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. Running head: SUPPORTING READING COMPREHENSION

Supporting Reading Comprehension in Middle School Students

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study focused on understanding how teaching supports students with reading comprehension in 6<sup>th</sup>-grade English Language Arts classes. Data was collected through student interviews and surveys, as well as examinations of teaching and teaching materials. Findings suggest that while technology-based instruction supports the tracking of students' performance, it is only somewhat effective in helping students develop their reading comprehension. In addition, it was found that purposeful scaffolding and direct instruction supports student success.

Implications include a need for teachers to use scaffolding and direct instruction and for more research to be done for different technology-based reading programs.

*Keywords: reading, teaching methods, student support*

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading is a critical academic skill often learned through formal schooling. Research shows that having underdeveloped reading comprehension skills can affect most aspects of a person's life. For example, those with lower literacy rates are more likely to be unemployed, living in poverty, and earning lower wages than those with higher literacy rates (Kirsch, et al., 1993).

It is for these reasons that I see the development of reading comprehension skills as critical in my English classes, and is something that we work on every single day. Students are learning how to read and analyze fiction and non-fiction texts in order to understand the content. Given the critical nature of reading comprehension, I have focused my work as an English teacher on supporting students' development of reading comprehension strategies so they may be successful as readers, be literate citizens, and also reach the benchmarks set by the district.

Currently in my classroom, I teach a variety of reading comprehension strategies to students supported by several resources - novels, Achieve3000 (a technology-based reading comprehension program focused on nonfiction texts), and short readings from different books or online sources. One set of strategies that I use with students when we read class novels are from Notice and Note called "signposts" (Beers & Probst, 2013). This is a set of strategies that get students to stop and think as they are reading when an author has a certain element in their writing. Of the 6 strategies in the book, one is called Contrasts and Contradictions (Beer & Probst, 2013). This is when a character in the story says or does something is not what they would "normally" say or do and students have to think about why the author made this choice (Beer & Probst, 2013).



I also use reading strategies to help students comprehend both fiction and nonfiction texts including predicting, inferring, visualizing, questioning, connecting, evaluating, summarizing, and synthesizing. Students use these strategies when completing assignments for novel studies and Achieve3000 articles.

#### Statement of Problem

Although the students are taught a wide array of reading comprehension strategies throughout the year, supported by these resources, the students in my classroom often struggle with their reading comprehension. When looking at testing trends for the past three years on the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) state exams, between 20-40% of students at my school do not meeting the standards for reading and writing. In my current English classrooms, 57% of students have met the standard for reading comprehension as measured by Achieve3000 and 75% are demonstrating proficiency through their course assignments; this is not sufficient.

#### Research Question and Subquestions

Given the critical nature of reading comprehension (Duffy, 2002; Rupley et al., 2009; Stevens et al., 1992; Quraishi et al., 2010) and my current students' struggles with reading comprehension, the purpose of this study was to better understand how my teaching is influencing students' learning experiences with reading comprehension. The research questions I explored are:

1. How are students currently performing in terms of their reading comprehension?
2. How am I supporting students' reading comprehension through my pedagogical and curricular choices?

### Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand how students are currently performing in my class, how my teaching affects their learning, and what approaches can be taken to better support students. I examined students' grades as well as my own teaching in order to better understand each of these areas. With the use of a reading comprehension program (Achieve3000) and class novels, students in my classes work on reading comprehension most days. However, data shows that over the past 3 years many students did not meet the state standards for reading. My research questions focused on my own classroom, teaching, and students and furthered understandings of their performance and my teaching.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading comprehension is a very broad topic that is looked at in a variety of ways by scholars and practitioners. According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), only 34% of 4th and 8th graders are reading at or above proficient level, while 1/3 of fourth graders and 1/3 of eighth graders are placing below basic scores for reading. The research also demonstrates that reading comprehension is critical for academics and also for lifelong learning (Cabaroglu, & Yurdaisik, 2008). For example, Scammacca, Roberts, Vaughn and Stuebing et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis from the literature on struggling readers from 1980-2004 and found that struggling readers in grades 4-12 can improve their reading ability when the appropriate interventions such as vocabulary development, word study, and more are taught by teachers (Scammacca et al., 2015). These statistics, combined with research on reading comprehension to support understanding of content across the academic disciplines (Scammacca et al., 2015), suggest that a focus on reading comprehension may support students in building the crucial skills necessary for understanding content. This literature review focuses on what is known about reading comprehension in general as well as the effectiveness of different instructional approaches and technology-based methods of teaching reading to support reading comprehension.

### Instructional Approaches to Support Reading Comprehension

While reading comprehension is something to which teachers in a variety of content areas must attend, how it is taught varies from teacher to teacher and school to school. The research describes a variety of instructional approaches that are designed to support students with reading comprehension (Attarzadeh, 2011; Clark & Graves, 2005; Duffy, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978; Pressley, 2002b; Proctor et al., 2007; Clark & Graves, 2005; Attarzadeh, 2011; Rupley et al.,

2009; Duffy, 2002; Stevens et al., 1991; Quraishi et al., 2010). Most prominent in the literature are two approaches —scaffolding and direct instruction.

### **Scaffolding**

The idea of scaffolding is largely credited to Vygotsky (1978) where he describes the process by which children learn subject matter supported by another knowledgeable individual within the zone of proximal development. Applied to reading comprehension, Pressley (2002b) describes the scaffolding that supports a building under construction. As the building is built-up and becomes stronger, the scaffolding is removed just like when a teacher supports a student in their learning and then steps back as the student is able to stand on their own. While it is important to support students through the process, it is more important to make sure that they are being guided to become independent readers and scaffolding is one way to approach this. Clark and Graves (2005) argue that scaffolding allows the teacher to modify the lesson being taught in order to address the needs of individual students within the class.

Proctor, Dalton, and Grisham (2007) conducted a study that focused on a reading program for students to use that would scaffold the information and help them move from a higher level of support to a lower level of support in order to become more independent and use the strategies on their own. They used an approach called a Universal Learning Environment where students would read four narrative and four informational texts (Proctor et al., 2007). All of the readings students accessed contained “prereading, within-reading, and post-reading activities and supports designed to scaffold and assess progress toward improving English reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge” (Proctor et al., 2007, p. 77). The findings suggest that while the program’s contributions to their reading comprehension growth were small, there was an increase in scores between the two tests (Proctor et al., 2007).

Also, Attarzadeh (2011) conducted a study with 360 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners who were organized into three groups - low, mid, and high proficiency - based on a proficiency test students took. The students were then enrolled in three different courses where three of the groups had instruction with scaffolding and the three other groups had instruction that did not. The focus of the study was to see the effect of scaffolding on the students as they worked through different units of learning English (Attarzadeh, 2011). Those in the scaffolded groups were shown a more interactive model of learning and those in the control group were taught in a more traditional setting with more independent reading (Attarzadeh, 2011, pg. 1). The results showed that the most significant influence of scaffolding came for students who were at the mid-level of reading proficiency. Those in the high and low-level groups did not show significant differences in their scores.

### **Direct Instruction of Reading Comprehension Strategies**

The research also describes direct instruction as a pedagogical approach that supports students' reading comprehension development. Direct instruction includes explicit explanations, modeling or demonstrating, and guided practice led by the teacher. It is often used to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009). This is different than some other techniques that teachers use such as Directed Reading Lessons where teachers guide students through the reading and then hold a discussion (Duffy, 2002). Duffy (2002) argues that this is no more than an "interrogation" and that most students do not pick up on some of the clues that teachers give when learning about a new reading strategy.

There have been a few studies conducted testing the effectiveness of direct instruction. Stevens, Slavin, and Farnish (1991) conducted an experimental study to see the overall impact of

direct instruction on reading comprehension strategies and how much using a cooperative learning process could enhance students understanding of the strategies. They studied reading comprehension of 486 third- and fourth-graders in 4 different elementary schools (Stevens et al., 1991). Stevens et al. (1991) had three groups in the study - direct instruction with cooperative learning (CL), direct instruction in reading comprehension (DI), and control - and the CL and DI groups used the same Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (CIRC) reading comprehension materials to teach their classes. Students were given a 30-item multiple choice pretest and a 20-item multiple choice posttest to measure the results (Stevens et al., 1991). The authors found that students in the CL and DI groups scored significantly higher on the posttest than the students in the control group and concluded that direct instruction has a significant impact on students learning specific reading strategies (Stevens et al., 1991).

Quraishi, Hmdani, Hussain, and Zeeshan (2010) conducted a similar study to see how effective direct teaching was with students learning English. They worked with 4 total sections of English classes, which were also separated into experimental and control groups, and each group consisted of 30 students (Quraishi, et al., 2010). They gave teacher-created pre and post-tests to students to measure their results. During the study, the control groups received the same type of instruction they usually had and the experimental group was taught with direct instruction (Quraishi, et al., 2010). Overall, their results showed the benefits of direct instruction - students in the experimental groups outscored those in the control groups, low achieving students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group, and the low achievers in the experimental group retained more information (Quraishi, et al., 2010). Taken together, the research on direct instruction suggests a positive impact on students' reading comprehension.

Scaffolding and direct instruction are two methods that teachers can use to help their students learn reading comprehension strategies. Scaffolding is a way to allow students to have a mentor that can help them learn a skill and slowly break off on their own and use the strategy independently (Clark & Graves, 2005; Pressley, 2002b; Vygotsky, 1978). Direct instruction is where teachers are directly working with students and even scaffolding their lessons to support students learning of reading comprehension strategies (Rupley, Blair, & Nichols, 2009). Both strategies have positive results from studies conducted about them.

### Technology Driven Teaching

The research also describes technology as a tool used by teachers to support students' development in reading comprehension. Some of the different programs being used are Achieve3000, RAZ-kids, and ICANREAD, amongst others.

The effectiveness of technology-driven teaching is being researched by many in order to see if it is as effective as traditional teaching materials. Achieve3000 is a differentiated online literacy program for students in grades k-12 that builds “phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing skills” (What Works Clearinghouse, 2018, p. 1). The Achieve3000 National Lexile Study, conducted by the company itself, states that if the program is used, Lexile reading gains increase dramatically and students build literacy skills based on the Common Core State Standards (Achieve3000, 2012). However, a study conducted by Hill, Lenard, and Page (2016) does not show Achieve3000 being the most effective program to enhance student learning. They conducted a 2 year trial and pulled data from 32 schools that showed the schools were not using the program as much as they should and students did not have any significant improvement in reading as compared to other schools without Achieve3000 (Hill,

Lenard, & Page, 2016). The results from this external study bring some doubt as to the accuracy of the Achieve3000's findings.

Achieve3000 is not the only program being reviewed. Wood, Grant, Gottardo, Savage, and Evans (2017) did a study to see what benefits there were to online and offline early literacy programs. They looked into 14 different programs and rated each one based on multiple factors. Overall, their research led them to conclude that the online programs were able to cover more content and support students more than offline programs and the offline programs helped students focus on fewer strategies but be able to develop them more (Wood et al., 2017). They also noted that the online programs covered more skills and sub-skills than the offline programs, but the offline programs were thought to have been more selective in the skills that they focused on. They did also note that scaffolding was tough across each type of program. They concluded that while online programs have their benefits, there needs to be more research done in order to make sure they are being used correctly and that they are helping early reading learners learn the necessary skills for reading comprehension (Wood et al., 2017).

Overall, technology driven teaching is still being researched to check for effectiveness. Achieve3000, the program my school uses, has a few studies being done on it and some of the data is not completely positive. Other online programs are also being looked into to check whether they are better than non-technology-based resources.

### Summary

The biggest findings that came from this research were that scaffolding and direct instruction are teaching strategies that are shown to support students' development of reading comprehension strategies. Scaffolding allows for students to become more independent in their work as they learn and direct instruction allows the teacher to run a workshop-like model of



teaching that focuses on student needs. Also, while Achieve3000 is being used across the country, there are studies being done that show it to not be totally effective. As well, technology-based teaching is not always effective, but studies are looking into different programs.

## METHODS

The purpose of this study was to better understand how my teaching is influencing students' learning experiences. The research questions I explored are:

1. How are students currently performing in terms of their reading comprehension?
2. How am I supporting students' reading comprehension through my pedagogical and curricular choices?

### Participants and Setting

The participants are my 6th-grade English students. They make up about half of the total 6th-graders at the school. Forty-seven percent of the group is girls and 53% is boys. About 60% of the classroom population is identified as White in their school profile. Sixteen percent of students receive special education services. The school population is 5.6% English Language Learners with about 1% of that being in my classes. Appendix A shows demographic information for each of my 93 students including race, home language, gender, special education services, and English Language Learner status.

I studied the learning experiences and teaching within three class periods (Table 1). Table 1 provides information for demographics of each class period based on gender, Individual Education Plans (IEPs)/504s, and English Language Learners (ELLs) in each class. My 3rd period class also has the Special Education (SPED) lead for my grade level in the classroom to support the students in there. I am a participant in the study because I am the interviewer and was in the room when my 6th-graders were taking the survey. I also recorded myself teaching and reviewed my methods.

Table 1  
*Information on the demographics of each class period.*

<u>Class</u>	<u>%Boys</u>	<u>%Girls</u>	<u>IEPs/504s</u>	<u>ELLs</u>
Period 3	47%	53%	10	4
Period 4	45%	55%	4	5
Period 5	67%	33%	2	4

The setting for this study is Viking Middle School (VMS). VMS is a public middle school located in a neighborhood that is considered more affluent in San Diego. However, the school also pulls from surrounding neighborhoods that are of lower socioeconomic status. Over 30% of the students are on free-or-reduced lunch. The school has a total of 602 students in grades 6-8 with about 43% girls and 57% boys. Forty-four percent of students are White with the other 56% reporting different ethnicities - Hispanic, Asian, two or more races, Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander. The school district, while located in a more affluent area, is one of the lower funded in the area. The school and district have a focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) education and have many programs to support it. The school is also using Project Based Learning (PBL) and design thinking.

#### Data Collection

For this study, I gave surveys, conducted interviews, and examined my own teaching and teaching materials from this year through video observation and document review. They occurred according to the following timeline (Table 2):

Table 2

*Data Collection Timeline*

Student Survey #1	January 11
New Novel Unit Begins	January 29 & 30
Student Interviews	January 30-February 1
Record Monthly Achieve Data	February 1
Video Observations	February 5 & 7
Student Survey #2	February 19 & 20
Record Monthly Achieve Data	March 1

**Surveys**

Two surveys were provided to students in hard copy format during the data collection period. The first survey was distributed at the beginning of the data collection period (Appendix B). It was designed to elicit how students personally feel about reading, my teaching, and how they are doing so far this year. It included general questions about reading and if they believe they can become better readers. It also asked them about the Achieve3000 program we use and how effective they believe my teaching is. Students were also give a second survey (Appendix B) at the end of the data collection period that asked similar questions to see how students felt after we focused more on reading comprehension strategies in class. These surveys addressed the first research subquestion: How are students currently performing in terms of their reading comprehension?

## **Interviews**

In addition to the surveys, select students were asked to participate in an interview (Appendix C). The interviews were designed to develop further understandings about reading in the classroom, specific in-class readings we have done so far this year, as well as past lessons. Three students were interviewed—one student with an IEP/504 Plan, one student who is at grade level reading, and one student who is above grade level reading. I chose these students because I wanted to make sure I was talking with a student who represented the different levels of reading comprehension and who may be receiving extra support in the class. The interviews were designed to address both research subquestions 1: How are students currently performing in terms of their reading comprehension? and 2: How am I supporting students' reading comprehension through my pedagogical and curricular choices?

## **Document Review**

In addition, past lessons and resources were reviewed as data sources for this study in order to understand what methods have been used so far and how effective they were for students. I looked at the novels taught and the supporting materials used for each novel unit. I also looked at the different Achieve3000 articles assigned and on what types of reading comprehension skills they focused. In addition, I examined the different assignments given that support reading comprehension. These documents support me in addressing research subquestion 2: How am I supporting students' reading comprehension through my pedagogical and curricular choices?

## Video Observations

I conducted video observations of my teaching of reading in order to understand how I was supporting my students' learning in regards to reading comprehension. I wanted to see the language that I used, the delivery of the lesson, and how much time I spent helping individual students. These video observations were designed to support me in answering subquestion 2: How am I supporting students' reading comprehension through my pedagogical and curricular choices?

Table 3

### *Document Collection and Review Timeline*

Review of Student Grades	January 15
Review of Past Lessons	January 30
Review of Post Study Work	February 27

## Data Analysis

My data analysis consisted of a few steps - compiling all survey data into one document, reviewing video footage of myself teaching, reviewing interview transcripts, reviewing student data for their grades and score information from Achieve3000, and reviewing teaching materials that I have used this year. Once I had my data together I began organizing it by which research question it answered. For my first research question - How are students currently performing in terms of their reading comprehension? - I looked at grades, Achieve3000 scores, student interviews, and lessons that I have taught this year. I wanted to see how scores matched with student interview responses and lessons taught. For my second research question - How am I supporting students' reading comprehension through my pedagogical and curricular choices? - I reviewed each set of data to compare what I did before and during the study and the scores that

students were receiving. When reviewing each type of data I found different themes emerged.

Overall, the data helped me to answer my two research questions: 1: How are students currently performing in terms of their reading comprehension? and 2: How am I supporting students' reading comprehension through my pedagogical and curricular choices?

## FINDINGS

This research was conducted in my middle school English classroom to better understand how my teaching is influencing students' learning experiences. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How are students currently performing in terms of their reading comprehension?
2. How am I supporting students' reading comprehension through my pedagogical and curricular choices?

The following describes the findings from this study in terms of the research questions. I analyzed my own teaching and teaching materials to better understand how I am supporting my students. I also surveyed and interviewed students to help me better understand their thoughts on reading in my classroom.

### How are Students Currently Performing in Terms of Their Reading Comprehension?

This study examined students' performance in reading comprehension in multiple ways. In terms of their scores on Achieve3000, 57% of students are within the grade level range for their Lexile (6th-graders should be between 925-1070). Those who are below grade level are between 5 and 700 points below the lowest Lexile for grade level and most of those students go up no more than 5 points per month. The video observations and document review confirm this finding, showing that students' scores on their activities did not increase significantly after getting more direct instruction. For example, in the observation dated 2/7/19, even though students were given a new tool to help them with their work they actually performed worse. The students' class work suggests a contrasting view of students' performance. I found that 75% of students were performing with an 80% or better on reading assignments. These contrasting



results may be caused by the use of Achieve3000 versus class novels or possibly nonfiction versus fiction texts.

In one of the videos I took on 2/7/19, I showed students a way to use Achieve3000 that was a bit different than they were used to. Typically, students are performing at an average of 66%-70% on the first try of their activities (the reading quizzes given at the end of each article). When students work on Achieve, they normally come in to class and are given the article to work on and have independent time to work on it. They complete a pre-reading survey, read the article, complete the activity, and then complete a post-reading survey. For this lesson, I wanted to show them how they could use different tools in the program to help them prepare for their activity as well as discuss as a class the topic they would be reading about. We started out doing the pre-reading survey together. This is a time for students to voice their opinion on an issue covered by the article before they read. I read the question out loud and gave students sentence starters to help them write their responses. After this, we discussed their answers. I then went into showing students how to use a tool in the program in order to see the activity reading questions while they were reading the article. This would allow them to know what to look for while they were reading and to highlight any important information as they were reading. I showed students twice how to use the method and asked that they really try to use this instead of rushing through the work. Once they were done with the assessment piece, I went in and looked at their scores on this specific article compared to their average scores. Specific results for this can be seen in my next section.

In addition, my document review revealed the average Lexile for each student and class period. Table 4 below shows the progression throughout this entire year for average Lexile scores. As is evident from the table, each class has seen the average Lexile increase since the

beginning of the year, yet only Periods 4 and 5 are within grade level range (925-1070).

Individual student Lexile information can be found in Appendix C.

Table 4

*The data presented here shows the overall changes in Lexile since the beginning of the year.*

<u>Class</u>	<u>September</u>	<u>October</u>	<u>November</u>	<u>December</u>	<u>January</u>	<u>February</u>
Period 3	840	860	875	875	878	886
Period 4	930	960	975	979	987	991
Period 5	939	969	974	977	976	955

Document review also showed how students performed within the novel units taught. The first novel of the year was *On My Honor*. The assignment that students worked on was a storyboard where they filled in a box for each chapter of the book (12 total chapters) with a Notice and Note signpost that they found for that chapter. They needed to write what the signpost was, what it meant/stood for, the page it was on, and then they were to draw an image that represented what was going on. We read the chapters together and talked about each of the signposts found and students were then to independently fill out their graphic organizer. They also were to analyze the signpost themselves. Overall, the average score was 79.32% on the assignment. Those with IEPs tended to have lower scores on the assignments. Most students struggled to analyze the signposts once they had found them. They were able to see it was a signpost but were not able to explain what it meant. Those with lower Lexile levels tended to have the most trouble analyzing the information as compared to those with Lexiles from about 1000 and higher.

The second novel read was called *A Long Walk to Water*. For this novel, students worked on teacher-developed reading comprehension questions for each chapter. These questions

covered different reading comprehension strategies (summarize, predict, infer, etc.) but I did not explicitly explain the strategies to each student. We read the questions together before we read, popcorn read the chapter, and then students had a chance to answer the questions independently. I asked students to make sure they restated the question in their answer as well as give as much detail as they could from the story. We discussed the questions to check for understanding after they had time to complete them. The overall average for the reading comprehension questions was 76.8%. When looking at the student work samples, there was almost a direct correlation between how well students did on the assignment to their Lexile level on Achieve3000. Below are samples of student work that I pulled from 3 students who are below (Kerry), at (Lael), and above (Patty) grade level for their Lexile in Achieve3000.

*Question 1: According to Dep, why were the visitors in the village?*

*Kerry: Thar loking for wator*

*Lael: Because theyre looking for water*

*Patty: The visitors are in the village because they were needing to talk about water*

*Question 2: What choice does Salva and the group have to face when it comes to water?*

*Kerry: They had to save the water*

*Lael: They need to preserve it*

*Patty: The group and Salva has to face either saving the 5 motionless men on the ground by using water or save the water for themselves.*

The answer to question 1 was “The visitors were in the village because they wanted to talk to the chief about where they could dig a well” and the answer to question 2 was “The choice that Salva and the group faced was whether or not they should use their limited supply of water to save the dying men they found or save it to make sure they could make it out of the desert”.

While all three students technically got the answer correct, only Patty for question 2 actually gave details in her answers that connected back to the text and showed a deeper understanding. The other answers do not contain much detail. This was a similar theme throughout most student work.

The final novel, completed during this study, was *The Giver*. In contrast to the previous novel units, during this unit, students were explicitly taught reading comprehension strategies designed to support them in summarizing, connecting, inferring, and visualizing. At the beginning of the unit, we talked about the different types of reading comprehension strategies and then, for each chapter, students chose one reading strategy and wrote their answers in the composition books we use for classwork. Students had a graphic organizer in their notebooks that listed the different reading strategies that they could use and a description of each to remind them what they were being asked to do for each. Looking at their work, student entries mimicked the trend that I noticed with the last novel where their level of answer pretty much matched their Lexile level. After we read chapter 3 of *The Giver* I had them select one of the different strategies and answer a specific question on it. Below are the questions and answers from some students.

*Predict: Based on what you've read and what you know, what do you think will happen next? What clues helped you to think about what will happen next? Is your prediction logical?*

*Bart: I think that he is going to get a job where he helps people. A clue that helped me is that he did not like playing pass but he still played it because it helps his friend. It is logical because they get jobs and some of them are helping people.*

*Otto: I think that Jonas will get into trouble because he did not follow the rules.*

*Visualize: Make a list of words the author has used to describe the setting. Did these*

*words help you to visualize it? Explain.*

*Marjorie: Considered, glances, expression, self-conscious, insensitive, unsettling, curiously, citizen, exception: These words did help me visualize the story by showing the feelings of the character.*

*Vincent: calming, career center, sanitary, clean, old, secure*

For predict, Bart answered all parts of the question that were asked. He used his knowledge of the chapter and showed me that he had a grasp on what was going on in the chapter. Otto only answered part of the question and did not show me that he was understanding more than just one key detail in the chapter. I gave students time to reread the chapter in order to make sure they were able to gather the information they needed to answer the questions. For visualize, Marjorie gave a list of words that were mostly related and gave a good explanation as to why those words were important. Vincent seems to have just listed some words that he saw while we were reading. Overall, student scores on this assignment averaged 80.3%.

As far as student performance goes, students are performing at an average rate throughout the different types of assignments we have. For Achieve, only 57% of my students are performing at or above grade level. Even with intervention and supporting students through modified teaching they still did not improve their scores significantly. When it comes to novel unit work, students are scoring within the same range. Average class scores range from the mid to high 70s to low 80s for scores and most students' scores on assignments are relative to their Achieve3000 Lexile level. It was a common theme that students would give basic answers to questions even though more was being asked of them. Their scores did improve on the assignments that were given during the study when they were being directly taught the strategies that they were using.

## How Am I Supporting Students' Reading Comprehension Through My Pedagogical and Curricular Choices?

Analysis of the surveys, interviews, and video observations suggest a variety of pedagogical and curricular choices aimed at reading comprehension. The data that answers the second research question includes information from my surveys, interviews, and videos.

### **Approaches to Teaching Before and During Study**

During this study I looked at how I taught reading comprehension through the first semester of the year and then how a modified approach was received by students throughout the time period of the study. Before the study began, my teaching focused on quick overviews of the task and students following the directions. When the study began, I started making changes and using scaffolding and direct instruction in my teaching. The curriculum taught in both instances is based on 6th-grade English Language Arts (ELA) standards. My pedagogy changes were based on some of the research that was done in my literature review.

### **Achieve3000 - Pedagogical and Curricular Choices**

Using Achieve3000 is required by the district but I like using it to have a way to track student progress throughout the year. Students begin working on Achieve in elementary school as early as first grade and once in middle school they are expected to complete 8 articles each month. With the different holidays and schedules, this means students are completing an average of 70 articles throughout the year. Students use it a lot, however, interest in Achieve3000 is not very high. This is evident from the survey data where students were asked if they felt that Achieve3000 helped them to become a better reader. Forty-nine percent of students do not feel that Achieve3000 is effective in helping them become a better reader. This trend also came up in

student interviews when they were asked the same questions and were able to give more detail. Gellert said, “I mean it's okay. It's kind of a pain but like if we do it, I feel like it has helped me a little bit.” While interviewing a different student, Carl, about Achieve3000 he said:

I think it's fun because you get to quiz yourself on what you know on that article. Those articles are teaching you what happened throughout the five, ten years that you've never really experienced.

Teacher: Okay. Do you feel that it helps you become a better reader?

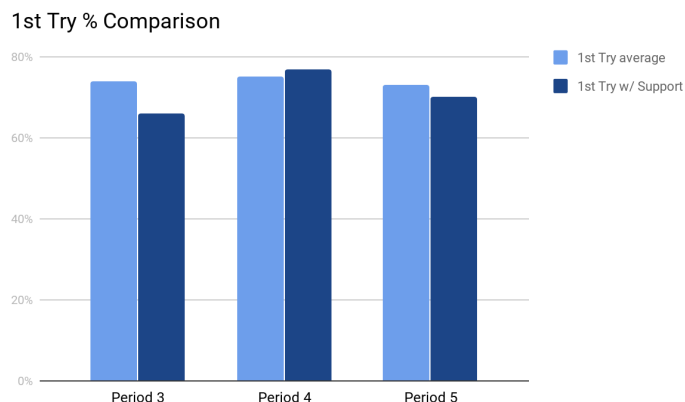
Carl: Yes.

Teacher: Have you become a better reader this year?

Carl: Yes, just not comprehending. I need to work on that.

While Carl believes that Achieve3000 could help him become a better reader, he does not feel he has gotten better at comprehending material, which is the goal of reading.

I wanted to take a different approach to Achieve3000 with students and made a pedagogical change that I reviewed per the video observation on 2/7/19. I scaffolded the lesson to show students a way to support them with the reading activity in Achieve3000. The hopes was that students would use the method of having the activity open as they are reading and be able to get higher scores on their activity. The results showed that 2 out of 3 classes got worse scores than they typically do. Period 3 had an average of 66% on their first try where the class typically averages at 74%. Period 4 had an average of 77% for the first try where the class typically averages at 75%. Period 5 had an average of 70% for their first try where the class typically averages at 73%. Period 4 was the only class that had an increase in scores using this method while periods 3 and 5 both had a drop in average scores. You can see these figures in the graph below.



*Figure 1:* Comparison of the 1st try average scores for each period to their 1st try with support.

The data collected for Achieve3000 showed that most students are not interested in using it and even with a modified approach designed to support them to do better on their activity they did not do significantly better.

### **Class Novels - Pedagogical and Curricular Choices**

As mentioned in a previous section, this year we have read three class novels - *On My Honor*, *A Long Walk to Water*, and *The Giver*. The first two were taught before the study began and the third was taught during the study. These novels were chosen based on being appropriate for 6th-grade based on reading level and recommendation.

While teaching the first two novels my approach was based on giving students instructions, giving them time to work, and then collecting and grading the work they turned in. The data suggests this approach did not support students' reading comprehension development. Results from the survey showed only 48% of students believed that we worked on reading comprehension "often" or "very often" and 69% of students felt that I was supporting them with their reading comprehension. Data from interviews showed that students could remember overall plot points of what we read but not the actual assignments that we did. All 3 students that were



interviewed, when asked about the assignments we did during the novels, could not remember a single assignment that we had worked on.

When I began the study, I made some pedagogical changes that I hoped would help students connect to the reading more and develop their reading comprehension strategies. These changes can be seen in my video observations from 2/5/19. The first part of the video was a lesson on summarizing. Instead of giving directions to the class and having students work in groups before going over the answers, we worked through everything together. I scaffolded the material so that we worked together as a class for a few questions and I gradually had them work more independently. I asked students to read the excerpts out loud to the class and then walked through how I would summarize the first excerpt. After the first one, I started asking for more student help as we moved through each excerpt. The reading comprehension strategy we were working on was summarizing and we were using short excerpts that students would then sum up in 1-2 sentences. I did not work directly with all of the groups or check in with individual students many times. When looking back at their work and scoring them, the average score was 75%. Some student examples can be seen below along with the excerpts that they were summarizing. Figure 1 is one of the excerpts that the students used to complete the assignment.

### FRANCE

It's difficult to imagine such an Elderly Rights Law being a legislative priority in many Western cultures.

France did, however, pass a similar decree in 2004 (Article 207 of the Civil Code) requiring its citizens to keep in touch with their geriatric parents. It was only enacted following two disturbing events, though: One was the publication of statistics revealing France had the highest rate of pensioner suicides in Europe, and the other was the aftermath of a heat wave that killed 15,000 people - most of them elderly.



*Figure 2.* One of the excerpts that students were summarizing.

These are some examples of student work from summarizing this excerpt:

*Otto: Passed a law, children must talk to parents. However, there is a big rate of pensioner deaths.*

*Hannah: France passed the law requiring to visit the elderly so they can be taken care of.*

*Lael: A lot of elders die. A large pop of elders. A lot of suicide.*

*Bart: France passed the law that children must talk to their parents because of the events that happened.*

Most students were able to give answers that had more details and actually summarize the whole excerpt. However, some were still scoring lower even though they had the ability to work with their classmates and we reviewed the answers before they turned their work in. Some students would hyper focus on one sentence of the excerpt and just reword that as their summary.

In the second part of the first video, we were working on gathering information from *The Giver*. I had students work on an activity that asked them to look back at the reading we had done so far and collect information about the different ages of people in the book and the “right of passage” for each. They designed the chart in their notebooks based on an example I had on the board. My pedagogical choice was to model what they were going to be looking for. I asked them to tell me some of the information they already knew and wrote it on my own chart on the board. I did not film us reading the chapters. When looking back on student work and scoring it, the average score was about 85%.

What I teach and how I teach it seem to have at least a some impact on students’ perceptions of reading comprehension instruction. When given the post-survey, 52% of students (up from 48%) felt we were working on reading comprehension more and 78% (up from 69%) said that I was effective in helping them be better readers. Making a few small changes in how I

was teaching, based on the research, helped students average scores go up by about 2% for their assignments. Students were also being more detailed with their answers to the assignments that they were given. Achieve scores did not go up significantly either, but two classes scored about 3-8% higher on their Achieve activities.

### Summary

Overall, some key findings came up from my study. One was that a large number of students are performing below grade level for Achieve3000 and they did not improve with the extra support given during the study. Student work during the novel units improves with the use of direct instruction and scaffolding, but I feel that more time could have been beneficial. The pedagogical choices I made during the study benefited students in their novel work but not on Achieve3000.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to better understand how my teaching is influencing students' learning experiences. My research questions were:

1. How are students currently performing in terms of their reading comprehension across different genres?
2. How am I supporting students' reading comprehension through my pedagogical and curricular choices?

This chapter includes a limitation of study, discussion of Achieve3000, discussion of direct instruction, scaffolding, and discussion, educational implications, and future research.

### Limitations of Study

There were some limitations to my research. One limitation was the amount of time I had for the study. I feel that this is something that could be looked at over an entire school year or even throughout multiple school years. I also feel that doing more interviews would have been useful to furthering my understandings of students' experiences. When looking into my surveys, there were more questions that I wish I had asked students. I wish that I had them reflect more in the post-survey and think about the changes that they noticed throughout the time I was conducting the study. I also feel that I had limited assignments to look back on that were graded to help compare information.

Another limitation is the ability to work with students on a more individual scale. My average class size is 30 students. This is smaller than previous years, but is still a large amount of students when I have multiple class periods at that size. With the demand for all of the different topics to cover and projects we are working on, it can feel like a rush to get through everything. This leaves little time to sit with each individual student and work with them on their skills.

While I can see their work and give them feedback, giving personal immediate feedback can be so much more powerful. This barrier makes it difficult to really assess each student and help them progress in their reading comprehension.

The findings that suggest direct instruction of reading comprehension strategies was supported by multiple studies I went through (Duffy, 2002; Quraishi & Zeeshan, 2010; Rupley, Blair & Nichols, 2009; Stevens, Slavin & Farnish, 1992).

#### Discussion of Achieve3000

The major findings from my study include that Achieve3000 may be a good program for tracking students' progress throughout the year, but it is not necessarily supporting students' learning in absence of specific instruction. One great feature of Achieve3000 is the fact that it is differentiated for each student based on their measured reading ability. They take three Level Set tests (beginning, middle, end of year) that determine their Lexile level. Once they have completed the Level Set, they begin to read the articles that are assigned to them. The length of the article, vocabulary, and quiz questions are all determined by the students' Lexile levels. This is a tool that allows students to learn the same basic material theoretically at their level. As they work on Achieve, and receive 88% or higher on the quizzes, their Lexile goes up and the work becomes more difficult.

The findings showed that student interest in Achieve3000 is not very high. Students begin working on Achieve in elementary school as early as first grade. Once in middle school, students are expected to complete 8 articles each month which means they are completing about 70 per year. Most of the articles were written before the students were born and contain very outdated information. This can be frustrating for teachers trying to find content supporting articles and makes teachers in different subject areas wary of assigning them in their classes.

These findings align with the literature on reading comprehension. For example, the finding that suggests Achieve3000 is not the best program for schools to use aligns with what Hill, Lenard, and Page (2016) found in their study.

#### Discussion of Direct Instruction and Scaffolding

Before the study began, my teaching consisted of going over what we were working on then giving students the independent time to do their work. After I worked through my literature review I decided that I would incorporate direct instruction (Quraishi & Zeeshan, 2010; Stevens, Slavin, & Farnish, 1991) and scaffolding (Proctor, Dalton, & Grisham, 2007; Attarzadeh, 2011) into my teaching. The research done on both was positive and was beneficial to students in classes they were being used. My results align with the information presented in these studies. For scaffolding I noticed that scores went up on most assignments (Proctor et al., 2007) and that those in the middle reading level had more of an increase than those at higher or lower levels (Attarzadeh, 2011). For direct instruction I saw results that aligned with Stevens et al. (1991) where students were understanding specific reading comprehension strategies better and results that aligned with Quraishi et al. (2010) where overall students were performing better with the use of direct instruction.

The lessons I taught during the study focused on being more student centered. I wanted to work through our lessons to emphasize what we were learning and why. We read *The Giver* together during the study and I modified my lessons to where they were not just answering reading comprehension questions on a worksheet. The results showed that the use of direct instruction and scaffolding were beneficial to student success. Scores on assignments were higher and students were answering questions with a higher level of thinking and understanding.

However, I felt that the study was too short to see any significant results from these modifications.

### Educational Implications

The implications for teacher practice are that teachers should use more than Achieve3000 for nonfiction reading and they should look more into direct instruction with an emphasis on scaffolding. Achieve3000 is shown to have lower student interest and the whole class cannot work together on each of the articles. While there are the perks of using a technology-based program (differentiation, easy access, less paper waste, etc.) it is important to make sure that the programs are well received and are really doing what they need to. Direct instruction has shown better results for students in my classes for their assignment scores. For my units, I typically assign bigger assignments that go through the whole time. However, including more formative assessments to check-in with students and see overall student progress throughout is better than just a summative assessment. If there are multiple formative assessments the teachers can modify the teaching in order to focus on a lesson more in class to help students better understand.

### Future Research

The implications for research on the topic are that more research should be done about online reading programs. Given the push for teachers to use them in schools, there should be a greater number of unbiased studies that examine their effectiveness. Also, more research should be done about direct instruction and scaffolding. In my study, I had positive results from using each strategy with my students and the research could define more specific guidelines around how teachers should use each strategy.

### Conclusion

Reading comprehension is such an important part of education. It helps students in all subject areas and allows them to really understand what they are learning. It is crucial for students to begin building their reading comprehension strategies early on so they can truly succeed in what they do.



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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

## Student Demographics

<b>Period 3</b>							
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>EL Status</b>	<b>Reported Home Language</b>	<b>Reported Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Special Ed Services</b>	<b>Jan. Achieve Lexile</b>	<b>Feb. Achieve Lexile</b>
Millie		English	White	F		1025	1080
Lars		English	White	M		650	620
Johnny		English	White	M		1180	1185
Karey		English	White and Japanese	F		1195	1235
Ethel		English	White	F	504	800	780
Beatrice		English	White	F		1080	1110
Tamantha	I	English	White	F		955	960
Jim		English	White	M		765	740
Neta		English	Filipino	F	IEP	520	540
George	R	English	White	M	IEP	835	790
Karrie		English	White	F		1255	1260
Karissa		English	White	F	IEP	605	595
Arlene		English	White and Black	F		1045	995
Shondra		English	White	F		1230	1270
Kyle		English	White	M	IEP	1000	1090
Stefani		English	White	F	IEP	680	675
Ligia		English	White	F		1170	1160
Deangelo		English	White and	M		585	585

Period 3							
Pseudonym	EL Status	Reported Home Language	Reported Race	Gender	Special Ed Services	Jan. Achieve Lexile	Feb. Achieve Lexile
			Japanese				
Leonard		English	White and Samoan	M		770	780
Mathew		English	White	M	IEP	395	410
Otis		English	White	M		1090	1120
Carmina		English	White	F		1255	1265
Tuan	R	Spanish	American Indian	M		705	690
Lael		English	White	F		940	950
Kerry		English	White	M	IEP	215	255
Mathilda		English	White	F		1135	1160
Hank	R	Spanish	White	M		1040	1045
Odis		English	White	M		1065	1090
Minerva		English	Japanese and White	F		795	780
Oswaldo		English	White	M	IEP	540	535
Zofia		English	White	F		905	965
Teddy		English	Black	M	IEP	610	625

Period 4							
Pseudonym	EL Status	Reported Home Language	Reported Race	Gender	Special Ed Services	Jan. Achieve Lexile	Feb. Achieve Lexile
Hannah	L	Spanish	Other Pacific Islander	F		535	500
Bathilda		English	White	F		1365	1435
Ludo		English	White	M		1060	1080
Amelia		English	White	F		670	670
Phineas		English	White	M		1045	1050
Alecto		English	White	M		1035	1040
Lavender		English	White, Filipino, and Chinese	F		1120	1120
Reginald		English	White	M		810	790
Vincent	R	Spanish	American Indian	M	IEP	940	960
Fleur		English	White	F		1255	1255
Gabrielle	R	English	American Indian	F		815	800
Petunia		English	White	F		840	795
Marjorie		English	White	F	504	1210	1165
Dennis		English	Filipino	M		1280	1325
Arabella	L	Spanish	Other Asian	F		685	695
Hermione		English	Black	F		865	885
Angelina		English	White	F	504	965	1000
Bellatrix		English	White	F		770	815

Period 4							
Pseudonym	EL Status	Reported Home Language	Reported Race	Gender	Special Ed Services	Jan. Achieve Lexile	Feb. Achieve Lexile
Colin		English	White	M		1040	1075
Luna		English	Other Asian	F		1255	1240
Narcissa		English	White	F		725	755
Pansy		English	Black	F		695	705
Padma		English	White	F	504	935	985
Albus		English	White	M		1060	1065
Vernon		English	White	M		985	935
Dudley	R	Spanish	White	M		625	600
Fenrir		English	White	M		1390	1420
Gellert		English	White	M		1350	1390
Rubeus		English	White	M		700	705
Parvati	I	English	White	F		980	1030
Lee		English	White	M		1439	1435

Period 5							
Pseudonym	EL Status	Reported Home Language	Reported Race	Gender	Special Ed Services	Jan. Achieve Lexile	Feb. Achieve Lexile
Homer		English	White	M		960	985
Bart		English	White	M		1250	1335
Marge		English	Filipino	F		1060	1080
Lisa	R	English	White	F		710	700
Itchy		English	White	M		775	740
Maggie		English	White and Chinese	F		920	925
Scratchy		English	White	M		970	1005
Barney		English	White	M		940	905
Ralph		English	White	M		n/a	595
Millhouse		English	White	M		850	850
Selma		English	White	F		1105	1165
Kent	R	English	White	M		680	700
Carl		English	White	M		675	660
Patty		English	White	F		1420	1415
Gary		English	White	M		920	850
Ned		English	American Indian	M		740	770
Gil		English	Chinese and Vietnamese	M		1390	1380
Maude		English	White	F		1120	1130
Lionel		English	White	M	IEP	1305	1335

Period 5							
Pseudonym	EL Status	Reported Home Language	Reported Race	Gender	Special Ed Services	Jan. Achieve Lexile	Feb. Achieve Lexile
Jimbo		English	Guamanian, Other Asian, and White	M		n/a	590
Lenny		English	White	M		955	1005
Otto		English	White	M	IEP	680	675
Troy		English	White	M		1250	1260
Jebediah		English	White	M		880	875
Edna	I	English	White	F		1045	1105
Cletus		English	White	M		870	870
Sherri		English	Other Asian	F		905	925
Terri		English	White	F		1085	1090
Moe		English	Other Asian	M		1000	1000
Mona	R	English	White	F		760	765



## Appendix B

## Student Surveys

**Student Reading Pre-Survey**

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Your answers will remain completely anonymous.

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being terrible and 5 being amazing, how good do you think you are at reading?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

2. How often do you read outside of school?

- a. Every day
- b. A few times per week
- c. Once or twice per week
- d. Never

3. Do you think people can become better readers?

- a. Yes
- b. No

4. Do you feel like Achieve3000 helps you build your reading skills?

- a. Yes
- b. No

5. What do you do if you do not understand something that you read?

- a.

6. What is your current Achieve Lexile?

- a. \_\_\_\_\_

7. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not at all and 5 being very often, how often do you work on reading strategies in my classroom?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

8. On a scale of 1-5, 1 being not at all and 5 being very, how effective do you feel my teaching is to you becoming a better reader?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

### Student Reading Post-Survey

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. Your answers will remain completely anonymous.

1. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being terrible and 5 being amazing, how good do you think you are at reading?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

2. Do you think people can become better readers?

- a. Yes
- b. No

3. Do you feel like Achieve3000 helps you build your reading skills?

- a. Yes
- b. No

4. What do you do if you do not understand something that you read?

- a.

5. What is your current Achieve Lexile?

- a. \_\_\_\_\_

6. On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not at all and 5 being very often, how often do you work on reading strategies in my classroom?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

7. On a scale of 1-5, 1 being not at all and 5 being very, how effective do you feel my teaching is to you becoming a better reader?

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

## Appendix C

## Student Interview

**Student Interview**

*Hello! I am going to ask you a few questions about reading and things we have read together and things you have read on your own. Please give me as much detail as you can!*

1. Do you remember reading *On My Honor*?
  - a. What do you remember from reading this book?
2. Do you remember learning the Notice and Note reading strategies?
  - a. Why do you think it was important to learn about Notice and Note?
3. Do you remember reading *A Long Walk to Water*?
  - a. What do you remember from reading this book?
4. Do you remember any of the reading assignments we worked on during the novel?
  - a. Why do you remember that assignment?
  - b. How did this assignment help you understand the novel better?
5. What are your thoughts on Achieve3000? (do you like it, is it useful, etc.)
  - a. Do you feel that it helps you be a better reader?
6. Do you feel that you are a good reader? Why or why not?
  - a. Do you feel that you could become a better reader?