

# Reading in the Middle

A newsletter for the Middle School Reading Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association

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## Building Readers who are Learners

The focus of this issue of *Reading in the Middle* is on building readers who are learners.

In our feature article, *A Middle School Literacy Initiative: Assessing and Supporting Students' Motivation for Reading*, Robin Bright shares how a middle school turned their focus to creating students who were readers and learners. In an intensive six week initiative Robin shares how teachers worked with students to improve literacy. She describes how school-wide change stemmed not only from altering the daily schedule but also from building teachers knowledge about fluency through poetry, making words and interactive think alouds. The participating teachers not only felt that the initiative was effective but reported that they were more comfortable assisting struggling readers in their content classrooms.

Our columnists have provided us with insightful and

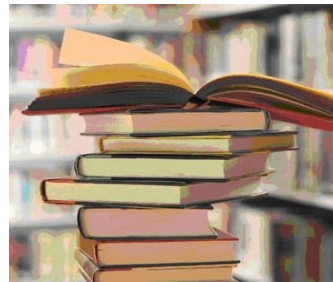
important information on Disciplinary Literacy and Novels in Verse for the Middle School Reader

Melanie Koss' booklist helps teachers create life-long readers by providing a list of novels in verse that engage and encourage students to be avid readers.

Vicky Zygouris-Coe discusses disciplinary literacy in the Civics classroom. She sets a context of which many middle school teachers are familiar and then moves to describe how middle schools can work to build students' disciplinary literacy.

We close this issue with a note from author Holly Goldberg Sloan the keynote speaker for the MSRSIG session at the IRA 2015 in St. Louis, MO.

We hope that you enjoy this issue of *Reading in the Middle*.



The purpose of this group is to provide a network for middle level teachers to share information, ideas, activities, strategies, and techniques. It is our goal to disseminate pertinent information and research on middle school reading, serve as a forum for expressing varying viewpoints on middle school reading, and promote an interest in further research in the field of middle level reading



## How Does the Middle School Reading SIG Serve Its Members?

- This SIG provides its members with information regarding the teaching of literacy in grades 5-9.
- This group provides a forum for teachers, students, and researchers to share teaching ideas, book lists, and research applications.
- The SIG publishes a peer-reviewed newsletter twice a year with teaching ideas, book lists, and research applications.
- Membership provides you with access to past and present issues of *Reading in the Middle* through our organization's website.
- The SIG presents an interactive professional development session as part of the Annual Convention of the International Reading Association.



# A Middle School Literacy Initiative:

## Assessing and Supporting Students' Motivation for Reading

Robin Bright, Ph.D, University of Lethbridge

Interest in middle school literacy has been growing in North America over the past decade and its importance cannot be overstated. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2000), "reading literacy is not only seen as a necessary foundation for performance in other subject areas within an educational context, but it is also a prerequisite for successful participation in most areas of adult life" (p. 3). A significant number of middle school students lack reading proficiency; in addition, their engagement levels differ from country to country. Furthermore, reading engagement appears to be more important than socio-economic background in predicting reading proficiency. This is good news for educators, because reading engagement—the time spent reading—and attitudes towards reading are aspects of schooling that "are amenable to change" (OECD, 2000, p. 151).

Reading motivation has been linked to reading achievement, knowledge about the world, and participation in society. "Highly motivated readers are self-determining and generate their own reading opportunities. They want to read and choose to read for a wide range of personal reasons such as curiosity, involvement, social interchange, and emotional satisfaction" (Gambrell, Palmer, Codling, & Mazzoni, 1996, p. 518). Researchers point out that for many students, intrinsic reading motivation dissipates as students move from elementary to middle school; struggling students lose intrinsic motivation for reading more rapidly than those who believe they are competent readers (Guthrie and Davis, 2003). Changes in reading motivation are the result of shifting environmental factors involved in moving from the

elementary grades to the middle school grades. These include larger school and class sizes, lack of contact with one homeroom teacher, classes taught by subject-specific teachers, greater use of content textbooks for reading, and the predominant use of whole-group instruction.

There is clearly a need for continued support for students as readers and writers past the elementary grades. The potential for increasing reading proficiency at this level appears to be greatest in the areas of reading engagement (time spent reading) and reading motivation (developing a positive attitude towards readings).

### One Middle School's Journey

I received a request from a former elementary school principal, Dean Hawkins, with whom I had worked on many occasions, and who was recently appointed principal at Wilson Middle School (a large urban school in a city of 90,000), asking if I could assist his staff in the development of a school-wide literacy initiative. I was particularly interested because it was the teaching staff who had identified that the literacy levels of many of their students was having a negative impact on engagement and academic success. The principal and his administrative group wanted to help their staff meet the goal to teach all subjects more effectively by attending to the various literacy levels of the students at the middle school level; typically a time when it is hoped that all students are reading fluently.

In order to do this, the staff envisioned a six-week intensive initiative that would have all the students take a daily one-hour course devoted to reading. Having assessed the reading levels of all students in the school through the Gates-McGinitie Reading Test (GMRT) and the Canadian Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), we hoped to develop an initiative that was cross-graded whereby students were grouped according to reading levels. Next, the teachers would require the necessary professional development in order to give them the background knowledge and strategies to be able to teach the students how to

read and how to improve as readers. Building on previous research (Guthrie and Davis, 2003; Ivey and Broaddus, 2001), the focus would be on increasing reading proficiency through improving reading engagement and attitudes towards reading. The idea of collaborating with the school staff to develop a reading literacy initiative for all students seemed worthwhile and potentially life-changing for the student and the teachers.

### Being Informed by Middle School Literacy Research

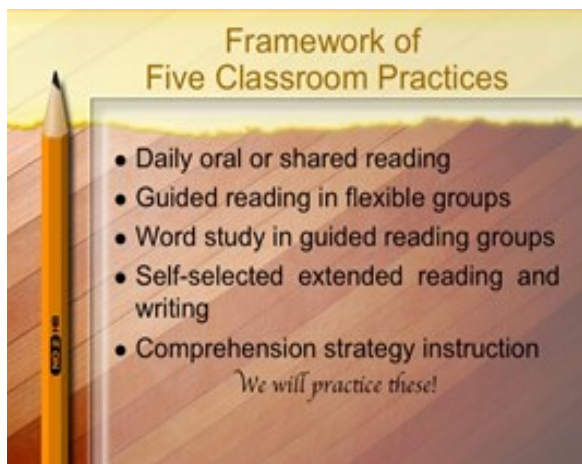
A great deal of literature and research is devoted to the topic of older students who struggle as readers (Lenters, 2006; Lovett, Lacerenza, DePalma, & Frijters, 2012; Solis, Ciullo, Vaughn, Pyle, Hassaram, & Lerous, 2012). For a variety of reasons, middle school students struggle who do so because of motivation, problems with comprehension, aliteracy, learning disabilities, complexity of textbook reading, and other difficulties. Some may face cognitive problems that make their achievement low and others are unmotivated. Furthermore, reading struggles often correspond to difficulties in other subjects where reading plays an important role (Au, 2000).

One of the difficulties facing students who have reached middle school with reading difficulties is that their teachers often have the view that their instruction should focus primarily on teaching content and subject disciplines and not on reading. In addition, teachers seldom have the skills to provide literacy instruction especially at the beginning levels even in the face of significant numbers of students who are not reading at proficient levels. However, once teachers are provided with support to learn about the ways to offer middle school literacy instruction, they often see how such supports will improve the instruction they offer in other subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies.

Slavin, Cheung, Groff, and Lake (2008) found three core characteristics of effective approaches to reading instruction: (1) co-operative learning, (2) strategy instruction in comprehension, and (3) comprehensive school reform. It is important to acknowledge that initiatives in middle school literacy require institutional change

in addition to substantial instructional support.

The kind of instructional support needed in middle school focuses on professional development for teachers in utilizing six prominent instructional strategies for struggling readers (Ash, 2002). These include: oral reading practice, guided reading, word study, reading self-selected books independently, writing about reading, and using strategies for comprehension (Figure 1). These practices figure prominently in successful tutoring and with students with identified learning disabilities. They also provide a worthwhile structure to use with the middle school teachers in planning a school-wide literacy initiative.



Student attitudes and the reading level of texts also matter when it comes to providing effective reading instruction to middle school students. Hall (2008) notes that adolescents are afraid to talk about reading if they feel it will reveal their weaknesses. She discovered the importance of grouping students according to their perceived weaknesses and reading levels in order to address their needs appropriately. Ivey (1999a) discovered that when middle school readers are matched appropriately to texts at their reading level, they read competently. They also display both interest in and persistence to learn what is being read. Miller (2009), the author of *The Book Whisperer*, suggests that what students who struggle need is not a significantly different approach to teaching reading than what their peers experience, but that they need more of it, and require thoughtful differentiation that meets their needs. Miller suggests ensuring that more time is spent on reading accompanied by direct focused instruction at a student's reading level using age-appropriate materials.

It is important that middle school literacy initiatives take into consideration 1: the school structure and commitment to literacy, 2: students, including reasons for reading struggles and reading levels, 3: teachers, their background knowledge about teaching reading, and 4: knowledge about reading instruction.

#### Beginning the Literacy Initiative

We began our professional development day with a strong commitment and an enthusiastic attitude from the staff to focus on literacy in the coming year. I modeled what instruction looks like in each of the reading components-

phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Adams, 1990). Then I shared five activities that would help middle school students both learn how to read, for those who needed that type of instruction, and develop as readers. These included: daily oral or shared reading, guided reading in flexible groups, word study in guided reading groups, self-selected extended reading and writing, and comprehension strategy instruction. I paired these with examples of classroom instructional activities in a slide entitled, the Framework with Instructional Strategies (Figure 2). Together, there was time to introduce and practice the instructional strategies for three of the five daily activities: reading poetry aloud (for fluency) making words (for word study), and using predicting, questioning, connecting, and summarizing (for comprehension).

#### Instructional Strategies Fluency Through Poetry

We practiced learning about the importance of fluency through poetry reading. I used examples from a strategy called The Poetry Academy (Wilfong, 2008), by bringing in books of poetry related to a number of different themes including sports, music, drama, science, math, social studies, and art. The teachers participated fully by choosing a poem to practice together and perform for their peers, albeit in very humorous and engaging ways. Additionally, we discussed the importance of providing reading material to the students that was at their reading levels to practice fluency otherwise the activity would likely result in frustration.

#### Word Study Through Making Words

In order to demonstrate what word study looks like in a middle school classrooms, we used several activities from the resource books: *Making Words* (Cunningham, Hall, & Heggie, 2001), *Making Big Words* (Cunningham and Hall, 1994), and *Making More Big Words* (Cunningham and Hall, 2001). I selected a number of words from science, math, social studies, and music that students in middle school needed to know but would find hard to spell. These words were cut into individual letters and then the teachers, in teams, were asked to make as many words as they could, first 2-letter words, then 3-letter words, and continue until they could use all the letters in a word. The teachers began to see the use-

**The Framework with Instructional Activities**

Classroom Practices	Examples of Instructional Activities
• -daily oral or shared reading	• -choral reading, Readers' Theatre, repeated readings, poetry reading, read-alouds
• -guided reading in flexible groups	• -literature circles, guided reading
• -word study in guided reading	• -word sorts, making big words, constructing and deconstructing words
• -self-selected extended reading and writing	• -reading/writing workshop, dialogue journals, discussion partners
• -comprehension strategy instruction	• -predictions, asking questions, clarifying points and vocabulary, summarizing



fulness of this activity for their students immediately. They noted that students would be able to manipulate and therefore, understand patterns in words including prefixes and suffixes. They also noted the value of having students manipulate the letters to see how the words they were using changed when letters were added or taken away.

### Comprehension Strategies Through Interactive Think-Aloud Lessons

The staff was familiar with teaching comprehension but the decision was made to share the same four strategies with everyone using Lori Oczkus' (2009) book, *Interactive Think-Aloud Lessons* which included: prediction, questioning, connecting, and summarizing. These strategies were selected as being necessary and important to begin talking about comprehension with the students. The teachers were encouraged to read more about the other strategies Oczkus shares in order to build these into their teaching repertoire as time permitted. I brought in props that corresponded to each strategy: a crystal ball for prediction, a microphone for questioning, lego blocks for connecting, and a lasso for summarizing. I indicated to the teachers that many students would remember these strategies and be able to talk about them if they had a way to associate the strategy with what they do, in their heads, as readers. I also encouraged the teachers to use hand gestures, as suggested by Oczkus, to have students show when they were using a particular comprehension strategy: moving their hands over an imaginative crystal ball for predicting, making their hands into a fist making a pretend microphone for questioning, linking their hands together using their fingers and thumbs to represent connecting, and making a swinging motion above their heads with a pretend lasso for summarizing.

In small groups, the teachers read a piece of text and practiced using one of the four comprehension strategies. They discussed how they might use these strategies for reading comprehension in their daily hour of literacy instruction with their own students.

### The Daily Schedule

In order to help the staff members view a possible 50-minute period that was organized according to the time each activity might occupy, I provided the following slide entitled, Example of the 50-minute Period (5 Groups). See Figure 3. I wanted to share this idea since many of the students coming from elementary school would be com-

Activity	Size of Group
Daily oral or shared reading Poetry Club (10 minutes)	All Groups
Comprehension strategy instruction (5 minutes)	All Groups
Guided reading with teacher and word study	One Group
Peer guided reading and word study practice	Two Groups
Self-selected extended reading and writing (25 minutes)	Two Groups
Revisit comprehension strategy instruction (3 minutes)	All Groups
Community Share (7 minutes)	All Groups

fortable and familiar with such an approach to instruction. Some teachers worried about offering small-group instruction having used primarily whole-group teaching. However, since teaching reading is best accomplished in small groups and in one-to-one sessions (Clay, 1993), it was important to share this way of working with students to the teachers.

During this first professional development day, each team of teachers met together to talk about how they could best use the knowledge they had about their group of students. The school district's curriculum director attended this professional development day and was extremely supportive of the initiative, which was an important aspect of this work as she was available to help find resources and help answer questions throughout the initiative.

### Before Implementation

Close to the time of implementation of the literacy initiative, two important steps were taken. The first was that the teachers and administrators began readying the school environment and the students for this initiative. Not only did they talk about this new initiative in their classrooms and assemblies, they had daily book give-aways and began putting up bulletin boards that related to reading and literacy to pique student interest. One very large glassed-in bulletin board at the front of the school featured every student and teacher in individual photos lining the entire board, each reading his or her favorite book; picture books, graphic novels, comics, the newspaper, and novels were featured. These early steps were very important to create excitement and anticipation for the initiative. It was felt that because it involved everyone, students would feel a part of the school-wide initiative.

I also met for a half-day with each group of teachers in their reading level teams. This was an interesting aspect of the initiative because it provided me with an opportunity to answer individual questions and gauge overall commitment to the initiative. I met first with the team that would be teaching the readers identified as reading between a grade 4 and a grade 6 level. Some of the work they did during this session was to identify the reading material they wanted to have available for the students and ensure that the students had lots of choice in their reading.

The teachers who would be working with the highest achieving readers (reading levels identified in the high school range) decided to offer the students opportunities to discover reading material at their level. They wanted to give their students time to read independently and share their responses with each other much in the way as is described by Miller (2009) in *The Book Whisperer*. The teachers who were going to be working with the students reading at grade level (grades 6 to 8) planned a daily schedule that each of them followed. They focused on reading several middle school trade books with their students in small groups and teaching comprehension and word study strategies. This group decided early on in the planning process to use music lyrics instead of poetry to highlight the instruction of reading fluency. They felt that music lyrics would be more engaging to their students than poetry might be.

Those teaching the students with the lowest levels of reading achievement (grades 1-3) appeared to be the most worried about the initiative. In particular, they expressed concerns related to the texts they would need to find that would be at the level of their readers but still be engaging and interesting to middle school students. Some of the questions that were discussed in these small planned meetings included:

- What books are appropriate to the level of readers I will be teaching?
- Where is the best place for me to find reading materials?
- What will the students be doing when I am not working directly with them? And how will I monitor their work and behavior?
- What other options might I provide to students doing the self-selected reading?
- What is guided reading? What should I be doing during these sessions?

Each team of teachers worked to answer the questions they posed and developed a 50-minute daily schedule modeled after my example, to guide them through six weeks of the literacy initiative. The librarian's role was also important as she was able to share with each team of teachers a number of new reading materials she had ordered that were available in the library.

### The Implementation

Administrators were seen to be very supportive and helpful throughout the six-week initiative, asking questions about how things were going and enquiring about how they could be helpful to the teachers. They also participated in discussions on the teacher blogs that were created to discuss questions, ideas, and concerns with one another.

I visited the school on two occasions during the literacy initiative, and was both thrilled and amazed to see how well it was working. Walking from classroom to classroom, I stopped in to see many of the teachers and their students and noted that most classrooms had organized students into smaller groups for instruction and for independent work; interestingly there were no behavior problems when I observed. The assistant principal offered the observation that the hallways were quieter than usual during the literacy initiative. It appeared that students were quite content to remain in their classrooms during this 50-minute period and did not seek to leave or take breaks. Overall, the assistant principal felt that student behavior improved during this time and attributed this partly to the cross-age organization of the time spent on literacy.

Ali, a first-year teacher, answered the first classroom door I knocked on. Her classroom was semi-dark so that she could show a YouTube video reviewing comprehension strategies before moving the students into their groups. Carol's classroom door was wide open and I walked in. This group, consisting of the highest-leveled readers, was so quiet you could hear a pin drop; each student reading his or her own book-everything from Charles Dickinson's *Oliver Twist* to Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*. When I asked one young girl why she chose to read *Oliver Twist*, she said, "Well, we put on a play of *Oliver Twist* that I was in, so I thought I would enjoy reading the book as well." I visited a third classroom with a teacher who told me that he was a "math and science" teacher. He was so enthusiastic about what the students were doing and how engaged they were with reading, that he said he was now incorporating some of the reading strategies into his other classes. In particular, he said he was looking forward to creating a word wall of vocabulary in his math classes.

During the 6-week literacy initiative, I conducted two one-hour sessions of booktalks for various groups of students. Bringing in the newest in young adult fiction that was written for a variety of reading levels allowed students to hear about books, fiction and non-fiction, that might "tweak their interest" and support their engagement with reading. Several teachers and the school librarian attended these sessions and showed their support for reading. In addition, the librarian was able to tell the students which books she already had in the library and which ones were on order and would be available for the students.

### Findings From Student Surveys

At the end of the six-week literacy initiative, the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ) was administered. The Questionnaire is a student-rated assessment of the extent to which each student is motivated to read, developed by Wigfield and Guthrie (1997). The questionnaire consists of 11 constructs of reading motivation using 55 questions for students to answer. For each item, the response format for the students asks for a rating that the students mark as sounding: 1=very different from me, 2=somewhat different from me, 3=somewhat the same as me, and 4=a lot like me.

The 11 constructs show how students are motivated as readers, based on: their self-efficacy, desire for intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, the pleasure they derive from reading, their desire to comply with and be evaluated favorably by the teacher, and their social reasons for reading.

### Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the students' perceptions of their competence as readers and their willingness to expend effort and persistence in the face of reading difficulty. The majority of students who took the questionnaire at Wilson Middle School scored themselves high in self-efficacy. This is an important finding as it suggests to the teachers that by talking about students' having positive expectations for success, with both time and effort, they can expect their performance to improve. The

teachers can build on the fact that most students believe in their ability to be competent at reading and can emphasize the importance of engaging in reading as a daily activity.

#### Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

This group of students shows that they are similarly motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Research indicates that students with higher intrinsic motivation for reading read more and more broadly. However, at least half of the students indicated their desire for external rewards and recognition for reading, which means that the teachers will want to utilize both kinds of motivational techniques to meet students' expectations about why they read. For those students who are motivated by *intrinsic* goals, teachers will want to emphasize what they will learn through their reading and also help the students to choose to read for interest's sake.

While teachers want to help students learn to set learning goals in order to be motivated as readers (and thus be intrinsically motivated to read), they also want to respond to students' views about how they are best motivated.

#### Social Motivation

Social motivation for reading is often cited as a significant factor to encourage reading, particularly among tweens and teens. Interestingly, the students at Wilson Middle School did not show a strong sense of being socially motivated to read. The overwhelming majority of students rated aspects of social reasons for reading low suggesting that they are not motivated to read because of a perceived ability to talk with others about their reading, or to talk about themselves as readers to family or friends. It would appear that reading might not be valued in their social circles outside of school. Visiting a library with family members was only mentioned by 25% of the students as a regular out of school activity. The percentage of

students who appear socially motivated as readers increases to 41% when they were asked if they talk to their friends about their reading, suggesting that teachers can support these kinds of conversations in school. If the school continues to develop a culture of reading that shows all members of its community are interested in reading, then the students can be socially motivated to read in their school community. One suggestion is to have guest speakers visit the school and reinforce the message that reading played an important role in their success, regardless of their area of expertise. It is possible, over time, that this will have a positive impact on the community outside of school.

#### Teacher Surveys

The teacher surveys focused primarily on the perceived helpfulness of the professional development work undertaken in the area of teaching reading and on the perceived usefulness of the literacy initiative to affect positively reading motivation and engagement. Every teacher supported future applications of the literacy initiative and suggested that time continue to be scheduled into the yearly timetable for literacy and reading instruction. More specifically, 93% of the teachers reported that they now felt confident teaching the struggling readers in their classrooms and all indicated that they would like to learn more about teaching literacy to support their teaching in other subject areas. Interestingly, given the concern expressed at the outset of the initiative by several teachers about teaching the students in small groups, 86% of the teachers indicated that they felt that placing students in small groups for guided reading worked well in their classrooms. Overwhelmingly, the teachers expressed satisfaction that their colleagues were available and helpful when they had questions about literacy instruction. It is clear that the collaborative nature of this initiative was a key contributor to its success.

#### Discussion and Recommendations

What do these findings about reading motivation mean to the teachers at Wilson Middle School? Students tend to have a healthy sense of self-efficacy, suggesting they haven't given up on themselves as readers and believe that they are competent and will persist in

developing their reading skills. Teachers need to recognize this and also not give up on the students when their reading achievement is far below grade level.

After reviewing the data from the student questionnaires and the teacher surveys, and discussing these with the assistant vice-principal, the following recommendations are offered as a way to continue and improve the literacy initiative at Wilson Middle School.

- Continue and consider expanding the reading initiative; continue the level of enthusiasm on the part of all teachers to ensure its success over time.
- Examine the reading amount done by students, as it correlates highly to motivation and achievement. This could become an aspect of next year's initiative.
- Involve the community in the literacy initiative. In order to accentuate the beneficial relationship between parental involvement and motivation to read, the school might try to find ways that promote parents and the surrounding community to become involved in the literacy initiative.
- Maintain the high level of teacher enthusiasm for the initiative. Teacher enthusiasm has been correlated with promoting intrinsic motivation for reading. It will be important for teachers to completely buy in to the literacy initiative in order to sell it to the students, as was the case the first year of the initiative.
- Continue with direct strategy instruction in reading fluency, comprehension and word study, as these have been shown to be successful in helping students develop self-efficacy leading to intrinsic motivation.
- Focus on developing intrinsic motivation. "Research is less clear about the effects of tangible incentives, such as prizes, on student motivation and performance. In general, tangible incentives have been found to undermine the development of intrinsic motivation" (Deci & Ryan, 1992, cited in Gambrell, 2011).
- Continue to share a wide variety of reading material with all levels of



students. Booktalks could also be introduced as a school-wide weekly activity in order to make reading an ongoing focus and to introduce the vast amount of literature available to this age group.

### Conclusion

Declining levels of reading proficiency in middle school is an area that will continue to require attention from researchers and educators in the coming years (Ivey and Broaddus, 2001). In addition, "We have failed to convince many students that they are readers. We may have taught them the skills but without the desire to use those skills, where is the benefit?" (Layne, 2009, p. 11). Schools, like Wilson Middle School, will seek ways to identify the literacy needs of their students and develop initiatives that will support their students as beginning, developing, and competent readers. An initiative like the one reported here offers one approach to improving middle school literacy by focusing on reading engagement and reading motivation (Guthrie and Davis, 2003). Motivation is only one aspect of reading proficiency but it is an area that appears open to improvement among this age group.

It is unlikely there will be a "one size fits all" approach to improving reading proficiency among middle school readers. This study points to the importance of middle school teachers continuing their own professional development in reading to become knowledgeable about the components of reading: phonics, phonemic awareness, comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. From there, testing in the early months of school is important to identify the reading levels of the students, and then teachers will want to work together with their administrators, to schedule daily instruction that groups students according to their reading levels. Doing so will require investment into reading materials that meet readers' needs from kindergarten to grade 10 and beyond. This study provides further evidence that, in order to address middle school literacy concerns, administrative support and commitment to modifying the school timetable is necessary as is a collaborative approach among teachers to support one another. Finally, professional development opportunities for teachers to learn more about teaching reading is also an important aspect of improving reading proficiency at the middle school level. This initiative is a valuable model for middle schools who to encourage all of their teachers to provide meaningful reading instruction in an effort to improve student attitudes towards and engagement with reading.

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The International Reading Association's Middle School Reading Special Interest Group seeks manuscripts for *Reading in the Middle*, an independent peer-reviewed publication. The journal publishes two issues a year sharing original contributions on all facets of language arts learning, teaching, and research focusing on young adolescents. *Reading in the Middle* offers middle level educators a practical guide to best practices in middle schools.

*Reading in the Middle* disseminates pertinent information and research on middle school literacy, serves as a forum for expressing varying viewpoints, and promotes an interest in further research in the field of middle level literacy. Manuscripts focus on quality programs, promising classroom practice, middle level author viewpoints, book lists for the middle level student, and teaching resources.

Presenters at the annual conference as well as other recent professional development events are invited to submit articles based on their work.

**The deadline is rolling. We are now reviewing articles for Fall 2015. The deadline for submission is March 15, 2015.**

***Reading in the Middle* follows specific submission guidelines. Articles should:**

- be approximately 3,500 words and, when appropriate, include photocopied (originals will be requested upon acceptance) samples of students' work, photographs of students working, charts, diagrams, or other visuals (work submitted by students may be of any length up to 3,500 words);
- offer specific classroom practices that are grounded in research;
- be double-spaced with 1-inch margins in 12-point font;
- include 100-word abstract and bulleted list of key points;
- follow the current edition of the publication manual of the *American Psychological Association*—please do not include an abstract, footnotes, endnotes, or author identification within the body of the text.
- identify any excerpts from previously published sources; should their use require a reprint fee, the fee payment is the responsibility of the author.

**To submit a manuscript:**

- submit a copy of your manuscript for blind review as a Microsoft Word file to [MSRSIG@gmail.com](mailto:MSRSIG@gmail.com) attach a separate cover letter that includes your name, affiliation, home and work addresses and telephone numbers, fax number, email address, and issue for which you are submitting. Your name should not appear anywhere in the text.



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To disseminate pertinent information and research on middle school reading, serve as a forum for expressing varying viewpoints on middle school reading, and promote an interest in further research in the field of middle level reading.

3. To act as a resource body to aid middle school teachers in implementing or improving reading and study programs for their students.

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# Teaching Civics Through a Disciplinary Literacy Lens

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Recently I spent some time observing social studies instruction in 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classes. The purpose of my visit was to “get a feel” for issues relating to content and literacy teaching and learning. Prior to my visit, the school principal shared with me that one of the challenges she has observed is that some social studies teachers use different strategies such as reciprocal teaching to engage students with texts, but they do not go beyond the template or strategy. She shared her concern about students not having time to talk about such abstract concepts such as “democracy,” “government,” etc., especially at the middle grades level. “These concepts are so abstract and far removed from the everyday life of a middle school student; how can we help teachers deal with the many demands of their content and assessments, and students who have difficulty reading and understanding the text or content?” she asked. My response was, “You hit the nail on the head!” From my experiences with high school teaching and learning in social studies, what she had observed at her school was representative of many schools and classrooms I had visited in the past three years.

## The Context

The topic under study on the day of my visit was *The Country's First Government*. That chapter is the first one of the unit on the Constitution of the United States. Students by now should have learned about the American colonies and their government, influences on American colonial government, the

settlement, culture, and government of the colonies, disagreements with Great Britain, and The Declaration of Independence. By the end of this unit of study, they should know the reasons for the development of the Constitution, its structure and principles. Essential questions for this unit were:

Why do people create, structure, and change their government?

How do societies balance individual and community rights?

How does social change influence government?

In the two classes I observed, teachers taught the content in a couple of ways. Both teachers used a narrated lecture on the topic developed by the publisher of the textbook that was delivered in a fun, motivating, and multimedia way. The lecture summarized key points, presented students with key questions about the Articles of Confederation, and presented challenges associated with the State Constitutions, including Shay's Revolution. The ways in which teachers engaged students in thinking and learning about this content varied.

For the purpose of this paper, I will describe some of my observations from class A. Teacher A provided students with much knowledge about the different events. In class A most of the time was devoted to the narrated lecture and in formative teacher monologue about the events, followed by a half hour out of the block schedule where students in small groups of four opened their textbooks and started using a *Fab Four Bookmark* (Oczuks, 2003) that reflected reciprocal teaching phases (Palinscar & Brown, 1984) as a means of coming up with questions, clarifying, and summarizing the content. The teacher had not used reciprocal teaching before in this class. He gave a quick intro-

duction and took count of how many students had used this strategy in other content area classes—half of the students in class raised their hands and indicated that they had used it before. As a result, the teacher proceeded with instructions that lasted for five minutes on how to fold their paper, on student roles per group (i.e., predictor, questioner, clarifier, and summarizer). Students were compliant and once they agreed on each group member's role and responsibilities, they took turns reading from the textbook; each group member read a paragraph from the six-page chapter. The questioner would ask if the group had any questions; if someone did, they would all record it on their paper. The teacher monitored their work and spent much time reminding students about their roles during the reading. Some groups were rotating from student to student reading aloud without writing any questions, summarizing, etc., while other groups were trying to decide what to write on their paper. It was obvious that in this class students did not have facility with the reciprocal teaching process.

The teacher encouraged students to look at headings and images in the text before they made their predictions. No discussion took place in terms of what the nature of predictions or questions were, nor did students have an opportunity to discuss evidence from the text to support their claims or conclusions. Students spent the majority of their time reading from the textbook and trying to fill in a strategy template. No connections were made to the essential question, no whole class discussion took place on chunks of content, no connections were made with the essential question, and no review of key domain-specific vocabulary took place. Key vocabulary for this lesson included the following Tier III (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013) words: *constitution, bicameral, confederation, Articles of Confederation, ratify, ordinance, Ordinance of 1785,*

**Questions about the Context**

The principal was concerned about students learning content in a deep and critical manner. For students to critically analyze social studies texts and form meaning from text(s), they need vocabulary learning that is intertwined with concept development; domain-specific academic vocabulary is not about memorizing words. None of the aforementioned words constitute general or everyday academic vocabulary; they are examples of domain-specific vocabulary. Were students busy? Yes. Did they take turns reading portions of the text? Yes. Did they engage in some writing? Yes. Were they compliant? Yes. Did their knowledge of the content increase? I don't know. Were they able to make conceptual connections among key vocabulary, events, and ideas? It is questionable. Did they have opportunities to discuss what they read or heard with their peers, listen to each other's perspective, and critically examine the text? I am left wondering about that.

<b>Topic:</b> The Country's First Government, Chapter 5, Lesson 1	
<b>Class/Period:</b> Ms. Coe/3 <sup>rd</sup> Period <b>Date:</b> October 8, 2014	
<b>Student Name:</b>	
<b>Essential Question:</b> <i>Why do people create, structure, and change governments?</i>	
<b>Key Vocabulary</b>	<b>Meaning</b> (Write a brief definition about the meaning of each word/phrase.)
Constitution	
Bicameral	
Confederation	
Articles of Confederation	
Ratify	
Ordinances	
Shay's Rebellion	
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Evidence</b> (Provide evidence from the text(s) to support your answer.)
1. Which colony was the first to declare independence and adopt a state constitution?	
2. Which two ordinances had a major effect on the history of the United States?	
3. Why were the Articles of Confederation needed for the new nation?	
4. What is a confederation?	
5. What problems did the Articles of Confederation cause?	
6. What were 3 key weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation?	
7. What were 2 key causes for Shay's Rebellion?	
8. What was 1 main effect of Shay's Rebellion on the nation's government?	
9. Think about all of the key events at this time— What do you think is the meaning of this quote?  "I do not conceive we can exist long as a nation, without having lodged somewhere a power which will pervade the whole Union." (George Washington's papers)	
10. Use evidence from the text and what you have learned so far to write your answer to the essential question.	



Why am I asking these questions? My interest is in middle and high school students' literacy and much of my work has centered on improving adolescent teaching and learning. Thus, my focus on disciplinary literacy. Disciplinary literacy refers to reading, writing, reasoning, speaking, and habits of mind that are reflective of the structure and demands of each discipline (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; McConachie & Petrosky, 2010; Zygouris-Coe, 2014). Disciplinary literacy involves critical reading of texts, deep understanding and learning, and an inquiry approach to learning (Zygouris-Coe, 2012). Disciplinary literacy promotes mastery of academic content and development of literacy knowledge and skills that support such development; through this lens, content and literacy develop simultaneously and in discipline-specific ways (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Zygouris-Coe, 2014).

For example, according to the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, & Technical Subjects in Grades 6-8 (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA & CCSSO], 2010), students are expected to know and be able to do the following:

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1)

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4)

Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7)

### **An Argument about Using a Disciplinary Literacy Lens in Social Studies**

My argument is not about reciprocal teaching as a strategy nor about the use of predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing—students need to be doing all of the above at all times. General literacy strategies are designed to provide students with access to texts and organization of their notes and thinking about the text. If Teacher A had spent some time on the purpose of the strategy, had modeled it using text, had provided examples and feedback, and had given students time to understand how and why to use it, we would have possibly had different results. Actually, an effective use of reciprocal teaching would have provided students with a good foundation for a moving to a critical analysis of the text through a discipline-specific approach. But, in this social studies classroom, the use of literacy strategies is viewed as an “achievement.” My argument is that as long as literacy instruction remains in the periphery of content-area teaching, it will not produce the results teachers are hoping it will. On the other hand, if content area teachers teach literacy skills in ways that are inherent to each disci-

pline while also teaching students about the content, results may be different. To be more specific, what are discipline-specific ways to build student content and literacy knowledge and skills and help them read, speak, write, think, and argue in ways that are reflective of social studies?

Allow me to provide you with some evidence for my disciplinary literacy in social studies argument. How about if the teacher had practiced the following? Take a look at the following suggestions and think about potential results in student content and literacy learning that is aligned with CCSS and social studies standards and may result in a more knowledgeable and critical 7<sup>th</sup> grade reader and thinker.

Analyze the way the text was organized and model to students how to read the text, the images, charts, and related textual information. (Discipline-specific text structure)

What key words/phrases, images, symbols, or evidence does the author use to persuade the reader? (Document/Image analysis)

Preview the text and identify critical domain-specific vocabulary every student will need to know and understand. (Academic/Domain-Specific vocabulary)

Examine the source information and analyze some primary sources. (Sourcing)

Read multiple accounts and perspectives. (Corroboration)

Help students understand the historical context of the Articles of Confederation, Shay's Rebellion, etc. (Contextualization)

Read the text closely and use evidence to support your claims. (Close reading of text)

Ask good questions about the text and discuss how this content helps to answer the essential question for the topic. (Close reading of text)

Use evidence to argue for or against the states' rights and purpose of constitutions. (Historical argument)

Use evidence from the text to answer the essential question for the chapter: Why do people create, structure, and change governments? (Historical thinking)

Identify key successful ordinances created under the Articles of Confederation. (Close reading of text)

Use evidence to identify and discuss the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation. (Use evidence to support claims)

Discuss the problems after the war that caused Shay's Rebellion. (Contextualization)

Hold a whole class discussion about the central historical question in this chapter. (Historical thinking)

### Sample Support for the Disciplinary Literacy in Social Studies Argument

Last, allow me to also offer a more specific example of a template or strategy that uses a discipline-specific approach to social studies learning and may help students develop critical content, reading, thinking, speaking, and writing knowledge and skills. The teacher could select the critical domain-specific words ahead of time or he or she could ask students to identify the key vocabulary in the text. The latter implies that students have had adequate practice with identifying key vocabulary from texts. A teacher could use the following template with students during or after reading. All of the questions require close reading of text, critical thinking skills, and collection of appropriate textual evidence. The questions require deep understanding of the content and also provide opportunities for small group or whole class discussion. Students will also need time to discuss their answers both in small group and in whole class settings to expand their knowledge and evaluate their evidence. Teacher feedback and cognitive and content prompting will be critical for student learning. Keep in mind that the following template will also require changes in the role of the teacher, the student, and the instruction. It also warrants different learning expectations and practices in the classroom. For students to start approaching text and developing content and literacy knowledge and skills in the following manner, the teacher can no longer be a narrator of historical events and the student can no longer function as a passive observer or listener. Students need opportunities to grapple with complex concepts and ideas, discuss what they are reading, explore different perspectives with peers and the teacher in social studies classes, and write about what they are learning.

### Lingering Thoughts

Of course in this short paper I am only able to express a couple of thoughts about a learning paradigm shift that in my view we need to take when teaching social studies in upper grades. Just like you I also grapple with the instructional challenges teachers face as they try to educate many students who come to class with weak background knowledge, reading, vocabulary and comprehension skills, and decreased motivation to learn. Planning and delivering instruction that addresses both the content and literacy demands of the discipline is a way to "hit" several goals with one "stone." Instructional and learning challenges are a constant factor in grades 6-12 and so are opportunities for continued dialogue, professional development, and a paradigm shift in teaching and learning.

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# Using Novels in Verse to Motivate Students to Read and to Write

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Novels in verse – they're a wonderful tool to use in the classroom to motivate students to read and to encourage them to write. The use of verse novels in the classroom can inspire students at all reading and writing levels by activating their imagination and targeting their interests. In addition, students like them.

Novels in verse can be deceptive. They look like typical novels but are compelling because they often have shorter formats, can be read quickly, have fewer words on a page, may contain illustrations, and tend to be emotionally driven, making them less intimidating. But, they aren't easy readers. They tackle intense subjects, relate to significant points in time, and tell quality stories while exposing students to poetic forms. They influence fluency, reading strategies such as inferring and visualizing, introduce students to literary devices such as similes and metaphors, and are a form that can be used to encourage, challenge, and motivate students to write.

A number of fantastic novels in verse have been published in 2014. Below are some of my favorites.

***Another Day as Emily* by Eileen Spinelli. Illus. by Joanne Lew-Vriethoff. 2014. Knopf Books for Young Readers. (978-0449809877).**

Life is not going well for eleven-year-old Suzy. Her brother made a lifesaving 911 call and now he's receiving all of the attention and her summer is not going as planned. She decides the best thing to do is to isolate herself from the world, and shuts herself up in her room just like Emily Dickenson, the focus of her summer library project. But emulating an eccentric poet is not as easy or fulfilling as it might seem, and Suzy has to find the life best suited for her. Spinelli's novel uses verse in a compelling way; it sets the tone of the novel and allows the reader to fill in the blanks.

***Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson. 2014. Nancy Paulsen Books. (978-0399252518).**

The memoir of esteemed writer Jacqueline Woodson, *Brown Girl Dreaming* is a poignant tale of her life growing up in the North and the South and finding her place in the world. She explores her relationships with family members and the bonds that take place between people regardless of location, all told through the eyes of a child. The language she uses is evocative and powerful, and brings the reader into the story to experience life along with Jacqueline.

***Caminar* by Skila Brown. 2014. Candlewick Press. (978-0763665166).**

In 1981, Guatemala is undergoing a civil war. When word of approaching Communist rebels reaches Carlos's village, he knows it is time for him to become a man and protect his family. But his mother tells him to hide for his own safety, and Carlos is left on his own to try and make his way to his grandmother's village and alert the villagers to the coming danger. Inspired by true events, *Caminar* tells Carlos's story as he joins a band of guerilla soldiers in his journey, and in the process, has to grow up too quickly and face the realities of war.

***The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander. 2014. HMH Books for Young Readers. (978-0544107717).**

Twins Josh and Jordan are the sons of a neighborhood basketball legend and fight to earn their father's respect on and off the basketball court. When Jordan gets a girlfriend and begins to separate himself from his tightly-knit family, Josh has to learn to cope with his changing relationships and life. Incorporating elements of rap, jazz, and form, this novel in verse uses powerful language to depict a child moving toward adolescence.

***Like Water on Stone* by Dana Walrath. 2014. Delacorte. (978-0375991424).**

Inspired by a true story, *Like Water on Stone* tells the tale of three siblings forced to walk to Turkey to escape the Armenian genocide of 1915 after witnessing the rest of their family murdered. This novel is beautiful and horrifying at the same time, as the siblings undertake the treacherous journey across mountains in harsh conditions, accompanied only by a mystical eagle. Heartbreaking and powerful, this novel explores familial bonds and courage in a time of incredible tragedy.

***Rhyme Schemer* by K.A. Holt. 2014. Chronicle Books. (978-1452127002).**

Kevin is a bully. But he gets a dose of his own medicine when his primary target finds Kevin's journal and bullies him in return. *Rhyme Schemer* shows both sides of the bullying equation through one 7<sup>th</sup> grader's eyes. It takes us through Kevin's home life – the cause of his bullying – to his being the bully, and then his experience of being bullied. This straightforward book can be used to start classroom conversations.

**Silver People: Voices from the Panama Canal** by *Margarita Engle*. 2014. *HMH Books for Young Readers*. (978-0544109414).

This verse novel tells the story of the construction of the Panama canal in 1906. Fourteen-year-old Mateo desires to leave his difficult home situation in Cuba and lies about his age to be hired on as a worker to help build the canal. Misled about the type of work he was going to be doing, Mateo is forced to work in harsh and squalid conditions amidst horrifying inequality while at the same time finding love and a growing sense of courage. Told from multiple perspectives, this moment in history is explored through the eyes of the workers, the engineers, Theodore Roosevelt, and even the trees and monkeys who were impacted by the rainforest project.

**A Time to Dance** by *Padma Venkatraman*. 2014. *Nancy Paulsen Books*. (978-0399257100).

Although her family wants her to become an engineer, Veda is determined to become a famous dancer of the traditional Indian Bharatanatyam dance. Her dreams are shattered when she loses her leg in an accident, and she must learn how to live with her new body. Her life changes yet again when an American doctor helps her get a prosthetic leg and she learns to dance all over again.



### Writing About the Road Less Traveled

Holly Goldberg Sloan

I like to talk about the road less traveled. How it is that a person can become a novelist or a film director. I use examples from my own life to view decisions (some small, some large) that have led me to a life of words and images, and a career as a storyteller. This is essentially what I speak about when I talk at schools. I try to encourage people of all ages to express themselves and in doing that (regardless if they make a living as a writer or a filmmaker) to have a bigger life. Words are the most powerful thing a person has. They are what sets us apart and makes us human. Art (to me) is the expression of emotion on the highest level. Communication is the connection.

Learn more at: <http://hollygoldbergsloan.com/>

