

Tailoring the fit: Reading instruction and middle school readers

Teachers can make reading instruction more responsive to the needs and interests of students.

Learning about reading is not something that ends for students after the fourth or fifth grade. Although students are expected to read purposefully in their content area classes by the time they reach the middle grades, teachers contend that many of these students “can’t read, won’t read, or will read but fail to comprehend most important information from text” (Bintz, 1997, p. 20). Paired with this problem is the reality that many middle school teachers are reluctant to teach reading, either because they feel inadequately trained or because they consider it someone else’s responsibility (Bintz, 1997; Gee & Forrester, 1988). This reluctance is exacerbated by teachers’ concerns over the lack of variety in instructional materials provided or by their belief that they must use textbooks—unsuitable or uninteresting for many students—as the basis for instruction (Bintz, 1997; Worthy, Turner, & Moorman, 1998). Furthermore, overwhelming pressure on teachers and schools to improve scores on high-stakes tests may subvert any efforts to make long-term, foundational changes in middle school reading programs. In short, students in middle schools still need good reading instruction, but many middle school teachers may be unprepared or unable to provide it.

This article explores ways to alleviate some of these tensions. We will describe what we perceive as a mismatch between the nature of reading instruction in middle schools and young adolescents’ reading abilities and dispositions toward reading. We begin by developing a clear picture of who middle school students are as

readers. Next, we evaluate current practices in middle school reading instruction in light of these findings. Finally, we propose ways to help middle school teachers conceptualize instruction that is responsive to students’ needs.

Sizing up middle school readers

Who are middle school students as readers? For years they have been perceived as readers in transition, and most educators would agree that there is a wide range of abilities and habits among middle school readers. Although this variation exists at every grade level, the academic differences between middle school students may be even more pronounced than in lower grades because of the amount of instruction students have experienced by this time. Differences in time spent reading may also widen the gaps between students both academically (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988) and cognitively (Stanovich, 1986). Consequently, there is a definite need for instruction that is responsive to individual differences.

Large-scale studies (e.g., National Center for Education Statistics, 1994) indicate that students in this age group do not demonstrate higher level comprehension skills. Also, young adolescents’ fluency is still developing, and students across reading levels are still learning about word patterns and meanings through the middle grades. Findings on middle school students’ reading habits and attitudes towards reading are of equal concern. In general, research shows that young adolescents do not read much for pleasure (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding,

1988), read less than they did in earlier years (Ley, Schaer, & Dismukes, 1994), and continue to develop negative feelings about reading as they move through the middle grades (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). Taken as a whole, the research on reading abilities and dispositions toward reading conducted during the last several decades paints a picture of the young adolescent reader as poorly skilled and apathetic. However, very recent examinations of young adolescents' reading highlight more positive dimensions of their reading habits and abilities, and several themes emerging from these studies help to create a more optimistic perspective on their status as readers.

Middle school readers are complex

The first theme suggests that although middle school students across ability levels are still developing as readers, their reading performance is multidimensional. They may be more strategic in their reading than previous research indicates, depending on the context of the reading (e.g., Lipson & Wixson, 1986). For instance, students whose limited decoding skills hinder reading comprehension may understand clearly and think critically when materials are read to them (Ivey, 1999). Also, middle school readers may use more sophisticated strategies for reading self-selected, high-interest materials than for assigned school reading (Bintz, 1993). Even struggling readers who are unable to use the strategies they have learned may be motivated to improve their abilities but hopeless about doing so in their current school situations (Kos, 1991) where the instruction and immediate expectations are far beyond what they are prepared to tackle. When schools or teachers do provide appropriate instruction, however, even middle school students who have been referred for special education services can make marked advancements in their reading (e.g., Morris, Ervin, & Conrad, 1996). Two critical responsibilities for teachers are to match instruction to individual student development and to provide contexts in which students can become engaged in reading.

Middle school readers have interests and preferences

The second theme deals with students' interest in reading. Whereas previous research indi-

cates that middle school students are generally uninterested in reading, it is now becoming clear that they at least have opinions about what they like to read. There are notable consistencies between the results of a survey of over 400 sixth graders in the southwestern U.S. (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999) and our own survey (Ivey & Broaddus, 1999) of over 1,700 sixth graders in the northeastern and mid-Atlantic U.S. In both studies, students ranked scary stories, sports books, comics, and magazines among their favorite things to read, and students in our study also preferred adventure stories. Overall, the students who responded to our survey reported reading a wide range of materials outside of school, including series books, popular adult fiction, picture books, and even some classic children's novels.

Regardless of achievement level in school reading, middle school readers find interesting things to read on their own, although sometimes these materials may be easier to read than what they read in school (Ivey, 1999). Most students in these grades have figured out the kinds of texts they can read most comfortably even if they are not provided with these materials in school. In addition, young adolescents discuss their preferred books with their peers, but these conversations probably do not resemble book discussions in school (Alvermann, Young, & Green, in press; Worthy, 1998). For them, the purpose of discussion is personal rather than academic.

Middle school students want time to read

Third, although middle school students may not often choose to read in their leisure time, they value time to read in school, and they are more inclined to read when a specific time is set aside to do so (Stewart, Paradis, Ross, & Lewis, 1996; Worthy & McKool, 1996). When we asked sixth graders what they enjoy about their reading and language arts classes among a range of options (e.g., reading with the whole class, reading class novels, book discussion groups), free reading time was mentioned twice as many times as most other activities (Ivey & Broaddus, 1999). Likewise, when we asked students to write "the best thing" about being in their reading or language arts class, the majority of their

responses were related to having time to read silently and independently.

Who are middle school students as readers? In general, it appears that they are not the competent, motivated readers we would like them to be. Nevertheless, teachers may be able to bring out the best in middle school readers. Research indicates that what middle school students need is instruction that is responsive to individual differences; meaningful, self-determined purposes for reading; and time to read. However, we believe that in most cases schools are not meeting these conditions.

Middle school reading instruction: An uncomfortable fit

Middle school educators undoubtedly recognize students' continued need to learn about reading, but reading curriculum and instruction as it currently exists may be inadequate and ineffective, particularly in light of what fosters young adolescents' motivation and ability to read. Here we suggest four common practices that are incongruent with what middle school readers need: a one-size-fits-all curriculum, use of a narrow range of materials for instruction, a lack of student directedness and ownership in the reading curriculum, and ineffective prioritizing of instructional time.

The one-size-fits-all problem. Despite the range and diversity of students in middle schools, instruction is neither conceptualized nor organized to address individual differences, and middle school teachers admit that they rarely differentiate their teaching to address the wide range of developmental needs within the classroom (Tomlinson, Moon, & Callahan, 1998). The whole-class instruction model in middle schools may be largely driven by the reading materials available to teachers. The most commonly used materials, typically textbooks and basal readers, presuppose that a single text written at a certain level of difficulty will be suitable for all students at a particular grade level or in a given class.

Even when trade books or novels are used, all students may be assigned the same book, and this was profoundly evident in our survey of sixth graders (Ivey & Broaddus, 1999). When we asked over 1,700 students to name two good books or stories they had read in their reading

or language arts class, they mentioned only a limited number of titles, with numerous students in the same classes citing the same books. For instance, hundreds of students named *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1960) and *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbitt, 1975). In contrast, students reported reading a large variety of materials at home. With such limited range in materials in terms of both difficulty level and interest, we fear that struggling readers in particular may never have opportunities in school to practice reading in books they can actually read. Even when developing theme-centered curricula that incorporate multiple texts, teachers may be focused on finding materials that relate to a selected topic rather than on locating texts that are accessible to struggling readers.

This mismatch between what many students are able to read and what they are expected to read is further complicated by the reality that in middle school they are unlikely to get the support they need to ever become proficient at reading the more difficult texts. Comprehension strategy instruction is sparse in middle schools, particularly in content area classrooms (Gee & Forrester, 1988; Smith & Feathers, 1983), and we have found little evidence that middle school students with limited word analysis skills and spelling knowledge get the help they need to read and write fluently. Likewise, if fluency instruction is neglected in elementary schools (Allington, 1983), we are certain that it is overlooked in the middle grades.

The materials problem. Middle school readers may have limited access in school to the books they like (Worthy & McKool, 1996; Worthy et al., 1999), and even seemingly motivated and competent readers may be secretly bothered by the books their teachers select (Ivey, 1999). In contrast, many students who are frustrated by school reading opt to read when their preferred materials are available (Ivey, 1999; Bintz, 1993; Worthy & McKool, 1996). There is growing evidence, however, that middle school students are most likely to get their preferred books from bookstores and libraries and are least likely to find preferred materials through their teachers or the classroom (Ivey & Broaddus, 1999; Worthy et al., 1999). This finding is not surprising if teachers are including only a limited range of materials for instruction. Expository texts, in particular, appear to be miss-

ing from reading and language arts instruction, despite the fact that students report reading these materials out of school (Ivey & Broaddus, 1999). Ironically, reading nonfiction materials would increase students' depth of knowledge in the content areas, and probably help students score higher on the standardized tests that are of such concern to teachers and administrators.

The ownership problem. Middle school students have limited ownership over the texts they read in school and the conversations they have about those texts. Rather, teachers govern the learning in a number of ways. In middle and secondary schools, reading across the curriculum focuses on facts and skills (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Becker, 1990) with few planned opportunities for students to engage in higher level thinking. Conversely, when even reluctant young adolescent readers initiate readings based on their own interests and questions, they deal with texts in more complex ways, such as relating stories to their own lives and recording information they find interesting (Bintz, 1993). Likewise, discussions in middle schools can be more accurately characterized as lectures and exercises in recitation (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990) rather than opportunities for students to interpret text or construct and challenge their understandings. Research indicates that when implemented thoughtfully and carefully, student-centered discussions can have a powerful effect on student learning (e.g., Almasi, 1995; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995). However, in our survey of sixth-grade readers (Ivey & Broaddus, 1999), peers and social learning did not emerge as critical components of reading and language arts classes, leading us to believe that effective strategies for social literacy learning may be rarely used in middle school classrooms.

Confusion over priorities. Despite compelling evidence about the importance of time spent reading, independent reading time has not become a priority in middle schools. Although teachers agree that self-selected reading is important, they still view it as a luxury, something to be included only when students have satisfactorily completed the school-endorsed curriculum and are prepared for high-stakes tests (Worthy et al., 1998). Middle school teachers who have 45-minute class periods as opposed to longer language arts blocks may be even less inclined to

include free reading time. Allington (1994) suggested that school days are fragmented in ways that prevent students from becoming engaged in books: "Imagine, for instance, attempting to read a wonderful novel in a series of 8–10 minute encounters" (pp. 20–21). Middle school teachers contend that they feel external pressures to prioritize explicit instruction over free reading time, but our hunch is that teachers themselves are not convinced that time spent "just reading" will help students flourish. We also suspect that some middle school teachers are uncomfortable with and unsure of their role as "teachers" during independent reading times.

The disjuncture between who middle school students are as readers and the middle school reading instruction we have is clear, but how can the fundamental differences be reconciled? In the remainder of this article we suggest some critical theoretical and practical issues for middle school teachers to consider as they reflect on their stance toward reading instruction.

What teachers need to know to tailor the fit

Our objective here is not to prescribe a middle school reading program, because we do not believe that programs themselves are responsive to the needs of students. Alternatively, we believe that knowledgeable, reflective teachers can create their own frameworks for instruction. Here we suggest what teachers can do to build a solid foundation for teaching reading to a wide range of middle school readers: (a) moving independent reading to the forefront of instruction, (b) providing access to varied reading materials, (c) approaching reading instruction as a developmental process, and (d) learning about individual students as readers and writers.

Moving independent reading to the forefront of instruction. Although we support already-existing schoolwide initiatives to promote independent reading (e.g., Sustained Silent Reading, Drop Everything and Read), we envision middle school classrooms in which independent reading is the focal point of instruction rather than a supplemental activity. In other words, student reading of self-selected texts (as opposed to specific novels or literary themes) would become the reading curriculum, and con-

Sample range of materials for middle school classroom libraries

High interest materials for engagement

- Lynch, Chris. (1997). *Johnny Chesthair* (He-Man Women-Haters Club Series). New York: HarperCollins.
- San Souci, Robert D. (1998). *A terrifying taste of short and shivery: Thirty creepy tales*. New York: Delacorte.
- Schwartz, Alvin. (1981). *Scary stories to tell in the dark*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Vail, Rachel. (1998). *If you only knew* (The Friendship Ring Series). New York: Scholastic.
- Walter, Virginia. (1998). *Making up megaboy*. New York: DK Publishing.
- Books based on comic strips (e.g., Calvin and Hobbes, Garfield)
- Magazines on special interests (e.g., dirt bikes, cheerleading, hunting, music)
- Joke and riddle books
- Newspapers and other current materials (e.g., baseball cards, record books)

Easy-to-read picture books and repetitive books

- Rylant, Cynthia. (1997). *Henry and Mudge in the family trees*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Sandin, Joan. (1989). *The long way westward*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Scieszka, Jon. (1994). *The book that Jack wrote*. New York: Viking.
- Sierra, Judy. (1995). *The house that Drac built*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Smith, Lane. (1993). *The happy Hocky family*. New York: Puffin.

Sophisticated picture books

- Baker, Jeannie. (1995). *The story of Rosy Dock*. New York: Random House.
- Crew, Gary. (1998). *The watertower*. New York: Crocodile.
- Mochizuki, Ken. (1993). *Baseball saved us*. New York: Scholastic.
- Simon, Seymour. (1992). *Snakes*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Soto, Gary. (1995). *Chato's kitchen*. New York: Scholastic.

Transitional chapter books

- Ackerman, Karen. (1994). *The night crossing*. New York: Scholastic.
- Byars, Betsy. (1991). *The seven treasure hunts*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Christopher, Matt. (1997). *Stranger in right field*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Dahl, Roald. (1966). *The magic finger*. New York: Scholastic.
- Scieszka, Jon. (1995). *2095*. New York: Scholastic.

More sophisticated fiction and nonfiction

- Jackson, Donna M. (1996). *The bone detectives: How forensic anthropologists solve crimes and uncover mysteries of the dead*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Konigsberg, E.L. (1996). *The view from Saturday*. New York: Scholastic.
- Krull, Kathleen. (1998). *Lives of the presidents: Fame, shame (and what the neighbors thought)*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
- Park, Barbara. (1995). *Mick Harte was here*. New York: Scholastic.
- Stanley, Diane. (1998). *Joan of Arc*. New York: Morrow.

(continued)

sequently, it would consume a significant block of the reading and language arts period.

Also, we envision teachers taking on more of an instructional role during this time. Although we acknowledge the importance of teachers serving as role models by reading on their own during independent reading times, they can use this time judiciously by attending to, getting to know, and teaching individual students as readers. This is a good time for teachers to conduct informal assessments (e.g., listening to students as they read, engaging students in discussions of what they are reading) that help them focus on what students *can* do as readers rather than on what they cannot do, and at the same time get a sense of individual student progress over time. Roller (1996) described what she did during the independent reading portion of her reading workshop:

I circulate among the children. Each day I focus on three to five children, and I have individual conferences with them. The conferences are about what the child is reading.... I concentrate on the child's particular needs. I identify the needs by asking the child what he or she is working on or by recalling previous interactions I have had with the child.... In the early conferences, there is a lot of discussion about choosing books. (p. 18)

Also, there is no better opportunity to focus on individual needs than when a student is actually engaged in a text that is on his or her instructional level. As teachers listen to students read and discuss their books, they can both model and explicitly point out the strategies good readers use. For example, a teacher might make a prediction about the book a student is reading and explain to the student how she developed the prediction (e.g., using prior knowledge and clues from the text).

Providing access to varied reading materials. Students need specific instruction in how to learn from textbooks and other materials they encounter in their content area classrooms. However, it is apparent from research that in order for young adolescents to develop and maintain interest in reading, teachers must respond to reading preferences. This requires more than awareness of award-winning adolescent literature that may be emphasized in some methods courses. Middle school teachers need to be knowledgeable about a wide range of literature, including popular series fiction (e.g., Animorphs

series) and other texts that “hook” reluctant readers such as scary stories, comics, magazines, sports books, and drawing books (Worthy, 1996). Recent research (Worthy et al., 1999) has shown that reading preferences are remarkably consistent in middle school readers regardless of gender, achievement, reading attitudes, and income level.

Teachers need direction in how they might build a diverse classroom library that would entice students to read and that would include materials for a variety of instructional purposes. This would require not only an understanding of reading preferences, but also substantial knowledge about reading levels and genres. The reading levels represented in any one middle school classroom could span from first or second grade all the way through high school. Thus, it would be important to include a plethora of books on almost all levels, ranging from easy-to-read picture books and relatively simple chapter books, to young adult and popular adult fiction.

A similar range in genres (e.g., magazines, poetry, information books, newspapers) and topics is necessary. In our recent study of reading in sixth-grade classrooms (Ivey & Broadus, 1999), most students reported reading contemporary realistic fiction or award-winning books of historical fiction or fantasy that were assigned during classroom reading time. Unfortunately, such narrow reading does little to expose middle school students to varied forms of exposition. This becomes a major concern for teachers who must ready students for high-stakes testing in the content areas. Teachers should have a firm grounding in trade books that support content area learning. The Sidebar lists a sample range of materials that should be included in middle school classroom libraries.

Approaching reading instruction as a developmental process. Given the range and diversity that exists among middle school readers, it only makes sense that students need a similar range of instruction. For many middle school teachers, however, it is difficult to imagine how to help a seventh-grade student who reads most comfortably in easy picture books such as *Frog and Toad All Year* (Lobel, 1976) and misspells even simple one-syllable words such as *rain* and *friend*, particularly when that same student is expected to understand the material from the seventh-grade science textbook. It is even more

Sample range of materials for middle school classroom libraries (continued)

Books easily scripted for Readers Theatre

- Bode, Janet, & Mack, Stan. (1996). *Hard time: A real life look at juvenile crime and violence*. New York: Delacorte.
- Fleischman, Paul. (1988). *Joyful noise: Poems for two voices*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Hurmence, Belinda. (1997). *Slavery time when I was chillun*. New York: Putnam.
- Myers, Walter Dean. (1999). *Monster*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Viola, Herman. (1998). *It was a good day to die: Indian eyewitnesses tell the story of the Battle of Little Bighorn*. New York: Crown.

Books for exploring perspective and format as readers and writers

- Avi. (1991). *Nothing but the truth: A documentary novel*. New York: Orchard.
- Draper, Sharon. (1994). *Tears of a tiger*. New York: Atheneum.
- Fleischman, Paul. (1997). *Seedfolks*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Hesse, Karen. (1997). *Out of the dust*. New York: Scholastic.
- Scieszka, Jon. (1995). *Math curse*. New York: Penguin.

Poetry and language play

- Clements, Andrew. (1996). *Frindle*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Igus, Toyomi. (1998). *I see rhythm*. New York: Children's Press.
- Raschka, Chris. (1992). *Charlie Parker played be bop*. New York: Orchard.
- Schertle, Alice. (1995). *Advice for a frog*. New York: Lothrop, Lee, & Shepard.
- Viorst, Judith. (1995). *Sad underwear and other complications*. New York: Atheneum.

Fiction books and nonfiction books for teacher read-alouds

- Bloor, Edward. (1998). *Tangerine*. New York: Apple.
- Brandenburg, Jim. (1993). *To the top of the world: Adventures with Arctic wolves*. New York: Scholastic.
- Curtis, Christopher Paul. (1995). *The Watsons go to Birmingham—1963*. New York: Scholastic.
- Jimenez, Francisco. (1998). *The circuit: Stories from the life of a migrant child*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico.
- Sachar, Louis. (1998). *Holes*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

difficult to imagine how to help this student within the context of a classroom of 24 other students, each with a unique profile as a reader. For some teachers facing this problem the solution is to refer struggling readers to special education programs where reading may not be the focus of instruction. We believe that even middle school students who are extremely behind their peers in reading can make significant strides given the

right kind of instruction (Ivey, 1999; Morris, Ervin, & Conrad, 1996). Like Allington (1994), we believe the majority of reading difficulties are the result of a lack of experience with print, rather than a lack of ability, even in the middle school years. Consequently, referral to special education programs is not a workable solution for many students. What students who lack experience need is a wealth of experiences with print, and we see no reason why regular classroom teachers in the middle school cannot provide it.

The critical issue, of course, is for teachers to provide experiences that are appropriate for individual students. Giving a seventh-grade student reading on a first-, second-, or third-grade level a choice of reading experiences in sixth- or seventh-grade texts will probably do more harm than good. In order for middle school teachers to provide productive reading experiences, they need to understand the big picture of how reading knowledge evolves from the early years through adolescence and into adulthood.

Teachers can begin to approach reading developmentally by facilitating different kinds of reading experiences that target the essential skills and strategies students need to evolve as readers. We recommend some critical components of instruction that address the development of all students and that are not typically included as part of most middle school reading curricula: teacher read-alouds, fluency activities, linking reading with writing, and word analysis.

Reading aloud to students. Teacher read-alouds are a greatly underused method for getting middle school students engaged in reading. Middle school teachers need to explore the diverse benefits of reading to students: providing a model of expressive reading and reading engagement, building vocabulary knowledge in the context of literature, modeling comprehension strategies, and exploring literature as a model for writing. Reading aloud is the method of choice when the entire class needs to be familiar with information in a book but the difficulty of the text curtails active independent reading by less skilled readers. This is the logical solution for dealing with class novels. Nonfiction trade books are still not regular fare for read-alouds in the classroom, although information books have a myriad of uses in classroom instruction (see Vardell & Copeland, 1992). Presenting nonfiction through read-alouds develops back-

ground knowledge, exposes students to patterns of writing, creates links across the curriculum, and encourages students' engagement in more reading of nonfiction. Most importantly, we view teacher read-alouds as a crucial component of instruction that should be included on a regular basis rather than just once a week or when time permits.

Developing fluency. Providing regular opportunities for students to read relatively easy materials is certainly one excellent way to help students build fluency. The benefits of rehearsed performance reading are also well documented. Wolf (1998) noted the shifts that took place in students' decoding and comprehension skills when one teacher moved from round-robin reading to a classroom theater setting where text was both interpreted and performed. Martinez, Roser, and Strecker (1998/1999) reported growth not only in fluency and comprehension, but also in students' self-confidence as readers, and this is particularly important for middle school students who have had only limited success as readers in many years of school. A variety of texts can be used for Readers Theatre scripts, including nonfiction trade books (Young & Vardell, 1993), poetry, picture books, and novels with formats that are easy to script (e.g., diaries).

Linking reading with writing. Middle school students need structure and practice to develop the skills necessary to pursue independent reading and research in content area materials. This can be accomplished through linking reading with the writing process (Moss, Leone, & Dipillo, 1997). With this focus students read not only to construct meaning, but also to discover and learn from the processes used by writers. For example, students can learn about perspective as a literary element by reading Anthony Browne's innovative *Voices in the Park* (1998), a picture book that portrays the same park visit from four different perspectives. Other texts, such as *Regarding the Fountain: A Tale, in Letters, of Liars and Leaks* (Klise, 1998) provide multiple sources for teaching unusual text formats such as scripts, memos, letters, drawings, and documents.

Promoting word analysis skills. Middle school students have much yet to learn about the structure of words, albeit at many different levels of sophistication. Effective teaching of word analysis skills, spelling, and vocabulary requires

teachers to understand the nature of the English spelling system and how it is learned (see Bear & Templeton, 1998). Unlike elementary teachers, however, middle school teachers generally do not incorporate this knowledge into their reading and language arts instruction, even though many of their students have word analysis and spelling skills that approximate those of average readers in the early grades. Consequently, some teachers may not address these issues with students, or they resort to phonics-type commercial programs that may not be suitable. We believe middle school students would be well served by word study (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 1996) that emphasizes spelling- and meaning-based explorations of patterns in words and that may include word sorts, word hunts in reading materials, word games, and thematic study in the content areas.

Learning about individual students as readers and writers. “How can I get to know individual students when I see a hundred students each day?” This is an important and valid question we would expect from middle school teachers when they hear the suggestion that they should be familiar with the details of each of their students’ reading and writing abilities and habits. Nevertheless, knowing individual students helps teachers gain critical awareness about how literacy develops and about how to meet students’ particular needs, and we believe this is the key to building an instructional environment that is responsive to individual differences.

How does a teacher gain this kind of knowledge about students? We suggest, quite logically, that this knowledge comes from getting to know and teaching one student at a time. We know from research about the benefits of having novice teachers conduct practical research in literacy development. It is firsthand experience that connects theory with practice in two distinct ways. First, the study of one student’s literacy development provides a structured context for reflection whereby teachers may step back and reexamine their own prior beliefs about teaching reading. Second, the case study readies novice teachers to accept the challenge of teaching reading in a classroom where students have varied ability.

We believe a tutoring or case study experience would have even greater benefits for experienced middle school teachers. Studies of

experienced teachers tutoring (Broaddus & Bloodgood, 1999; Fogg & Morris, 1997; Morris, Ervin, & Conrad, 1996) described the increased import teacher-tutors placed on the instructional components critical to a multidimensional literacy program. The teachers commented on how much students were able to accomplish with focused intervention even when these same children had experienced little or no success in classroom literacy activities. Reading fluency, guided reading, word study, and writing not only became a framework for tutoring sessions, but also were reconsidered and refined in classroom instruction. The personal contact of tutoring was viewed as a key factor by the teachers. Also, the one-on-one instruction afforded teachers the opportunity to look closely at the individual strengths and needs of students and the effects of different teaching practices.

Overall, developing a personal relationship with a less skilled reader changed teachers’ views about accepting the challenges of teaching reading and writing to students who were working below grade level. Given middle school teachers’ discomfort and apprehension about meeting the needs of struggling readers and about differentiating instruction, this is a particularly important finding.

Even with appropriate training and support, the question still remains as to how middle school teachers can have a tutoring experience when the school schedule does not provide time for it. We can conceive of two possible solutions.

First, middle schools can creatively block time for one-on-one instruction. For example, middle schools that operate under a teaming system often schedule both an individual planning period and a team planning period for each teacher. We argue that at least one portion of one of these planning periods could be devoted to tutoring one struggling reader, since even just 30 minutes each day with one student would substantially benefit both the student and the teacher.

Second, teachers can reconceptualize regular classroom instruction in ways that allow them to work with individual students, even if they do not get to work with any particular student on a daily basis. In short, this means minimizing whole-class instruction in favor of flexible grouping or workshop approaches whereby the teacher can have closer contact with individual students and circulate among students as they

go about their reading and writing tasks. It does not mean that teachers help students complete whole-class assignments in which everyone in the class is expected to read the same materials, answer the same questions, or create the same product. Rather, teachers would act as mentors and facilitators who help students along as they complete tasks that are individually appropriate and personally relevant.

Align instruction to readers

Our message in this article is simple and should be commonsensical. Neither middle school students nor their teachers are served well by the reading programs we currently have in place, and studies of young adolescents as readers clearly illuminate the reasons for this dissatisfaction. An obvious first step toward improvement is to better educate new and experienced teachers about how to create skillful, engaged readers. We have proposed a framework for teachers to reflect upon that is based not on an established curriculum or on conventional wisdom of what middle school reading ought to be, but instead on evidence about who middle school students are as readers.

Certainly, classroom teachers do not carry the burden of improving middle school literacy instruction alone. We agree with Vacca (1998), who eschewed the general neglect of adolescent literacy that is evident in "educational policy, school curricula, and a public mindset that doesn't appear to extend beyond learning to read and write in early childhood and elementary school" (p. 605).

We challenge administrators to make sound decisions about their reading programs. One broad, underlying problem may be the ambiguous place of reading in middle schools. For instance, some schools have a separate reading period, while in other schools reading is subsumed under the language arts block period. Also, in some schools every teacher, regardless of content specialty, teaches one class of reading during the day, while in other schools reading instruction is relegated to the reading and language arts teachers. Schoolwide reading initiatives, such as Drop Everything And Read (DEAR), are often scheduled for times other than reading and language arts classes, such as during homeroom where students may have neither access to interesting reading materials nor

teachers who are equipped to provide a motivating environment for reading.

In addition, pressures from high-stakes testing create confusion over what ought to be taught in reading programs. In our recent work in reading and language arts classrooms we have observed teachers not only teaching skills for taking comprehension tests, but also covering topics and content that appear on test passages as opposed to focusing on the kind of instruction that would lead students toward becoming life-long, independent readers. Although the place of reading instruction may depend upon a variety of factors, such as school structure and student needs, we are certain that those who are responsible for instruction should have a substantial amount of training in teaching reading and particularly in helping students who struggle with reading. Furthermore, reading instruction ought to focus on reading for a variety of purposes, not just for taking tests.

We also invite teacher educators to evaluate how they prepare middle school teachers to create student-responsive reading instruction. For beginnings, we see a need for more reading coursework for students seeking middle school certification. While the number of middle schools offering reading programs has increased significantly in recent years, a national survey (Romine, McKenna, & Robinson, 1996) showed that reading coursework requirements have increased only modestly. Most states do not require any reading coursework for middle school certification, and for those that do, the focus is on content area reading. Few states require a course in developmental reading for middle school teachers despite the wide range of achievement among young adolescent readers and evidence they are still acquiring essential reading skills. Likewise, these teachers may receive limited support for improving reading instruction, as evidenced by a survey in one state indicating that many middle school teachers receive no planned staff development in reading (Humphrey, 1992).

Nevertheless, as teacher educators and researchers, we see obvious potential for change, particularly if we want to align instruction with what research has demonstrated about young adolescent readers. No program or prescriptive curriculum will meet the needs of the wide range of readers in middle school classrooms. Rather,

we need knowledgeable, reflective middle school reading teachers who are experts at tailoring the fit.

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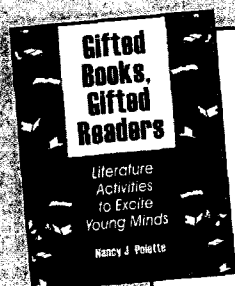
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