

“I Have Shakespeare in My Blood”: Reading Intervention with Middle School Boys

By Leah Guenther

1. The Puzzle

Before I retire from teaching, I want to figure out the Mark Jacksons and the Devin Burnsidés and the Terrance Fields of the world. These are young men who would be branded, by any casual, uninformed observer, as hooligans, hoodlums, thugs. Every crass term that you might apply to these students could swiftly be defended with evidence. Street fights. Hall fights. Classroom fights. Gang activity. Apathy. Drug use and sale. Total rebellion. But these kids also have another thing in common: they’re brilliant. And there’s one more thing: few people seemed to have noticed it until these boys picked up a Shakespearean text.

This paper is not an attempt to get closer to figuring out *why* Shakespeare might be of interest to this population: plenty of work has been done on Shakespeare’s universal appeal. Before Shakespeare’s words even began circulating in print, Ben Johnson—Shakespeare’s rival, colleague, and collector of his works—wrote in the preface to Shakespeare’s First Folio that Shakespeare “was not for an age, but for all time.” This timelessness has played out in our schools, in America and across the world: according to a survey delivered by the Royal Shakespeare Company and taken in 43 countries, 64 million students study Shakespeare each year. Moreover, many of these Shakespearean adopters have been from surprising, and inspiring, corners. Kelly Hunter has noted the effective use of Shakespeare for students with autism and other disabilities; Rafe Esquith has widely documented his use of Shakespeare in the elementary classroom of English language learners; and Laura Bates has highlighted Shakespeare’s application in rehabilitation programs within the criminal justice system.

The question, then, is not *if* Shakespeare is able to reach a wide variety of people—even his initial audiences, in his own day, were filled with queens, peasants, and everyone in between. However, when we get specific, when we look at the vocabulary and the syntax and the

complex historical contexts and literary elements that make up a Shakespearean play, *how*—and *how specifically*—are students who are not reading on grade level managing to make their way into this complicated text?

In this paper, I take as my focus this very question: *how* is it that a struggling reader is able to access a Shakespearean text? In an age of reading interventions—when so many texts are designed specifically to get the interest of a specific student’s age, gender, cultural background, and reading level—*how* do students find an entry point in this, but yet not other, texts? In addition, this paper seeks to answer:

- What are the literacy skills that struggling readers bring to bear upon a Shakespearean text?
- What other literacy skills are unlocked during the analysis of such a text?
- And, once unlocked, how can these burgeoning literacy skills be transferred to other complex texts?

To be sure, this question has not newly seized my attention. I have taught exclusively in schools where students read below grade level, and, for years, have seen examples of struggling readers who find an ease and flow through a Shakespearean text. I recall watching Terrance, a student in my 9th grade class a few years back, as he seamlessly, almost effortlessly, interpreted line after line of *Macbeth* while students around him sweated through each word. “How are you understanding this so clearly?” I asked him, hoping he would magically reveal an educational Rosetta Stone to me. “I don’t know. I just get it,” he said. “It’s raw.” I told him that his facility confused me, and I suggested, with amusement, that it was almost like he was born in the Renaissance period. “Maybe I’m older than I look,” he chuckled. “What, like 400?” I asked. “More like 300,” he said devilishly, referencing a number that was, at the time, tied to the faction of street gang in which he was reportedly a rising star. Gang-related references were, in my classroom and in the school, verboten. But, in this case, all I could do was laugh with him, appreciating a lyrical turn of the vernacular, a bit of wordplay that looked to the spirit of Shakespeare himself.

Until last school year, my examples of these truly gifted Shakespeareans were limited to one or two per year—always boys. During the 2014-2015 school year, however, the year I began teaching middle school instead of high school, I found elements of this gift in the entire male half of the 7th grade class. This paper is an attempt to investigate this group of boys, a group of African-American young men in a public school on Chicago’s South Side. I taught this group of gentlemen as 7th graders and then, to my great delight, looped with them through this, their 8th grade year. Many puzzles still remain unsolved; however, looking closely at a subset of 5 of these students has at least begun to reveal what parts of themselves these below-grade-level readers used to crack through to the heart of a writer whose words frustrate even most highly-educated adults.

2. Reading Levels

5 members of the larger 7th grade class were chosen as the focus of this investigation due to their significant growth as readers. The most straightforward way of measuring this growth is by looking to their NWEA Reading scores (Table A). At the beginning of their 7th grade year, this group had an average NWEA Reading score of 199.8, a score that translates on NWEA’s grade-level-equivalent charts as an early-to mid-year 4th grade reading level. By the end of their 7th grade year, this group of boys had an average score of 216. This score put the group at a mid-year 7th grade reading level, indicating 3 years of growth in one year, leaving them only a few months behind their grade-level target.

TABLE A: 2015 NWEA Reading Norms

Grade	Beginning of Year	Middle of Year	End of Year
K	140.0	151.3	158.1
1	160.7	171.5	177.5
2	174.7	184.2	188.7
3	188.3	195.6	198.6
4	198.2	203.6	205.9
5	205.7	209.8	211.8
6	211.0	214.2	215.8
7	214.4	216.9	218.2
8	217.2	219.1	220.1

9	220.2	221.3	221.9
10	220.4	221.0	221.2
11	222.6	222.7	222.3

When reflecting on what had contributed to this growth, each student, to a person, mentioned our study of Shakespeare. This information was conveyed in interviews with me; in surveys at the end of our first year together and the beginning of our second; and in other overheard conversations. After I had announced the score increases at the end of last school year, one student—pretending to receive an Academy Award—said, “I’d like to thank Shakespeare.” Another student, continuing with the awards-show theme, said, “I’d like to thank the Renaissance for my renaissance!” marveling at his own wordplay. A third broke into a more serious tone, saying reflectively, “I’d like to thank Shakespeare for giving me a mind to think.”

Their success was undeniable, and their attribution of that success to Shakespeare caught my attention. Still, as interesting as it was, it didn’t answer any of my questions about *how* it had happened—and, in fact, raised even more. Yes, it was true that these boys had exceeded 1 year, even 2 years, reaching 3 years of growth. Yes, it was also true that they felt they knew why. It was hard to deny their success, and it seemed unwise to ignore their analysis of it. But yet, questions still circled through my mind as to the *how*. And another thing circled through me, which was a growing uncertainty, even gloom. What accepted assumptions were being violated with this information? What basis might this information give me to start questioning reading levels, text complexity analyses, and reading interventions, as a whole?

The Common Core does not list Shakespeare in their “Exemplar Text” list until the 9th and 10th grade. At this level, the text that they recommend is *Macbeth*, a text with a Lexile Score of 1350. According to the current Lexile rankings, this text would be high for a 9th grader, whose Lexile

score has, for years, been expected to be in the 960-1120 range (Table B). However, the new Common Core-preferred Lexile expectations for each grade level are much higher—something that, according to new Common Core argot is called a “Stretch’ Lexile Band.” This Stretch Lexile Band for 9th and 10th grade has been raised to 1050-1335, indicating that even for this “stretch” class of Lexile, *Macbeth*—with its 1350 scoring—is, still, just that, a stretch.

TABLE B: TEXT COMPLEXITY AND LEXILE GRADE BANDS

Grade Band	Current Lexile Band	“Stretch” Lexile Band
K-1	N/A	N/A
2-3	450L-730L	420L-820L
4-5	640L-850L	740L-1010L
6-8	860L-1010L	925L-1185L
9-10	960L-1120L	1050L-1335L
11-CCR	1070L-1220L	1185L-1385L

But what about my students, who—in 7th grade—found themselves not only accessing, but benefiting from, this very text, *Macbeth*, with its 1350 Lexile score? In the standard Lexile system, the suggested range for a 7th grader was 860-1010; in the new Common Core “stretch” class, the 7th grade Lexile range is 925-1185. But what about my students, whose reading level measured as 4th grade? Their Lexile, on the low end of the 640-850 range, made their success with *Macbeth* all the more puzzling. If we can trust that these rankings and ranges truly indicate access and comprehension and “difficulty” level of texts, *how* were these students making their way into a text that was two times as high as those we are told to use by reading interventionists who want us to “meet students where they are”? If a student at a 4th grade reading level could access an 10th grade text, what did that say about “instructional” reading levels and “frustration” levels at all? Were there

questions to be put to these “levels” themselves? And if so, what new rules and guidelines did I need to use in order to proceed?

3. Data Collection

The only place where answers to these questions could be located was within the students themselves. I used the following sources of data to track where the students had been during their 7th grade year and where they were going during their 8th.

- **Teacher Documents:** For historical data from 7th grade, I referenced notes and emails about the students as well as lesson plans and past assignments. For the current school year, I kept a teacher journal where I recorded anecdotes about the students’ progression.
- **Student Surveys and Interviews:** Students were given an end-of-year survey in 7th grade and a mid-year survey in 8th. Students were also interviewed at various points about their experiences and development during their 8th grade year.
- **Student Work:** Students’ assignments, papers, and text annotations were consulted through the course of the second year.
- **Standardized Test Results:** Students’ ongoing NWEA scores were included, starting at the end of their 6th grade year to the present, giving two years of growth data.

4. The Focus Group

The 5 boys whom I have studied are presented, as a means of introduction, in the general profiles below. They are, in order, from the highest initial NWEA Reading score to the lowest.

- **Lawrence, our poet,** began with a reading score that was only 1 year below his grade level. He always appeared to be a creative student and a good writer, and when he wrote poetry—most often about his incurable addiction to gyros—he would exclaim about his rhyming couplets, “I got bars!” During his 7th grade year, however, his priorities were off,

and his evenings were spent doing things other than getting a good night's sleep. He was given the nickname of "Lawrence Van Winkle," a fusion of his name and the notorious literary character who slept for twenty years. Lawrence's dad noted that they called him "Little Buddha" at home, referencing a sense of soulful thinking, which could definitely be witnessed at fleeting moments—but only when one caught Lawrence awake.

- **Terrell, our mathematician,** began his 7th grade year with a Reading score that was 2 years behind grade level but a Math score that was on target. In the early part of his 7th grade year, Terrell made his stance on reading clear, repeatedly telling me, in detail, all of the reasons why math was a superior subject. In addition to math, Terrell—a tall and handsome, popular kid—focused on athletics and on girls. In middle school, however, being a ladies man doesn't require that you're smooth: Terrell was a lactose-intolerant milk addict who earned the nickname "Flatulina" for his profound and excessive gas attacks. More concerned about his image than with saving us from himself, he'd ask that we'd consider calling him "the manlier Flatcho" instead. Usually he'd ask us this while, ironically, downing another carton of milk.
- **Derrick, our social butterfly,** had a reading score that put him 4 years behind grade level. This did not seem to concern him, and he made it a point to talk openly about reading being a drag. Talking openly was, in fact, Derrick's most noticeable skill for a while. Last year, his inability to turn off his social skills and work with a partner without distracting them, or himself, was legendary. This was resolved by Derrick spending most of last year working with an "imaginary partner," an empty chair with whom he would comically, animatedly share his reflections during group work. Derrick is an expansive, portly young man who has the cool and comical vibe of an older one—something like everyone's favorite uncle. He is the type of kid who is always emoting on Facebook about some girl or another breaking his heart. In addition to wearing his heart on his sleeve, Derrick is also known to

wear full, one-color ensembles on out-of-uniform days. Most recently he appeared in a red sweatshirt, red sweatpants, and red tennis shoes, all perfectly coordinated in hue.

- **Jacob, our traumatized reader** was over 4 years behind grade level in Reading when I met him. He took a quieter approach than Derrick did to his subject matter confusion. Instead of acting out, Jacob tried to blend in. He had long ago decided on a series of coping mechanisms to get attention away from himself. When asked questions in class, he'd scan his brain for any words he could remember from the day's work, responding randomly with terms like "preposition?" when we'd moved on to Social Studies or "simile?" when we were piecing together an independent clause. Jacob was also known for copying whole lines and paragraphs directly out of the text instead of answering questions in his own words, and he skillfully aimed to avoid all eye contact. Jacob, at one point, exhibited so few decoding skills, and had such confusion over phonics, that I considered having him evaluated for special education services.
- **Mark, our ongoing mystery** was the lowest performer, at 5 years behind grade level. Mark had the highest number of discipline referrals of all the students in the class since he was continually bouncing between acting out violently and trying to get away with doing zero work at all. Mark was involved in continual eruptions, outbursts, fights, and fits of rage. On days that Mark attempted to accept his responsibilities as a student, we would talk about how nice it was to have banished his "evil twin." Mark is, if you haven't already figured it out, the kid who took to Shakespeare like a fish to water, despite his supposed 2nd grade reading level.

5. School Context

My Shakespearean journey with these boys began during the 2014-2015 school year. This was one year after the school began the process of a "turnaround," a drastic policy move in which the

entire staff of a school is replaced in order to institute a resetting, a new vision. This move came after decades of neglect that had left the school with the dubious distinction of being the 3rd lowest performing school in the state of Illinois. Although the fresh staff was committed to a new course of action for the school, many grim realities remained. 90% of the students were below grade level in reading and math. The school was located in an area of the city that ranked 8th out of 77 in Quality of Life Crimes and 11th out of 77 in Violent Crimes. 45% of residents in this area of the city have not earned high school diplomas, and the median income for the neighborhood is \$24,176, compared to \$46,195 in the city at large.

Because of these challenges in the school and the community as a whole, administration and staff were trying in earnest to make significant and rapid gains. The school experimented with small-group lesson plans, computer software that adapts to students' skill level, and a variety of new, Common Core-aligned curriculum maps. While these efforts were well-intentioned, they were directed more towards increasing raw numbers than they were with increasing passions and interests and curiosities. Added to this were my own personal challenges as a new middle school teacher: both rumor and reading surrounding middle school students had led me to expect constant moodiness and a brain not yet developmentally ready for abstract thought. I knew that I'd had success going off the grid in high school and making my own curricular changes in course, but I wasn't sure what to expect from students this young, this behind, and with quite this many bad habits. As a result, the beginning of my time with these students was, I soon began to see, uninspired.

In the introduction to Alfred Tatum's *Reading for Their Life: (Re)Building the Textual Lineages of African American Adolescent Males*, Michael W. Smith summarily states that "schools are denying current students a chance to experience the importance of literature in their own lives through a focus on countless skills and the use of texts that are irrelevant or watered down." Smith's words are especially true in a historically underperforming school like my own where the district feels

pressure to make rapid gains in public-facing tests to the detriment of the things we teachers inside of the classroom know matter more, such things as student motivation, inspiration, investment, and identity. Tatum himself, looking toward African-American young men specifically, asks, “What is U.S. ‘schooling’ doing *to* or *for*” this group? He asks “How are we nurturing the *identities* of these young men?”, “How are we supporting these young male’s belief in themselves?”, and “How are we helping these young men to enjoy school?” Tatum argues that it is a school’s job to rebuild a literary history for young men, to show them texts that will allow them to think through the tough issues of life, enabling them to see what’s at stake in being literate and literary.

6. A Change of Plans

As I’d done in the past, when faced with lackluster curricular options, I turned to what I knew and loved. It is no secret to my students, or, frankly, to anyone who knows me, that Shakespeare is, undeniably, the author I first and foremost adore. I, myself, had an academic awakening in college when I began seriously to study Shakespeare: I abandoned all other types of literature, began a focus on Renaissance authors, and proceeded until I had a doctoral degree in the field. When I broached the subject with my 7th graders of starting to read Shakespeare, I made all of this clear. I also made it clear that this course of study was going to be hard—really hard. This, I said, would make our heads hurt at times. This, we would have to read and reread and read over again, yet again. This, I told them, was literature so complex that many adults didn’t even understand it. But, I assured them, we would. And, I made clear, it would be worth it. I told them that we’d find ways to understand people who lived 400 years before us, that we’d see and appreciate all the things that had changed—and, more importantly, all the things that hadn’t—over time.

My appeals weren’t all rational or philosophical, though. I had other marketing ploys up my sleeve. Before we started reading, my students became familiar with Shakespeare’s image, in the form of a 6-foot tall cardboard replica that had been strategically positioned in the classroom for

weeks. And he was covered, I'll admit, with heart-shaped stickers in order to draw intrigue. "He's my literary boyfriend," I told them, playing to my younger crowd's affections. Oh, and yes, I did hold Shakespeare's outstretched cardboard hand a few times. And, it's true, I kissed him a few times on the cheek, which really set the crowd on fire. But, after this affectionate and playful introduction, we rolled up our sleeves and we got down to business. Sure, we did have a birthday party for him in April, and we all danced around with him, and balloons, in order to celebrate the 399th anniversary of his death. But that was several months after needing to sell him, and, by then, they were already sold.

7. Approaching Shakespeare

During that initial study of Shakespeare, we took it slowly. We began with a "Coming Attractions" script that I wrote in a style that mimics movie trailers (Appendix A). Students read various parts, some of which included—again as a marketing tactic—making ghost sounds, cackling like witches, and ranting about the absolute power of a king. Students knew from that preview that the play contained questions of power, deceit, revenge, betrayal, and the supernatural, which allowed us then to do an attitude survey on those very themes (Appendix B). Students enjoyed thinking and talking through whether they agreed or disagreed with statements like "People should always try to get as much power as they can" or "I would do something illegal if I were positive it would get me what I want in life." During these activities, Shakespeare's play was starting to seem lively, and maybe even relevant, and I felt the students as a whole deciding they might want to come along for the ride.

I know from past experiences that this feeling of exhilaration is necessarily followed by the cool splash of reality that the actual words of Shakespeare's text present. We didn't dig right into the beginning of the text, however. I chose a single passage, a mere sixteen lines of a monologue, in which a soldier describes, in deliciously gory detail, an act of bravery that Macbeth had performed on the battlefield. Designed as a cloze activity, students had to familiarize themselves with the resource of the glossary that was located on the bottom of each page of their text (Appendix C). This is a standard element of all Shakespearean texts, and such glosses usually deal with word definitions that have

become archaic over the years. Filling in these definitions allowed them to step a bit closer to the meanings, and it helped them to start understanding the slow pace with which to expect our work to proceed. Students then moved on to putting each line into their own words. Next, they tried working through the tone in which the speaker would've said the line if performing it in the theatre. And, finally, they got up and began acting it out, using all of the violent motions that it would take to rip someone open "from the nave to the chops," to cut their head off, and to hoist that head upon your valorous sword or "battlements."

We hadn't read the first word of the play, and we'd already been working on the text for more than two weeks. It was an approach I'd used before, at the high school, level, and it had worked. I noticed that it was working the same way—if not better—with my current, much younger students. What was going on, I wondered? Is there really no grade too low, no text too hard, if the proper scaffolds are presented? I rolled the dice and started reading a Shakespearean play in my 6th grade class as well, and I had similarly positive results. I noticed among the kids in both grades that their engagement was increasing (witnessed through constant hands in the air with answers), that behavior problems were decreasing (witnessed through a decrease in discipline referrals), and that, without fail, each day when we got through our grammar and vocab routines and turned to the Shakespearean text, I would hear "Yes!" whispers and see pumping fists throughout the class.

Although I used the same traditional, non-translated version of the text as I had before, and although I showed students several film adaptations of the text after we had read it, I did make a major change from my previous instruction. Whereas at the high school level, we had often listened to a dramatic recording of the text and then stopped to dig into particular lines, I decided to leave that behind. I beefed up the costume department of my classroom (at last count, I had 20 different wigs alone), and I played to these younger students' restless, active, dramatic personas. Even though they struggled with reading aloud, the classroom was a sea of raised hands each day when we were handing out reading parts and their appropriate disguises. Nobody giggled at students' mispronunciations. No

student ever gave up. After all, we knew it would be hard. We knew some smart adults didn't even understand it. And, of course, there was that fact that it was over 400 years old. Of course we were, all of us, going to struggle.

8. Initial Shakespearean Reactions

I didn't know at the time that Shakespeare would be transformative to the students who are the focus of this study. Therefore, I wasn't watching these students in particular last year. There are breadcrumbs that remain, however: notes in my teacher's journal, assignments left on the Google Drive, stray videos and snapshots, emails to colleagues, and reflections that were recorded in surveys at the end of the year.

- With the introduction of Shakespeare, **Lawrence** woke up. And, with that literal and figurative awakening, a surprising new problem arose: whereas at the onset of the year, I often had to drop a dictionary near him to startle him out of his slumber, I now found myself dealing with the very physical and emotional nature of Lawrence's epiphanies. I was constantly saying "Lawrence, please stop shouting out" and even "Lawrence please sit down," as he'd jump out of his chair or yell out an "OOOOHH! I GET IT!"
- **Terrell** was not sure that he was invested in becoming a literary analyst, but he could see that our process of working through Shakespeare was increasing his reading comprehension. Terrell had started thinking more about high school and college, and he began getting the idea that Shakespeare was going to help him with both. This stemmed from the fact that a few of the top-ranking students in the class mentioned that, at their high levels, the adaptive NWEA test had given them Shakespearean passages to analyze. After hearing this information, Terrell became sold on the idea that his goals were linked to high NWEA scores and that those high scores were, in turn, linked to Shakespeare. "I'm going to

go hard till I get me that Shakespeare,” he wrote in his notebook when asked, prior to the year-end NWEA, what his approach to the test would be.

- **Derrick** found an outlet for his social energy through the enactment of drama. I made an important note in my journal last year, only a few weeks into our Shakespearean adventure, about how Derrick had nearly broke his neck that day, stretching out of his chair, and yelling “Me! Me! Me!” in an attempt to get cast in a role for the day. Not picking him, which inevitably happened on various days, would lead to pouting fits and resentment on his part. Picking him would lead to a lot of celebration, preening, requests for particular costume elements, and trips into the hall to “get into character.” A star was born.
- **Jacob** was the number one student I worried about when I thought about taking our group on a whole-class exploration of Shakespeare. My fears, however, were almost immediately abated. Jacob rolled up his sleeves and worked through our steps, seemingly appreciating the fact that others around him—now nearly all of the others around him—were struggling, too. For Jacob, Shakespeare served as something of an equalizer, forcing all students to slow down and puzzle through the work. And, in exchange for Shakespeare giving Jacob that equal playing field, Jacob gave Shakespeare all of his love and admiration. In my journal from the period, I made a note that while we were still in the first act Jacob declared, “Shakespeare is my favorite author of all time. Forever.”
- And then there was **Mark**. Mark, the disruption. Mark, the disengaged. Mark, the one whose evil death-stare could unnerve even a most stoic disciplinarian like myself. Mark exposed the unsteady foundation of the theory that all of us struggle with Shakespeare. He, like Devin Burnside, like Terrance, and like others before them—and other mysteriously brilliant young men to come—breezed through the most complex diction and syntax, sighing impatiently as we waited on his classmates to try out their interpretations and misinterpretations. “Listen,” Mark would say definitively, annoyed, “Here’s what he’s

saying.” He’d roll his eyes at others who didn’t see what, to him, was obvious. And, somehow, some way, his proclamations were always right.

9. Seventh Grade, Test Results and Reactions

When we reached the final weeks of 7th grade, it felt as though something important had happened in our classroom. We became a group of scholars so different from those who had struggled—under my wobbly guidance—at the beginning of the year. Importantly, the end the year brought with it hard data, in the form of the NWEA Reading test, to give shape to these feelings of growth. Although I discussed above the average growth of 3 years for this group of boys, below I reference each student’s specific improvement (Table C).

TABLE C: READING IMPROVEMENT OVER ONE YEAR (SPRING – SPRING)

Student	Spring 2014 NWEA	Spring 2015 NWEA	Grade Level Change Over 1 Year	Total Years of Growth
Lawrence	213	216	mid-year 6 th to mid-year 7 th	1
Terrell	210	218	mid-year 5 th to end-of-year 7 th	2.5
Derrick	198	217	end-of-year 3 rd to mid-year 7 th	3.5
Jacob	194	218	mid-year 3 rd to end-of-year 7 th	4.5
Mark	184	211	mid-year 2 nd to beginning-of-year 6 th	3.5

Moreover, the students’ reactions to their scores—in terms of pride, identity, and motivation—were notable:

- **Lawrence** began 7th grade with a 213, indicating a mid-year 6th grade reading score. He improved, by year’s end, to a 216, a mid-year 7th grade level. Lawrence was disappointed with this score and thought he should’ve done better. He blamed a resurgence of his sleepier side during testing and vowed that when NWEA rolled around again he would get his late-night habits under control for good.

- **Terrell** started off 7th grade with a 210, a score placing him at the mid-year 5th grade level. At the end of 7th grade, he had a 218, exactly what he needed to be on grade level. This news caused him to pound his heart with his fist and say, “It’s that Shakespeare, bro.”
- **Derrick** began with a 198, which equated him with an end-of-year 3rd grade score. He improved to a 217, which put him at a mid-year 7th grade score. Derrick, who was known for praying a lot before tests, gave the glory to the Heavens and celebrated by running around the room punching the air.
- **Jacob** started out with a 194, a mid-year 3rd grade score. At the end of 7th grade, he had a 218, putting him exactly at grade level. Jacob took much pride in this achievement, as did his family. His mother posted his score—as well as the fact that he now had an A in my class—on Facebook. And, although Jacob was not as demonstrative as his classmates when he got his scores, his sense of pride was palpable. “I brought my Shakespeare brain to the test,” he said proudly, by means of explaining his growth.
- **Mark** began 7th grade in the mid-year 2nd grade range for reading with a score of 184. By the end of the year, he had a 211—a whopping 27 points of growth—which put him at a beginning-of-year 6th grade level. There was nobody in the school who gained that number of raw points, a fact in which Mark took great pride. His mother also authored a Facebook post on the subject and was rumored to be getting on people’s nerves bragging about it.

10. Year Two of our Journey—This Time into Hell...

It is a fortunate case that after our first year together I was able to spend another year with the same students. This practice of “looping” is common in our school, not as much as a result of pedagogical choice, but more as a practical decision based on our small school population and limited manpower. Having done this once before at the high school level, I was looking forward to it. There is a great deal of time spent at the onset of each year setting up rules, getting to know students’ abilities,

and forming relationships with the individuals with whom you'll be working. In our case we were able to skip this and get down to business straightaway.

Just as importantly, I knew from my previous year with these students that I could push the limits of my curriculum. After our first full year together, I spent the summer reflecting on what the next steps might be. The idea that students would stretch to meet high expectations had been confirmed, but how high could we go? Could I present even harder texts, and, if so, what would those be? Could I withdraw some of the supports and still get the same results? How far could we stretch this whole thing, I wondered, without a snap?

I pushed the envelope, going for an older, more allegorical text as our entry in 8th grade: Dante's *Inferno*. There is, after all, nothing like a 13th century Italian epic poem to test the limits of your pedagogical approach. Although this was not a play, learning what I had from the students' interest and engagement in the prior year, I was able to highlight the dramatic elements of this text that would lend themselves to moments of theatre. For example, at the onset of Canto 1, a leopard confronts Dante, preventing him from proceeding on a pathway to Heaven. This leopard is described as "all tremor and flow," a phrase with which we spent at least 20 minutes, teasing out the contradiction, acting out the confluence, physically embodying all of this trembling and flowing from one corner of the room to the other. Likewise, when we reached the "Vestibule of Hell," and were told of its multisensory and varied audio components, we spent a considerable bit of time reenacting those sounds: the wailing, the pounding, the crying, and the tearing of flesh. Our performance was, in fact, so authentic—and so very impassioned—that a team of security guards came running to the room to aid in what they interpreted to be an urgent need for their help.

That being said, there was not nearly as much scaffolding for this text, not much ramping up, hand holding, or tip-toeing into the its waters. There were no film adaptations to watch, no stage directions to lean on, no cardboard Dante with whom to frolic and to flirt. Students were digging into this text for what it was, doing with me the heavy lifting of analyzing the allegory, the imagery, the

allusions, and even the poem's *terza rima* structure. There were days of frustration, sure, and days when parts of the text would feel like a slog. However, those were easily counterbalanced by the more numerous days when the kids' gung-ho attitudes and overall gusto would take me aback, days when I'd stop and remember, wait, this is Dante's *Inferno*, and these are middle school kids, and, oh yeah, this school—just two years back—was the third lowest performing school in the state.

Students responded positively to Dante, so much so that many students in the class began to switch their allegiances from Shakespeare to his camp. Mark didn't commit too passionately, but he did admit that "Dante my homie," and Terrell, who seemed increasingly up for broadening his experience and knowledge base, said that "Dante really makes me see some things I didn't know could be out there." Lawrence wisely noted that Dante could be viewed as an extension of Shakespeare, in that "Shakespeare shows us the sins men commit and Dante shows us what happens to us in Hell when we commit them." Lawrence felt this message was strong and said "I gotta get my life right—I don't need to be getting eaten by some three-headed dog in eternity." These students made me realize that Shakespeare was an important entry point, but that his texts weren't the end-stage. The analytical skills that Shakespeare had allowed these students to see within themselves were easily being transferred to other arguably more formidable texts.

There were, still, some students who weren't sold on the Dante phase. They insisted that, although they enjoyed Dante's works, he simply was "no Shakespeare." In these cases, students brought to the fore Shakespeare's applicability to everyday life. Derrick, our actor, said he found his attention drifting off at times, that at times he'd be thinking not about the text but about "how itchy my head be." "It's not the same as Shakespeare," he said, commenting on the differing amounts of believability. "It's just not real," he noted correctly, "to see all these man-horses and bird-ladies and monsters everywhere." Similarly, Jacob found Dante's works lacking in emotional depth compared to Shakespeare. For him, Shakespeare was relevant on a daily basis, and he admitted, "I find myself thinking of his advice all the time."

To this point, Jacob was not all talk: the fact that Shakespeare was wound up in the fabric of his days has come up time and time again. In one particularly striking example, Jacob found himself drawing on Shakespeare in a most surprising moment, in the midst of a heated argument. Walking out of class one day, he disregarded proper hallway etiquette and elicited the attention of a security guard. I watched from a distance as he tussled with the guard, who said “Jacob, listen to me!” “I don’t have to listen to you,” Jacob said defiantly, “I ain’t afraid of you.” The security guard—an imposing gentleman who is 6 feet 6 inches tall—was nonplussed. “You’re not afraid of me?” he asked. “No,” Jacob continued boldly, “I ain’t afraid of nobody ‘of woman born.’” The security guard, missing the *Macbeth* reference, looked down the hallway at me, trying to piece together the context of this defiant, but oddly lyrical, interaction. “Did you hear that, Dr. G?” Jacob yelled in my direction, “I just told him I ain’t afraid of nobody ‘of woman born’!” “That’s Macbeth,” Jacob told the confused guard, “That’s Shakespeare. That’s my daddy.”

11. Emerging from Hell to Test Again

At the end, of our exploration of Dante’s *Inferno*, it was time for our school to return to NWEA testing. I appreciated the timing of this test, curious to see whether the changes I was seeing in the focus group—their overall increased sense of themselves as scholars and readers of challenging texts—would be further reflected in standardized test score gains.

In truth, the students’ scores in January 2016, midway through their 8th grade year, blew past any of my expectations for them. As mentioned above, when these students began 7th grade they had an average score of 199.8, which equated to an early-to-mid 4th grade reading level. By the end of their 7th grade year, they had collectively improved to a mid-7th grade reading level, leaving them only a few months behind their target. In the middle of their 8th grade year, during the mid-year testing cycle, these students’ scores had risen to a 222.4 average. As reported by NWEA, scores in the 222.3 to 222.7 range equate to an 11th grade reading level. NWEA does not measure scores beyond the 11th

grade level. In sum, the group of students, who began at an average 4th grade reading level, has advanced to an 11th grade reading level, equaling seven years of growth in one and a half years as reported by the NWEA exam.

Given these results, I began looking elsewhere for signs of this group’s improvement. Our school was, after all, a turnaround school, and it was possible that students were having an overall academic renaissance and not just a singular rebirth in reading. Looking toward these students’ performance in math highlighted that, in fact, the students were growing in other academic fields—but it was still not nearly as dramatic. For example, in math, this group had a beginning-of-year average of 212 in 7th grade (a 5th grade reading level) and, at last measure in January 2016, averaged a 225.6, which is a middle-of-year 7th grade level. Their math score, in other words, while it showed growth of two years in a year and a half, still leaves them lagging their grade level target in math.

The specific quantitative gains of each student are described below (Table D).

TABLE D: READING IMPROVEMENT OVER 1.5 YEARS (SPRING TO WINTER)

Student	Spring 2014 NWEA	Spring 2015 NWEA	Winter 2016 NWEA	Grade Level Change Over 1.5 Years	Total Years of Growth
Lawrence	213	224	225	mid-year 6 th to 11 th +	5+
Terrell	210	218	229	mid-year 5 th to 11 th +	6+
Jacob	194	218	223	mid-year 3 rd to 11 th +	8+
Derrick	198	217	220	beginning-of-year 4 th to end-of-year 8 th	4.5
Mark	184	211	215	mid-year 2 nd to beginning-mid-year 7 th	4.5

Just as interesting, however, were the qualitative gains that the students were making, the improvements in stamina and attitude and scholarly persona, all of which are described in the profiles below.

- **Lawrence** is the student who began at the reading level most close to his grade level. With a 213 at the onset of his 7th grade year, he was approximately one year behind. In winter of his 8th grade year, he had a 225, which put him above NWEA's 11th grade reading level. Lawrence had a similar improvement in math, going from a mid-6th grade score to one above the 11th grade. It is undeniable, however, that even with these dueling talents, Lawrence has embraced his poetic side over his mathematical proclivities. In addition to writing his own poetry, he has become interested in performing powerful works of literature in public. Recently, at a whole-school assembly, he performed an August Wilson monologue, playing the part of a homeless man who was struggling with the responsibilities of a new baby. In the presence of all of his peers, he rocked a plastic baby in a blanket and sang a song about a passing locomotive that he hoped would pick him up and ease his troubles. In terms of his former somnolence, it has faded—perhaps too far into the past. Lawrence is currently so boisterous in class, always jumping out of his seat to express an epiphany, that I've given up on keeping him in his chair.
- **Terrell** was two years behind grade level in reading when I met him and, on the winter test, scored above the 11th grade. When we met, he was a student who was firmly committed to his love of math over language arts. This was likely because of his success in math: his math scores showed him, at the beginning of 7th grade to be at a mid-year 7th grade level. In a mid-year 8th grade survey, however, he said, "English is starting to become my favorite class," a response that was updated, in a recent survey to "This is the best class in the school, and the most important. Reading is everything." Terrell, through the course of his enrichment class with me, has become obsessed with thinking through how he would fit into the different periods of history we've studied this year. When comparing himself with stars of the American Revolution, people like Benjamin Franklin, whom he adores, he said, "Do you think if he met us, he'd just think we were a bunch of slobs?" However, when thinking about

the players of the Trojan War, he noted, “I’m pretty sure that if I went back to that time I’d be the smartest person there—I can’t believe that they fell for that horse trick.” All of that being said, the flatulence problem still remains, but now Terrell goes into the walk-in coat closet to relieve himself, saving our learning environment from distraction.

- **Jacob** came to me with a 3rd grade reading level in English, and he was at a middle-of-year 4th grade level in math. After the winter NWEA, his math score remained at the 4th grade level, but he ranked above the 11th grade level in reading. His improvement, at this point of the cycle, was the greatest, and his investment in the author who turned the switch for him has been, by far, the most intense. Enough cannot be said about the level of admiration and fandom that Jacob holds for Shakespeare. He, unlike some of the other boys, hasn’t moved on from this first love; he will not shower these affections on any other author I pass his way. Dante was good, but he was “no Shakespeare.” Virgil was fine but “Shakespeare’s better.” In the spring quarter, Jacob began showing an other-worldly ease and facility in comprehending Walt Whitman, an ability to interpret and explain Whitman’s deep, earthy truths to less skilled classmates. However, he refused to put Whitman in the same category as his first love. “I’d only like Whitman if I found out that he was Shakespeare’s daddy,” he explained, “then he’d be my grandpa. And that would be alright.” Jacob also has refused to let many conversations go by without shifting them in Shakespeare’s direction. When, for example, we were discussing Lincoln’s assassination, Jacob said, “I wish he’d been shot watching a Shakespeare play—then we’d be talking about my daddy.”
- **Derrick** had a score in the 3rd grade range when I met him, and, after the winter NWEA, was on track for his 8th grade level. That is not so in math, where his 3rd grade level has moved only to the 5th grade range. Derrick, who used to use every opportunity to socialize in class, has decidedly aligned himself with peers who will push his thinking. Because of his reading scores from early last year, he was still enrolled this year in an intervention class where

Read 180 was the main curriculum. He argued against this, saying that he needed “to read challenging books.” Moreover, Derrick has made a remarkable shift with independent reading as well. Even after his Shakespearean awakening, he admitted that he didn’t like reading books on his own, that he’d “get sleepy” and would notice that “my mind would kind of drift off.” This year, however, he recently erupted in the midst of independent reading time, yelling “NOOOO!” when a character met an untimely demise. “That was my boy!” he said, explaining that the main character was someone “I started to think about as my friend.”

- **Mark** was the lowest-ranking student when I met him, with a score that indicated a 2nd grade reading level. Mark, after the winter NWEA, scored at the 7th grade reading level, leaving him as the one student who was still behind where he should be as an 8th grader. His improvement in reading, however, has led to an overall improvement in his behavior as a student. Not only did he stop getting sent out of class on a continual basis, but he also became so transformed that he was given leadership roles in the classroom that required him to direct his fellow students through daily routines. Mark was so successful with this role that I started leaving him in charge of the class when I went off to a meeting or professional development. He, not the substitute, was the one who would make sure his classmates were on task. We began to laugh about how he used to have an “evil twin.”

12. Our Second Trip into Shakespeare

In January, my students began clamoring about the season premiere of their favorite show, *Empire*. Each day, there was a reference to whether, in this season, Lucius would be able to maintain a hold on his hip-hop dynasty. Having never watched the show, I didn’t know what threat his ex-wife “Cookie” posed, or why it mattered which of his three sons would take over the record label. After being ridiculed for being so out of the loop, I went home and watched the first episode of the show, not expecting much. However, to my great surprise, I saw a controlling patriarch, suffering with failing health. I saw him wrestle with which of his three sons should run his enterprising business. I saw the

two sons who didn't deserve this inheritance poised to receive it. In short, I saw Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

It didn't take more than a few web searches to realize that this was not in my mind, that the creator had openly talked about this broadcast series as being his hip-hop version of *King Lear*. Our class was concentrating on a year-long investigation of the Seven Deadly Sins which had been ushered in by Dante's *Inferno* and which were being explored more in depth through various non-fiction texts around pride and envy and gluttony. We had just been gearing up to do an in-depth study of greed, for which *King Lear*—with its money-grabbing daughters—fit perfectly. I could not wait to see my students' reactions when they realized that Shakespeare, whom they loved, and *Empire*, which they also adored, were coming together in this particularly fortuitous way.

For my own purposes, however, I wanted to use this unique repeat visit into the words of Shakespeare in order to further examine the boys in this study's focus group. What would happen during this second trip through Shakespeare? Would I be able to tease out some of the skills that they used on the text and help others to use those same skills? Could I help these boys draw attention to the ways they approached Shakespeare and, in turn, assist them in applying those skills even more productively to other complex texts?

Asking the students outright why Shakespeare appealed to them offered broad comments that showed a respect for history and a common humanity. Derrick claimed that he liked Shakespeare "because I like learning about his stories, and how he makes us think back in history." Terrell said, "I liked seeing how things were back then," and Lawrence said he "liked the words they used to use to describe stuff we know." "I have not seen nothing like that before," Jacob observed, "It was old, but it was new." And Mark aptly noted, "I want to do more Shakespeare units. Can we? I like seeing how things were. What other plays will we read?" Of course, being Mark, he couldn't resist tacking on a parenthetical note to point out his superior skill, adding "(I just get mad because a lot of times the class messes it up.)"

However, sitting down and asking a kid who understands Shakespeare *how* he understands Shakespeare does not go very far to render specific answers on how it happens. And, I'll admit, I spent some weeks hitting my head against various walls. Some of the answers that I got were things such as "I don't know" and "It's easy" and "What's not to understand?" I tried a variety of unsuccessful question types and interview contexts. I even went so far as to tell them that I was trying to figure them out and desperately needed their help. "I just get it," Mark said, repeating the sentiments of so many puzzling Shakespearean naturals before him. "Maybe it is because Shakespeare is my ancestor," he said. "Yeah, I think it's that. I think I have Shakespeare in my blood."

13. Watching Like a Hawk

At this point in my research, I had no choice but to watch them, constantly, openly, and, to some extent, humorously. "There she goes, trying to figure us out again," Mark said once, laughing, still offering me no further answers to my questions. I made up some new questionnaires—nothing. I found what I thought were some new thought-provoking questions—no again. I videotaped class and watched the interactions later—answers did not come.

I did notice one curious thing during the videotaping, however. There were innumerable examples of whole-class discussions during which Terrell and Lawrence and Jacob and Derrick were ferociously waving their hands in the air, yelling out various versions of "Ooh-oo-me-me-me!" and "Over here, over here!" and "Please! ME! I know!" while other students chose decidedly less aerobic ways to participate. There was a lot of adding on to each other's comments, disagreeing with one another, getting worked up by one another's readings or misreadings of the text. I noticed this interdependence, but I put it aside, finding it not a useful answer to my driving question of an individual *how*.

I wanted to take advantage of the earliest stages of the play to do the bulk of my research on these students' process of interpreting the text. Dramatic texts, in many ways, become easier as we

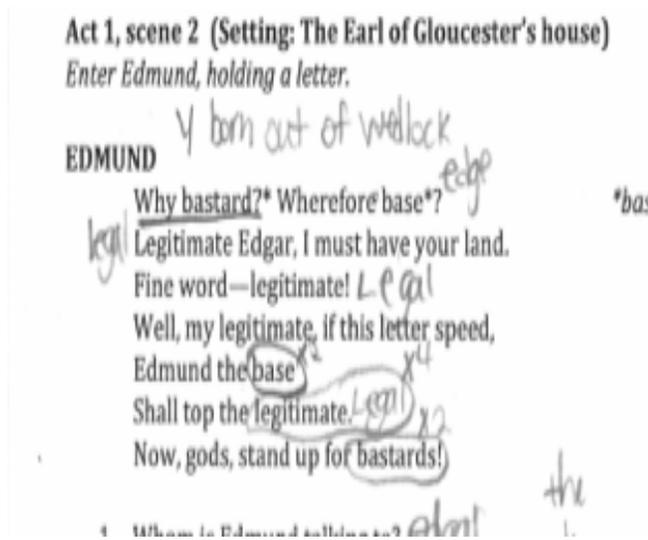
move through them, characters and their habits starting to become more familiar and predictable over time. With this in mind, I wanted to isolate students, to take them away from my assistance and their classmates', forcing them to put their interpretations out there in cold readings of new passages with characters unknown. I did this in Act 1, Scene 1 of the play, plopping down a complicated passage and asking for a line-by-line translation. The results were alarming. Students panicked. They made no notes on the text other than the attempted translation notes on the answer line. Initially, I started to wonder if maybe *Macbeth* had been a fluke, but then I realized that I'd been asking too directly for a result when what I wanted was more of a glimpse into the process along the way.

A few days later we began Act 1, Scene 2. A character that we'd never met was taking the stage for a soliloquy, and I decided to give another cold-read assessment. This time, however, I didn't ask for a line-by-line translation. Instead, I told students to answer a few questions, but that before they did that, I wanted to see their annotations as they worked through the body of the text. Students who went straight to the questions were redirected, and I narrated the room, complimenting students who were taking their time marking up important words and phrases in the text. Students then began putting into practice bits and pieces of our classroom routines, adding in questions, circling repeated words, asking whether they could look things up on computers and in dictionaries. Before I knew it, 20 minutes had passed, then 30, and students were still working intently on their own. The passage was a mere 7 lines long.

The results could not have been more different from the previous examples. Not only were these pages filled with lines and arrows and circles and comments, but also the corresponding questions I had asked now boasted a range of correct answers. This was true of the class as a whole, and it was also true of the focus group. However, when looking more closely at the focus group's papers, it quickly became clear that—although they all came to the same, correct, interpretation of the character—the students in question had dramatically different approaches to the task.

When I looked at Lawrence’s paper, for example, it offered a web of circles and numbers that showed his focus on the pattern of the language. The word “legitimate,” an important word in this passage since the character is classified as a “bastard son,” is repeated throughout. Lawrence circled its first usage and wrote a “1” next to it, then circled and numbered the next two uses of the term (FIGURE A).

FIGURE A: Lawrence’s annotations



Terrell’s paper, on the other hand, indicated a far different approach, one that involved circling unknown words and then looking up—and writing down—the definitions of those words. His paper is, thus, a good example of his mathematical mind at work, piecing together parts of the sentence like an equation. Jacob didn’t take an approach at all made up of tracing poetic patterns or piecing together word parts. Instead, his paper is a series of questions and theories. “Could be that…” he begins at one point and “Could he have…?” he asks at another.

This is where the information gathering stopped, however, because Derrick and Mark handed in completely blank papers. Their questions were answered, of course, and they were answered correctly; however, there wasn’t a single bread crumb left along the way. I sat down and talked with Derrick about his interpretation and how he got there. He mentioned, again and again, how the character must “feel”: he “feels” rejected; he “feels” the need for revenge; he “feels” that it is unfair that

his legitimate brother will get all the land. He read some lines aloud as the actor he thought might have read them, getting all of these feelings into the words.

Mark, on the other hand, as should come as no surprise at this point, offered no such pattern or insight. Within a single minute, Mark was answering the questions. I told him that I didn't want him answering the questions until he'd shown me his annotations on the text. "But I already know what it means," he said, irritated. "What does it mean then? What's he saying?" I challenged, thinking surely that even he—Mark, the natural—couldn't sum this up this brand new character in a minute flat. But he did, and, while doing it, he peered up at me with disdain.

14. The Parts of the Whole

Over the course of the next few weeks, I gave a series of similar assessments, noting with great interest that the students' patterns as described above repeated themselves time and time again. Although I was somewhat fearful of pigeonholing the students, I started thinking of ways to classify their particular, individual responses to the texts in front of them.

- **Lawrence**, unsurprisingly, took the poetic approach, finding patterns in language, hearing repetition and rhyme, appreciating diction and syntax. Taking these linguistic clues often led him to the broader—and the deeper—meanings and themes, going from the intricate linguistic brushstrokes to the larger literary vista.
- **Terrell** continued to take a mathematical approach, repeatedly resorting to the dictionary, thinking through part by part, talking to himself and saying, "Okay, we gotta break this down."
- **Derrick** continued to think about the interpersonal parts of the text, the ones that explained the characters as people. He'd puzzle through what a real person in the given situation would do in order to find an access point in a passage he didn't understand. Derrick was also seen

repeatedly reading aloud the passage, trying to hear and feel the way that they would be delivered on the stage.

- **Jacob** continued to read and reread the passages, writing down questions and theories, with repeated use of “do you think...” and “maybe...” and “what if...”
- And **Mark**, oh yes, Mark. He, as has become predictable, breezed through, repeatedly, letting nobody know what was going on in that mysterious mind of his as he offered up perfect translations of the most dense passages.

Putting this all together, I began to realize that it was no accident that these young men had had such success as a group. They were, in some ways, a perfect literary storm. I couldn't help but think back to those videos of whole-class discussions that had caught my eye: they were bouncing off of each other, adding on and disagreeing with each other, tacking their part to a larger, bigger analytical picture. I just hadn't seen their individual, unique contributions to that whole until now.

15. The Group Dynamic

After observing these students' individual approaches to comprehending and analyzing a complex Shakespearean text, I formulated a master list, one that spelled out a series of steps that would lead a student toward a multifaceted understanding of the text (Figure B).

FIGURE B: The Group Approach

Classroom Approach to Text Analysis

1. Sentence (Jacob)
* mark of sentences, read and reread
2. Word (Terrell)
* Break it down, define at the word level.

3. Resource (Terrell)
 - * Consult resources for word help, either context clues or the dictionary.
4. Meaning (Mark)
 - * Determine an overall sense of what the sentence means in translation.
5. Language (Lawrence)
 - * Trace language patterns and literary devices.
6. Questions (Jacob)
 - * Ask questions.
7. Relationship (Derrick)
 - * Think about relationships between characters, between ideas.
8. Voice (Derrick)
 - * Consider how a real person, and how an actor, would sound.
9. Theme (Lawrence)
 - * What's the overall point that the author was trying to make?

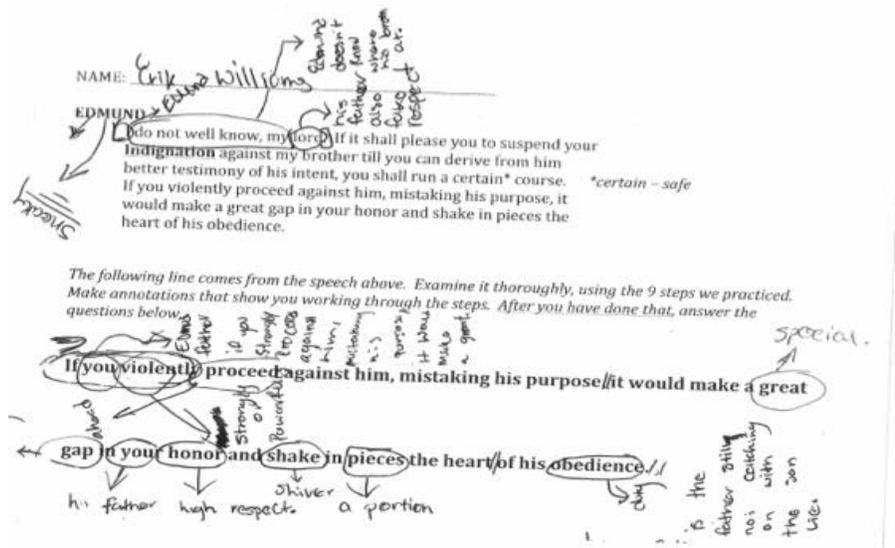
What stuck out to me was that this series of steps was not at all revolutionary; it was, in fact, a series of logical steps that any thorough literary analyst would use to make good sense of the text. What was significant was the fact that it came from a mixture of students who had each found their own way into the text—a way based largely on their own way of approaching the world. Each student's approach seemed, in retrospect, so obviously an extension of his personality. It became so clear in hindsight that each young man brought a distinctive part of himself to bear upon the text in order to make sense of it.

While this list may not have been revolutionary, what it did have going for it was its authenticity. I truly did observe students in the class taking these approaches; each boy was, in fact, an expert in his particular plan of attack. When I brought this list of techniques to the class, I told them that I'd been observing and learning from some of the skilled interpreters among us. I told them that I

wanted to share their approach so that it could be useful to all. I was able to go down the list, saying things like “When I watch Terrell, he immediately tackles a sentence at the word level” and “When I observe Derrick, he’s always trying to think of how the line would sound on the stage.” During this day’s lesson, there was something special in the air: the young men in the focus group were shocked, pride-filled, beaming, and the rest of the class was intent on following along, looking as though they’d received a long-awaited key. On his way out of the room, Jacob said, “My daddy Shakespeare would have been proud of us today.”

Over the following weeks, it was interesting to watch the class implement their classmates’ approaches, just as it was interesting to watch those in the focus group start to more consciously expand their own repertoire. Knowing that he was most likely to concentrate on relationships and on things theatrical, Derrick began to challenge himself to take on more word work, becoming, as the assignment below shows, a dedicated user of the dictionary like Terrell (Figure C).

FIGURE C: Derrick’s Annotations



Likewise, Jacob began to spend more time focusing on word patterns and syntax, taking on the work that was usually in Lawrence's wheelhouse alone.

Throughout this process, I couldn't help but feel that this approach, this idea of studying students and presenting their skills back to them, was authentic and important and ideal. But I did suffer with a bit of guilt for dissembling. Mark, who made it on our list with Step 4, meaning, hadn't offered we outsiders any clues as to how he always achieved it, and so quickly. I became more and more convinced that whatever he had couldn't be studied or taught.

16. The Natural

I began this paper with the wish that by the end of my career, I hope to understand the students like Mark who take to Shakespeare in a way that appears effortless. Often, in my experience, these have been students who, until that point, have been disengaged with school. They are often students who have, until that point, caused disturbances in the classroom, in the school, and sometimes in the community at large. These students, more often than not, have—up until the point of seeing Shakespeare on the page—felt or been told that they are not measuring up as readers. These are often the students we classify as “low,” when, in fact, they are anything but.

Through the course of this study I was able to see, in part, *how* many of my students were accessing a complicated text like Shakespeare. Students were bringing parts of themselves, inborn or cultivated, as a tool that could unlock certain of its parts. A social butterfly found a way into the text through the relationships of the characters. A mathematician found a way to treat the language as a formula. A struggling reader with the patience to ask slow and steady questions found an author whose writing led to more and deeper questions that kicked his brain into high gear. And an old soul with an ear for poetry found an even older soul to guide his growingly mature and contemplative thoughts.

I never, however, throughout this span of nearly two years, was able to see into the true *how* of Mark. He still remains a puzzle to me. In a surreal moment that happened late in the school year, however, the mystery yielded ever so slightly. We were doing an assignment about the recurrence of the words “natural,” “unnatural,” and “nature” in *King Lear*. Students were to look up the definitions of each word, as well as the places that each word occurred in the play, and begin to make some assumptions about the theme of nature and the unnatural in the play. Mark had separated himself from the rest of the class and was working at a table in the back of the room. When I walked by, on his screen was the word “natural.” I chuckled to myself and leaned over to look more closely at the definition. The first definition, listed under the nouns, described a natural as “a person regarded as having an innate gift or talent for a particular task or activity.” I laughed out loud and sat down next to him. “You know,” I said, pointing to the definition, “that is how I think of you when I think of you reading Shakespeare—an innate gift or talent.” He smiled from ear to ear. “I still wish you could explain it...” I said, expecting nothing of the sort. “I think I know what it is,” he said thoughtfully. “There are lots of other things I don’t understand when I first read them, but with Shakespeare I read it twice.” “Do you mean,” I asked, “it would only take a second reading for you to understand the other stuff?” “Yeah, probably,” he said, “but that other stuff, I just don’t care about.”

17. A Final Round of Data

At the end of these students’ 8th grade year, we returned for one final go at the NWEA Reading test. The students brought to the test a sense of determination that I hadn’t seen before. Derrick entered the room punching at an imaginary foe, saying “Lemme at him! Where is he?”, referring to the test. Terrell went to bed at 6 p.m. the night before, wanting to save up energy. And Mark grabbed a bust of Shakespeare off of my desk and told the class to “rub Shakespeare’s head for good luck” as he walked around the room. Mark then promptly put the sculpture on his own desk, right beside his computer, and touched him periodically throughout the next few hours.

I'd been nervous about this day myself. The kids had grown so much as academics that the test felt like an afterthought. Watching Derrick and Terrell debate over Whitman interpretations, seeing Lawrence knock over his desk as he jumped out of it during an Emily Dickinson epiphany one day, hearing Jacob's disappointment that he wouldn't be able to read *Othello* with us next year because he was graduating—all of it added up to the stuff that will give us teachers chills, the stuff that will well up our eyes with tears, the stuff that will make us feel sorry for all of the other schmucks out there who don't get experiences like this during the work day.

I also was worried about the test itself: it is designed to assess reading levels at the elementary and middle school levels, and it loses its precision at the top. Were these boys going to be able to eke out a few more points, or was the test going to lead them to a disappointment that they didn't deserve? Had their prior scores, by chance, been flukes? What would happen? When test day rolled around and I saw the passages they were getting—excerpts from Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Emerson's *The American Scholar*, as well as texts from our friends Shakespeare and Whitman and Dickinson and Franklin—I held my breath a bit. The boys, however, did no such thing. They geared up and settled in, some of them taking from 9:20 in the morning until 2:45 in the afternoon. "I got this," Derrick said, as I spotted a passage from Goethe pop up on his screen.

When the day was over, there was reason to celebrate (Table F). Lawrence continued his upward climb from a 225 to a 227, as did Terrell, moving from a 229 to a 233. Derrick surprised me, taking his already-impressive on-grade-level score of a 220 to an even more impressive 227. Jacob floundered a bit, moving from a 223, which had him situated above grade level, to a 219, which took him back to the 8th grade realm. It may have been a result of him being ill (he had a giant pile of tissue on his desk as a wad of tissue completely shoved up one nostril during testing), or it may have been a more usual evening out of scores.

What struck me most, and moved me, was Mark. Mark the inexplicable natural. Mark, one of half of the former evil twinship. Mark, whose reading level had just two years ago registered as 2nd

grade. As Mark pressed the enter key for his final answer, I watched from across the room, trying to detect signs and signals from his face. The test, which, to its benefit, instantly reports students' scores to them, informed him that he'd scored a 222. This score, like the other boys' from this study, put him off of the 11th grade norms chart. It was hard for both of us to contain our excitement, as well as our sentimentality. I showed him his growth as it related to where he started and told him, with utmost honesty, that I was about to cry. "Me too," he said, his eyes gleaming. "What do you think happened here? How did you do it?" I asked. "I think it was when the school turned around," he said. "And Shakespeare. Shakespeare helped too."

TABLE F: READING IMPROVEMENT OVER 2 YEARS

Student	Spring 2014 NWEA	Spring 2015 NWEA	Winter 2016 NWEA	Spring 2016 NWEA	Grade Level Change Over 2 Years	Total Years of Growth
Lawrence	213	224	225	227	mid-year 6 th to 11 th +	5+
Terrell	210	218	229	233	mid-year 5 th to 11 th +	6+
Jacob	194	218	223	219	mid-year 3 rd to mid-year 8 th	5
Derrick	198	217	220	227	beginning-of-year 4 th to 11 ⁺	7+
Mark	184	211	215	222	mid-year 2 nd to 11 ⁺	9+

18. Limitations

In addition to the small sample size, the main limitation of this study is its complicated relationship to standardized testing. This investigation takes as its foundation a skepticism about what a reading score is, how it unfairly classifies a student, and how it can ultimately tell us very little about what a student is capable of doing. And yet, even as it calls into question so many elements of a test score, this study uses the NWEA Reading score as a primary marker of student growth. The irony is not lost on me.

That being said, the study retains its dependence on NWEA scores for a few reasons. The test is adaptive, normed, and has been around for decades, all points in its favor over tests like the recently-minted PARCC. Moreover, for better or worse, a rising NWEA score is more than just a number on paper for my students. Grade promotion depends on it. High school admission depends on it. Selection for honors courses and electives in high school also depend on what that NWEA score reveals. Having a rising NWEA score matters, and knowing what types of literary approaches—and what types of texts—get that number moving upward matters quite a lot.

19. Policy Recommendations

There are four major action steps that I take away from this study:

- We should reconsider what a “low” reader is, and what we think he or she is capable of doing.
- We should reconsider what a “reading intervention” looks like.
- Schools might consider looping with students as a type of intervention.
- Schools should prioritize teacher and student choice.

20. Conclusion

This paper has taken as its focus the question of *how* a student with a 4th grade, or even a 2nd grade, reading level is able to access a Shakespearean text. After focusing on a few students in my classroom who successfully bridged this gap, there were two main issues of policy and practice that were brought to the fore. First, what do we mean when we talk about a student being a “low” reader? Second, what role should teacher choice play in the classroom at large?

An argument can be made that it is not Shakespeare that affected my students alone, but that it was my own personal relationship with this particular author. This line of thinking might mention that I was inordinately passionate about the text, that I was well trained in interpreting Renaissance literature. Such an argument would point out that Shakespeare in another person’s hands may not

progress in the same way, and this is true. But it is also true that another text in my hands would have different results. While this is one of the limitations of this study, it is also one of this study's main points. Shakespeare was *my* answer to the problem of a lackluster curriculum—it doesn't have to be everyone's. What my students saw in my presentation of Shakespeare was an example of what it looks like to be inspired by, moved by, and committed to deep thinking about an author.

My students bought into my Shakespearean campaign because it was authentic. Other teachers have other texts that have moved them. Those teachers should be able to bring, while teaching the standards, these texts to light for their students. Fortunately my administration values this sort of teacher choice, but such choice is all too infrequent these days. While the Common Core State Standards were designed to be a set of chosen standards, not a set of chosen texts, the *testing* of the CCSS brought with them such items as the PARCC exam, the Achievement Network quarterly assessments aligned to the PARCC exam, as well as the Engage New York scripted curriculum aligned to those tests. Through this process English teachers are no longer the spokespeople for texts and authors and arguments that might matter to their students; they are, instead, the distributors of test-friendly excerpts of texts, bits and pieces of which have been pieced into text sets, the ideas and authors of which will never have the chance to get into someone's "blood."

In our current educational environment, a student who is deemed to be a "low" reader is set on a certain path. This pathway is intended as improvement, but it may have unintended consequences that work against that student making the large leaps in comprehension that are needed. In my school, for example, a struggling reader would be streamed into a "high" or "low" class with students of similar reading levels. This student would also, during independent reading time, be directed toward certain texts that have been marked, and marketed toward, students at that "reading level." The student would, as well, be pulled from an elective or from physical education or from an enrichment course or even from science, in order to engage in a reading "intervention" program (Read 180, LLI, Compass Learning, System 44, etc.) that is "targeted" to their specific reading level.

These programs have a laser-like focus on raising a grade-level equivalent reading score, or a Lexile level, and in many cases they are effective in making the numbers rise. However, how much credence can we put in these levels when we see some students accessing some texts so far beyond their range? Are we willing to say that a student with a 2nd grade reading level needs a “high interest – low level” text when, at least in one case mentioned above, such a student may be able to access a text at the high end of the Common Core’s “stretch” Lexile band for 9th-10th grade? Moreover, what else is at stake in setting a ceiling for these “low” readers? Do these computer programs and scripted curricula instill a love a reading? Do they cause students to wrestle with universal or existential questions? Do they instill motivation to struggle with complex text and change students’ conception of themselves as scholars? And will they, we should continually ask ourselves, give students, as one of my boys said, “a mind to think”?

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APPENDIX A: COMING ATTRACTIONS for *MACBETH*

NARRATOR: (in dramatic, movie trailer voice) *Coming soon, to a theatre near you, William Shakespeare's thrilling tale, Macbeth, a play about ambition, guilty consciences, witches, ghosts, and... MURDER!*

WITCH #1: (in creepy witch voice) Greetings witches! We meet here to discuss Macbeth! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

WITCH #2: (also in creepy witch voice) Yes! Because we are witches, we can see what will happen to him in the future! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

WITCH #3: (again, in creepy witch voice) He probably will be skeptical of us because we are so hideous looking and because we have these creepy witch voices...! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

ALL WITCHES TOGETHER: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

NARRATOR: (excitedly) *The witches are right! Macbeth does doubt that what the witches say is going to come true! But yet, he hopes that it will...!*

MACBETH: (nervously) Wow... Can you believe what those witches said about my future!?

BANQUO: I know! They said you would get a big promotion to the job of something called the "Thane of Cawdor" and then that you would be king of Scotland some day!

MACBETH: (excitedly) And that some day your kids would also be the kings of Scotland! Who knew?!

ALL WITCHES TOGETHER: We did! Because we can see the future! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

NARRATOR: *Watch as the witches' prophecies begin to come true...!*

KING DUNCAN OF SCOTLAND: Congratulations, Macbeth! I am giving you a promotion to the job of "Thane of Cawdor"!

MACBETH: (shocked) Wow, thanks! (Whispering to himself) This is just what the witches said! I have to tell my wife!

NARRATOR: *Watch further as Macbeth's ambitious wife starts to push him to do things he doesn't want to do!*

LADY MACBETH: (in an overly sweet, manipulative voice) Honey, the witches said you'd be king! Why not speed things along?

MACBETH: Do you really think that is the best thing to do?

LADY MACBETH: Yes, I do. And I'd love you more if you were king. (whispering to herself) I doubt you'll do it though, because you're too nice and kind of a wimp.

MACBETH: Okay.

LADY MACBETH AND MACBETH: (kissing noises)

NARRATOR: *And watch as Macbeth goes through with it, actually murdering the King while he sleeps...!*

KING DUNCAN OF SCOTLAND: (making snoring sounds)

MACBETH: (in crazy voice) Take this!

KING DUNCAN OF SCOTLAND: (as if in pain) Ow! Ow! Owwwwwwwwww!

ALL WITCHES TOGETHER: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

NARRATOR: *And watch as the horror continues...!*

WITCH #1: (in hushed voice) Pssst. Hey, Macbeth...Don't forget that thing we said about how Banquo's kids will become kings some day...

MACBETH: Wait...there's more to this?

ALL WITCHES TOGETHER: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

BANQUO'S WIFE: (sobbing noises)

NARRATOR: *Learn how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth deal with their guilty consciences...*

LADY MACBETH: I feel so guilty!

MACBETH: I know! I keep seeing things!

GHOST OF BANQUO: (In ghost voice) Ooooooooooooo-oooooooo-ooooo!

NARRATOR: *Will Macbeth be able to carry on as the King of Scotland? Will people find out what he has done? And will Macbeth's guilty conscience be the end of him? Find out answers to these questions and more in William Shakespeare's Macbeth!*

ALL TOGETHER:

ALL WITCHES: Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!

KING DUNCAN OF SCOTLAND: Owwwwwwwwww!

LADY MACBETH AND MACBETH: (kissing noises)

BANQUO'S GHOST: Oooo-oooo-ooooo-oooooo!

BANQUO'S WIFE: (sobbing noises)

APPENDIX B: ATTITUDE SURVEY FOR *MACBETH*

Directions: For each of the following statements, mark an "X" on the line indicating how much you agree or disagree with the statement. Use the lines below to explain the reasons for your choice.

1. People should always try to get as much power as they can.

Agree ----- Disagree

Explain:

2. I find it easy to stand up to pressure from other people.

Agree ----- Disagree

Explain:

3. I would do something illegal if I were positive that it would get me what I want in life.

Agree ----- Disagree

Explain:

4. I believe that there are religious and/or supernatural forces that control what happens to you in your life.

Agree ----- Disagree

Explain:

5. I believe it is hard to live with guilt, knowing that you did something wrong.

Agree ----- Disagree

Explain:
