The Self-System of a Struggling College Reader: "I Just Figured Somewhere Along the Line I was Gonna Fail."

Susan Nash-Ditzel
Georgian Court University
nash-ditzels@georgian.edu

This qualitative study aims at explaining reading beliefs and behaviors of college students taking a developmental reading course through analyzing components of the students' self-systems. A student's self-system is comprised of many different factors that may or may not develop in tandem through experiences in and out of school (Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger, & Pressley (1990). These factors include: self-efficacy, self-esteem, locus of control, achievement, motivation, and attributional beliefs of learning. Unfortunately not all students' self-systems develop appropriately. Schraw and Bruning (1999) claim that as the self-system weakens, a student's ability to engage in deeper processing of a text also diminishes. I used the self-system framework to understand my students' learning and reading beliefs and behaviors.

Several years ago I made a career change from elementary reading specialist to instructor of developmental reading at a community college. College developmental reading is not something students, instructors or colleges tend to discuss, yet the number of freshmen entering college requiring developmental reading courses remains high (see NCES report, 2003). In fact before I began my current position, I was unaware such courses existed at college. Further, whenever I mention to someone that I teach reading at a college, a barrage of questions inevitably follows. "What do you mean you teach reading at college? Don't the students know how to read? If they can't read how did they graduate high school?" I too wondered about these questions. In fact, I wondered so much about who my students were as learners and readers that I conducted the following study to clear up some of the mystery. To facilitate my understanding I used a framework developed by Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger, and Pressley (1990) which explained students and their learning via their self-systems.

The Self-System

A student's self-system is comprised of many different factors that may or may not develop in tandem through experiences in and out of school (Borkowski et al, 1990). These factors include

self-efficacy, self-esteem, locus of control, achievement, motivation, and attributional beliefs of learning. As students' self-systems develop at home and school early in life, they may come to recognize what makes them feel good as learners and what steps they applied to attain that feeling. Students are likely to replicate those steps in different learning situations to continue feeling positively about themselves as learners.

Unfortunately not all students' self-systems develop along these lines due to internal and external factors that occur both in and out of school at a very early age. Initially, if students do not develop positive or effective attributional belief patterns, they will feel a lack of control over their learning. When learning is out of their control, students experience a decrease in self-determination. They feel it is useless to self-evaluate their performance and abilities because their ability to learn was not in their hands to begin with (Borkowski et al., 1990). Further, Schraw and Bruning (1999) claim that as the self-system weakens, a student's ability to engage in deeper processing of a text also diminishes. I believed that by understanding my students' self-systems I would uncover who they were as learners and readers.

There are six components of the self-system. A brief definition of each is provided below.

Self-Efficacy
Bandura (1991) would argue the most crucial mechanism of personal agency is a student's beliefs about her ability to complete a task. Self-efficacy influences a student's choices, aspirations, effort, perseverance, stress levels and vulnerability. Those students perceiving themselves as highly efficacious will typically attribute a failure to poor effort on their part. Conversely, students regarding themselves as inefficacious see a failure as a lack of ability. In this study, self-efficacy is viewed as the students' beliefs about their capabilities as readers and learners.

Achievement
Research suggests that the use of metacognitive strategies increases academic success, particularly with students with learning disabilities (Ruban, 2000; Smitley, 2001). This understanding is of particular importance to the focal study as the participants were taught metacognitive reading strategies to increase self-regulated reading behavior. Research supports the idea that high self-efficacy and achievement are linked. That is, students with high self-efficacy will in turn achieve academically (Schunk, 1989; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990). Achievement in this study was conceived as the students' ability to receive passing grades as well as the impact receiving those grades had on their self-efficacy.

Self-Esteem
Self-esteem and achievement fuel each other. As students begin to achieve, their feelings of self-esteem rise in tandem (Carr, Borkowski, & Maxwell, 1991; Borkowski et al., 1990). I viewed self-esteem as how the students perceived themselves in comparison with others around them and how these comparisons affected their perspective of themselves as readers (Bandura, 1991). In a classroom, students' self-esteem forms as they compare their ability to their classmates'. They may notice differences in workload or materials, or the way teachers treat them in comparison to other students. As this information accrues, children begin to lay the foundation for their self-concept.

Locus of Control
When students learned techniques to solve problems, they believe "they can apply it successfully, and know that it improves performance" (Schunk and Rice, 1992, p. 61). The relationship between learned behaviors and successful outcomes promotes a sense of control over one's learning, which is significant, in the case of my study population, because "remedial readers often view their achievement outcomes as beyond their control" (ibid.). Students demonstrating characteristics of learned helplessness believe that their efforts are likely to result in failure. Effort and self-esteem are closely related. If a student puts forth effort only to be faced with failure, this demoralizes self-esteem. In an effort to protect self-esteem, students may equate failure with external causes such as poor teaching or lack of support (Borkowski et al., 1990). Students believing failure is caused by external factors are also likely to view success as caused by something over which they have little control such as luck or class placement.

Students in a self-esteem protecting 'mode' see little value in learning strategies because they take effort and have no reason to believe they will promote success. For this study, the concept of locus of control was defined as the extent of control the students believed they had over their reading and learning experiences.

Motivation
Motivation can be defined in many ways; however, in this study it was defined as desire and perseverance with regard to reading and school in general. I focused on the participant's desire to read both in and out of school, and their perseverance when faced with school assignments. College students in developmental classes typically have lower motivation when compared to non-developmental peers. Low motivation can be attributed to negative feelings towards reading, little faith in developmental courses, and the fact that they will not receive credit for the courses, even though they are required by the college (Allgood, Risko, Alvarez, & Fairbanks, 2000).

Attribution Beliefs
Attributional beliefs about education differ from person to person depending on their learning style and the task at hand. It is common knowledge that in order for a student to achieve in an academic setting, they must attend classes, they must spend time studying appropriately, and they must complete assignments. However, past experiences may alter some students' perception of these common aspects of learning. Some students "come to the university with conceptualizations of disciplines that are out of sync with academic reality," and the mismatch "between the academy's and the student's definition of disciplines makes it hard for students to get their bearings with material" (Rose, 1989, p. 191-192). Attributional beliefs in this study focused on the participants' viewpoints regarding reading, past and present.

Snapshot of the Study

The Participants
The investigation of my students' self-systems spanned ten weeks of a fifteen-week semester. Five of my own students were chosen to participate. As the study took place during the second course in the two course series, I knew many of the students in my classes. The participants were chosen based on steady attendance, a record of turning in work, and a willingness to share their thoughts in class. In other words, I was looking for students who would be most likely to

continue with the course until the end of the semester as well as students who might participate willingly in a one-on-one interview with me. My final pool consisted of three males and two females, all nineteen or twenty years old. A brief background of each student is provided below.

Liz, a soft-spoken, hard-working student, was classified with a reading and math learning disability in first grade. Recently her two elementary-aged siblings were also classified with dyslexia. Liz experienced the pull-out and push-in model of support until she graduated high school. However, at the time of the study, Liz had not yet notified the college of her disability and was not receiving any additional support. After completing two years at the community college, Liz planned on transferring to a four year university to become an elementary education teacher.

Mark came from a family of four boys. Mark's family relocated from out-of-state two years prior to this study. Mark's mother stayed home to raise the children while his father worked construction. In middle school he received pull-out basic skills reading support in addition to his regular Language Arts class. Mark planned to graduate from the college with an Associate's Degree in law enforcement and become a state trooper.

Jillian, who was always bright and bubbly, had no clear career goals at the time of the study. Like Mark, she received basic-skills reading support in middle school in lieu of electives such as art. Jillian had a longstanding fear of reading in front of her peers; thus, for the first several weeks of the first semester course she refused to make eye-contact with me when I addressed the class as a whole. In fact, she purposefully turned her chair so her back faced me. Only after I promised her that I would never make any student read aloud did she return her chair to the forward-facing position.

Ryan was the only participant who applied and was accepted into numerous four-year universities. After a football injury in his senior year resulted in a loss of scholarship money, he decided to start at the community college prior to transferring to a university to pursue a career as a lawyer. Ryan was never classified with a reading disability but received pull-out reading support during elementary school. Later, in high school, he took a one semester reading course after he did not pass a state mandated test. Due to his family's constant relocation Ryan changed schools nine times from grades three through eight.

Lastly, Darren had struggled with dyslexia all of his life. Classified in early elementary school, Darren was in a self-contained setting for most of his school career. Unfortunately, many times he was placed in classrooms designed for students with behavioral problems. Darren's docile nature made it easy for him to be overlooked by teachers. He believed that he slipped through the cracks and graduated high school unable to recite the alphabet correctly. Unlike Liz, Darren had notified the college of his disability and had received one year of special education classes in both reading and math prior to this study.

The Course
The two-course developmental reading program I teach is required by the college for students scoring below a particular cutoff point on the entrance exam. Most credit-bearing courses at the college require students to pass the reading courses prior to enrollment; however, there are a

handful of college-level courses students can take simultaneously. It should be noted that at the time of the study all the participants were enrolled in at least one credit-bearing course during the study. Over two semesters I teach the following strategies derived from landmark reading comprehension studies (Paris & Jacobs, 1984; Pressley, El-Dinary, Gaskins, Schuder, Bergman, Almasi, & Brown, 1992): activating schema, inference, summarizing, fix-up strategy for unknown words, asking and answering questions, and determining importance. I taught the strategies using the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). A variety of texts were used in the course, but college-level textbook excerpts were the staple. The course met weekly for three hours and is followed by a two hour lab taught by learning assistants.

Data Collection and Analysis
In an attempt to understand some of the intricacies of the participants' self-systems, I chose to conduct a pre and post semi-structured interview (Patton, 2002). The interviews focused on the students' past and present feelings towards reading as well as themselves as readers. At the end of the study all interviews were transcribed. Transcribed data was coded for evidence of the six self-system components by using the definitions that were provided in the above sections as guidelines. Coded data was then analyzed for patterns and themes related to each element of the self-system as a way of understanding the affective beliefs and behaviors of my developmental readers. Current research was used to support the findings.

Self-Systems Past and Present
According to the participants' interviews they noticed a shift in many areas of their self-systems. I use my students' words to build an understanding of struggling college readers' reading beliefs and behaviors prior to the study as well as at the conclusion. I also share their insight as to why they believe these changes occurred. Lastly, I incorporate current research as a way to support and further explain the findings.

Self-efficacy
While not all of the participants outwardly expressed feelings of poor efficacy in discussing their reading experiences prior to college, these feelings seemed to surface intensely when they reached their first credit-bearing courses. They were now faced with college-level tasks, all of which the participants believed to be more difficult than anything they had experienced in high school. When Liz purchased the textbook, before taking it out of the wrapping, she reported thinking to herself, "Oh, this is gonna be easy….and then I opened it and saw this crazy stuff." The "crazy stuff" Liz referred to was, "Big words and detailed meanings to certain things." As she browsed the book, certain words "blew her away." Her most prominent fear was that "she would make a fool of [herself]" in front of her classmates if she was asked to read aloud.

Ryan and Mark also doubted their reading ability as they began their first college-level course. Mark explained he was "nervous" when he began his psychology course. After attending just one class, Mark immediately knew the course "would not be easy." As he read the first two chapters from the textbook Mark felt the material "was kinda out there." Similarly, Ryan shared regarding his psychology course, "When you first go to class and you see what you gotta do–you look at the syllabus, see everything that's required of you--you're like, *Oh, I'm gonna fail probably. How am I gonna remember all this?*

Jillian and Darren felt a lack of self-efficacy even before attending a credit-bearing class at the college. She recalled "it really wasn't that big of a surprise" that she had to take developmental reading in college. "Even before [she] took the [placement] test" she instinctively knew "there was no way [she] was gonna pass." In her own words she explained, "I'm a really bad test-taker to begin with, so on top of not liking to read, and not understanding—I just figured somewhere along the line, I was gonna fail." Likewise, Darren felt he was "unprepared" for college. So much so he thought he "couldn't even pass one [college] class."

The participants experienced emotions similar to Rose's (1989) personal story of struggling to adapt to college reading, in which required course texts represented a significant increase in reading difficulty over high school. Rose simply said, "I was out of my league" (p. 43). These students felt out of their league as well. Students not accustomed to the academic rigors of college courses may experience anxiety, apprehension, or bewilderment (Allgood, et al., 2000), which inevitably result in feelings of lowered self-efficacy.

Interestingly, none of the participants involved in the study were completely consumed by their inefficacious thoughts. All persevered to the end of their credit-bearing courses. What had allowed them to overcome their seemingly strong feelings of inefficacy? While none of the participants could definitively answer that question, Ryan, Darren, Jillian, and Liz shared that after participating in the developmental reading course and learning strategies for comprehending texts, their reading ability had increased and, as a result, so had their confidence. Ryan's comments in our last interview best summarized the sentiments of the participants:

Susan: When you first got into let's say psychology class and you saw the textbook, what was your first initial thought?

Ryan: How am I gonna remember all this?

Susan: Okay. Did those feelings change? Have they changed?

Ryan: Yeah. It's just normal.

Susan: What's just normal? That feeling?

Ryan: No. It's like when you first go to a class and you see what you gotta do, all the – like you look at the syllabus, see everything that's required of you, you're like, '*Oh, I'm gonna fail probably*.'

Susan: Okay.

Ryan: It's like you just take it one step at a time and you go on.

Susan: Right. So have you been able to remember everything?

Ryan: Yeah.

Susan: How have you been able to do that you think?

> *Ryan:* How? Just studying, I guess. Like I said, I know I use 'em; I just don't think of them at the time.
>
> *Susan:* When you say *them*, the strategies?
>
> *Ryan:* The strategies, yeah.
>
> *Susan:* So you believe that they are occurring subconsciously?
>
> *Ryan:* Yeah.
>
> *Susan:* Okay. Why do you think this has happened?
>
> *Ryan:* I have no idea. I guess because I'm learning and paying attention more; and I guess they do work and I don't really know it. I don't sit there and go, 'Oh, it's the fix-up strategy;' it just happens.

Ryan, who thought he would initially have to drop his psychology course, received a 96 on his first exam. Undoubtedly his confidence began to build. At the end of his second semester of the reading course Ryan stated that he had "more [confidence in his reading ability] than before" he began the reading courses. While he admitted at first he "hated the fact that [he] had to be in [the developmental reading course]," Ryan questioned whether he "would've failed out of school or not" had he not taken the class.

Allgood et al., (2000) noted that "In order for students to develop positive self-efficacy beliefs they need to acquire competence and skills in coping with difficult lessons and assignments. (p. 212). I infer that as the participants progressed through the reading course, they were able to build their repertoire of strategies, as well as their understanding of these strategies, enabling them to cope with difficult assignments. Passing scores on assignments and assessments, both in my class and their content courses, confirmed they could in fact accomplish difficult tasks, and their sense of self-efficacy was bolstered (cf. Schunk, 1994).

Achievement: "I was doing good because it was like—it was really easy work."
I noticed an interesting pattern of achievement directly influencing the participants' self-efficacy. Receiving good grades in elementary, middle and high school, sometimes very good grades, was a recurring theme. Of the five participants, not one had ever failed a class. With the exception of Mark, who recalled receiving mainly Cs on his report cards, the other four participants consistently received As and Bs in all of their classes. While all the participants seemingly experienced positive achievements as indicated by their report cards, as they entered their first college-level course, they doubted their ability to read and understand the required texts.

Past research supports the idea that students with high self-efficacy will in turn achieve academically (Schunk, 1989; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990). However, all of the participants had achieved academically, but none initially exhibited high self-efficacy. This led me to question how realistically they perceived their achievement. In other words, did these students feel they deserved the high grades they received? Ryan and Mark both admitted to

rarely studying. Ryan explained he "didn't do anything" academically in high school, he "just went to school" everyday. Interestingly, Ryan's documented achievements were perhaps the greatest in high school; he often made the honor roll. Similarly, Darren and Jillian felt they did very little in high school to earn the good grades they received. Darren admitted he had "no clue" how he passed with such good grades, but described it as a combination of "really easy work" and the teacher "just passing [him]."

Young and Ley (2002) found that in an open enrollment college setting, both regular admission students and developmental students showed high self-efficacy. There appeared to be a mismatch between actual ability and perceived ability. Young and Ley thought the findings puzzling since they did not confirm past research stating low achieving students will have equally low self-efficacy. Could it be that the students in Young and Ley's study had received the same message of high achievement based on high school grades and report cards as my participants? Unfortunately their study did not detail the background of the students, and did not follow up with the students after taking credit-bearing courses. However, Young and Ley supported their finding through anecdotal evidence gathered from developmental faculty, stating "developmental students do not know they do not know," creating an "inflated sense of what [they are] capable of doing" (p. 26).

This notion concurs with the messages the participants received throughout their school careers. They were making progress in school but did not know they were not on par with their classmates. Further, all of the participants in this study were pulled-out of their regular classes for supplemental reading instruction or were in a self-contained special education classroom. This may have affected their perception of what good readers do. Ryan seemed to know he was not achieving as much as his peers and he felt the students remaining in the regular classroom were learning and reading "harder stuff" than the students in pull-out classes.

Researchers would argue that the participant's metacognitive systems were so underdeveloped they had trouble recognizing their own lack of ability. They did little monitoring and evaluating when involved in a task, lacking an internal measure of whether they had adequately achieved (Borkowski et al. 1990; Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Stone & May, 2002). They based their self-assessment solely on external factors, such as grades on assignments or report cards.

Schunk (1994) offers an additional view suggesting:

Effective self-regulation depends on students making attributions that enhance self-efficacy and motivation. Attributions enter into self-regulation during the self-judgment and self-reaction stages when students compare and evaluate performance (Schunk, 1989). Whether goal progress is deemed acceptable depends on its attribution. Students who attribute success to factors over which they have little control (e.g., luck, task ease) may hold low self-efficacy if they believe they cannot succeed on their own (p. 82).

Schunk's ideas are reflected in most of the participant's stories as they internally sensed their abilities did not match those of their peers, nor the grades they received.

Even though initial doubts plagued each of the participants, they all were able to pass their 100-level courses. Jillian was very happy with the B+ she received for her paralegal course. Darren thought he was not capable of passing one college course yet earned a C in history. Liz worked very hard all semester and was pleased with a B in education and a B+ in English. Ryan, who took three credit-bearing courses, received a B+ in macroeconomics, a B+ in psychology, and an A in English. Mark received a D in his psychology class, which is considered passing.

Self-Esteem: "I'm a really, really bad reader."
Self-esteem and achievement fuel each other. Research has shown that as students begin to achieve, their feelings of self-esteem rise in tandem (Carr, Borkowski, Maxwell, 1991; Borkowski et al., 1990). However, as noted above, all the participants left high school with fairly high achievement, yet most of the participants spoke of times in school when they experienced feelings of low self-esteem regarding their perception of themselves as readers.

Bandura's (1991) account of how the growth of self-esteem develops in a social setting offers a possible explanation of why the participants "achieved," as demonstrated by the grades they received in high school while still feeling less capable than their peers when it came to reading activities. The participants valued the comparisons with their classmates according to their stories. Liz explained, "I was not as great of a reader as everybody else in the class was. . . . Some of my words were kind of hesitant." Ryan recalled in middle school he "knew how to read" but "wasn't as smart as [his classmates]." Some of the participants not only compared themselves to classmates, but to other family members. Darren recalled that his twin sister would "come home, and have books that [were] more advanced." As he began to recognize the differences in his sister's assignments and reading materials, he described feeling "stupid" in comparison. Darren explained his reading ability in elementary school as "pretty bad." Ryan felt that his step-father contributed to his negative view of himself as he often corrected Ryan's speech, grammar, or word choice making him feel "just plain dumb."

Most of the participants who were pulled-out for reading support felt stigmatized. Receiving reading support in school only intensified the negative messages Ryan received at home from his stepfather. He recalled hating being "labeled" and feeling "stupid" during his early years of school due to the reading support he needed out of the classroom. He felt students receiving reading support "were not good enough" to participate in the regular classroom activities. Liz was confused in elementary school when she was pulled-out for special education classes. She explained, "Well, when I was little I didn't really understand it. I was just kind of upset. Why I was being pulled out and everybody else got to stay in with the regular teacher?" It was apparent to Liz the students in her regular classroom "read a lot better than I did."

At the conclusion of the study, the participants reported some shift in their feelings of reading-related self-esteem, yet their words were not entirely convincing. Mark now believed he was "a *little* better" than most of the students in his reading class. Similarly, Liz felt she was able to read "*almost* at the same level as everyone else," in her education course. Ryan explained that as a reader he changed from "bad to good—to *better*, actually; not good." Their tentative words suggest that longstanding struggles with their self-concepts regarding reading may have been the most deeply-rooted developmental problem in their self-system.

Reading research indicates students struggling with reading and participating in remedial reading settings for extended periods of time lack confidence, are easily frustrated, embarrassed, and have an innate fear of failing (Mueller, 1999, Rosenthal, 1995). As all of the participants were in a remedial setting at one time or another, their feelings of low self-esteem seemed to align with the research. While most of the participants were no longer receiving specific reading support once they reached high school, even children as young as first grade are aware of their self-concept regarding reading competence (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993). As students advance through school their self-esteem declines as difficulties or poor performances accumulate (Chapman & Massey, 1995). This decline may result from increasing salience of social comparison and classroom competition as students advance through the grades (Harter, Whitesell, & Kowalski, 1992).

Locus of Control: "My teachers didn't teach me much."
In an attempt to protect self-esteem, students quickly equate failure with external causes such as poor teaching or lack of support (Crocker & Park, 2004; Borkowski et al., 1990). Students believing failure is caused by external factors also believe success is caused by something they have little or no control over such as luck or class placement (Nunn & Nunn, 1993). Students in this study often described a feeling of helplessness or being lost when trying to read. In many instances understanding a text was facilitated by an external factor, namely a teacher or a parent. Jillian described a typical reading class experience in middle school:

> I didn't understand what was going on [in the text]. Like unless somebody else was reading it out loud, and then the teacher had a discussion on it – that's when I would understand what [the text] was saying. If we were just reading it [independently], I'd [only] get like a glimpse of it.

In a situation like this, Jillian looked to her teacher to discuss the events of a text orally since reading independently brought confusion. Ryan shared a story similar to Jillian's describing a typical day in his reading support classroom in elementary school:

> I just remember sitting there reading and following along in the books. I remember you recited back what [the teacher] read. And I remember walking out of the classroom and forgetting everything. The next day [the teacher] would go "What'd you read?" and I couldn't tell her what I read because I forgot.

In elementary school, Darren reported he was "making progress" in reading due to the techniques of his special education teacher. However, when his family relocated and he was forced to change schools he felt "completely lost" when reading. He believed his new special education teacher "wasn't doing her job."

Growing up, Mark relied on his mother for help in reading. When I asked what he would do in the past when he came across a challenging piece of text he responded, "Like if I don't understand a sentence. If I can't still understand it, I'll ask my mom."

While their past reading experiences heavily relied on external factors, most of the participants reported they had more internal control over their reading when the study drew to a close, and none mentioned the need for external support to make sense of a text. How had such a shift occurred? Some of the students attributed this increased control to utilizing the reading

strategies learned in the course which in turn allowed them to be more aware of their thoughts while reading. Mark explained,

> I think [the reading strategies] did help me, because it helped me focus on [the text] more–because I actually had to read it and then write down what I think about it. So I can't wander off [and say], "Oh, I'm done."

By using the reading strategies and thinking about the text while reading forced Mark to focus. He began to realize there were few opportunities to "wander off" when he was actively involved in reading a text.

Similar to Mark, Jillian explained how she was now able to monitor herself more efficiently while reading.

> Well, I read as much as I can. And then when I see I'm starting to wander off, I'm like, "Okay." And I read the next paragraph. I'm like, "You know what? You're really wandering off now. Just stop reading for a little bit." So it's either I quit for the day, or I quit for a little bit and go back to it. . . . So I'll just stop for a little bit, watch a little TV, and then go back to reading it again.

Many students are not aware when they stop comprehending due to the fact they are not actively self-regulating (Afflerbach, 2002). Many times these students will continue reading until they reach the end of the text, unable to remember what they have read, leaving them feeling helpless. Jillian and Mark's awareness of her reading behaviors was an essential step in becoming more active, aware, in-control and self-regulating readers (Schunk & Rice, 1992).

Motivation: "I would never really finish it."
Students possessing more control over their learning tend to be more highly motivated   (Paris & Turner, 1994). Increased motivation can be attributed to knowledge of learning strategies, use of these strategies, and a feeling of control over the learning situation.   Some would argue motivation is at the core of academic success (Harter, 1985). As Mealey (2003) explains, however, "[A]t risk-college students must become aware of (a) their negative attitudes toward learning in general and (b) themselves as learners specifically before" their motivation is likely to change (p. 210).

The two factors Mealey (2003) suggests were clearly evident in the participants' stories. While all of the participants had read outside of school for pleasure, most held a deep-rooted loathing for school reading assignments. Jillian's sentiments best describe what all the participants reported, "[A]t home when we had to do reading assignments, I'd be like, 'Oh this is so long. I don't understand what's going on. Whatever.' I'd just give up."

Based on their lack of motivation to complete reading assignments in the past, I wondered if the students would be motivated to complete assignments at college. I soon discovered through their interviews that all of the students kept current with their assignments. Money was the explanation provided. All of the participants were paying their own way through school, and none wanted to pay twice for a course. While money was a strong motivator to complete assignments, I was curious if the participants would be sufficiently motivated to appropriate the strategies learned in the developmental class while reading their assignments? Jillian's words

answered this question as she reflects upon her motivation to persevere through a challenging piece of texts in the past as compared to today.

Susan: But like on your own in high school, did you use a dictionary or another fix-up strategy?

Jillian: *(shakes head no)*

Susan: No? Okay. Why? Why not?

Jillian: …I just was like, "Oh, whatever, I'll skip [difficult words], and then maybe I'll understand after reading like the next part of it."

Susan: Okay.

Jillian: And then I wouldn't understand that, and then I'd go on to the next one, and then I'd be done with [the text], and I'd be like, "Well, I just didn't understand anything that happened there." *[Laughter]*.

Susan: *[Laughter].* So why do you think now, you've made the change to say, "You know what? Let me use a dictionary or another fix-up, whatever."

Jillian: Because it actually like–it works. It actually does help.

Susan: Okay. All right. Do you believe learning these strategies has helped you become a better reader?

Jillian: Yes.

Susan: In what way, do you think?

Jillian: I don't know. I take my time to read, because – instead of just breezing through it, I actually like – even if it's the most boring thing, I wanna understand what's going on.

Susan: Okay. All right. That's different, then. So you wanna understand?

Jillian: Mm-hmm.

Susan: Whereas before–

Jillian: Before, it was just like, "Oh, I'm just gonna read it to get it over with and be done with it."

Susan: So your feelings towards the act of reading, they've changed?

Jillian: Mm-hmm. [It's] not like, "Oh, reading. I have to do that?" It's like, "Okay, I'll read it and see if I can try to understand it."

Susan: So it's like a challenge almost, "Let's see if I can understand it."

Jillian: Mm-hmm.

Jillian's answer depicted intrinsic motivation regarding not only reading but reading and understanding. Ryan reported reading "anything [he] can get his hands on" to continue practicing his reading strategies. Darren's motivation was reinforced through his blossoming vocabulary as he explained below:

> I actually challenge myself now. I really wanna challenge myself. I mean, I'm trying to use like bigger words now—words that I know the meanings to, obviously. But I didn't know bigger words [before]—like I really didn't try to learn them; I just used smaller words.

The understanding of contributing factors leading to success and failure played a large part in the students' ability to motivate themselves (Mealey, 2003).

Most of the participants feared their abilities would not be strong enough for them to pass content courses. However, they all persevered, even when thoughts of dropping the course surfaced. Based on Mealey's (2003) ideas, at some point the participants were able to make the switch from attributing passing the course to effort rather than ability. Additionally, other researchers might suggest that as the participants' understating of strategies increased so too did their motivation (Nist & Holschuh, 2000).

Attributional Beliefs: "[B]efore, I would just skim and be like, 'Oh, yeah, I know what it is.'"
 High school required little effort from the participants and was seen by some participants as "a joke," or "a waste of time." The participants had few reasons to develop positive attributional beliefs about reading and learning in general (Rose, 1989).

One pattern that surfaced concerning the participants' attributional beliefs with regard to reading was that good reading does not necessarily equal fast reading. Jillian described this best when she explained, "I thought a good reader was somebody who could read really, really fast, [but] reading fast doesn't mean that you're gonna understand what you're reading."

Ryan experienced a similar change with the time he devoted to studying for his 100-level courses. The amount of time it took him to adequately prepare for his classes was much greater than he expected. "I want everything done in like ten minutes, but I realize it takes two, three, four hours to do stuff [i.e. reading, studying] now." In contrast to high school, Ryan accepted the

fact he actually has to "read and *understand* [text]" for his college courses, which is "gonna take time."

In our last interview, Mark complained it took him "a long time" to read and simultaneously use the strategies; however, he believed the strategies were beneficial to his comprehension. Jillian also felt the reason she did not use the strategies as much as she knew she should was because they "take too long." On the other hand, she talked about the issues arising from decreased strategy use. "[Without the strategies] I wouldn't understand [the text], so you might as well just do [the strategies], because then I'd have to reread it like three more times anyway." Jillian saw the value of the strategies but needed to "force" herself to implement them while reading independently. In the final interview she said, "[the strategies] are really important, because if you don't do it in your head, then you're just–then I'm just going back to my old ways, just reading it" and not understanding. It appeared that Jillian was aware of the value of the reading strategies held because she had experienced firsthand how they helped her make meaning out of text. If strategies are seen as successful, students are more likely motivated to use them to gain control over their reading, and their perception of self-efficacy would improve (Nist & Holschuh, 2000).

Across the Self-System

As I looked across the above sections, I was able to see the many ways in which the students' perceptions of reading, as well as themselves as readers had shifted due to changes in their self-systems. Many researchers would argue that as the participants became more proficient at using the reading strategies, the components of their weakened self-system began to mend (Borkowski et al., 1990; Carr, Borkowski & Maxwell, 1991; Allgood et al., 2000; Nist & Holschuh, 2000; Mealey, 2003). The findings of my study appeared to be consistent with this research. I observed a direct relationship between students' increased understanding and application of strategies and their attitudes towards reading.

Based on their descriptions of past reading experiences in school, it was clear all of the participants at some time or another truly disliked reading. Whether this was based on the fact that reading took longer than they wanted, or their frustration over not understanding what they read, each participant shared their own unique negative perspective. At the conclusion of the study, each participant explained how she/he no longer viewed reading as negatively as they had in the past. Some even reported they now enjoyed reading and wanted to continue reading independently. Jillian admitted, "I kinda like reading now, [as] opposed to before, where I didn't even want to pick up a book." Likewise, Darren said, "I've seen a lot of changes [in myself as a reader] 'cause I've learned new things, and I kind of like to read now." Ryan explained in greater detail how and why his perspective shifted:

> I don't hate [reading]–You need to do–it's something you need to do. You're gonna read stuff all your life. You're gonna sign–stuff you need to sign. You need to sign something like taxes. You need to understand everything you're signing, because [there] could be some kinda penalty.

Even Mark, who perhaps despised reading the most of all the participants, admitted that he didn't "see reading as the devil" anymore.

For some time, researchers have claimed students' perceptions are crucial mediators of learning (Anderson, 1985; Brown, Bransford, Ferrera & Campione, 1983). Underprepared college students' perceptions about themselves as learners and their ability to perform a task are the most influential factors in determining whether or not they implement a previously taught learning strategy (Saumell, 1994); Ruddell & Unrau, 1994).

It proved vital for the participants in this study to shift their perceptions of reading and themselves as readers. However, change in perceptions did not occur overnight. It was a long, challenging, uphill journey, more so for some than for others as changes in perception of self occurred in each participant in different ways and at different times.

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