the data sources, and the procedures used in this study. Chapter IV presents a look at the at-risk readers' backgrounds. Chapter V chronicles the actions of at-risk readers during group discussions. Chapter VI gives a detailed view of the discussion groups, and Chapter VII discusses and interprets the findings from the data collected. It also suggests implications for further studies with reference to at-risk readers, discussion groups, and comprehension.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In viewing the four at-risk readers as they interacted in discussion groups, it was important to review areas that were of direct importance in relation to this study. Four areas have been noted to have a direct influence in this study. These areas are: (a) at-risk readers, (b) the reading/writing connection, (c) reading methods and philosophies, and (d) discussion groups.

At-risk readers are normally able to function in the reading classroom. However, through observation and ongoing monitoring of their classroom performance and grades, it is apparent that they are unable to make a connection with reading and writing activities. These students are often able to function adequately in other classroom activities that require speaking, listening, interacting, and reasoning. Unfortunately, they are unable to make these connections during formal reading activities. They are not considered to be learning disabled students, nor do they receive any assistance from special programs or teachers. At-risk readers fall into a category that can best be described as "no man's land", an area where few teachers focus their attention or instruction.

At-risk students are the students who are left in classrooms because they do not qualify for any specific interventions. These students are required to complete
daily reading activities similar to their active reading peers. Because of this at-risk readers must perform in reading programs that are designed to reach the average student. Some notable programs and philosophies are: (a) basal instruction, (b) skills-based instruction, (c) the whole language philosophy, and (d) literature-based instruction.

While all of these reading methods and philosophies are viable reading techniques, they all present problems when dealing with comprehension, especially for at-risk readers. This problem is compounded for at-risk readers because of the difficulties these students encounter when trying to deal with daily activities. An alternative to standard comprehension lessons is to have the at-risk students experience the story through peer interaction and writing. Discussion groups allow the at-risk readers to share and discuss the stories read with active readers. Writing or reporting about the story also allows the at-risk reader to review the story. Both the discussions and writings give the at-risk readers greater opportunities to try to comprehend stories read during reading activities.

This study sought to determine whether or not at-risk readers were better able to comprehend stories if they were given the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings, background knowledge, and gathered information with their active reading peers. By chronicling the behaviors of four
at-risk readers as they participated in discussion groups that focused on stories read, I hoped to note progress in four areas that helped to assist the at-risk readers in their quest to comprehend stories.

At-Risk Readers

It has been noted that some students have great difficulties dealing with the traditional reading activities that are the central focus of classroom reading programs. These students are able to function in the classroom and complete activities. However, through close observation and ongoing discussions with these students, it becomes more and more apparent that some students are unable to make a connection with the reading activities. These same students are very bright in many areas and able to participate in discussions and activities that require speaking, listening, interacting, and reasoning, but they seem unable to make these connections during formal reading instruction.

These students cannot be categorized as active readers, however, they are not learning disabled readers either. They instead fall into an area where few teachers focus their attention or instruction. These students are loosely called "at-risk readers". In order to define the term "at-risk reader", and adequately describe the behaviors and attitudes exhibited by these students, a general description of the two groups of readers that
border the "at-risk" group, the active readers and the learning disabled readers, is necessary.

Active readers are those students who are able to perform the various tasks that are presented daily. They have acquired sufficient background knowledge through their personal experiences and have the ability to transfer these experiences to their reading activities in order to comprehend text. Grant (1994) and Simpson (1984) describe active readers as readers who are able to attend to the text at hand, interact with it, reconstruct the text, elaborate on the meaning of the text in relation to specified learning tasks, and give the text a personal significance. It should be noted that the active readers are the central focus of most regular reading activities.

The label "learning disabled" varies among school systems, however most definitions contain certain traits that are most often considered when a school seeks to describe a student in their system as learning disabled. First of all "it is common in research and in public policy to identify a child as learning disabled if there is a discrepancy between observed and expected achievement" (Fletcher, Shaywitz, S.E., Shankweiler, Katz, Liberman, Stuebing, Francis, Fowler, and Shaywitz, B.A., 1994, p.6). Kirk and Bateman (1962-1963) described these children as having problems mastering academic tasks in the absence of mental retardation, sensory disorders, and cultural
factors. Learning disabled readers were described by Rutter and Yule (1975) as a group which is experiencing general reading backwardness, and represented by readers whose reading skills were consistent with their IQs.

These students are unable to deal with printed text and often read far below their grade level. They experience phonological limitations such as segmenting spoken words phonemically, errors in naming, reduced or slow speed in oral reading, limited memory, and severe problems with comprehension (Wolf, Bally, and Morris, 1986; Brady, 1991; Brady, Mann, and Schmidt, 1987; Gathercole and Baddeley, 1990). Many special programs have been designed to assist at-risk and learning disabled students with reading instruction. However, these programs serve to segregate them from the regular classroom (Allington, 1994). Tropea (1993) and Skrtic (1991) explained that special programs serve to exclude the learning disabled student and to maintain the traditional school curriculum or instruction for students who are not assigned to these special programs.

With these parameters now set, it is essential to define the phrase "at-risk reader". Sanacore (1994) reminds us that there are many dimensions to being an at-risk student, including academic failure, drug addiction, alcohol abuse, HIV infection, teenage pregnancy, and crime. While these factors are of considerable influence, the
focus in this study will be on the behaviors specific to reading abilities.

One area that seems to create at-risk reading behaviors is that of cultural deprivation. At-risk readers in this realm are those who probably will not succeed in school because they lack experiences in their communities, families, and homes that schools expect and require for success. These students usually lack self-esteem and have little motivation to learn (Danielson and Tighe, 1994). These at-risk readers have few, if any, literacy experiences at home and receive little support from their parents and families, therefore their reading behaviors have not developed to a point where these students are able to adequately function in a regular reading classroom.

At-risk reading behaviors can also be found in students who are raised in environments that are rich in text and literacy development experiences. Here their primary deficiency is that these students tend to lack the motivation necessary to complete the reading activities required to be successful in school. In other words, they do not express interest in, nor do they put forth effort when completing reading activities. At-risk readers lack self-confidence in their own abilities, and they do not persist when they encounter reading difficulties (Ames, 1990). Students who lack the motivation to complete reading tasks often exemplify the same behaviors as
students who have been culturally deprived of literacy development opportunities.

In addition to the two categories described above, there are also some students who have not been culturally deprived, nor do they lack the motivation to read, but they still have great difficulties in reading. These students are not considered to be learning disabled, but they still do not depict the attributes of the active reader. These students exhibit a predisposition toward learning/mastery goals, however their desire and knowledge will not result in sufficient mastery of reading activities in order to be considered active readers (Corno, 1992).

While students from each of the three above groups all seem to have different origins for their reading difficulties, they do exhibit many of the same symptoms. Typically, all at-risk readers exhibit several of the following characteristics: (a) overreliance on the graphophonic cueing system, (b) lack of fluency in oral reading, (c) a view of reading as accurate word recognition versus meaning construction, (d) few writing strategies, and (e) little self-monitoring and self-correcting behavior (Tancock, 1994).

In essence, at-risk readers have so many problems decoding and reading the words presented to them that they rarely try to deal with comprehending the written materials. With this in mind, Dowhower and Speidel's
(1989) definition of reading seems even more profound. They stated that "reading is comprehension and that readers must actively construct meaning from written text."

Teachers are actively promoting the notion that the main goal of learning to read is the understanding of text which ironically is the main stumbling block for the at-risk reader, and the one area that teachers often omit in their instruction of the at-risk reader.

While it has been noted that the at-risk reader has great difficulties dealing with and making meaning of text, little instruction is aimed at teaching comprehension strategies, so consideration of the at-risk reader is rarely included in the development of classroom reading instruction. Therefore the at-risk reader begins to slowly fade into the background as reading instruction is rarely focused on meeting his/her needs. Teachers normally attempt to assist at-risk readers by separating them from the rest of the class and teaching them in small groups, focusing the bulk of their instruction on skills and phonics.

Although many schools are shifting toward reading curriculums that are concentrating on more child-centered, holistic classrooms (Hintze, Shapiro, and Lutz, 1994), at-risk groups are still infused with fragmented reading instruction, structured by complicated sequences of skills (Cooper, 1990). The traditional program of remediation
involves extensive teaching of isolated sub-skills and reteaching, over and over, of those skills not mastered through what many have termed as skill and drill (Kirk, 1994). The students complete numerous worksheets that focus on the isolated skills in an orderly sequence. Most activities concentrate on having the student learn how to decode words so that they can read with greater fluency.

Phonics activities also play an important part in the at-risk reading curriculum. This approach focuses on letter names and letter sound correspondences also mired in worksheet activities which promote the idea of students working in isolation in order to complete these activities. Eventually the phonics activities progress to the reading of stories with carefully controlled vocabularies, measured sentences, and limited plots. By this, Glazer, Searfoss, and Gentile (1988, p.5) view comprehension as a "product that results from a student's ability to call words via phonics activities and offer expected answers to questions and assignments."

Both the skills approach and the phonics approach are founded on the premise of being linear and hierarchial. As Lipson and Wixson (1991) observed, readers who have been instructed in skills and phonics, understand text by analyzing the print as they move through successive levels of analysis. However, it seems that in spite of the repeated skills and drills and the focus on letter/sound
relationships, many at-risk readers have not grown into literate students. Many of these students still have not learned to read at all or they still read very slowly and with little comprehension. Because people use many different strategies, beyond the word attack skills, when normally reading for understanding (Smith, 1985), the at-risk readers continue to fall behind their peers until they eventually fall into the category of the learning disabled readers.

Many programs that are designed to correct reading problems and disabilities are in place in some school systems. Huge sums of money have been earmarked in efforts to remediate reading problems, however little is spent on preventing these problems. A great deal of research evidence suggests that reading failure can be prevented for most children, and only a very small amount of children do not respond to preventive measures (Hiebert, Colt, Catto, and Gury, 1992; Hiebert and Taylor, 1994). Conversely, very little evidence supports the notion that programs designed to correct reading problems beyond second grade are successful, and notes that those programs beyond third grade are highly unsuccessful (Kennedy, Birman, and Demaline, 1986).

Five notable early intervention programs that have yielded some success are: Success for All, The Winston-Salem Project, Early Intervention in Reading (EIR), The
Boulder Project, and Reading Recovery (Pikulski, 1994). The programs emphasize strategies and skills, repeated reading of picture books, phonemic awareness and blending abilities, and word recognition skills. All programs employ either some or all of these activities. While these programs do elicit positive effects, they still promote the idea of separating the at-risk reader from the rest of their classmates.

At-risk students present a great problem for regular classroom teachers. Teachers must attempt to focus their instruction on the needs of the majority of their students. At-risk students were often excluded from regular classroom reading activities in an attempt to give them more individualized attention. This method has proved to be counterproductive to the at-risk students' success in reading.

The Reading/Writing Connection

Teale (1987) and Goodman (1986) suggest that reading and writing are processes for comprehending written language. Researchers have taken an active interest in the significance of the connection between reading and writing and have found that they mutually reinforce each other in the process of literacy development (Musthafa, 1994).

Purves, Rogers, and Stoteer (1990) noted that literature is anything that evokes responses from readers, listeners, and viewers. With this in mind, writing is an
easy and efficient method to use along with a literature-based or whole language program as it gives students an avenue by which to respond to what they have read, and it also allows for eventual assessment of student work. Writing in response to literature allows for students to become more actively involved in the reading process through collaborative discussions of stories with peers, and then through the writing itself, as students can then personally reflect on their reading.

Reading and writing are reflective of one another, so they serve to reteach or reinforce reading activities. Also, by focusing on the writing process, students are able to become more adept at skills such as spelling, capitalization, punctuation, sentence structure, and other grammatical skills. Actively writing during class time helps to give greater meaning and purpose to skills that, in the past, were basically taught randomly and in isolation. This isolated approach greatly reduced their significance for students.

Writing can be used as a process to make meaning out of confusing ideas. Diaries and journals are kept so that a person can come to reconcile with uncertain situations. The same idea can be used in responding to literature or basal stories. The writing fuses personal feelings and background knowledge with new information. Students' responses to literature can show engagement in the form of
personal involvement with the text, or can allow the reader to make inferences based on what is read (Danielson, 1992).

Writing is therefore used as a tool in the comprehension process. The students are able to grapple with the information derived from the basal story or the literature read as they go through the steps in the writing process. The writing will normally invite the students to return to the story in order to clarify areas that seem vague. The reading and writing serve as supporters, and each defends the validity of the other.

As Pierpont (1990) noted, the more opportunities that students are given to read and to write about books, the deeper their responses to literature will be, and the likelier the chance that students and teachers will become partners in learning. The students' responses, although often of a personal nature, become more developed as the students gain experience in writing. Students will "gain maturity in writing as they conscientiously work to incorporate newly learned ways of thinking about things and as they learn more about the needs of their audience" (Bayliss, 1994, p. 247). Written responses to literature, therefore, serve to give the teacher individual student reactions to stories read. These responses will not only chronicle student comprehension of the stories, but will give the teacher insight as to how each student makes the information meaningful.
When writing about stories, one problem that could possibly occur would be that of students' written responses essentially reflecting the views of the teacher. Students want to please their teacher or make a passing grade so they use their writing exercises as a means of "fulfilling their teacher's expectations rather than an occasion for thinking through the literature they had read" (Marshall, 1987, p. 58). Using a variety of methods in which to discuss stories, other than the basic teacher-directed question/answer sessions, would not only promote independent thought and understanding, but would motivate student interaction and therefore greater comprehension of the stories.

Writing in response to literature allows for students to become more actively involved with the basal stories and the literature-based readings they have experienced. The writing activities give students greater opportunities to share personal experiences and to include their own background knowledge while trying to understand the text. Writing influences student comprehension by making the students active participants in the comprehension process. Current theory and research now shows that it is the reader that plays the decisive role in the meaning making (Musthafa, 1994), so all readers need to be given opportunities to understand text. In keeping with the fact that comprehension is such a dynamic force in reading
instruction, the basals and literature-based activities should be used to the greatest benefit. Making a connection between the reading and writing processes would serve as a catalyst for comprehension and understanding of text. The writing itself turns the reader into an active participant in the reading process and eventually a comprehender of the text. In the writing process, the meaningfulness, personal relevance, and personal involvement are vital conditions for students to truly understand why they are completing these activities (Smith, 1988).

Reading Methods and Philosophies

Basals

Despite current criticisms of basal series used in classrooms, "the basal reader is the most powerful tool and pervasive force affecting reading instruction in the elementary schools throughout the nation" (Antonacci, 1988, p. 131). Although basals are an efficient manner by which to teach reading, they are very structured, and thus they may work counterproductively in helping to develop students' comprehension abilities (Antonacci, 1988). While "new basals" have addressed some of the questions brought forth by teachers and adjusted their programs accordingly, the issue of how to achieve comprehension is still at large. The trend is for more integrated language arts instruction (Routman, 1988), and a greater recognition and
appreciation for quality literature in the instructional program (Galda, Cullinan, and Strickland, 1993). This trend has been the catalyst for many teachers and school systems to extend or alter their reading programs to include more literature in their reading programs, even if they are using a basal series as their primary reading program.

The prevalence of basal reading programs in our classrooms is a great influence on reading instruction in our schools. While most teachers are willing to express their discontent with the basal programs in place in their schools, they still use the programs as the central focus of their reading instruction. Many reasons have been cited for the continued use of basals in the classroom. Teachers' dependency on basals is central to the lack of teacher empowerment in reading, whereas teachers view the basal as the most essential resource in reading instruction (Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas, 1994). This is due to many mitigating circumstances such as time, money, availability, continuity from grade to grade, and school system requirements. The basal is viewed as a safe and efficient method by which to teach reading, so oftentimes it becomes the entire program.

Comprehension of text is the ultimate goal for readers, however it is often of secondary importance in basals. Skills instruction is usually the primary focus in
basal reading activities. Unfortunately, the skills presented are often unrelated to the stories and provide little assistance when reading the stories. Since most basals fail to connect skills instruction to the stories or to real life situations, teachers need to examine and adjust skill instruction to make a connection between learning a skill and applying it when reading text (Reutzel and Cooter, 1988). Teachers who wish to foster student expertise in applying reading skills may have to modify basal tasks considerably by designing their own practice tasks and accompanying assessments (Miller and Blumenfeld, 1993).

Although basals are considered by many teachers to be an acceptable reading program, they do not deal with comprehension in a manner that is conducive to optimum understanding of the stories read. When comprehension is dealt with, it is after the fact; teachers frequently teach comprehension skills after students have read, and perhaps misunderstood, a story (Duffy and Roehler, 1984). Prior to reading stories little time is spent activating student background knowledge and tying this knowledge in with the basal story to make it more personal for the students. Discussions are short and do not include input by many of the students. Comprehension questions normally follow the completion of the stories, and are usually generated by teacher-directed question/answer sessions.
The teacher-directed comprehension activities give teachers the opportunity to informally monitor and evaluate student understanding of the story, but allow for little, if any, student interaction. Students are often unwilling to participate in these question/answer sessions because the answers to the questions have been predetermined by the basal and the teacher. This does not give students the chance to give the stories a personal meaning, therefore they feel that their answers are not important. Because new knowledge is acquired only when a new proposition is stored with related propositions in an existing network (Gagne, 1985), activating background knowledge is crucial to comprehension (Yopp and Dreher, 1994). Students need to be given occasions where they are able to explore text and become actively involved in the comprehension process in order to truly understand stories read.

Skills-Based Instruction

Skills-based instruction is an earmark of basal reading instruction which is used regularly in over ninety percent of the classrooms in the United States (Smith and Salz, 1987). Basals are often the primary materials used in the teaching of reading (Afflerbach and Walker, 1992), and many teachers use basals as their total reading program (Shannon, 1983). Basals are noted for their structured format, skills dominance, teacher-centered and direct instructional methods, vocabulary control, overreliance on
worksheets as practice activities, ability grouping, and systematic assessment techniques (Antonacci, 1988; Reutzel and Cooter, 1988; Slavin, 1987).

These characteristics are considered to be both positive and negative, depending on the person or school system judging, and their views in regard to reading. Basal publishers have greatly attempted to please their major purchasers, school districts; therefore, basals focus primarily on teachers' accountability and assessment practices which pleases most administrators, but in turn makes the basal a very structured, systematic, regimented instructional instrument (Moser and Perez, 1992; Durkin, 1987). Since teachers are often required to use basals in their classrooms, they do so even if they have reservations about their effectiveness.

When teachers are required to use materials in a manner that they do not deem to be acceptable, they become "reading dispensers," and lack empowerment in regard to their own teaching and beliefs. When teachers are empowered as reading instructors, they have the confidence to view themselves, rather than the basal, as the most essential resource in reading instruction (Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas, 1994). Teachers often find themselves engaged in a struggle between their beliefs in reading and the methods they are required to use, therefore they have no confidence in their own abilities as a reading teacher.
The blame for the lack of teacher empowerment classically falls on the basal reading techniques.

With all of the negative rhetoric about basals currently in circulation, the main question one might ask is "Why are teachers still using basals in their classrooms?". Teachers have expressed many reasons for employing the use of basal materials in their classrooms, most notably because they feel comfortable using them. Basals have materials, ideas, and stories readily available for classroom use. Basal materials adequately introduce, teach, support, and enrich both skills and comprehension. Additionally, they provide structure, organization, and guidance for teaching, so teachers do not have to spend valuable time planning for reading instruction. Second, they also offer assessment tools which is of great importance to teachers, as some teachers have great difficulty deciding what activities to assess and when to assess them. The basal removes the guessing and anxiety of assessment, helping the teachers to feel more confident about assigning grades. Third of all, basal series provide for consistency between grades, classrooms, and schools. Basals are the most efficient reading method in regard to consistency which provides a strong basis for choosing basals as a primary reading method in most schools (Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas, 1994; Wiggins, 1994).
Basals have many negative attributes, but they also have many positive aspects. Unfortunately, teachers are required to defend themselves if they choose to actively include a basal reading program in their classroom. It is important for teachers to be aware of the problems that can occur when using basals. However, if basals are used as more of a teaching tool than a complete program, teachers will be able to include other activities in order to tie in comprehension and skills activities.

**The Whole Language Philosophy**

The whole language philosophy receives far more positive acclaim when discussed, however many teachers have great difficulty when trying to explain exactly what they mean when they declare themselves to be "whole language teachers." One problem may be that many teachers have tried to alter the meaning of whole language in order to employ it as a method by which to teach reading, when in fact it is a philosophy of reading.

The whole language philosophy can best be described as "teachers, as co-learners in a learner-centered classroom, assuming that language, reading, and writing acquisition are parallel processes that grow out of pursuing meaning in social situations" (Goodman, 1986; Harste, 1989; McCaslin, 1989). In a whole language classroom, the focus is primarily on three facets of literacy: (a) children's literature, (b) writing, and (c)
authentic assessment (Speigel, 1992). Focusing on these areas helps to promote a positive learning environment, as students become active, involved members in the reading process (Shepperson and Nistler, 1992).

**Literature-Based Instruction**

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the United States among elementary teachers in using children's literature as the core of their reading program (Lehman, Freeman, and Allen, 1994), and many states have mandated the use of literature in their reading programs. Teachers have noted that quality literature contains rich themes, language, and vocabulary, as well as vibrant illustrations that invite students into the reading arena.

Literature-based instruction is a branch of the whole language tree where the central focus of a lesson is a book or a group of books. Students concentrate on the text and comprehension, then skills and phonics activities are completed as a result of the core literature. Quite often, themes are set as the starting points for lessons, and literature is chosen based on its relationship to the central theme. Many teachers acquire multiple copies of trade books so that their students can focus on that one body of literature, whereas others share one book with their students and then focus on supporting literature. Both methods have proven to be extremely successful as comprehension levels have shown a significant increase,
especially since the literature invites discussion on many different levels (Eeds and Wells, 1989).

Teachers that adopt literature-based instruction as their reading program are required to make many decisions regarding materials, grouping, instructional practices, and assessment. Allowing teachers to make such unilateral decisions brings rise to some concerns about the implementation of a literature-based program. Some concerns are in regard to the lack of available materials, and the money necessary to acquire these materials. It is common knowledge that funds are limited in all areas of education, so administrators often have to question the great expense of multiple copies of trade books. Another concern is in the lack of continuity from grade to grade and from classroom to classroom. Many teachers often choose the same trade books to read in their classrooms grade after grade, so their reading programs can become redundant. Assessment practices are also questionable because testing occurs at the discretion of the individual teacher, so levels of achievement will not be on an equal level. However, literature-based instruction normally is viewed in a more positive light than basal or skills-based instruction.

Literature-based instruction lends itself to a less structured type of reading program where the focus is shifted from skills to comprehension and the integration of
language arts. Sharing literature that is fun and exciting for students will help to foster a sense of intimacy and adventure in the reader (Calkins and Harwayne, 1991). A literature-based classroom should maintain and use, as an integral part of the reading program, a well stocked classroom library which includes poetry, newspapers, trade books, content-area books, and magazines. Both fiction and nonfiction books and materials should be selected for reading lessons and activities due to the interest of the students and the quality of the literature, and they should represent a wide range of difficulty (Harste, 1989).

There are numerous reasons for using literature as the foundation of a reading/writing classroom. Some of the benefits are: (a) predictable and repetitive texts give early readers confidence in their reading abilities, (b) vocabulary and concept development are learned within the rich context of a meaningful story or genre, (c) readers learn about other people and settings through many perspectives, (d) literature generates interest in the real world, (e) literature involves readers and listeners with the infectious nature of language, (f) literature allows for the exposure to multicultural issues, (g) literature nurtures the imaginations of readers, and (h) literature promotes independent reading (Danielson and LaBonty, 1994).

The literature-based program guides the reader to interact with text on a more emotional level, therefore
students are able to transfer insights into writing with greater ease. However, reading comprehension should also be approached from a more strategic angle, focusing on the reasons for reading and writing. Literature-based programs promote a firm foundation of thinking, reading, and oral language (Tiedt, Gibbs, Howard, Timpson, and Williams, 1989), however students must still be able to apply basic grammar and writing skills when completing writing projects. They must be able to: (a) classify information, (b) sequence information, (c) compare and contrast ideas, (d) determine cause and effect, (e) give main ideas and supporting details; and demonstrate many other reading, writing, and grammar skills.

Since the literature-based program is a less structured program than the basal program, it lends itself to greater involvement in the process of writing. As Murray (1984) noted, seventy percent of the time spent writing should be devoted to the prewriting stage, as it is in this stage where images are collected and connection to past experiences are made. During this stage students are invited to return to the original literature read, or to extend their reading and understanding through other readings. These activities help to support student comprehension.

School systems and teachers employ various types of reading programs in their classrooms. While all of the
programs are acceptable methods by which to teach reading, none have been able to solve the problem of comprehension. The basal and skills-based techniques are teacher centered and concentrate mainly on skills and phonics instruction. Comprehension in basals and skills-based activities are of secondary focus. Literature-based instruction focuses more on comprehension and integration of language arts, however students still have problems with comprehension.

In order to reach optimum comprehension, teachers need to focus on student background knowledge and intensive, student focused discussions. Students should have ample opportunities to share and discuss their questions, concerns, and personal knowledge of subjects as they pertain to stories. Collaborative efforts will permit students to actively participate in their own quest for comprehension of text which will make reading, writing, and comprehension more personal and important for them.

**Grouping Techniques**

Most teachers aspire to teach by one reading philosophy or method, however consideration should be given to the fact that special learners require different sorts of instruction (Lerner, 1993). Dudley-Marling (1994) noted that since at-risk students did not profit from a standard curriculum, then teachers needed to use other techniques to meet their needs. Using a variety of grouping techniques in a regular classroom reading program would better serve
the needs of the at-risk reader. Focusing on discussion groups and cooperative learning would bring the at-risk reader into mainstream reading instruction. These techniques should be supported by varying combinations of other grouping methods, all of which are explored in the following pages.

**Discussion Groups**

While both the basal reading program and the literature-based reading program are viable classroom reading methods, and should both be considered as acceptable instructional techniques, connecting the reading activities to writing activities can often be very difficult for students. This, quite possibly, may be due to the fact that students often feel uncomfortable about their writing abilities and about openly sharing their own thoughts and ideas. As individuals, the background knowledge needed for comprehension is often inadequate, so the student does not have the necessary language abilities or understanding of the text to write anything down (Moser and Perez, 1992). These problems could be solved by allowing students to share their ideas and writings with their peers in order to build their confidence, and to help them to feel more comfortable with their decisions in regard to writing.

Opportunities to discuss the required reading, whether from the basal, from a novel, or from other literature, are
important to the comprehension process. Meaning is simultaneously brought to the text and taken away from it in a personal manner (Danielson, 1992). Therefore, students are then able to relate to the stories and have a more personal relationship with them.

Group discussions not only provide an avenue for personal experiences and background knowledge to be used in comprehending text, it also provides a way for students to feel more confident in expressing their own thoughts and ideas. Students will no longer have to stand in a spotlight and hope that their answers are correct in order to avoid humiliation. Vygotsky (1978) noted that students who interact socially with persons who are more expert than themselves will benefit by reaching beyond their current level of development. They will be allowed to share and discuss their ideas and beliefs and their discussion groups will provide a support system for future open class discussions and literature-response writing.

In standard reading and comprehension activities, teachers focus mostly on comprehension questions that call for direct answers, so individual student's views and schema are not adequately explored. Student collaborations prior to and during the writing process have given students ample opportunities to activate their own background knowledge, discuss the literature, and make connections between their own beliefs and understandings and those of
their peers. Successful comprehension can only take place when students reconcile their own thoughts with the text. Through interaction with peers, students can develop the abilities to reflect upon their unique personal constructs and responses and thereby become active negotiators of meaning (Straw, Craven, Sadowy, and Baardman, 1993).

Group discussions help students to take all of the information gathered and apply it specifically to the stories read. The peer group can then use the information to gain understanding of the events in the stories. Students assist the other members of the group in transferring information to their individual writing. The aims of the student community-within-a-community are collectively to develop, through reading and writing, its own knowledge claims, and cooperatively to find ways to fit its knowledge claims into the knowledge of the larger community (Reither and Vipond, 1989).

The discussion groups are beneficial for teachers in that they help to transfer the responsibility for making meaning from the teacher to the student. In time the students will become more actively involved in the collaborative process and look more to their peers for information and assistance rather than looking to the teacher. This will give the teacher more time to observe individual students and groups, and then to redirect and add to discussions when necessary; acting more as a
moderator than the central focus of the discussions. The written responses to reading will give the teacher a means by which to check student comprehension, along with their ability to make inferences and connections between bits of information.

Another advantage of discussion groups is that teachers will have extra time to provide opportunities for students' individual differences and backgrounds to be addressed. As Prince and Mancus (1987) stated, by activating prior knowledge and developing new schema, problems in overcoming cultural and socioeconomic differences that may have made understanding of text difficult can be conquered. Students are entering classrooms from many diverse backgrounds and with many diverse learning difficulties and the teacher cannot always understand his/her students' views and schema. Allowing students to work in discussion groups will bring out background knowledge from the rich social structures evident in classrooms and blend it together to form greater comprehension for all of the students.

**Cooperative Interaction**

In order to ensure the success of the discussion groups, it is important to lead the students to a point where they are able to work cooperatively. Johnson and Johnson (1990) recommended teaching interpersonal skills to ensure that group work is effective. Students often become
frustrated when they are unable to persuade their peer group members to get involved (Swafford, 1995). An integral part of forming successful discussion groups is to assist students in understanding their roles. Students need to be aware that everyone should be given opportunities to share, all opinions should be respected, and facts should be discussed and elaborated upon. However, if other group members disagree with statements, facts, or opinions, then all group members should recheck the information by referring to the original text.

While the general rules of discussion are simple, students are normally unaware of these basic rules of behavior. A common problem in discussions is that students can not determine fact versus fiction. General class discussions about proper group discussion etiquette help to alleviate potential problems. Teacher monitoring and participation also served to assist in helping group members to learn the art of discussion.

The discussions allowed for group members to "shuttle back and forth between the text world and personal experiences and knowledge" (Villaume and Hopkins, 1995, p. 191). This interpersonal interaction allows for the literature and the students' prior knowledge to become "inseparably linked together and thus inscribe themselves into one another" (Iser, 1989, p. 271). Students' responses are often extremely short and basic in the
beginning. This could be due to their fear of giving incorrect answers, or lack of understanding of what it means to participate in a group discussions. Students are also accustomed to classroom discussions being controlled by teachers asking questions about topics predetermined to be significant (Cazden, 1988). As students interact in the discussion group over time, the discussions will begin to facilitate the development of personal response (Villaume and Worden 1993). Eventually structured routines and talk about talk will benefit the evolution of the discussions and the responses will flourish (Villaume, Worden, Williams, Hopkins, and Rosenblatt, 1994).

Fundamental Grouping Methods

Another key to the success of the discussion group is in allowing the at-risk readers to interact with as many active readers as possible. Varying group assignments helps to facilitate their involvement with their peers. Four fundamental grouping variations that help to ensure the success of discussion groups by allowing for optimum interaction are: (a) whole class grouping; (b) peer cooperative grouping; (c) flexible grouping; and (d) remediation grouping.

Whole Class Grouping

Whole class instruction provides a positive alternative to ability grouping when teaching to meet the
needs common to all members of the class (Robinson and Good, 1987). Phonics, comprehension, and vocabulary building exercises can be appropriate for whole group instruction. Whole class group instruction is advantageous in that teachers can have longer lessons, supervision is for one group only, private help can be provided to individuals while students are working independently, and at-risk children do not lose self-respect by being identified as lower ability learners.

**Peer Cooperative Grouping**

Peer cooperative grouping provides an immediate support system for students, especially the at-risk readers. Quite often students are in need of assistance, but teachers are otherwise engaged and unable to stop to help them. Allowing students to work in small collaborative groups would serve to continue a positive work flow. Cooperative learning groups have positive effects on academic achievement, social development, and student motivation that often exceed those of other instructional strategies (Battistich, Solomon, and Delucchi, 1993). Also, a variety of reading activities that would otherwise be omitted can be presented because of the support of the active readers and their interaction with the at-risk readers. Peer cooperative grouping provides a means for peer group discussions to take place. The cooperative techniques allow for students to lend
support to their peers, thereby paving the way for group discussions to occur.

Flexible Grouping

Flexible grouping of students would not only allow for teachers to institute an eclectic reading program in their classrooms, but would also serve to support motivational techniques. Flexible grouping would help to promote student success as grouping by reading ability contributes to retentions (Wiggins, 1994). When students are steadfastly placed in one reading group, they are locked into the group's progress instead of progressing and making headway in overcoming their own reading difficulties. When students are placed in a reading group, there is very little movement from group to group after the first months of school, therefore there is little room for progress or success in the reading program (Hiebert, 1983; Shannon, 1985). Three major grouping techniques that should be a part of every successful reading effort are: (a) whole class activities, (b) peer cooperative groups, and (c) remediation groups. Flexible grouping policies allow for all of these techniques to take place when necessary in a reading classroom.

Remediation Grouping

Remediation groups would take place only when the necessity arises due to various students exhibiting a persisting problem in a specific area in reading. These
group meetings would focus on the isolation of one specific skill or area of reading that continues to be a problem to certain students, whether active or at-risk readers. These group meetings would assure students greater success in the whole group activities, and help to more strongly develop strategies that can be used in independent reading activities. The remediation groups would be constructed out of need, but would not be limited to the at-risk reader. Any student who seems to be having a problem in a certain area would be invited to participate, which would also serve to avoid isolating the at-risk students by placing them in a concrete ability group. The most effective teachers use a combination of whole group and small group instruction (Rosenshine and Stevens, 1984).

**Chapter Summary**

In summary, at-risk readers are students who remain in the regular classroom in spite of their obvious reading problems. They are also required to participate in the standard reading program in place in the classroom, however, they are often separated from their peers via ability grouping. At-risk readers' reading instruction focuses mainly on skills and phonics instruction. Comprehension instruction is rarely a focus for the at-risk readers. In order to assist these students in reaching optimum comprehension, it is important that they are given the same reading opportunities as their classmates.
Therefore they should be given the same reading and writing assignments as their classmates. They should also participate in reading groups that provide them with opportunities to benefit from their active reading peers.

Peer discussion groups provide opportunities for the at-risk readers to interact with the active readers in the reading classroom. The at-risk readers are given a chance to share ideas and ask questions in an intimate setting with their fellow classmates in small group discussions. The at-risk readers are provided with occasions where they can speak up because they do not have to answer questions with predetermined answers in a teacher-centered arena. Writing (reporting or reviewing) activities culminate the reading and discussion activities. The writing allows the at-risk reader to review his/her own understanding of stories read. These factors yield a framework for motivation, equality, and optimum comprehension for at-risk readers.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study was an observational case study in a self-contained fourth grade classroom with both regular education and special education students at a public primary school in a southeastern Louisiana parish. The focus of this study was to investigate the actions of the at-risk readers as they interacted with active readers in flexible, heterogenous groups in order to discuss and comprehend text. A pilot study was conducted from September 1994 to December 1994, and originally focused on flexible grouping techniques. The evaluation of the field notes for this pilot study gave rise to the following broad question, and four supporting questions. These questions were:

I. Did collaborative peer discussions assist at-risk readers in comprehending text and transferring the gathered information into writing?
   A. Did discussion group interaction alter the intensity of the individual students' at-risk behaviors?
   B. Did the at-risk readers use the input from the active readers to aid their comprehension and writing?
   C. Did the at-risk readers share their knowledge
of the subjects at hand with their group members?

D. Did the collaborative discussion groups begin to function more independently, and with less teacher input, as time went on?

A further, more indepth investigation of these questions began in August 1995 and ran through December 1995. Observations of four at-risk reading students over a four month period were charted in field notes and reflective notes. The notes were gathered by a student teacher as an outside observer, and by me (the classroom teacher) as a participant observer. These students were observed when participating in various groups and at various stages during the school year in order to note development over time. The case studies were considered in regard to applied research purposes. As Patton noted "applied researchers work on human problems; and the purpose of the research is to contribute knowledge that will help people understand the nature of a problem so that human beings can more effectively control their environment" (1990, p. 153). Participant observation was the primary means by which information was gathered. Discussions and interactions with the other fourth grade teachers provided a broader view as well as a means of comparisons with regard to at-risk students in other environments. Key informants used included the principal
of the school, the other fourth grade teachers, the third grade teachers (those who previously taught the at-risk readers in the study), the Project Read facilitator, and the parish reading administrator. They were used to provide a more indepth view of the entire reading class, the grouping techniques, and the progress of the at-risk readers.

A qualitative look at the at-risk readers began with a broad view of their behaviors and then moved to a more specific view in order to note details (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). This study reflects the viewpoint of the researcher as a classroom teacher as suggested by Patton (1990).

Participants

Four students were chosen as the focus of this study. These students were all considered to be at-risk readers based upon criteria discussed on the following page. These four students are in my fourth grade classroom. This school closely adheres to the philosophy that self-contained classroom teachers should all have an equal amount of at-risk readers and active readers, as well as an equal amount of students with behavior problems, students labeled as gifted and talented, students with speech, language, or hearing problems; in other words, a heterogenously grouped classroom population. The teachers at this school also teach reading by using the same reading series, so reading criteria is set throughout the school.
Teachers held meetings to discuss reading strategies and techniques so that they would continue to maintain a level of continuity from grade to grade and from classroom to classroom. This structured working environment allows for teachers at this school to consider at-risk reading behaviors of students from similar viewpoints. This standard viewpoint was of great assistance as I selected the four participants for this study.

**Selection Criteria**

The selection of the four participants in this study was based on four main criteria and a fifth criteria that served to further define individual at-risk behaviors. First, the students were selected based upon the scores they received on the California Achievement Test in both their second and third grade years. This test noted reading scores that compared these students to other students across the United States. These scores gave a numerical standard by which to note at-risk criteria.

Second, the selected students fell into a category where they were not currently in the Project Read reading assistance program. Project Read is a multisensory approach to reading which focuses on problem readers. This program is an alternative to the standard reading program in place in this school. Students are selected for this program because of their reading difficulties and their inability to qualify for special education programs.
Third, all students were in some type of reading or language assistance program that would denote a potential reading problem. Assistance with one or more of these noted problems had to have taken place at some point in each participant's school career. Some of the participants were still enrolled in one or more of these programs. Some notable assistance programs are: (a) Chapter I reading, (b) reading tutorial programs (available via special education services), (c) speech or language therapy, and (d) hearing impaired assistance programs.

Then, the students had to have been considered to be at-risk readers by both their second and third grade teachers. Therefore, their problems had to be noted for two consecutive school years by teachers at this school. This criteria allowed for investigation of the students' reading problems occurring in the two previous grades. Meetings with these key informants helped to yield indepth information when selecting the participants. Students had to have been noted to have had chronic problems functioning in the standard reading programs in place at this school.

The school centered reading instruction around the 1983 Houghton-Mifflin reading series until June 1994. This series was very structured and focused on skills-based instruction. Comprehension was noted by scores on multiple-choice quizzes. Writing, creative or otherwise, was not a focus in this series. Small group instruction
was an integral part of the teaching method stressed in this series.

The school adopted the 1993 Harcourt Brace Jovanovich reading series, *A Treasury of Literature*, beginning in September of 1994. This series features on writing activities and the incorporation of skills into daily reading activities. Outside and supportive reading activities are included to develop a basic comprehension of the story. Whole class grouping and cooperative small group instruction are stressed to promote involvement of all students in reading activities. The four at-risk students included in this study received instruction in reading in the 1983 Houghton-Mifflin reading series in second grade. They made the transition to the 1993 Harcourt Brace Jovanovich reading series in third grade; therefore, they all have similar backgrounds regarding their reading instruction.

Finally, in addition to the above criteria, students had to exhibit one or more of the following problem characteristics that would compound their reading difficulties. These characteristics, while of a varying nature, have all caused great difficulties for students. The characteristics are: (a) poor home environment, (b) cultural influences, (c) dyslexia, (d) attention deficit disorder, (e) attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, (f) student motivation present, but grades and abilities not
equal to motivation, and (g) student chronological age and grade appropriate age not equal due to numerous retentions.

After receiving my class assignments, I carefully examined students' past histories in school with a primary focus on their reading histories. Since I wanted all of my participants to have similar backgrounds with regard to their reading instruction, I decided to consider only those students who had been registered in our school for at least two consecutive school years. This would also mean that these students would have experienced reading instruction that focused on the 1983 Houghton-Mifflin reading series and the 1993 Harcourt Brace Jovanovich reading series. Then I noted scores on the California Achievement Test for the past two school years, which revealed that seven students were eligible to be participants in this study.

Meetings with the eligible participants' second and third grade teachers followed. These meetings consisted of discussions about each of the students that further qualified or disqualified these students. During our initial discussions two students were disqualified because one was placed in Project Read and one was placed in Special Education, so their reading problems were being remediated directly. Another student was disqualified when she was moved into another classroom. This resulted in the selection of four at-risk reading students who were to be the focus of this study.
After the final decisions were made with regard to the participants, I met individually with each of the selected participants' second and third grade teachers. This way we could discuss each student in great detail. We were also able to bring in support teachers such as speech therapists, the former Chapter I teacher, and the guidance counselor. These meetings provided insight into each individual student's background with regard to their behavior, home environment, general attitude toward school, and specific problems in reading.

Participants Selected

The four participants selected had been enrolled at the same school for two consecutive school years. They met the selection criteria and were considered to be at-risk readers. These students provided both gender and racial diversity in that two females and two males were chosen. More specifically, one black female, one white female, one black male and one white male were selected as participants. In order to maintain their anonymity, assumed names were assigned to the participants.

Susan is a white female, age nine, who has been noted as having chronic problems in reading in the past two years (second and third grade). Her reading scores on the California Achievement Test ranged between the 20th and 40th percentile for two consecutive school years. Susan received speech and language therapy for at least three
years, but has since been released because she mastered all of the goals set by her speech therapist. She was also enrolled in the Chapter I reading assistance program for three consecutive years, but is no longer in that program (it has been disbanded due to federal guidelines relating to the free lunch program). Susan has not been referred to the Project Read reading assistance program because her previous teachers considered her to be too "high" to be placed in this program. Her problems primarily focused on writing and application of skills. Susan's creative writing abilities are very far below fourth grade standards, as are her handwriting skills. Her oral reading skills are fair to average, however she does show strength in comprehension when she relates orally. All of Susan's previous teachers consider her to be a highly motivated student and a very hard worker. However, her final scores on reading and writing activities consistently fall into the below average to failing range. Susan receives very little assistance or support from home.

Joan is an African-American female, age twelve, who was retained three times, once each in grades kindergarten, first, and second. Her grades range from the average range to the slightly below average range. Her reading scores on the California Achievement Test ranged from the 25th to the 45th percentile for two consecutive school years. Joan's home environment is considered to be lower socio-economic.
She lives with her father, his girlfriend (who is considered to be "Mama" by Joan), and her brothers. Joan's "parents" have been fairly helpful and supportive throughout her school career; however, her father is often out of town due to his job. Joan received Chapter I reading assistance for three years. She is currently enrolled in speech and language therapy with a concentration on language assistance, and has been in this program for four years. Joan was tested for special education services in first grade, however she did not qualify. She also spent one year in Project Read, but she failed the program. She was then returned to a regular reading classroom. Joan is considered to be a hard worker by all of her previous teachers, however her grades do not match her effort. She is a fairly good reader, but her comprehension skills are very poor. Joan's writing skills are basically equal to her reading skills in that she writes fairly well, but usually has difficulty stating a point. Joan is also noted for her extreme shyness and her very introverted manner.

Tommy is an African-American male, age ten, who has never been retained. His grades hover near the average range, occasionally falling into the below average range. He received Chapter I assistance for four years. His reading scores on the California Achievement Test ranged between the 20th and the 50th percentile for two
consecutive years. Tommy's teachers in developmental kindergarten through first grade referred him to special service teachers for a variety of reasons, such as speech and language therapy, communication disorders, and anti-social behavior. Tommy received speech and language therapy beginning in developmental kindergarten for five consecutive school years. He has since been discontinued because he met all criteria set in his individual education program. Tommy also worked on behavior problems with the school's guidance counselor. Initially, he met daily with her in kindergarten and first grades. Then, he met with her on a weekly basis in second grade, and he now meets with her only occasionally as his behavior has greatly improved. Tommy's family is lower socio-economic, and the children have spent time in foster homes in the past. Tommy has been living with his mother, brothers, and sisters for four consecutive years at this point. Tommy is considered to be a very motivated student. He is a fairly good reader, and has fair to average comprehension abilities. He demonstrates the ability to write long stories and paragraphs; however, he often rambles and has a difficult time stating his point. Tommy's reading difficulties are probably attributable to the severe problems he had encountered in the past regarding his speech, language, and communication; therefore, Tommy is considered to be at-risk.
Quintin is a white male, age ten, who has never been retained, but did spend one year in developmental kindergarten. His reading scores on the California Achievement Test in second and third grades ranged from the 55th to the 65th percentile, however Quintin has other problems that have a profound effect on his reading and writing abilities. These problems include a sensory-neural hearing loss in which he retains only 25% to 30% of his hearing in one ear and approximately 75% of his hearing in the other. He has been labeled as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and takes ritalin daily because of his condition. He received speech therapy from kindergarten through third grade, but was released at the end of third grade because he had reached all of the goals set by his speech therapist. Quintin is considered to be an average oral reader with average to below average comprehension skills. His creative writing abilities are considered to be far below average, primarily because he rarely completes assignments. Quintin's second and third grade teachers both noted that he does show signs of having adequate reading abilities; however, he is considered to be an at-risk reader as a result of his classroom performance and below average grades.

Data Collection

The data sources used in this study were (a) interviews with key informants, (b) background histories
via cumulative educational records and test scores, and (c) field notes. Various combinations of the data sources yielded a view of the participants prior to and during the study. The sources noted trends and developments regarding the at-risk reading behaviors. Background histories are a crucial part of this study. Observational case studies often include a historical treatment of the setting and participants in addition to the concerns of the contemporary scene (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). First of all, the participants' histories determined whether or not these students were considered to be at-risk readers. School records gave a chronological view of the students' educational milestones, and recorded specific events that charted the students' reading and educational problems. Records noted all interventions that were tried with the students, therefore giving a full picture of the students' educational histories. Previous scores on standardized reading tests were also listed in the student records.

Second, the discussions held with the students' second and third grade teachers yielded information about their specific classroom and reading behaviors. The second and third grade teachers also yielded information that helped chart their approaches regarding the teaching of reading and writing. They also shared their procedures for comprehension activities, and they discussed how each student was able to function in these settings. It should
be noted that all of these teachers, while teaching in both reading series, used a more teacher-centered question/answer style when discussing stories. Very little, if any, student/peer interaction was included during comprehension lessons. Also, very little writing was done in direct correlation to reading stories and comprehending them.

While the second and third grade teachers were the primary key informants, other key informants who provided substantial information were (a) the speech therapist, (b) the guidance counselor, (c) the vice-principal, and (d) the principal. These key informants were able to discuss specific problems that the participants had encountered at some point during their educational histories. These problems were believed to have contributed to many of their at-risk reading behaviors. Improvements and limitations of these deficiencies were noted during interviews and discussions with these key informants. Another data source that was used was the field journal. The field notes were taken in a two-fold manner. First of all, field notes were taken by both my student teacher and myself. This allowed us to note the behaviors, actions, and discussions from two viewpoints.

My field notes were taken from the perspective of a participant-observer, and were both descriptive and reflective. The descriptive notes helped to capture the
setting, people, actions, and conversations observed, while the reflective notes gave me the opportunity to analyze and reflect upon my concerns and ideas with regard to the group discussions observed (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). These field notes assisted in venturing guesses and hunches, considering suspicions, making predictions, citing areas of neglect and topics in need of subsequent inquiry (Jorgensen, 1989).

The student-teacher's field notes were from the viewpoint of an outside observer. She gave an overview of the scenes (discussions), and then noted major and distinctive features, relationships, patterns, processes, and events. She also later reflected on her field notes in order to note concerns and questions that were worthy of future discussion. This viewpoint was extremely important because participant observers are "insiders" and do not view their world from this outside standpoint (Jorgensen, 1989).

Finally, the student-teacher and I were able to compare our field notes and reflective notes and discuss our observations. Discrepancies and varying viewpoints were also noted during these discussion periods. A joint journal entry was entered following the discussions between the participant observer and the outside observer that noted these similarities and differences. These discussions also gave rise to emerging trends.
Data Collection Procedure

In order to complete this study, permission from the local school board, the school principal, and the parents of the students in the classroom was obtained. The parents of all of the students in the class were invited to a meeting early in the process. This meeting helped to explain the purpose of the research methods that would be used during reading instruction. My role as the teacher and researcher was outlined at this time. The roles of the student teacher and the participants were also explained. Copies of the following permission letters can be found in the Appendix section: (a) a copy of the letter requesting permission to conduct the study from the school district (Appendix A); (b) a copy of the letter granting permission (Appendix B); (c) a copy of the letter requesting permission from the school principal (Appendix C); (d) a copy of the letter granting permission (Appendix D); (e) a copy of the parent permission letter (Appendix E).

Background information was gathered from cumulative education folders in August 1995. Key informants were initially interviewed in August 1995, prior to the observation period. They continued to be a source of information as questions arose during the observation period. Formal observations of each of the four at-risk readers began in August 1995. Observations were completed two to four times a week. The observations were completed
by participant observation and outside observation. Triangulation of the sources included information from the following: (a) student records and test data, (b) key informants, and (c) field notes.

**Participant Observation**

I was involved with the groups' interactions and discussions as a participant observer. Since the methodology of participant observation focuses on the meanings of human existence as seen from the standpoint of insiders (Spradley, 1980), I decided that it was important for me to become a part of the group. I sat with one group per session and attempted to participate as an equal member. As their classroom teacher, I made a concerted effort not to take charge of the discussions and the actions of the group. I allowed the students to begin the discussions and ask questions of each other. I tried to intervene only when I was asked a direct question, or when the discussions reached an impasse. My reluctance to become a dominant figure in the group rose out of my concern that the group members would view me as "the teacher" and withdraw from interacting with one another. The students, however, did not look to me for guidance or assistance very often. When they did ask questions, they were most often about the spellings of words, punctuation, or paragraph form. They tended to omit me from the central story discussions and treated me as an equal member of the
group. I spoke occasionally in order to clarify points or if a direct question was asked of me. Normally one or two of the group members would emerge and lead the discussions. The group members did not consider me to be the leader of any of the groups. Although I was a rather inobtrusive group member, adding little to the group discussions, my assumed role in the group allowed for me to have direct experiential and observational access to the insiders' (group members') world of meaning (Jorgensen, 1989).

Field notes were taken while I participated in the group; however, I tried to write only when I was not directly involved in group discussions. If I needed to fill in information I missed during the group discussions, I was able to review the outside observer's notes at a later time in order to do so. I also wrote in a reflective journal in order to note my own feelings and impressions after the group meetings were over. As a participant observer, I tried to note the moments of triumph or discouragement that the group, and especially the at-risk readers, experienced during the discussions.

Outside Observation

My student teacher sat away from the group and took notes as an outside observer. She always observed the same group with which I was participating. Therefore, she was able to take a close look at the groups' interactions and discussions from a point of view separate from mine. Her
notes were more detailed as she chronicled the groups' actions. She also interjected her impressions and reactions into her notes. She was able to see all of the groups' actions from a panoramic viewpoint. She was able to note the subtle actions that I may have missed as a result of my involvements with the group (rereading parts of the story or answering questions). The outsider's viewpoint painted a very detailed picture of the groups' actions and discussions, with the focal point being the at-risk reader in each group.

Data Analysis

Since these case studies were of a descriptive/reflective nature, the broad question stated previously was the basis for this study. However, the focus was to capture student conversations and actions as accurately as possible. It should be noted that when new patterns emerged, the study was altered accordingly. Since I have chosen to view these case studies from a descriptive/reflective stance and an applied research stance, it should be noted that both view research as a means to "capture a slice of life;" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992, p. 119) and apply the findings to "real-world problems and experiences" (Patton, 1990, p. 154).

The compiled data was analyzed following the guidelines of qualitative research. Field notes were reviewed and organized, emergent themes and patterns were
noted, and reporting and interpretations of these themes and patterns followed the verification by key informants. All field notes were charted and color coded in regard to emergent themes and patterns. A clear and concise description of the at-risk students and their interactions with active readers emanated.

As in most case studies, the emerging themes guide data collection, but formal analysis does not occur until the data collection is completed. The constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987) is a research design for multidata sources, which is similar to analytic induction in that the formal analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of the data collection. Glaser (1978) offered the following steps in the constant comparative method: (a) begin collecting data; (b) look for key issues, recurrent events, or activities in the data that become categories of focus; (c) collect data that provide examples of the categories of focus; (d) write about the categories by attempting to describe and account for the examples in the data while continually looking for new examples; (e) work with the data and emerging themes to discover basic relationships; and (f) gather samples, code and write as the analysis focuses on the core categories. Initially data were collected and some initial coding was completed to note emerging themes. My student teacher (the outside observer) and I (the participant observer)
continued to discuss, compare, and analyze the data throughout the observation period. Our thoughts and analyses were noted from an insider's viewpoint as we noted actions and behaviors directly as they occurred. A team of peer debriefers also noted emerging themes as they reviewed field notes on a weekly basis. They also helped to note moments where bias could have interfered with analysis. The final step in the analytic process was the review of the field notes and analyses reviewed by an external auditor in order to verify the findings.

**Qualitative Research and the Classroom Teacher**

Classroom teachers have the ability to gather considerable data on a daily basis, and their classrooms and students offer countless subjects worthy of study. Most teachers do not have the luxury of taking detailed notes, nor do they have access to a wide variety of participants that a researcher might have. However, they can integrate the role of researcher into their role as a teacher. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) presented the following model for using the qualitative approach to improve teaching effectiveness: (a) select a problem area on which to focus and direct research; (b) keep detailed notes pertaining to that issue, recording observations and dialogue whenever possible; (c) look for emerging patterns in your data; (d) use the data to make decisions about classroom methods and procedures.
Classroom teachers benefit from using the qualitative approach in this analytical manner by becoming active researchers. They are not only teaching, but observing themselves and evaluating their own performances. They are able to step back and view their students and themselves from a distance. Immediate conflicts can be noted with regard to a larger view of research and development. Conclusions drawn from the data can lead to new methods and procedures being introduced into the classroom environment.

Trustworthiness

Studies employing qualitative research methodologies give rise to a variety of questions regarding validity and reliability of their data collection methods and final conclusions. In order to establish trustworthiness, the researcher must convince his or her audience that the findings are legitimate and reliable (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In order to establish trustworthiness, these procedures were followed: (a) sustained engagement; (b) triangulation; (c) peer debriefing; and (d) auditing.

Sustained Engagement

By observing the four at-risk students from the stance of participant observer, I continued to be an integral part of the classroom setting as I conducted this study. Observing, participating, and accumulating field notes throughout the course of the study helped to establish emerging themes and patterns. The involvement of my
student teacher as an outside observer also allowed for continuing engagement in the process. Reviewing and discussing our field notes helped to continue to determine emerging trends and eliminate irrelevant data.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation was built into the study to ensure trustworthiness. Triangulation is based on the premise that no single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival causal factors...Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observations must be employed. This is termed triangulation (Denzin, 1978, p. 28).

Data was triangulated by including information from the following: (a) student records and test data, (b) key informants, and (c) field notes. This allowed for a view of the data from multiple perspectives allowing for a better understanding of the observations and interpretations of events.

Student records and test scores offered specific information about the students that helped to give insights into the students' home environments and at-risk behaviors. The key informants offered input from two viewpoints, as former reading teachers of the participants and as teachers specializing in at-risk behaviors. The students' former teachers, the speech therapist, Chapter I teacher, guidance counselor, and principals offered input about specific at-risk behaviors, classroom behaviors, and support programs.
Field notes completed triangulation of the data by providing current information regarding the at-risk readers.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted the importance of a peer debriefer in order to guarantee the accuracy of the information presented in this research. A committee of second, third, and fourth grade teachers served as a peer debriefing committee. They offered insights regarding the four at-risk students and the types of reading instruction used. This committee offered questions and concerns regarding data collected throughout the course of the study.

An external auditor assisted with data analysis and provided for a comprehensive view of and an accurate analysis of the data. Qualitative researchers view reliability as a "fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study" (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The external auditor offers an exoteric view of the data after the field notes have been analyzed. The external auditor verified the process and determined that both the data collection procedure and the conclusions were reasonable and logical in their representation of the data. The external auditor was a staff member at the same school where the research was conducted; therefore, she was knowledgeable about the reading and support programs at our school. She also serves as a school building level
coordinator for special education referrals, and is knowledgeable about at-risk behaviors.

Confidentiality

Another issue related to the trustworthiness of the study concerns confidentiality. In an effort to portray a more accurate picture of the at-risk students, I decided that concealing their names would protect them from harm or punitive action. The identities of key informants, peer debriefers, and the external auditor were also kept confidential in order to ensure the reliability of their input.

Conclusion

This study was conducted in an effort to provide an indepth look at four at-risk students' attempts to comprehend text. An integral component of this study was the observation of the at-risk readers' actions as they interacted with active reading peers in discussion groups. The researcher also noted the progress that these students made regarding their writing abilities when trying to review the stories. Examples of these events as evidenced in the data and conclusions shared offer one view of these subjects. Future determinations regarding the generalizability of these research findings are left to researchers who wish to apply these findings to other situations. Future researchers must develop their own perceptions about the data offered in this study compared
to their own settings in order to generalize the information. Applying the data to individual classroom settings or content areas would extend the findings and conclusions in this study.
A PROFILE OF STUDENT AT-RISK BEHAVIORS
AND BACKGROUND HISTORIES

Susan

Susan was born in October 1986, and is the middle child in the family. She has one older sister and one younger sister. Her parents divorced prior to Susan's kindergarten year, and her mother had custody of the children when Susan entered school. Her father and step-mother acquired custody of the children in 1992, prior to Susan's entrance into first grade. This transition in custody was the result of measurable neglect and some abuse in varying forms. The reassignment of custody resulted in Susan's change of schools. She currently lives with her father, step-mother, sisters, and one step-brother, and has attended this school since first grade.

In 1993 an educational and mental health evaluation was completed by a private evaluator which noted that Susan exhibited the following difficulties: (a) attention problems when focusing on individual activities such as seatwork or tests; (b) difficulties with understanding and following oral and written directions; (c) difficulty completing activities without assistance and reinforcement; (d) poor confidence and low self-esteem; and (e) difficulties in developing lasting friendships. Key informants have also articulated these problems, and agreed
that relatively little progress has been made in overcoming these problems throughout Susan's school years.

Susan entered kindergarten in August 1991 at the age of four. Her kindergarten year was spent at another school which is in a town approximately one hour from the school she now attends. Susan entered the school she currently attends prior to beginning first grade in August 1992.

Discussions held with Susan's first, second, and third grade teachers offered the following student profile: (a) Susan has always been an extremely well behaved student; (b) she has always gotten along well with her peers; (c) she was generally thoughtful and kind; (d) Susan has shown signs of immaturity; and (e) she was excessively absent, which often caused her to fall behind in her classwork. The key informants also added that she was an attentive student and was normally on task when completing classroom activities; however, she needed assistance in order to complete independent activities. Susan's previous teachers considered her overall performance to be "poor".

Susan's reading abilities were considered to be in the below average range, but her oral reading skills were considered to be her strength. Although she read fluently, she did have difficulty with some unknown vocabulary words. The key informants all agreed that Susan's difficulties with vocabulary increased as the reading and vocabulary activities became more difficult. Susan was able to answer
comprehension questions relating to the stories when given opportunities to do so orally, but she was not as successful when completing written comprehension tests.

Susan's handwriting was considered to be poor by all of her teachers. She demonstrated a deficiency in fine motor development in areas pertaining to this skill. Her lack of ability in handwriting was considered by all of her previous teachers to be a large factor in Susan's inability to complete creative writing activities. Susan's writings were described as "unclear", "too short", "poor", and "confused", and all key informants agreed that she was basically unable to relate information in written form.

Susan was referred for speech therapy in 1991 with the focus of her therapy being on articulation problems. Susan continued to receive speech therapy through third grade, but was released when she met the goals on her individual education program. Susan's classroom teachers and the speech therapist believe that her oral expressive abilities were below grade level and chronological development; and, she still shows signs of this problem. She was evaluated for language disorders in third grade, but she did not qualify for therapy.

Susan's reading scores (reported with regard to national percentile rankings) on the California Achievement Test in second and third grades are as follows:
SECOND GRADE

TOTAL READING SCORE ............ 30th Percentile

READING VOCABULARY .............. 24th Percentile
Word Meaning ............... Partially Mastered
Multimeaning Words .............. Not Mastered
Words in Context ............ Partially Mastered

READING COMPREHENSION .......... 35th Percentile
Reading Information ............. Mastered
Constructing Meaning ............ Not Mastered
Evaluating and Extending Meaning .. Mastered

WORD ANALYSIS .................. 37th Percentile
Consonant Blends and Digraphs .... Mastered
Short Vowels .................. Partially Mastered
Long Vowels .................. Partially Mastered
Contractions ................. Mastered
Compounds ................. Mastered
Roots and Affixes ............. Mastered

THIRD GRADE

TOTAL READING SCORE ............ 36th Percentile

READING VOCABULARY .............. 34th Percentile
Word Meaning ............... Partially Mastered
Multimeaning Words .............. Partially Mastered
Affixes ...................... Not Mastered
Words in Context ............ Mastered

READING COMPREHENSION .......... 39th Percentile
Recall Information .............. Partially Mastered
Constructing Meaning ............. Mastered
Analyzing Form ................. Partially Mastered
Evaluating & Extending Meaning .. Partial Mastered

WORD ANALYSIS .................. 25th Percentile
Consonant Blends and Digraphs .... Mastered
Short Vowels .................. Not Mastered
Long Vowels .................. Not Mastered
Variant Vowels ................. Not Mastered
Compound Words ................. Mastered
Roots and Affixes ............... Partially Mastered

These scores show that Susan had greater problems dealing with vocabulary words and vocabulary activities. She showed greater strength in the areas of comprehension;
however, it should be noted that over one half of the comprehension activities on the CAT test in both second and third grades were either only partially mastered or were not mastered at all.

Susan received Chapter I assistance beginning in second grade where the Chapter I teacher focused on both Susan's vocabulary and comprehension deficiencies. The Chapter I teacher noted that Susan showed a strength in oral reading, but her fluency seemed to be hindered by her inability to decode unknown vocabulary words. The Chapter I teacher noted that Susan was able to relate answers to comprehension questions orally, but she had greater difficulty answering the same questions when she read them silently. Even when given multiple choice questions, her answers were not always correct. The Chapter I teacher also cited problems with fine motor skills, handwriting, and creative writing.

Although Susan has many learning deficiencies and reading problems, she has never been referred for a special education evaluation, neither has she been referred to the Project Read reading assistance program. All of Susan's previous teachers noted her desire to do well in their classes, and related that her "good" behavior made it easy to help her, so they did not refer her for any special reading assistance. They also noted that Susan had never been retained. Since she has remained in regular classroom
reading classes, but shown little improvement; Susan is considered to be an at-risk reader who is eligible for participation in this study.

**Classroom Vignette**

Susan is well liked by her peers, and she is a very thoughtful child who likes to share. She often gives books, pencils, and other materials to students in need. Her kindness, however, is only extended to students who are near to her, which further confirms Susan's shyness. Susan only speaks when spoken to in class, and she will only talk to other students when they initiate the conversation.

Free time activities and center activities are provided for students who complete classwork, but Susan usually spends this time sitting in her desk playing with a toy or reading a book. She rarely ventures out to play games or read books with other students. The only free time activity that Susan shares with others is the "chalkboard" activity where students can draw or write on small chalkboards with colored chalk. I have noted that students often like to play "school" when engaged in this activity, and Susan has related that she "loves" to play school, but she never played the role of teacher.

During recess periods, Susan often plays alone, and is rarely included in groups of students or game activities. She will occasionally "play" with one student at recess where she often holds their hand and hugs them, which
exhibits very immature behavior for a fourth grader. One of Susan's favorite free time activities, whether inside or outside, is to have another student read to her.

Susan enjoys spending time with me or other teachers, and often sits near me in the classroom. Occasionally she will strike up a conversation, where she normally talks about her family, sharing stories about her brothers and sisters. Many of her stories are repeated and few have a point. When questioned regarding specifics about her stories, she rarely has an answer or an explanation.

Susan is considered a "good" student because she is well behaved, always attentive, and completes all assignments and homework on time. However, she is often absent and missed ten days of school during the observation period. All of her absences were not excused because they were not accompanied by doctor's excuses. These absences have added to her problems with her classwork.

Joan

Joan was born in December 1984. At the time her parents were married, but Joan's mother passed away prior to Joan's entrance into school. She entered kindergarten in August 1988, and was retained in kindergarten at the end of her first school year. Joan and her two younger brothers were placed in foster care from September 1989 until September 1990. Joan attended three different schools from 1988 to 1990. When she entered first grade,
she was placed in a regular first grade classroom because transitional first grade was not available at our school. Because of her low reading abilities, Joan was placed in a kindergarten reading block while completing her other courses in her assigned first grade classroom; therefore, Joan's reading remained on a kindergarten level for three years.

Joan's father regained custody of his three children in 1990, and Joan and her brothers currently reside with their father and his girlfriend. The girlfriend is considered to be the family "caretaker", and is called "Mama" by Joan.

Joan is currently twelve years of age, and was retained in first and second grades, as well as kindergarten. Joan's reading history revealed that she received a great deal of special assistance throughout her school years. It was also noted that Joan has had many other problems that have attributed to her reading difficulties.

Joan's social skills were charted since her entrance into kindergarten, and her kindergarten teachers noted that she was a very shy, withdrawn child who rarely played or mingled with other children. Joan's first, second, and third grade teachers stated that she was a very well behaved student; however, she rarely spoke or participated in classroom discussions or activities. Joan's teachers
have stated that she had an extremely low self-concept, citing that she often considered herself to be "ugly" or "dumb". While she has friends, Joan rarely exhibited a role of leadership. She does seek out friends who are older and more mature, as she is normally at least two to three years older than her peers.

Joan's vision and hearing were tested in 1990 when she was in first grade. Her teachers noted that she often seemed to have problems understanding their oral directions, so they sought medical assistance. It was found that Joan's vision was normal, but her hearing was impaired. She had severely reduced hearing in her right ear, but hearing tests were delayed for several weeks due to the fact that the school nurse found a foreign object embedded in Joan's right ear. Extensive discussions between school authorities and Joan's "caretaker" finally resulted in the object's removal upon a visit to an ear, nose, and throat specialist. However, even after the object was removed, it was noted that Joan's hearing was still impaired by 35%.

Joan was diagnosed as having severe speech and language problems when she was in kindergarten. Her speech was extremely difficult to understand due to many errors in articulation, and she rarely spoke in complete sentences, even when she initiated the conversations. Joan's language was also severely delayed, as evidenced by her inability to
name body parts, colors, numbers, or letters of the alphabet. Joan also showed signs of poor listening skills because she was usually off task. Key informants have noted that Joan was often unaware of her speech and language deficiencies, but she often avoided speaking. Joan is still currently in speech and language therapy, and her speech therapist noted that she always works very hard during her lessons; but, her progress is slow. Joan's articulation has shown improvement, but her language development is still delayed.

As stated earlier, Joan repeated kindergarten reading for three consecutive years. Joan's former teachers have noted that she had great difficulties with vocabulary, oral and silent reading, decoding, and comprehension. Joan was placed in the Project Read reading assistance program in second grade; however, she failed the program. It seemed that Joan had great difficulty dealing with the heavy phonetic content, so she was removed from the program after two school years and returned to the regular classroom reading program. The regular reading program is a literature-based reading program. Joan showed greater achievement in the regular program, but her grades still remain in the C-D range.

Joan was enrolled in the Chapter I reading assistance program from first through third grades where her assistance focused on sight words, oral reading, and
decoding. She also received help in building up her background experiences, and the Chapter I teacher noted that Joan enjoyed having someone read to her. Again, it was noted that Joan's progress was slow and minimal.

Joan's handwriting was considered to be fair to good by all of her teachers. She did show some delay in fine motor development, but her motor skills have greatly improved. Joan's creative writing abilities were noted as being below grade level, and her writings were always convoluted and confused. She often made no point in her writings, showed a great delay in grammar skills, and had great difficulty punctuating sentences.

Joan was referred for special education services in 1991, but she did not qualify for the special services because she did not score high enough to show a strength in any area. Therefore, Joan remains in a regular classroom and receives only language therapy. Her inability to qualify for special education reaffirms her status as an at-risk reader.

Joan's scores on the California Achievement Test in the area of reading are listed below. The scores reflect national percentile rankings. These scores also exhibit evidence of Joan's at-risk reading problems.

**SECOND GRADE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Percentile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL READING SCORE</td>
<td>41st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>READING VOCABULARY</td>
<td>46th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Meaning</td>
<td>Partially Mastered</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Multimeaning Words ............... Partially Mastered
Words in Context ................ Partially Mastered

READING COMPREHENSION ............. 35th Percentile
Recall Information ............... Partially Mastered
Constructing Meaning .......... Partially Mastered
Evaluating & Extending Meaning ... Par. Mastered

WORD ANALYSIS .................. 60th Percentile
Consonant Blends and Digraphs ........ Mastered
Short Vowels ...................... Mastered
Long Vowels ...................... Mastered
Contractions .................... Mastered
Compound Words ............... Partially Mastered
Roots and Affixes ........ Mastered

THIRD GRADE

TOTAL READING SCORE ........... 33rd Percentile

READING VOCABULARY .............. 41st Percentile
Word Meanings .................. Partially Mastered
Multimeaning Words .......... Partially Mastered
Affixes ...................... Not Mastered
Words in Context ............... Mastered

READING COMPREHENSION .......... 27th Percentile
Recall Information .......... Partially Mastered
Construct Meaning .......... Partially Mastered
Analyze Form ................ Partially Mastered
Evaluate & Extend Meaning . Partially Mastered

WORD ANALYSIS .................. 35th Percentile
Consonant Blends and Digraphs ........ Mastered
Short Vowels ...................... Mastered
Long Vowels ...................... Not Mastered
Variant Vowels ................ Not Mastered
Compounds ....................... Mastered
Roots and Affixes ........ Mastered

Classroom Vignette

Joan is a rather quiet, well behaved student. She often seems withdrawn, unhappy, and bored; but, she does have two very good female friends in the classroom. One of Joan's friends is basically a "school" friend who Joan spends time with only during school hours. She related to
me that they never visited each other's homes or talked on the telephone. This could be due to the fact that Joan is black and the other girl is white. Joan is only one year older, so the two girls have mutual interests due to their advanced chronological age. Joan's second friend is considered to be her best friend, but she is three years younger than Joan. She lives in Joan's neighborhood and they spend a great deal of time together. Joan visits this girl's house, often spending the night there.

While Joan favors spending time with her friends during free time activities, she does not limit her interactions to these classmates. She likes to play games and draw, as evidenced by the greeting cards she draws for me, her father, and her friends, and her clothing designs. She shares and spends time with others, but she prefers to be with only one or two people at a time, avoiding large groups and gatherings.

Joan is considered to be a good student in that she is always well behaved and completes assignments on time, but there are times when she does not complete homework. This is often because she did not receive assistance at home. She accepts any "punishments" given for not completing her homework, and she never complains.

Joan does not like recess very much, and she often complains about having to go outside. She much prefers to remain inside the classroom. She enjoys talking to me
quite often, usually discussing clothes and boyfriends. She has related that she has a boyfriend and would like to start dating, but her father feels that she is too young to date. Basically, Joan's social behavior is more mature than that of her classmates, which is due in part to her advanced chronological age.

**Tommy**

Tommy was born in August 1995. He has two older brothers, one younger brother, and two younger sisters, and they all currently reside with their mother. Tommy and his two older brothers spent time in foster care from March 1987 to August 1987 prior to Tommy's entrance into school.

Tommy began school in September 1990, and was placed in a developmental kindergarten class because of his low scores on the *Gesell Kindergarten Assessment* administered prior to Tommy's school entrance. At that time, the assessment team noted that Tommy showed delays in social and personal development, physical development, language development, and math development.

Tommy began therapy for speech and language delays in the spring of his kindergarten year. He often showed great difficulty understanding directions, and did not respond to teachers when directions were given. Even when the teachers attempted to give individual assistance, Tommy seemed confused and unable to carry out the tasks. Tommy's kindergarten teachers noted extreme delays in language
development, as evidenced by his inability to name colors, letters, or body parts. He also showed little, if any, understanding of his school environment. Eventually, Tommy underwent an evaluation for communication disorders. The speech therapist noted that Tommy began to respond to therapy between his kindergarten and first grade years, showing remarkable progress by the time he reached third grade. At the end of his third grade year, Tommy was released from his speech, language, and communication therapy having reached 100% of his goals.

When Tommy was in developmental kindergarten he had severe behavior problems. He often cried and threw tantrums in class, exhibiting antisocial behaviors such as biting, hitting, pushing, shoving, and poking others. He was often removed from the classroom and sent to the principal's office where Tommy fought with teachers, principals, and the guidance counselor. They stated that he hit and kicked them at various times, and he "hid" under their desks, refusing to come out. It usually took at least two adults to extract Tommy from his "hiding" places. Tommy was eventually suspended from school for three days during his kindergarten year, so the guidance counselor set up various behavior modification programs between 1990 and 1993 (developmental kindergarten and first grade). She noted that a great deal of progress was made during that time. Tommy related very well to positive reinforcement
and affectionate gestures such as hugs. Tommy was placed on ritalin for a short time during his developmental kindergarten year, but his behavior showed no change after an adequate amount of time, so the medication was discontinued.

Tommy's behavior problems severely interfered with his academic progress, because he was easily distracted and frustrated. He was often off task, noting a very short attention span. He also lacked the confidence necessary to complete activities. Tommy seemed unable to master daily tasks such as writing, cutting, coloring, buttoning, and zipping, and his academic success during his developmental kindergarten and kindergarten years was very poor.

Tommy also had few friends, and his behavior during play time activities was noted as being impulsive and overanxious. He often sought attention by yelling, fighting, and crying. The attention he received from both his peers and his teachers was negative, however the negative attention seemed to appease him. Some of Tommy's earlier teachers noted that he was often oversensitive to criticism and cried excessively when corrected.

Tommy's reading progress suffered along with his other academic work. Initially, he showed little knowledge of letters or words. As he progressed from grade to grade, his teachers noted problems with vocabulary, oral reading, decoding, and comprehension. Tommy's teachers also
expressed that he made great strides every year in overcoming his behavior problems, and he was described by all of his teachers from first through third grades as being "increasingly motivated" and "a pleasure to teach". These reviews reflected Tommy's success in overcoming his behavior and social difficulties.

Tommy received Chapter I reading assistance in second and third grades. His reading grades ranged from B to D, mostly hovering in the C range. His reading scores on the California Achievement Test in both second and third grade reflected these reading difficulties. The scores are listed below by national percentile ranking.

**SECOND GRADE**

TOTAL READING SCORE..................16th Percentile

READING VOCABULARY..................16th Percentile
Word Meaning..........................Partially Mastered
Multimeaning Words....................Not Mastered
Words in Context.......................Not Mastered

READING COMPREHENSION................16th Percentile
Recall Information.....................Not Mastered
Constructing Meaning..................Not Mastered
Evaluating & Extending Meaning......Not Mastered

WORD ANALYSIS..........................53rd Percentile
Consonant Blends and Digraphs........Mastered
Short Vowels..........................Partially Mastered
Long Vowels...........................Mastered
Contractions............................Mastered
Compounds...............................Mastered
Roots and Affixes.....................Mastered

**THIRD GRADE**

TOTAL READING SCORE..................35th Percentile

READING VOCABULARY..................20th Percentile
Word Meaning..........................Not Mastered
The Chapter I teacher noted Tommy's problems with vocabulary and comprehension. She stated, however, that Tommy was like a "sponge", and learned tasks quickly.

Tommy exhibited some problems with fine motor development early on, but this improved over time. His handwriting was considered to be fairly good, and his creative writing abilities were also described as "good". His stories were described as being of adequate length and fairly clear. Tommy's teachers have noted a continuing problem with sentence structure, punctuation, and grammar.

Tommy has made a great deal of progress in overcoming his behavior problems. He overcame his speech, language, and communication disorders. He is currently considered to be a well behaved, motivated student by administrators and teachers. However, Tommy is still average to below average in reading; therefore, he is considered to be an at-risk reader, and eligible for this study.
**Classroom Vignette**

Tommy is a very popular student, and he is extremely well liked by his peers. He is always polite and thoughtful, and he shares books and materials whenever he is asked, usually offering the materials prior to being asked. He frequently helps others to complete activities, but is never disruptive. Tommy always adheres to classroom rules and admonishes other children for disrupting the class or for breaking classroom rules. Even when reminding students to mind their behavior, Tommy is polite to them. He whispers phrases such as, "Shh! You might get into trouble!" or "Watch out, you might miss recess!". Tommy is very aware of the rules and always follows them. He also attempts to remind his peers to obey the classroom rules and to focus on lessons.

Tommy always seems to be intensely interested in all lessons and classroom discussions. He is well prepared for every subject, taking books and materials out promptly. He also completes assignments and homework on time. Tommy enjoys rereading classroom materials with other students, reviewing notes, and studying whenever possible. Tommy has occasionally asked to study for upcoming quizzes during his free time, often studying with many other students. He usually studies mostly with two other classmates because "they always make A's", again showing evidence of his will to achieve.
During recess time Tommy enjoys a variety of activities, such as football, basketball, soccer, chase, or tag. He sometimes even studies at recess. During free time or center time, Tommy enjoys working with the microscope, playing science games, or working on the computer. He frequently borrows science magazines from the reading corner because they are "cool". Tommy's greatest problem during free time activities is deciding which activity he would enjoy most. Many other students ask Tommy to join their games, so occasionally he will ask me "What should I do?" or "Who should I play with?". When he declines an invitation, he always adds "...but I'll play with you tomorrow, OK?". Tommy is always extremely considerate of the feelings of others, and his kindness adds to his popularity with his peers.

Tommy is also a very affectionate child. Immediately after completing all of his morning duties (unpacking, sharpening pencils, and preparing for math), he stops by my desk to say "good morning" and to give me a hug. He asks questions about how I am feeling or how my nephew is doing in school. His visits are always brief, but very thoughtful. Tommy's last act before getting on the bus every afternoon is to give me a hug. Sometimes in the afternoon he will apologize for the misbehavior of other students. For example, he once said "I'm sorry everybody talked so much today.". I assured him that I knew that he
had not spoken out of turn during class. He added, "I know, but I feel bad for you because you can't teach when they talk."

Tommy exhibits a great desire to achieve in the classroom, and he displays extreme thoughtfulness, kindness, and compassion for his peers. Tommy's pleasant attitude has made him a favorite with his peers, as evidenced by the fact that he is well liked by his teachers and classmates who often asked him to join in free time and fun time activities.

**Quintin**

Quintin was born in September 1985. When he entered school, he was an only child, but he now has a two year old brother. His brother was born when Quintin was in second grade. Quintin has always lived with both of his parents who described him as being "spoiled", "selfish", and "unable to accept criticism or punishment". They have also stated that "he has never been told no to anything". Quintin's parents have expressed guilt over his extremely negative, unpleasant disposition.

When Quintin entered school he was placed in developmental kindergarten because of his poor performance of the Gesell Kindergarten Assessment. The assessment team noted at that time that Quintin had an extremely poor attention span, needed constant redirection, and often refused to complete activities. The assessment team noted
that he was very immature, and his physical and scholastic development did not match his chronological age.

During Quintin's first year in school, it was discovered that he had a marked hearing loss. His developmental kindergarten teacher noted that Quintin often had problems understanding directions, and he frequently asked the teacher to repeat the directions. Evaluations by the school nurse and an audiologist led to the discovery that Quintin was born with a slight defect in his right ear. This caused a sensory-neural hearing loss in both ears. Quintin currently has 75% of his hearing in his left ear, but he has only 25%-30% of his hearing in his right ear. Because of this hearing problem, Quintin has always received preferential seating in his classrooms and repeated instructions from his teachers.

Quintin's teachers have described him as having "very poor" behavior and being "a very difficult student". His teachers have noted that he was often argumentative and beligerent. His classroom assignments and homework were done poorly and not completed on time. He rarely made and kept friends, because he could not "get along" with his peers and classmates. Quintin's teachers admitted to isolating him from the others on a regular basis, and they claimed that he often forced them into punishing him because of his "rudeness". Also, he was often sent to the principal's office for such behaviors.
Quintin's poor concentration and inability to complete activities led to an evaluation for attention deficit disorder in 1993, his second grade year. His teachers had all noted that Quintin showed a great deal of knowledge pertaining to reading and other subjects; however, he was not able to share his knowledge through standard classroom activities. Quintin was evaluated by his family physician and diagnosed as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The final report listed Quintin's behaviors in two categories, at-risk and very high risk. The at-risk behaviors were: (a) anxiety, (b) confidence, (c) aggressiveness, (d) resistance, and (e) socialization. Quintin's very high risk behaviors were: (a) inattention, (b) impulsivity, (c) hyperactivity, (d) anger, and (e) academics. The doctor prescribed ten milligrams of ritalin daily, which he continues to take both at home and at school (five milligrams at breakfast and five milligrams after lunch). Quintin's teachers have noted a marked difference in his behavior when he has not taken his ritalin.

Quintin also received speech therapy from 1991 to 1993. He quickly reached 100% of his goals and was released after only two years of therapy. The speech therapist noted that Quintin's speech difficulties were related to his hearing disorder, and when his hearing problems were addressed, his speech quickly improved.
Quintin's teachers and speech therapist noted that he was very adept in his general background knowledge and reading skills, vocabulary, and decoding skills. He read fairly well when reading orally, and he was able to comprehend most stories. Quintin's problems are due primarily to his short attention span and poor behavior.

The scores that Quintin received on the California Achievement Test reflect his abilities in reading. The scores are listed below in national percentile rankings.

**SECOND GRADE**

**TOTAL READING SCORE** ..................60th Percentile

**READING VOCABULARY** .................59th Percentile
  Word Meaning ................................Mastered
  Multisensory Words ..........................Mastered
  Words in Context .........................Partially Mastered

**READING COMPREHENSION** .............62nd Percentile
  Recall Information .......................Mastered
  Constructing Meaning ....................Mastered
  Evaluate & Extend Meaning ...............Partially Mastered

**WORD ANALYSIS** .......................59th Percentile
  Consonant Blends and Digraphs ............Mastered
  Short Vowels ................................Mastered
  Long Vowels ................................Mastered
  Contractions ..............................Mastered
  Compounds ..................................Mastered
  Roots and Affixes .........................Mastered

**THIRD GRADE**

**TOTAL READING SCORE** .................65th Percentile

**READING VOCABULARY** .................74th Percentile
  Word Meaning ..............................Partially Mastered
  Multimeaning Words ........................Mastered
  Affixes ....................................Partially Mastered
  Words in Context ..........................Mastered

**READING COMPREHENSION** ...............55th Percentile
  Recall Information .......................Mastered
Constructing Meaning..................Mastered
Analyzing Form..................Partially Mastered
Evaluate & Extend Meaning........Mastered

WORD ANALYSIS..................23rd Percentile
Consonant Blends & Digraphs........Mastered
Short Vowels..................Partially Mastered
Long Vowels..................Not Mastered
Variant Vowels..................Not Mastered
Compounds..................Mastered
Roots and Affixes...........Partially Mastered

Quintin's test scores and academic abilities made him ineligible for Chapter I or Project Read, but his poor behavior and lack of motivation have continued to impair his reading progress; therefore, Quintin is considered to be an at-risk reader and eligible for this study.

Classroom Vignette

Quintin does spend time with some of the boys in the classroom, but he often argues and disagrees with them. He has a difficult time compromising when differences of opinion arise. He always insists on playing the game he wants to play or on having everyone agree with him. Other students often turn him down when he asks them to play with him, so Quintin is not very popular with his peers.

Students who sit near Quintin usually ask to be moved to another desk in the classroom because Quintin talks to them constantly. He asks his neighbors unimportant questions all day long. The questions are often about topics such as pencils, notebooks, lunch, or football cards. If one classmate refuses to answer his questions, he will turn to another and continue to ask the same
questions. Students tattle on Quintin because they do not want to get into trouble for talking when they should be working.

Quintin is rarely allowed to spend time in the activity centers available in the classroom, because his classwork is rarely completed on time. He has to be given extra time to complete assignments. When he does go to the centers, problems usually arise. Some notable problems that have arisen are that Quintin starts arguments when he loses games; he has cheated at games in order to win; he tore a magazine because another student got it first when he wanted it; he yelled at me (the teacher) when he was not allowed to work on the computer; and he hit another student with the cover of a puzzle box because the other student placed the last piece to the puzzle.

Quintin usually finds students to play with at recess. He sometimes joins a group of boys who are playing football or soccer, occasionally bringing a ball to school in order to be allowed to participate in these activities. Quite often Quintin's recesses end early because he ends up arguing with others involved in the game. However, it has not been noticed that Quintin is turned away from these games by the other students.

Quintin generally has a very negative outlook, and he often tells stories of how he "can't ever win games" or how he "can't make good grades" or how "no one likes him".
Quintin begins every morning by coming to my desk before going to his own, although he has been told over and over again to report to his own desk immediately upon arriving in the classroom. He proceeds to complain about various things until I become angry and tell him to return to his desk. Some reasons that he usually comes to my desk are to give me excuses for incomplete homework or because of some problem that has occurred before classes began. Quintin's attitude for the entire day can normally be judged by his actions as he enters the classroom first thing in the morning.
CHAPTER V

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT BEHAVIORS AND GROUP INTERACTIONS

Chronicling the behaviors and actions of four at-risk readers as they participated in classroom reading activities over a period of four months gave a clear picture of how these students interacted in group discussions. Formal observations of Susan, Joan, Tommy, and Quintin began on August 20, 1995 and ended on December 19, 1995. Students' behaviors were specifically noted in order to answer the following questions. These questions were formulated in order to support the broad question that is the basis for this study. The questions to be answered in this chapter are:

A. Did discussion group interactions alter the intensity of the individual students' at-risk behaviors?

B. Did the at-risk readers use the input from the active readers to aid their comprehension and writing?

C. Did the at-risk readers share their knowledge of the subjects at hand with their group members?

Question A

Question A examined how the discussion groups alter the intensity of each individual student's at-risk behaviors. As the at-risk readers interacted with the active readers, specific behaviors were charted. Because
the students have such a great number of at-risk behaviors, only the most notable reading behaviors were discussed.

**Susan**

Susan has many problems that contribute to her reading difficulties. In first through third grades, she received speech and language therapy because of her inability to relate orally. She also has fine motor problems that have caused her to write illegibly. Another problem that has caused Susan a great deal of difficulty is that she is very shy and withdrawn.

When Susan read orally, she read clearly. However, she needed some assistance regarding unknown vocabulary. Even after the unknown vocabulary word was related to Susan, she was still unable to repeat it clearly. When Susan read the definitions of the words, she often was unable to explain the meaning of the word in her own words.

When Susan participated in the group discussions, she was very attentive. She listened to the discussions with a great deal of interest often nodding her head in agreement, gesturing when appropriate, or offering a few words of support to other students. She usually offered support in the form of agreement. For example, she would whisper phrases such as, "Yes, you're right.", or "Uh-huh!". However, Susan never openly participated in the group discussions. She answered questions asked directly to her whether by me (the participant observer) or by a peer group
member. When Susan did answer a question, her answers were usually correct as she related information taken directly from the text. Questions that required personal interpretations, knowledge, or opinions were not answered. She avoided giving these answers by shrugging. She occasionally added "I don't know" and giggled.

Susan took notes and copied information, but she did not do this independently. She copied the notes from one of her group members. She did this by sitting next to one of the group members and copying from their paper. She rarely asked for clarification regarding words or written information. A close look at the notes and webs copied by Susan showed that she had indeed copied exactly what was written by another student; however, because of Susan's fine motor problems the information was usually not readable. Susan's group members always allowed her to copy from their papers, but never checked to see if she understood the information.

Susan's writing abilities are very poor, and her handwriting is practically illegible. Her creative writing ability is considered to be that of a beginning first grader. She showed little evidence of knowledge of capitalization, punctuation, or sentence structure. Susan's written reviews were very short. In the beginning they were from three to five sentences in length, and the sentences consisted of three to five words. After
approximately two months, Susan began to include more information in her writings. She clearly stated the main point of the story, however she rarely shared supporting details in order to clarify her point. Her handwriting was considered to be unsatisfactory, however it had come to be more readable. Her letter formation eventually reached a point where the letters were clear enough to recognize. Susan's greatest accomplishments occurred when she included capital letters and punctuation marks. These adjustments have helped Susan's reviews to become more readable.

In Susan's case, the group discussions have altered her at-risk behaviors only slightly. Her attentiveness and focus on the group discussions and activities reflected her motivation to succeed. Nevertheless, she did not offer information unless directly asked. The information shared was limited to relating information directly from the text. She showed no evidence of increasing her knowledge of language or vocabulary. She showed a slight improvement in her writing abilities, as evidenced by her writings including main topics from the stories, longer written reviews, and correct capitalization and punctuation.

Joan

Joan's greatest problems lie in the fact that she has had speech and language problems throughout her school years. She still receives speech and language therapy once
a week to assist with this chronic difficulty. Joan's language problems have caused her problems when reading orally. She showed great difficulty when trying to learn new vocabulary words. She rarely understood or defined the words by the use of context clues. Dictionaries and glossaries were used to define words; however, Joan usually had great difficulty when trying to read the definitions. Joan usually volunteered to read orally, but became embarrassed when she did not know the vocabulary words. She occasionally made excuses in order to stop reading. For instance, she would start coughing and ask to be excused from the classroom.

It was observed that Joan had greater difficulties when experiencing nonfiction text. This was often due to the fact that she was unable to understand the vocabulary as she had no background knowledge about these factual subjects. Joan usually remained silent when groups discussed factual information.

Conversely, Joan participated readily when discussing fiction stories. She shared ideas with the group members. She related information from the stories, often sharing her point by rereading it from the story. She even related her feelings and opinions about the fictional stories.

Joan took notes during group discussions. She often asked other students what they were writing and copied that information directly. She occasionally asked a group
member to explain information that they had written. During these instances, she listened carefully and then ended with "OK" or "Uh-huh". Joan used her notes when writing her final review of the story, as evidenced by the fact that she checked off information as she used it in her final review. When asked why she chose to do this, Joan said, "Because I don't want to use it again."

Joan altered her at-risk behaviors by asking questions about unknown vocabulary words and information. Joan was more successful in this endeavor when she was involved in discussions relating to fiction materials. She used information from the discussions in order to assist her with her writing. Therefore, it was deduced that her at-risk behaviors were only slightly altered.

**Tommy**

When Tommy first entered school, he was placed in developmental kindergarten because he was basically unable to perform on the kindergarten entrance test, *The Gesell School Readiness Screening Test*. Tommy also showed signs of antisocial behavior and communication disorders. Although Tommy had been given an extra opportunity to become developmentally equal to his peers, he still lagged behind them. He has come to be a very motivated student; however, his motivation to achieve does not help him to successfully complete reading activities. Tommy attended language, speech, and Chapter I classes due to past reading problems.
Tommy's interest and motivation continued when he became a part of the discussion groups. This was evidenced by times when he asked questions if he was confused about stories read, and looked to other students to define or clarify the meanings of vocabulary words. Tommy also took notes, questioned peers when confused, and then used the notes when writing reviews.

As Tommy became more accustomed to working with the discussion groups, he began to take on more leadership roles. He often explained to other group members that everyone in the group should share information. In order to achieve this, Tommy numbered students in the group and told them that they should "tell something" when it was their turn. The first time Tommy assigned numbers to the group, he assigned the number four to himself. When he realized that he would be last to speak, he reassigned the numbers, counting himself as number one. While Tommy continued to maintain order during the discussions, he still continued to look to the other active readers in the group to explain confusing information.

The discussion groups seemed to be a vehicle for Tommy to exhibit leadership and organization. He looked to the active readers to assist with unknown vocabulary and information; however, he still remained in charge of the group's actions. Tommy's difficulties with speech, language, reading, and communication were practically
diminished during the group discussions, as he seemed to overcome these problems when working with small groups.

Quintin's most notable at-risk problem was that he had been diagnosed as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. He exhibited a negative attitude about most classroom activities, and he rarely completed activities. He only completed activities when extra time was allowed.

When weekly discussion group schedules were posted, Quintin often complained about the students assigned to his group. He made claims such as "They don't like me!" or "I hate them! They are dumb!". At first the other students tried to argue with him or have him removed from the group. However, they were told that group assignments would change weekly, so students had to work in assigned groups for that one week.

Quintin began the first group sessions by trying to take charge. He told the other group members that they "had to listen to him" or that he "was in charge". His tone of voice was stern and demanding, and usually argumentative. He was challenged by his peers every time he started a group session this way. A phrase often used by the group members was "You are not in charge!". These confrontations often led to disagreements that ended with Quintin refusing to work with the group. I (the teacher and participant observer) had to remove Quintin from the
group and remind him that everyone was supposed to work together. Then I instructed the group members that they were to all required to share ideas and participate in the discussions. These specific instructions usually redirected the group, returning them to the task at hand. At that time, Quintin did join in with the group's discussions; but, he rarely took notes. He claimed that he could "remember" without writing notes.

Quintin proved to be quite knowledgeable about nonfiction stories. At these times he shared information and participated actively in group discussions. He seemed more at ease and friendly when interacting with his group members. He even took notes more readily.

As time went by, Quintin stopped arguing about his group assignments. He did not attempt to take charge during the initial group sessions either. He took more notes, however he never did accumulate as much information as his group members. Approximately midway through the observation period, Quintin began to become more attentive to and active in the group discussions. He also more closely followed the rules required when participating in the group discussions. Quintin still argued with group members about story information; however, when they were able to prove him wrong, he would stop arguing.

It was noted that when Quintin approached a group with a negative outlook, the group members responded negatively
in return. Quintin did not actively take notes or participate in discussions during these instances, and his writings were usually short and disorganized because of this. Alternatively, when Quintin approached a group with a calm, positive attitude, he was accepted by his group members. He also took more notes, and his writings were longer and of greater quality.

Quintin's change of attitude could be attributed to the active students' enthusiasm about working in groups. The more they accepted him and helped him to participate in the discussions, the more involved he became. Quintin also became more aware of behaviors and actions that were required in order to successfully participate in group activities. While Quintin still continues to get off task at times, he does so with less frequency. His attitude about group assignments and activities has become more positive. Therefore, it seems that the group discussion activities have helped Quintin to alter his at-risk behaviors.

**Question B**

Question B chronicles the at-risk readers as they interact with the active readers. Specifically it looked at how the at-risk readers use information shared by the active readers during group discussions. It further noted whether or not the at-risk readers transferred the gathered information to their written reviews.
Susan

Susan was always extremely focused on the group interaction, although Susan added little to any of the discussions. She continually concentrated on the discussions of the other group members as evidenced by the fact that she nodded, smiled, and gestured in agreement or disagreement whenever appropriate. These actions or reactions demonstrated Susan's interest in the group's interaction.

As the other group members offered specific or factual information relating to the text, Susan followed along with great interest. She copied notes directly from the papers of other students by sitting near one student and copying that student's notes. She sometimes asked the "chosen" student to tell her an unknown word. Occasionally, when webbing information, Susan tried to follow the exact webbing technique as her chosen partner. This was never successful because of the differences in their handwritings (Susan writes very large and unclear). Susan's inability to create a mirror image of another person's work often upset her; however, when someone, either a peer group member or teacher, suggested completing the web on another sheet of paper, Susan was pleased with that solution and completed the activity.

More conscientious students attempted to include Susan in the actual oral discussions by directly asking questions
Susan related facts from the stories at this time; however, in the beginning she never related opinions. Toward the end of the observation period, Susan offered brief, vague opinions about the stories, such as "I like this story." or "This story was good.", but this was only when she was asked.

Susan's first attempts at writing reviews of the stories read were unsuccessful because she never returned to the notes or information webs to assist with her writing. Although she had all of the information necessary to detail the events in the story, she never used it. In one particular group session, another student directly pointed out to Susan that she needed to write at least three or four facts about the story in order to retell it, then the group member also showed Susan how to recopy the information from the notes in a logical sequence. Susan showed some improvement from that time on. Her writings then included at least three or four facts from the stories. The facts were generally in sequential order; however, they were never followed up with details that would support or explain the main fact.

During a later discussion group session, another student related to Susan that she needed a closing sentence in order to adequately end her paragraph. He also explained that an opinion is an adequate manner in which to close a paragraph. Then the student asked Susan how she
"felt" about this particular story. Susan answered "I don't know," and then shrugged nervously. The peer group member then asked specifically "Did you like this story or not?". Susan answered "Yes.". The other student then proceeded to show Susan how to write a closing sentence that stated her opinion. Susan's opinions were always vague and brief, similar to her oral opinions, but from that time on they were included.

Susan was always attentive during group discussions, as evidenced by the fact that she listened to discussions, copied information, and reviewed the stories. Susan did not use any of the information in her writing until it was directly explained that she should. Even then, her writings were brief, unclear, and incomplete. While Susan attempted to gather the information, she used only a minute amount of it to aid in her writing. Therefore, she did not use enough of the input given by her peers to successfully complete her writing assignments.

Joan

Joan was usually focused on the group discussions, but she normally only spoke when it was her "turn" or when another student asked a direct question of her. However, she did actively participate by taking notes and copying information.

Joan attempted to copy as much information about the stories as possible. She often copied information directly
from the papers of peer group members. Joan also asked questions of her group members whenever clarification was necessary. Examples of Joan's questions were: "Is this the right place (order)?", "Which one (fact) came first?", and "What did you think about it (the story)?". She often rearranged her gathered information, erased and rearranged it again. Joan then referred to a group member and asked if he or she thought her new arrangement was "correct". Quite often the entire group became involved in a discussion about the "right" or "wrong" way in which to arrange their notes, webs, and future essays or reports. Joan was the force behind spearheading these discussions, because her concerns with perfecting her own work led her to ask questions that led the groups to recheck their own notes and information.

While Joan's focus and interest were usually directed on the discussions and group activities, she did not participate in the group activities with the same vigor when the focus of a discussion was on factual information. Joan became very quiet when the story read was a nonfiction story; furthermore, she did not volunteer to read aloud and often made excuses when asked to do so. Two excuses were, "I'm tired. I don't want to read right now." and "Do I have to? I hate this story.". When Joan did read orally from the nonfiction text, she had great difficulties pronouncing the vocabulary words. She also had extreme
problems when trying to explain what she had read, and she often gave up and refused to talk at all. She would stop by saying "I don't know this stuff.", then she would become very quiet and sometimes angry. When group members or a teacher would try to coax her into becoming involved in the discussions again, she would withdraw even further by turning away from the group.

Joan took notes about the nonfiction stories; but, her notes were messy, disorganized, and unclear. She did not ask questions about the factual information, nor did she work to reorganize her notes. Joan seemed unsure of how the facts linked together, but did not ask for clarification.

All of Joan's reviews of fiction stories were always neatly written. The papers that Joan wrote chronicling the fiction stories were always sequential, filled with supporting details, and closed with detailed opinions about the action. Conversely, the nonfiction papers were poorly written and disorganized, and the information included was usually incorrectly related. Vocabulary words were used incorrectly in sentences with regard to parts of speech and context.

Overall, there was an extreme difference between the papers written about fiction stories and the papers written about nonfiction stories. Nevertheless, Joan did use information taken from the discussions about both types of
stories. She was a very active participant during the discussions about the fiction stories. She was an extremely passive participant when factual information was discussed; however, she did use input from the active readers in the groups when she completed her written reviews.

**Tommy**

As stated earlier, Tommy was an active participant in the group discussions. He organized the group members so that they would all have equal opportunities to share story details and opinions during the discussion periods. Whenever group members disagreed with regard to facts from the stories, Tommy insisted on having all group members return to the text in order to clarify the facts, then he would copy the information down directly from the story.

Tommy often had great difficulty understanding new vocabulary words. Even after he had defined the words, he often used them incorrectly in sentences. At first, Tommy just corrected the sentences on paper, then he began asking the group members if he had "said" the word correctly. Many group members just made up a sentence using the vocabulary word in question, some wrote the sentence down for him, and others gave elaborate descriptions of the words. Tommy often practiced using the vocabulary words independently in journal writings or other independent writing activities. He actively took notes and
participated in webbing activities, copying as much material as possible. He sometimes referred to the notes of other group members and at other times he referred to the text and copied facts directly from it. Furthermore, he checked spelling with great regularity. He often told the group members "If you check it (spelling) now, you won't have to later!".

Before Tommy completed his written reviews of the stories, he always reread any notes and information that he had compiled during group discussions. His reviews were always extremely long and detailed. The reviews often measured from one and a half pages to two pages long, where Tommy focused on restating as many details from his notes as possible. One problem Tommy encountered was that he often included information that was not necessary in order to retell the stories, where he included facts that were irrelevant and unimportant. Editing sessions with active readers during group times helped Tommy to realize that he did not have to restate every detail in order to clearly retell or explain a story. The editing sessions also helped Tommy to become more aware of sentence structure, paragraph format, and rules of grammar. As the observation period was drawing to a close, Tommy's writing had become very clear and organized.

Tommy wrote down other group members' opinions if he agreed with them. When he agreed, he would say "Uh-hmm,
you're right - yep!”, then he would write down that opinion. If he disagreed, he would just shrug and say "OK, if that's what you think...", but he would not write down these opinions. Tommy usually had valid reasons for his own opinions, but was not inflexible. His mind could be changed if a group member could prove to him that he was mistaken with regards to specific facts from the story.

Tommy focused on all of the action and discussions during group sessions. He copied as much information as possible from the other group members, and he also openly discussed opinions and feeling about the stories. Then, he used the information from his notes when writing reviews. Furthermore, Tommy also looked to the group members to clarify the meanings of and correct usage of vocabulary words. His writings improved with regard to paragraph format, sentence structure, and grammar due to editing sessions with other group members. Therefore, it was deduced that Tommy used input from the active readers when trying to understand the stories, as evidenced by the fact that he related this input to his writings.

Quintin

In the beginning, Quintin spent a great deal of time arguing about the group's discussions, so he did not accept anything stated by other group members. He wrote few notes and included few facts in his webs, so his written reviews were short and poorly written.
As Quintin's behavior improved, so did his ability to share information. Quintin began to take notes with greater frequency, and he also started to return to the text in order to help group members to clarify information. He more readily accepted facts and information shared as evidenced by his willingness to copy notes. At times he did not seem to be paying attention to the discussions; however, he would continue to copy notes from a group member's paper.

As Quintin took more notes, his writings seemed to improve. He began to include more details in his writings, and he also added more opinions and personal insights when writing. Quintin did not like to edit his writings and often became angry when other students pointed out problems with his reviews. It was noted that when he would rewrite the review independently, he usually always made the changes recommended by peer group members.

Quintin used input from the group discussions in his writing; however, he often did so begrudgingly. He has continued to show improvement in his behavior, discussion skills, and writing abilities as he continues to work in the discussion groups.

Question C

Question C also chronicled the at-risk readers as they interacted with the active readers. This question examined times when the at-risk readers shared their own background
knowledge with the active readers. It also looked at the at-risk readers as they attempted to share, defend, or change their personal opinions.

**Susan**

As related earlier, Susan rarely spoke during group discussions. Neither did she offer any opinions or feelings about the stories. Susan only spoke when questions were directly asked of her.

Susan never involved herself when a difference of opinion arose relating to details in a story, but she often nodded in agreement, agreeing with opposing opinions or sides. Eventually the students returned to the text to solve their disagreements. Susan followed along with the group members as they reread the text; however, she never shared her opinion as to who was correct or incorrect. When asked direct questions at these moments, Susan would smile broadly, open her eyes widely, and shrug.

The only information offered by Susan was when she was questioned directly. Her answers were always related by using information directly derived from the text. In at least half of the sessions, Susan never spoke at all. Susan did not share any of her own background knowledge with her group members. If she did have any knowledge of information relating to any of the stories read, she gave no evidence of it on any level - oral or written, so no ideas or extensions to the stories were offered by Susan.
Therefore, Susan gave no valuable input or information to the other group members.

**Joan**

Joan participated in the group discussions by primarily taking notes while the other students shared ideas. She also worked vigorously at organizing her written notes in a clear and concise manner. During discussions about fictional stories, Joan did share facts and opinions about the stories; however, the facts shared were taken directly from the story. Joan normally restated information directly from the story when she shared with the group. Occasionally she would refer to the text and read the information instead of just telling the group about it. She did not elaborate on the information that she shared with personal knowledge, nor did she tell personal stories relating to the material. Joan's input during discussion sessions focused directly on information derived from the story.

Again, Joan rarely shared in discussions pertaining to factual information, and she often became distant during these discussions. When other peer group members tried to coax her into joining group discussions, she would become irritated and angry. She never gave any personal information about the factual or nonfiction stories, her writings were confused, and vocabulary was used incorrectly exhibiting a lack of understanding of the text.
When Joan gave her opinions about the stories, they were often brief, and the opinions always focused on whether or not Joan liked or disliked the stories. She only stated her opinion when asked directly by another group member; then, when she gave her opinion, she did not elaborate on it. She did not tell the group members why she liked or disliked the stories even when she was asked. On two occasions, I offered prompt questions by asking her if she liked or disliked specific parts of the stories. She just shrugged and replied "I don't know.". Joan "liked" every fiction story read during the observation period and she "hated" every nonfiction story read during that period.

While Joan did gain information from the group, as evidenced by her notes and writings, she did not share any of her own background knowledge. She offered to share facts taken directly from the text, but she shared no personal knowledge or feelings about the stories. Joan got involved in the discussions about the fictional stories, and she even offered brief, vague opinions about them. She sometimes related information from other stories she had read. She did not, however, share any information about the nonfiction stories. Overall, Joan did not share personal background knowledge about any of the stories with her group members, however she did accept some of the information when the stories were of interest to her.
Tommy was always an active participant during group discussions. Tommy insisted that all students take a turn when sharing information, and he normally enjoyed being the first one in the group to share information. He referred to the text in order to restate or clarify details from the stories.

It was noted that Tommy did not have a great deal of background knowledge regarding the nonfiction stories; however, he often checked out books from the library about the subjects being discussed. He often brought these books to the group sessions and shared information from them. Tommy's interest in acquiring knowledge led him to use encyclopedias on a regular basis, and to share this newly acquired information with his group members.

When discussing nonfiction stories, Tommy always shared thoughts, ideas, and opinions. He told personal stories in order to make his points. After he explained his feelings about the stories or characters, he often added "That's what I think. What do you think?". His opinions were occasionally changed, but only when a group member specifically pointed out information that validated altering his opinion.

Tommy shared any prior knowledge that he had about stories read with his group members, and he also started reading about subjects he knew little about. Furthermore,
he shared books and materials with his group members, and actively related any information that he possessed to other group members.

Quintin

While Quintin did not always seem to enjoy participating in group discussions, he did like to take his turn to share information. One problem that he initially encountered was that he often drifted away from the subject or story. This problem initially caused some arguments to arise, but over time Quintin remained on the topic and fewer arguments ensued.

When fiction stories were read, Quintin often related stories where he encountered some of the same actions as the characters in the stories, and then he gave information that directly chronicled the action in the story. He just replaced the main character with himself. At first, the other students pointed this out to him, and he became angry. Over time group members just ignored the correlations and allowed Quintin to relate his stories. During these times, he often shared opinions that the other students were able to question and discuss with him.

Quintin was more adept than many of his group members at relating nonfiction materials. He seemed to be knowledgable in many areas, and he was able to relate this material to the groups. He seemed to be happier at the times when he was able to be the focus of his peers'
attention. Occasionally, he brought a book or magazine to
the group in order to share information.

Therefore, Quintin shared his own background knowledge
with his group members. When he was allowed to do so, he
went into elaborate explanations about the information.
His attitude and behavior also showed a marked improvement
when he took on this brief leadership role.
CHAPTER VI

THE EVOLUTION OF THE DISCUSSION GROUPS

The last support question analyzed the progress made by the at-risk readers within a specific group setting. This question focused directly on the ability of the groups to function independently, and with less teacher input, as the observation period progressed. This question was considered separately from the others because it analyzed the behaviors and actions of the groups as a whole instead of individual students. Guiding students to a point where they could work as a group and discuss stories led to a consideration of the following: (a) why I originally chose to group students in discussion groups; (b) an examination of grouping procedures used during reading instruction due to problems that had arisen in my classroom in the past; (c) a look at the steps that the students went through when learning to work within a group.

Discussion Groups

Background

Having been a teacher for thirteen years, I have noted the changes and trends in reading instruction. Some of the notable techniques I have employed in my classroom are: (a) phonics techniques, (b) skills-based activities, and (c) literature-based activities. While each of the techniques met with some success and some failures, all were considered to be viable classroom teaching methods.
However, I continued to see two major problems with all of the methods—comprehension acquisition and writing skills. Students often scored poorly on comprehension tests, and they rarely perfected any of their writing activities. Noting that these same students would be required to complete a great deal of their future academic work via written reports, I felt that developing the link between reading, comprehension, and writing (reviewing or reporting) would be important.

Another problem that I wrestled with was the idea of dividing my students into ability groups. The "low" group or at-risk readers never seemed to receive optimum reading instruction. The at-risk readers were never able to catch up with their peers. Their reading and writing suffered, and they often developed a low self-concept. However, I continued to notice that they had a desire to participate with and to be accepted by their "higher" level peers.

Initially, I tried grouping during content area activities where I noted some success. Eventually the discussion groups became a part of our daily reading activities. Setting up the discussion groups led me to a realization that students needed some instruction about expected behaviors in order to remain on task during group activities. The following description of the discussion groups reflect preplanning, evaluation, reevaluation, and reconsideration of group activities as the students became
more adept at participating in discussion groups.

Assigning Groups

Students were assigned to groups on a weekly basis, and assignments were posted on a bulletin board in the room. Prior to the group sessions, general instructions were given to the entire class regarding assignments. Students work with their assigned group when reading, discussing, and writing about the designated weekly story.

When assigning the groups, I tried to place students in groups with peers that they had not worked with for at least two weeks prior in order for the at-risk students to gain insights from at least six different students every two weeks. One at-risk reader was placed in a group with two or three new active readers every week. Prior to assigning the groups, I also considered the behavior, strengths, and weaknesses of both the at-risk readers and the active readers. Grouping the at-risk students with active students who were able to assist with specific weaknesses helped to strengthen the groups. Also, avoiding grouping assignments where a potential for behavior problems existed lead to greater success.

Student Interaction

At first, the students floundered when attempting to conduct the group discussions, and they had a difficult time bringing up topics that needed to be discussed. When topics did arise, they were usually only stated, but not
discussed. For example, a group member would state, "The boy let the fox out of the pen.". This was a definite fact taken from the story, but none of the other students would elaborate on this fact by sharing details pertaining to this idea. The students had a difficult time understanding how to share ideas about the stories in order discuss them.

Neither the active readers nor the at-risk readers shared their own background knowledge during the first discussions. In the beginning, they related information that was derived directly from the stories, and they never shared their opinions or feeling about the stories. None of the at-risk students took notes or attempted to write anything down, and only a few of the active readers attempted to jot down notes.

In order to assist the students in learning how to discuss the stories, Johnson and Johnson (1990) recommended teaching interpersonal skills to ensure that group work is effective. Therefore, I led them through an array of steps so that they could begin to feel more familiar when discussing the stories. The first step was to assign prompt questions that helped to open the discussions. The prompt questions were very vague and open to various interpretations. An example of a prompt question was, "Why were the characters important?". Students were then given an opportunity to discuss only that particular question. The students quickly learned that they had to list and
discuss each of the characters in detail. Further instruction led the students to a point where each student shared a thought, fact, or opinion about each prompt question, understanding that they all had to talk and share ideas on only one topic at a time.

The next hurdle was in attempting to lead students to notetaking, so that they could use them later when they began writing their reviews of the stories. During whole group activity sessions, the class discussed note-taking techniques, webbing techniques, and categorizing techniques. Students were informed that there was not one specific method in which to take notes, so they were allowed to decide which method best suited their purposes. They were instructed to discuss these methods with their group members and then have the entire group decide by majority vote as to which method best suited their purposes in order to complete the weekly assignments.

Eventually the students became more adept at discussing the stories. After just a few weeks, students started to deviate from the prompt questions, and their discussions started to flow more easily. They also began to web the stories or take notes about them with greater frequency and ease.

When the discussions began to flow more successfully, I had the students close each session by sharing their personal opinions about one part of the story or about one
character in the story. As time progressed, the students started to add their opinions when discussing each individual topic in the stories. Students began to note the similarities and differences of opinions. When differences arose, they were instructed to return to the text in order to better explain their reasons for their opinions. Some of the students had problems accepting opposing opinions from their group members, but a reminder to the students that respecting the opinions of the other group members, due to the fact that opinions can neither be correct or incorrect, allowed for students to share their feelings more readily.

**Group Diversification**

As the students became more comfortable with the discussion format, the groups started making more independent decisions about how they chose to complete their assignments. One of the first questions that the students asked was "Do we have to read the story out loud?". I considered this question and later told the students that each group member should read approximately one page of the story aloud, then the group could choose to complete the reading of the story in any manner they preferred. Some groups chose to complete the reading of the stories silently, and others chose to do so orally. As time passed the groups began to take note of other factors in order to choose the method by which to read the assigned
stories. Some notable factors stated by the students were: the length of the story, the type of story (fiction or nonfiction), and the interest level of the stories. Interestingly enough, the more compelling titles led the students to oral reading, while less interesting stories led the students to silent reading.

Student decision making led the students to various methods of webbing and note-taking. Each group decided on the method that they felt would best suit their needs. They further extended their notes and webs by including color coding techniques. Some groups chose to underline the main ideas in one color and underline supporting details in another color, while some groups began to note paragraph changes with yet a third color. Still other groups attempted to categorize information on different colored papers. As the groups developed, they became very creative note-takers.

As the group members began to share more ideas with one another, the groups started to diversify. Each of the group members was then able to carry some of their new found ideas and methods to a new group and to new students the next week. Eventually ideas spread around the room and grew as students added to these ideas with their own ideas.

**Student Writing Activities**

At first, the students' writing activities were short and unclear. They showed little knowledge of
capitalization, punctuation, sentence structure, or paragraph formation. As the groups made strides in discussing the stories and gathering information, the students' written reviews of the stories became longer and more detailed. The students' first writings mirrored their notes or webs. They included main ideas and some details, but lacked background information or opinions. As the discussions became more productive and the gathering of information became more prolific, the students began to add background information and opinions.

The next group writing activity was group editing. Students shared their reviews with their group members, allowing them to assist the writer with grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and other technical points. The editing process grew from a session where students were initially offended when their peers offered suggestions, to a session that students came to depend on in order to achieve their best writings. Editing sessions began to take more time because the group members wanted input from their peers. One student explained that "We (the writers) need their (the group members) help to fix the stuff (grammar, punctuation, etc.) that we messed up." Groups eventually requested extra editing sessions on occasion.

Teacher Input

The groups initially needed a great deal of direction in order to understand the behaviors that were to become
the focus of the discussion groups. I had to explain each step and work with each group, often stopping the groups and giving explanations to the entire class before allowing the groups to proceed. The groups looked for a great deal of reassurance regarding their choices; but, over time they began to become more confident. Their confidence led to more independence, and they began to look to one another for help or suggestions. Finally, they began to disregard my input on many points because they preferred different ways of completing the activities. Some groups even disliked having me around, stating that "We (the students) can't work with you (the teacher) here!".

The students came to work as a group, gaining confidence in their own thoughts, ideas, and knowledge. Because of this, they were able to function very well on an independent level. They only wanted my input when the groups reached an impass and needed a tiebreaking vote in order to make a decision.
CHAPTER VII
FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS
FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings

This study described the behaviors of four at-risk readers as they interacted in discussion groups with active readers in an effort to comprehend the various stories. Their actions were chronicled as they moved through the reading and writing processes. Indepth observations of the four at-risk readers as they interacted in discussion groups furnished information that explained how the readers' at-risk behaviors initially impeded their success when attempting to read and comprehend stories. The observations further chronicled the accomplishments of the four at-risk readers and the discussion groups, and focused on the at-risk readers comprehension and writing. By providing an analysis of the at-risk readers' interactions with active readers, the research presented valuable insights regarding grouping techniques, the writing process, and comprehension acquisition.

This study investigated three questions that related to the at-risk readers' behaviors and one question that referred to the success of the grouping technique. These four questions offered specific information that led to conclusions regarding one broad question. The broad question and support questions were that guided this research were:
I. Did collaborative peer discussions assist at-risk readers in comprehending text and transferring the gathered information into writing?

A. Did discussion group interactions alter the intensity of the individual students' at-risk behaviors?

B. Did the at-risk readers use the input from the active readers to aid their comprehension and writing?

C. Did the at-risk readers share their knowledge of the subjects at hand with their group members?

D. Did the collaborative discussion groups begin to function more independently, and with less teacher input, as time went on?

Field notes taken by my student teacher (the outside observer) and by myself (the participant observer) produced emerging themes and findings which are related in the following summaries.

**Question A**

Question A investigated how group interactions influenced the subjects' at-risk behaviors. All of the students exhibited a great deal of enthusiasm about being placed in groups, but initially they would not participate in many of the groups' discussions unless directly questioned. The students were basically shy and withdrawn.
As the group discussion activities became more familiar to the students, the at-risk readers became more involved in group activities, some more than others.

While the four subjects exhibited a variety of at-risk behaviors, their actions all followed the same basic patterns. Initially they displayed minimal interest or involvement in the groups, then, they became involved when other group members questioned them directly. Last, they showed greater interest in the discussions, but their involvement in the groups' activities were still primarily as passive group members. Tommy was the only subject who exhibited any leadership qualities; and, his leadership was limited to group organization techniques. Quintin demanded to be the group leader, but was never successful.

As the at-risk students became more familiar with their group members and interacted more freely with them, some of their at-risk behaviors appeared less obvious. However, the at-risk students continued to have difficulties in specific reading and writing areas. The group interactions allowed the at-risk students to function as equals in the classroom because of their equal group placement. Therefore, behaviors that required motivation eventually diminished. The behaviors that indicated significant improvement were: (a) oral discussion techniques; (b) the ability to relate story information; (c) note-taking; and (d) writing (creative).
While some of the students' at-risk behaviors were altered because of the group interactions, some behaviors became more apparent. These behaviors were: (a) Susan's inability to relate information in a written form; (b) Joan's inability to relate to vocabulary and information that is not in her background; and (c) Quintin's inability to focus on assigned tasks. Some of the at-risk students' behaviors became more apparent, but the group discussions altered individual students' at-risk behaviors with enough intensity to allow them to complete reading activities.

**Question B**

Question B focused on whether or not the at-risk students used input from the active group members in order to improve their comprehension and their writing assignments. The groups followed a general plan of reading a story, discussing and webbing a story, then writing a written review of the story. Each group included only one at-risk reader and two or three active readers.

Susan was very attentive during group discussions. She said little, but she gestured in agreement or disagreement throughout the sessions. Susan actively copied notes throughout group sessions; however, she copied directly from a peer group member, so she left the group sessions with the same gathered information as her peers. Her writings, however, grew to a point where she stated a maximum of only three or four points from a story, but she
never stated supporting details. While Susan used some input from her group members, she did not exhibit comprehension of stories through her written reviews.

Joan exhibited a disposition toward fiction stories. She took notes with great vigor, sometimes copying directly from a group member's paper. She also asked questions in order to clarify information which she often added to her notes. Joan's written reviews about the fiction stories were filled with information and they were written in a logical sequence. Comversely, Joan did not show the same level of achievement when dealing with nonfiction stories. When relating nonfiction material, Joan did not use some vocabulary words correctly, nor did she relate information correctly or sequentially. While Joan's fiction reviews were far superior to her nonfiction reviews, she did use input from her peers in order to relate both types of stories.

Tommy focused on and then became an active participant in all group discussions. He vigorously copied information during discussion activities, occasionally copying from other group members in order to complete or clarify information. Furthermore, he directly copied information from his notes in order to complete written reviews. He further altered his writings to include suggestions made by his peers during editing sessions. Tommy used a great deal of the active readers' input in order to complete his
written activities. His written reviews exhibited a clear understanding of most of the stories read.

Quintin's general attitude often hindered his ability to interact with students. He was often greatly offended when other students did not agree with him; however, he did actively take notes even when he was quite angry. When he was unable to focus directly on taking notes, he copied the notes from a group member's paper. Quintin related information gathered during group discussions in his writings, therefore exhibiting comprehension of stories.

The success of the individual students' writings varied; however, all of the at-risk students copied notes that helped them to accumulated information about the stories. They all used the gathered information to some extent in their writings. Susan and Joan used input from group members when writing, although other factors occasionally impeded their success. Tommy and Quintin were more successful in including information in their writing. Overall, the at-risk students did accept and include input from the active readers; furthermore, their writings did reflect an adequate level of comprehension of the stories.

**Question C**

Question C focused on whether or not the at-risk students shared their own background knowledge with the other members of their discussion groups. The at-risk readers were initially very shy, quiet, and withdrawn, plus
they spoke very little; therefore, they shared very little information. As time progressed, the at-risk readers became more comfortable when participating in group activities, as evidenced by their involvement in the discussions.

Susan shared no personal information about any of the stories read. However, she did answer direct questions, but only with information derived from the stories. Susan did not exhibit any evidence of background knowledge either during the discussions or in her writings.

Joan participated in the discussions, but her input reflected only an ability to relate information from the stories. Joan offered no personal knowledge about pertinent subjects, but she did offer opinions. However, her opinions were brief, and she was unable to support them with personal knowledge.

Tommy became an active participant in every discussion. He shared thoughts, ideas, and opinions with the same vigor as the active readers. He exhibited greater background knowledge when discussing fiction stories, and compensated for any lack of background knowledge by checking out books and encyclopedias that he shared with his peers. So while Tommy's personal knowledge was limited, he was able to participate as an equal. Tommy stated opinions often helping group members to form or change their feelings about the stories.
In contrast to the other group members, Quintin seemed quite knowledgeable regarding nonfiction subjects. He occasionally shared his own personal materials with group members, and he related any knowledge he had with them. He also shared some information regarding fiction stories, but most of this information was related in "tales" about how he had encountered the same experiences as the characters in the stories read. Quintin had difficulties when trying to interact with group members, but he seemed to become more comfortable with and active in discussions when he was the focus of everyone's attention.

Susan and Joan were not able to share any personal knowledge of the subjects relating to the stories. Tommy and Quintin offered any personal background information that they possessed, and brought in books and resources that added to their knowledge and the knowledge of their group members. These resources greatly enhanced group discussions. Joan, Tommy, and Quintin offered opinions regarding the stories. Consequently, it seemed that the students shared whatever knowledge they had about the stories, and were only limited by the amount of knowledge they personally possessed.

**Question D**

Question D addressed the ability of groups to function without teacher leadership and input. The ability of groups to function as a unit, independent from teacher
control exhibited the most obvious results in this study. Initially the groups were unclear about what was expected of them, so I (the teacher) had to lead them through the steps necessary for adequate discussions to ensue. The points that needed explanation were: (a) how students were to share information; (b) what information should be discussed; (c) note-taking and webbing techniques; and (d) sharing personal opinions.

After the students gained an understanding of the steps necessary to discuss the stories, they began to make decisions regarding the importance of information and how the information should be gathered. Groups considered various webbing techniques and chose the techniques which best suited their individual group. They only asked for teacher assistance when seeking permission to attempt a new method of webbing or notetaking, further noting that they did not enjoy my input during their discussions because I did not allow them to "make up their own minds" about the stories.

The groups quickly learned to function as independent units as evidenced by their abilities to complete the following tasks: (a) they worked together to gather, discuss, and chart information; (b) they made decisions as a group; (c) they shared information; (d) they assisted one another by editing stories; and, (e) the group members looked to one another for support.
Question I

The findings suggested by each of the four support questions led directly to the analysis of the final stage, or broad question. This question focused directly on the individual at-risk students' abilities to relate the stories in a written form, therefore proving that they have comprehended the stories. The at-risk students' written reviews were charted throughout the observation period in order to note: (a) the amount of story information included; (b) the amount of personal information included; and (c) whether or not reviews were written in correct sequence.

Susan had the greatest difficulties in overcoming her at-risk behaviors, because she rarely became directly involved in the group discussions and she related no personal background knowledge of the subjects at hand. She did, however, remain attentive throughout the discussion process, and compensated for her lack of handwriting and creative writing skills by copying notes from other group members. Therefore, she did gain information from the group discussions, although she did not add any personal knowledge to the information. Susan's greatest at-risk behavior was in her inability to relate information in a written form. Although her progress was minimal, Susan's written reviews improved, and she exhibited a low-level understanding of the stories.
Susan included only basic facts from the stories, because she generally related main idea information. However, she did not support this information with any personal or background knowledge. Her reviews, however were always written in sequential order. Susan continued to exhibit at-risk characteristics regarding her few writing strategies (Tancock, 1994); however, Susan demonstrated personal involvement with the text (Danielson, 1992) by relating information directly from the story. Susan exhibited a lack of background knowledge and language abilities needed in order to comprehend stories (Moser and Perez, 1992); but, she related information gathered during group discussion activities. Over time, she began including short opinions, and also corrected punctuation and capitalization errors. This showed that her involvements in the group discussions had led her to a realization of the importance of correcting writing errors and sharing her own thoughts.

Susan's written reviews improved minimally, but steadily over the course of the observation period. She began to include more story information, which was always written in correct sequential order. She eventually began to give brief, vague opinions about the stories by relating whether or not she liked the stories. It was concluded that Susan exhibited comprehension of the stories read and discussed on a basic level, because she was able to recall
the story by restating enough of it in order to prove that she understood the main idea.

Joan did make some progress in overcoming her at-risk behaviors, but her progress was hindered by her inability to relate any personal knowledge of the nonfiction materials read. Joan's speech and language deficiencies seemed more prominent when discussing nonfiction materials. Conversely, she was able to adequately discuss fiction materials, and clearly related information from stories. She also added opinions and personal input during these sessions.

Joan actively took notes which she directly related to her writings. She often reread her notes or webs, then she numbered the information in preparation for her writing assignments. She proceeded to copy the information in the noted sequential order, including supporting details, personal input, and opinions. Joan's reviews of fiction stories were far superior to her reviews of nonfiction stories. The nonfiction reviews showed greater evidence of her language difficulties by continuing to reflect a misunderstanding of the vocabulary and basic concepts. She did continue to improve these reviews by relating more facts derived directly from the stories and less personal knowledge.

Joan was once placed in Project Read in order to address her at-risk reading behaviors. She was also tested
for special education services, but did not qualify because she did not show any notable educational strengths. Joan did not qualify for special education and her reading failed to improve when placed in a reading assistance program. Therefore, programs that served to segregate (Allington, 1994) the at-risk student did not meet Joan's needs. Through direct interaction with her peers, Joan was able to develop her personal abilities to take notes on and discuss the stories in order to become an active negotiator of meaning (Straw, Craven, Sadowy, and Baardman, 1993). Her writings reflected her ability to gain information from her peers and use it to improve her own writings. Therefore, it was concluded that Joan only exhibited a limited understanding of nonfiction stories, because these stories included only basic facts derived directly from the stories. Joan's level of comprehension was much higher when relating fictional information, because she included a clear and complete review of the stories including adequate story information in correct sequence and personal input to further explain the stories.

Tommy's most notable at-risk problems were the result of cultural deprivation at an early age. While he has made great strides in overcoming his problems, he still exhibited "a discrepancy between observed and expected achievement" (Fletcher, Shaywitz, et al, 1994, p. 6). Tommy exhibited a great motivation to learn and to achieve,
but his grades did not match his desire. However, he did attempt to overcome his problems, again exhibiting desire. Tommy became an active participant in all group discussions beginning early in the process. He took on a leadership role by organizing the groups' discussions so that every student would have an opportunity to share information, and he shared story details, personal knowledge, and opinions about the stories. He also gathered information from his peers through the discussions and note-taking. He became an active researcher in order to build his own knowledge base and to share information with group members. Therefore, he simultaneously brought information to the text and took it away from the discussions for personal gain (Danielson, 1992).

Tommy's written reviews were always long and filled with story details and personal input; however, he occasionally related too much information, including minute details. Tommy's reviews were always sequentially ordered. He used the peer discussions as a vehicle to explain unknown or unclear information, and he related all suggestions directly to his written reviews. Therefore, it was concluded that Tommy's written reviews exhibited a clear understanding of the stories read. Tommy was able to gain maturity in his writing as he began to gain information from his peers that helped him to develop new ways to think about information (Bayliss, 1994).
Quintin's at-risk behaviors were best described by Danielson and Tighe (1994), as he is a student who lacks self-esteem and has little motivation to learn. Quintin exhibited social behaviors that caused him to have problems completing assigned tasks, such as negativity and a lack of motivation. This is evidenced by the fact that he has been diagnosed as having attention deficit disorder, and does take ritalin daily. Quintin had a negative attitude toward his peers, and he frequently did not complete assignments. He was more apt to remain on task when he was sharing information, and he began to take notes with greater determination as time proceeded. Quintin needed more teacher direction than most students, but he eventually began to work within the constraints of the discussion groups.

Quintin had a basic knowledge of writing skills, but initially he chose not to complete writing activities that exhibited a level of understanding. As he interacted with discussion group members, he also gained a great deal of maturity by incorporating his newly acquired knowledge and relating it to a specific audience (Bayliss, 1994). His writings became longer and more filled with details and personal knowledge, along with being well planned and written in sequential order. Tommy exhibited comprehension of the stories read through clear, concise, well-developed writings.
Finally, the data gathered strongly suggested that discussion groups assisted at-risk readers in comprehending text as demonstrated by their written reviews. The at-risk readers gained insights and information from their peers in order to comprehend the stories read. They also included enough of this information in order to complete written reviews of the stories. Editing sessions with peers further added to the at-risk students' successes by allowing the students to perfect their writings.

Limitations

It is important to note that with all types of research limitations are inherent, and as one might expect this study was no different. Within the parameters of this study, some emerging limitations of the case study research method were noted.

Information gathered through field notes did not always provide enough information in order to adequately draw concise conclusions from the data. The most notable area where this occurred was in attempting to determine whether or not the at-risk students' behaviors were measurably altered because of the affects of the discussion groups. An evaluation of their overall behavior suggested that they were able to overcome these at-risk problems, although quantifying each individual problem would have been virtually impossible. Therefore, data pertaining to every individual at-risk behavior was incomplete, and a general
summary was given in order to explain the overall at-risk behavior of each participant.

Completing this study in my own classroom also caused a certain level of bias on my part. I was careful to schedule observations on a set schedule, and I followed the guidelines set for the discussion groups. I also included an outside observer and compared my notes and conclusions with hers in order to avoid my own emotional considerations. It was difficult to exclude information regarding other student behaviors and accomplishments. While I had my notes and conclusions reviewed by both the outside observer and a key debriefer, I still could have included some information about the students that could have slightly swayed my views.

**Implications for Future Research**

Because I focused my research on one broad question and four support questions, I eliminated other emerging themes from this discussion. A reconsideration of the data collected from the field notes would suggest that a great deal of corresponding data was collected that would justify analysis. Notable areas that warrant further study include: (a) an examination of how the discussion group activities affected the students in other classroom activities; (b) an examination of how the interaction in discussion groups helped to foster student friendships; (c) an examination of leadership roles; and (d) an examination
of the active readers' behaviors and actions during discussion group sessions.

This discussion of at general at-risk behaviors has revealed that researching more specific at-risk behaviors would be beneficial. Some at-risk students identified as dyslexic or having attention deficit disorder are now placed in regular classrooms. These learning difficulties are being recognized, but students are still expected to complete regular classroom activities. Noting their behaviors as they interact directly with their peers during discussion groups could reflect valuable insights into overcoming their learning disabilities.

This research specifically looked at how four students sought to overcome their at-risk behaviors with the assistance of peer interaction. They proved this by exhibiting comprehension of stories through written reviews. These at-risk readers could have been compared with active readers using a comparison/contrast design.

Epilogue

Susan, Joan, Tommy, and Quintin brought specific at-risk behaviors into my classroom. All were expected to accomplish the goals set by the school system and by me. It was apparent from our first day of school that these students would need a great deal of extra attention and assistance. Unfortunately, providing for individual instruction is often impossible in a regular classroom
setting. In order to meet the needs of these students with greater regularity, I developed a classroom atmosphere that encouraged students to learn from their peers.

I have noted areas of success along with areas that require future modifications. My most profound discoveries lie in the fact that I, as a teacher, have realized that my students have come to be independent, responsible students. As a reading teacher, I have offered my students a viable alternative to regular classroom reading instructional procedures. Because of this alternative, the students have developed to the extent that they are able to confront, reexplore, interweave, refine, or change their interpretations (Langer, 1994) of stories read in order to comprehend them.
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Dear Mr. Robere,

I am currently preparing to begin gathering data to complete the research necessary to write my dissertation. This dissertation will complete the requirements set forth by Louisiana State University for a doctorate degree in Reading Education. I would like to be granted permission to conduct this study in my own fourth grade classroom at School. Mrs. , my principal, has been informed of my intentions and has been kind enough to give me a great deal of guidance and assistance as I am laying the groundwork for this study.

My study will be a qualitative look at at-risk readers and their attempts to comprehend text through collaborative group activities with active readers. The study will look at four basic areas: (a) how the at-risk readers interact with their peers, (b) acquire background knowledge from their peers, (c) use this interaction to aid in comprehension when writing papers or essays in relation to their readings, and (d) whether or not this interaction helps the at-risk readers to become more independent in their comprehension acquisition.

This idea was conceived in my third grade classroom at School, as I could see a need for more student interaction in order for students to adequately comprehend stories read. The new Harcourt Brace Jovanovich reading series currently employed by the Ascension Parish School System lends itself to this study because of its focus on writing and heterogenous grouping. While this study is of great interest to me, I also hope that it will be informative and beneficial for Ascension Parish.

Enclosed is a copy of the letter that I plan to send home to the parents of my fourth graders in order to inform them that their children will be participating in this study. Please note that the students' identities will be kept confidential. Also, scheduled meetings will be set so that I will be able to explain this study to the parents and answer any questions that could arise.

With the continued cooperation and assistance that I have always gotten from Ascension Parish and I am sure that this study will be a great success. If you should have any further questions, please contact me at .

Sincerely,

Jane A. Medver
Mrs. Jane Hedver
4155 Essen Lane, #203
Baton Rouge, LA 70809

Dear Mrs. Hedver:

This letter grants permission for you to conduct a study in your classroom at School in order to complete the requirements set forth by Louisiana State University for a doctorate degree in Reading Education.

Yours truly,

Shelby J. Robert
Superintendent
Ascension Parish Schools

SJR/ksl

cc: [Redacted], Principal
Dear Mrs. [Name],

As you are aware, I have been pursuing a doctorate degree in Reading Education at Louisiana State University. The only requirement that I have left to fulfill is the dissertation. I was hoping to complete the study and gather the data necessary to write my dissertation in my own fourth grade classroom at [School] during the 1995-1996 school year.

My study will be a qualitative look at at-risk readers and their attempts to comprehend text through collaborative group activities with active readers. The study will look at four basic areas: (a) how the at-risk readers interact with their peers, (b) acquire background knowledge from their peers, (c) use this interaction to aid in comprehension when writing papers or essays in relation to their readings, and (d) whether or not this interaction helps the at-risk readers to become more independent in their comprehension acquisition.

This idea was conceived in my third grade classroom at [School], as I could see a need for more student interaction in order for students to adequately comprehend stories read. The new Harcourt Brace Jovanovich reading series currently employed by the Ascension Parish School System lends itself to this study because of its focus on writing and heterogeneous grouping. While this study is of great interest to me, I also hope that it will be informative and beneficial for Ascension Parish.

I am truly looking forward to completing this study in my classroom at [School]. Your guidance and input on this project have been extremely helpful thus far, and I will value your assistance as I gather the data for this study. Thank you for your constant support of my graduate endeavors and for your confidence in me and the pursuit of this study.

Sincerely,

Jane A. Medver
August 21, 1995

Ms. Jane Medver
4155 Essen Lane
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70809

Dear Ms. Medver,

This letter is to inform you, that I will grant permission for you to conduct a study with your students at [School] during the 1995-96 school year.

I understand that this study will be your dissertation to fulfill the requirements for a doctorate degree in Reading Education.

I welcome the opportunity to find out more about our at-risk readers.

Sincerely,

[Principal]
School
Dear Parents,

I am currently completing the requirements for a doctorate degree in Reading Education from Louisiana State University. The last step in completing my degree is to complete a research study in reading and then write my dissertation. I am planning to do the research and complete my study with my own students this school year. However, please note that the identities of all of the students noted in the study will be kept confidential, so your child will not be specifically named in the study.

This study will look at how at-risk readers benefit from interacting with active readers when trying to comprehend stories read during reading. Daily reading lessons will not be interrupted, and students will still be required to meet the standards set forth by the Ascension Parish School Board and Dutchtown Primary School with regards to the Harcourt Brace Javanovich reading series.

On Thursday, September 7, 1995 at both 8:00 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., I will be available to meet with you and discuss this study. If you should have any questions, please attend one of these sessions or call me at 927-9543. Please fill out the bottom portion of this letter and return it as soon as possible.

Thank you for your cooperation and assistance with this study.

Sincerely,

Jane A. Medver

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I would like to attend the meeting on Thursday, September 7, 1995 at 8:00 a.m.

I would like to attend the meeting on Thursday, September 7, 1995 at 3:30 p.m.

If there is an opportunity for photographs, videotaping, or audiotaping, my child may participate.

(Child’s Name)  (Parent’s Signature)
VITA

Jane Ann Medver was born on March 25, 1960 in New Iberia, Louisiana to Thomas and Ronnie Medver. She attended public schools in both Lydia, Louisiana and New Iberia, Louisiana. Miss Medver graduated from New Iberia Senior High School in 1978. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in elementary education from the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette, Louisiana in 1982. She received her master's degree from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana in 1991. She also received an Education Specialist's degree in reading from Louisiana State University in 1993.

Miss Medver has been an educator for fourteen years. She has served as a classroom teacher in first grade, second grade, third grade, and fourth grade. She taught all subjects in a self-contained situation in these instances. She also taught fifth and sixth grades as a reading and language arts teacher. Additionally, she worked as a tutor at both the DePaul Dyslexic Association and the Sylvan Learning Centers, where she focused on assisting students with at-risk behaviors and learning disabilities. Here she became more aware of behaviors associated with dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, and visual and hearing impairments. Miss Medver is currently employed in a local school system as a fourth grade teacher and completing the requirements for
the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in Curriculum and Instruction (Reading) from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Jane A. Medver

Major Field: Curriculum and Instruction

Title of Dissertation: Connecting Reading to Writing: At-risk Readers' Comprehension Acquisition via Discussion Groups with Active Readers

Approved:

Earl Cheek
Major Professor and Chairman

John M. Yanchi
Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Peter A. Sodenberg

W. L. Rem F. Piner

Date of Examination: March 18, 1996