

To Be or Not to Be. . . (Reading)

By: Richard A. Gadsby, MetLife Fellow, TNLI New York

During the 15-minute silent reading period at the end of the school day, Ms. Roman wearily looked around her room as the reading of the class novel dragged on. Freddy said he left his novel at home, as he thumbed through his math textbook. Charlie continued to look through his bookbag for the copy of *Catcher in the Rye* that he never intended to find, while Derrick simply stared absently off into space. On the other side of the room, Cierra and Annabelle read quietly, as did the vast majority of the girls in the class. Finally, a frustrated Ms. Roman asked her students, “Why aren’t you boys reading the class novel?”

“The book sucks!” said Derrick. “I hate reading.”

Freddy added, “It’s boring!”

“But didn’t you choose to read *Catcher* as a class?” said Ms. Roman. Three male students replied that the book choices were bad and uninspiring. As the students prepared to leave, Ms. Roman made an announcement: “You guys bring in anything that you want to read tomorrow, including newspapers.” Even the boys looked rather pleased as they hurriedly walked through the door.

“Ray, I’m about to let my students read anything that they want as a class novel. I am willing to try anything to get these boys reading at this point,” Ms. Roman told her colleague, Raymond Berry, “even if it means that I can’t teach *Othello* this year.” Ray was a Social Studies teacher in whom Mrs. Roman often confided. As an eight-year veteran teacher, Ray knew how the system and school worked, but since he was not an English teacher, Ms. Roman always felt comfortable confiding in him.

“Okay,” said Ray, “but what about your high-level readers who are ready for Shakespeare? You know they get bored easily. And what about Mitchell (the Assistant Principal)? You know she loves the classics.”

Ms. Roman sighed and responded, “I am thinking about them, but I can’t leave half of the class behind on material that they can’t relate to and don’t understand. Hopefully, Mrs. Mitchell will understand.”

### Community and School Description

The Eldridge Cleaver Middle School is an 'underperforming' junior high school in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York, with 75% African-American, 20% Hispanic, and 5% Middle-Eastern, Asian or Other students. With an enrollment of approximately 900 students, it is one of the larger schools in its region. Among Cleaver’s students, 75% qualify for free lunch under the federal Title I program, meaning that the vast majority of its students come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Approximately 30% of Cleaver’s students are performing at a level 1 or 2 proficiency level in both the New York State-administered Reading and Mathematics examinations,<sup>1</sup> which qualifies it as an under-performing school in the region.

Bedford-Stuyvesant is a growing community experiencing a moderate level of gentrification, thereby becoming a more diverse community. The community has been traditionally comprised of primarily African-American, Caribbean-American, and Hispanic lower-income families, but has seen an influx of more young professionals and Caucasians over

---

<sup>1</sup> New York State applies four categories of achievement on its assessment examinations: Level 4 (student exceeds the performance standards), Level 3 (student meets the standard), Level 2 (student is approaching the standard), and Level 1 (students is far below the standard).

the last five years. The result is a community that is experiencing increases in parent involvement from the better-educated professional community, but less demographic changes in the student body as parents with greater resources send their children to private schools or better-performing schools outside of the region.

Mrs. Mitchell, the assistant principal, lived in the community and was concerned about the impact of the neighborhood's changing demographics on Eldridge Cleaver. She knew that a better educated and more affluent population base would increase the level of scrutiny and pressure for improvement that the school already faced. While she viewed increased community involvement as a positive development, she had concerns that the community might also use Cleaver's past struggles against the school. In particular, she feared that its failure to meet the government's prescribed annual progress goals on the standardized tests might be used as a pretext to pressure the Education Department to close the school and re-open it as a new, small school. Small schools were the latest trend in school reform, aimed at rehabilitating large dysfunctional schools. Mrs. Mitchell envisioned this new school with a new administration, and more importantly, a new target demographic student body: fewer African-American, Hispanic and low-income students, and more Caucasian and middle-class students. Mrs. Mitchell had recently spoken to a colleague in a similarly changing neighborhood who had witnessed the same events totally change the demographics of his local school.

A 14-year veteran educator, Mitchell herself is frustrated by the school's performance on recent state assessments, and hears on a daily basis about the importance of improving the school's reading scores from her bottom-line principal, Mr. Hightower. An 'old-school' educator, Mrs. Mitchell believes that all students can learn and that the onus is on teachers to engage, cajole, and force them to do so.

The school principal, Mr. Hightower, was a second-year principal and a graduate of one of the city's controversial "principal training programs." The majority of his experience was in the business sector as a mid-level manager at a pharmaceutical company, never serving as a classroom teacher. He was in the second year of a three-year plan to turn around the academic performance of Cleaver. He knew that without some tangible improvements on the New York State Math and English assessments, his position would be in jeopardy. Hightower hoped that modest improvements on the state scores would encourage the Regional Superintendent to give him some more time to work with the Cleaver students. Hightower insulated staff from these pressures, but he realized that they understood the external and internal forces at work and were getting nervous about the upcoming state examinations and their impact on the future of the school.

Hightower's reputation among the staff at Cleaver was that of a good organizer and delegator, but not necessarily a great communicator with the adults or children. The staff respected his vision for the school, but not everyone fully bought into his emphasis on standardized test scores and full accountability for the teachers. Feeling this attitude among the staff, he thought that he would need to take a more direct role in supervising the staff and possibly eliminate some of those teachers who doubted his methods.

### The English Department Meeting

At the next week's English team meeting, Mr. Carney, the veteran teacher, whispered to Ms. Roman, "Did you hear that the Department of Education is going to force this new reading program down our throats? They want every teacher to let the kids read whatever books they want. There's NO way I'm doing that. I don't care what they say. How are we supposed to

prepare the kids for the State Exam if we can't use test-level texts to teach them the skills they need to succeed on the test? I'll have kids reading comic books, for Chrissakes! I've been teaching for ten years. I know these slower kids can improve their skills by watching their classmates model reading and comprehension techniques."

Ms. Roman realized that she agreed with some of Mr. Carney's thinking, but reflecting on her own recent curriculum decision, simply nodded and responded, "Yeah, it seems pretty crazy." She generally kept her distance from Tim Carney, whom she viewed as a teacher who had passed his prime. She had heard about how students' reviewed him favorably years ago, when he taught the high-performing students in the homogeneously-tracked class. Since the classes were switched to heterogeneous groupings of all ability levels three years ago, the rate of improvement among his students had slowed. Also, some of the students whose reading ability was below their grade level, characterized him as 'impatient' with them.

#### Ms. Roman's classroom

Ms. Vivian Roman was a fifth-year veteran teacher in her third year at Eldridge Cleaver. She taught four classes of approximately 28 students each. Ms. Roman was a 'traditional' English teacher, believing in strong fundamental reading and writing skills, and while supportive, was very skeptical of the wisdom of the increased emphasis on standardized test results in New York. However, as an eighth-grade English teacher, Ms. Roman faced the pressure of preparing her students for the state English examination, which students must pass in order to graduate from the eighth-grade and move on to high school. In the 2004-05 academic year, approximately 25% of her students failed to achieve a Level 2 score, the minimum score required for promotion under New York State standards. While she did not feel her position was in jeopardy, she did feel both serious external and internal pressure to achieve better results on the test because everyone would be examining the scores very closely, especially "The Hawk," as Mrs. Mitchell was affectionately known.

#### Ms. Roman's Students

Four students stood out in Ms. Roman's class. Derrick Simpson was a 14-year-old African-American student who was a Level 2 Reader, which meant that he read below his grade level, but was close enough to grade level to be promoted according to the New York City criteria. He was a willing reader, but only if the material interested him. Otherwise, he would resist, sometimes loudly. His mother was unresponsive to the school's requests for her involvement with Derrick, so Ms. Roman and the school were primarily left to their own devices for strategies to improve his achievement.

Freddy Sanchez was a 15-year-old Hispanic student who is a Level 1 reader. He was recently de-certified as an IEP student (individualized education plan, formerly known as special education) and did not have much confidence in his academic abilities. As a result, he became easily frustrated and was a reluctant worker and participant. Freddy needed more remedial assistance than Ms. Roman could feasibly provide in a general education classroom and was not willing to seek out extra help. While his mother was supportive, her English was not strong enough to provide any tangible reading or writing support. She didn't force him to attend extra help after school hours because he had child care responsibilities for his younger siblings.

Cierra Green was a 13-year-old African-American student and Level 4 reader. She enjoyed reading but her parents were concerned that the new reading curriculum was not challenging her because she was no longer asked to read the most challenging texts. Ms. Roman

also feared that her scores might decrease some on the upcoming state exam for the same reason. Cierra has told Ms. Roman that she enjoyed the challenge of higher-level texts, but felt that without the classroom discussion of the novels, she didn't fully understand them and missed discussing more complex themes. Thus, she had been using her choices on novels that she enjoyed, but also fully comprehended.

Finally, Charlie Ray was a 13-year-old Caribbean-American student and Level 2 reader. He was enthusiastic in class and enjoyed reading, but had trouble comprehending the grade-level texts beyond a superficial understanding. He felt much better about himself when reading texts closer to his actual reading level. Ms. Roman thought that Charlie was making good progress and would soon be ready to move on to more complicated novels. His parents had been supportive and Ms. Roman credited them with helping Charlie improve his reading ability.

### English Language Arts Instruction

In 2003, the school regional officials gave each middle school English teacher a broad classroom library of books and instructions to categorize the books by reading level. Teachers were to direct students to make their own selections based on their appropriate level. The typical eighth grade set of books varied in reading levels from the fifth to tenth grade reading levels, and the content varied: young adult topics, science fiction, historical fiction, reference materials, etc. The stated goal was to encourage reading and improve skills by having students read on their individually appropriate level, rather than have the entire class read a novel that did not match many students' abilities or interests. Some of the teachers, including Ms. Roman, received professional development on methods of implementation. During the 2003-04 academic year, the plan was implemented on various levels with differing levels of success throughout the school system.

### Ms. Roman Sees Results

After a month of implementing her new reading plans, Ms. Roman began to see some response from the students. The boys started off a bit slowly, but read and participated more in class. Charlie and Derrick started off with newspapers, sports and music magazines while Freddy still did not participate, usually staring off into space during silent reading time. Ms. Roman realized that the library might still be too limited and began to survey the students on the types of books they preferred and added those to the library. The students responded to the improved selection and all began to read more and more.

However, the biggest breakthrough came with the use of literature circles, a practice where students discussed a common book or applied various reading/analytical skills to different texts as a group. Several of the boys began to engage in discussions about the books and appeared legitimately interested in the discussions. Freddy could occasionally be seen listening in on the discussions, even if not participating.

Meanwhile, the results for the girls were more mixed. The struggling readers among the girls began to read more, but rarely ventured towards their appropriate grade-level texts. They seemed content just having novels that they could read comfortably. Also, a disturbing trend emerged among several of her higher-performing girls, including Cierra. Ms. Roman noticed that their choice of topics veered heavily towards novels with teenage themes—romance novels especially—and away from the more substantial, diverse themes that Ms. Roman had chosen for the class under the prior reading program. She worried that these new novels would not challenge and develop the students' analytical skills.

When questioned about her choices, Cierra simply stated, “I liked the Shakespeare stories, but these books really hold my attention because they’re about things that I see all the time. Besides, if the boys can read comic books and the newspapers, I should be able to read these, right?” Unable to come up with a response that didn’t seem unfair, Ms. Roman decided to drop the issue. Inwardly, however, she worried that Cierra’s choices would cause her analytical development to stagnate instead of blossom.

#### One Week Prior to the State Exam

Ms. Roman and Mr. Berry were discussing the implementation of the ‘student-choice’ reading model. Ms. Roman noted that the model was working more successfully for her than for some of her colleagues, “The professional development session that I attended for planning the classroom library has been really helpful for me. It’s too bad it wasn’t open to all English teachers. The program has been a little difficult to manage, but it has helped some with my boys. They are fighting me less on their in-class reading. They are still not really pushing themselves, but they are reading more than before. I heard that Carney is boycotting the whole program; his class is still reading class novels. He said his kids like the novel, and his struggling readers were catching up on the content in class. He is banking on his kids doing the same or better than the other classes on the state exam.”

Mr. Berry responded, “I guess we will see what happens when and if Mrs. Mitchell figures it out. I know one thing, if his kids don’t score well on that exam, Carney might be gone, even though he’s been here for awhile.”

#### Three Months after the State Exam

At the English department meeting, Mrs. Mitchell, the English department head, stated that she had just been chewed out by the principal because the English department staff were “not on the same page.” Mr. Hightower had received calls from the parents of several students expressing concern over the instructional focus leading up to the exam. Several students complained to their parents that the test was much harder than they expected because they were reading simpler material in class, mainly because the teacher told them that they could do so. Ms. Roman winced as she saw a sly smile cross the face of Mr. Carney. However, Mrs. Mitchell explained, she had also received complaints from several students that they were being forced to read books in their English classes that they did not understand and were not particularly interested in. They felt this probably led to poor results on the state exam as a result.

“I know that some of you teachers have not been following the curriculum,” said Mrs. Mitchell. “This needs to stop. Everyone will explain what they have been teaching and their feelings about the curriculum. I also have the state exam scores to review after our discussion to see if your students’ performances justify your position. Ms. Roman, let’s begin with you.”

#### Dilemmas

Ms. Roman panicked inwardly as she pondered her possible responses to the Hawk’s inquiries: should she attempt to justify possibly hindering the progress of her female students for the benefit of the male students in the classroom? Are novels that are below grade-level—and the level of the State Exam—truly preparing students to pass the State Exam? Does she reveal her belief that certain colleagues’ opposition to the program is related to their poor commitment to helping their lowest-performing students?

## Discussion Questions

- 1 How much control should teachers have over their own curriculums?
- 2 How do we evaluate the student who makes academic progress but fails to meet the performance standard?
- 3 Should schools differentiate their curriculums to meet the differing learning styles of female and male students?
- 4 Is traditional, classic literature necessary for every student in an English classroom?
- 5 How much weight should be allocated to standardized test results in the curriculum development process?
- 6 How can schools respond to changing community demographics and needs while maintaining their identity?
- 7 How can administrators motivate teachers with diverse goals, styles, and experiences to work for a common goal? What is the most effective leadership style to achieve this goal?