

# Reading in the Middle

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



This issue of Reading in the Middle offers an exciting combination of articles. First Laurel Snyder, shares her insights as to writing for the middle school reader. Then Ann Skippers follows this piece with insights for teaching middle school students using Laurel's books.

Next Dana Solomon and Timothy

Rasinski share research and techniques for improving middle school students' fluency. Then Melanie Koss shares high interest books to support middle school student's fluency.

We know that you will find some useful information and enjoy the issue.

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## Call for Manuscripts

*Reading in the Middle* publishes 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* 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.

# Invisible Stitches: Writing for the Middle School Reader By Laurel Snyder

I have to be honest—middle school scares me. When I remember living through those complicated years myself, I want to bury my head under a pillow. Seventh grade was the year my mother decided to move me to a new school district, and I found myself lost in a strange place, without any friends, unsure of the person I wanted to be.

Does anyone know who they want to be at 12?

I wasn't yet a woman, and just thinking that word—woman—made me cringe. Everything about my life and my body embarrassed me. But I also wasn't a child anymore, and I hated to be treated like one. I was caught, confused, mid-stream. Still believing in magic, but knowing I wasn't really supposed to anymore. Not yet wanting to hold hands with boys, but also not wanting to be left behind, without a hand to hold. Smart enough to know that popularity didn't matter, but caught in the drama of lunchroom politics.

The thing is—I draw on exactly those cringe-worthy memories when I write now, and I find that as my books age up (several of my earlier books are better suited to upper elementary school), and grow into middle school—that excruciating mid-stream is exactly what makes writing more exciting than it's ever been, if it also makes the work difficult. Midstream is, I think, where I find the greatest capacity to surprise myself, because in every middle schooler there is contrast or conflict. There is a child and an adult.

A bully in seventh grade still has some softness left to him, some hesitation or doubt. A shy bookish girl is inevitably staring at the back of the neck of the boy in front of her, and wondering about him, even if she isn't "there yet." Every kid feels like an anomaly in middle school. Everyone feels like

they're keeping secrets, like nobody else has ever gone through this before. There's a newness to middle school, a spirit of discovery, and often a loneliness too. That's fertile ground for a writer. What makes it hard is precisely what makes it rewarding.

In books for elementary school readers, kids are usually found staring at the world, the big beyond, and trying to figure it out. Whether lost in a magical universe with a dragon for a friend or processing the death of a grandparent, the average child in a book is puzzling over their surroundings and other people. They're trying to fit themselves into the larger world.

By contrast, the average book for high school students takes readers deep inside a protagonist, to a place that is self-aware, struggling with the inner working of the teen mind and soul. However dystopian or romantic it might be, however deep or flat, a young adult book is almost always about an interior world. The outside world functions largely as catalyst or setting for this journey.

Put simply, kids explore the world, young adults are the world.

But in middle school, readers (and characters) are almost always working on both projects at the same time. No sixth grade child is only a child. No sophisticated eighth grader has left childhood completely behind, and so there tends to be a blending of the internal and external worlds in books for this age group. Because of this, there's the least chance an author can rely on stereotypes, on tricks and tropes. Every kid is many kids in middle school. Keeping secrets and changing daily, pretending, and trying on new identities.

So writing for middle school means, in some sense, splitting the difference. Developing a fuller awareness of the self than one usually finds in a book for, say, an eight year old, but also allowing for a remaining hunger to understand the surrounding world that isn't always there in a young adult novel. By definition, good books for middle schoolers have to be complex, if not complicated.

The books of my childhood that did this best are, not coincidentally, books that stand the test of time. Madeleine L'Engle and Cynthia Voigt spring first to mind. Both authors manage a truly perfect balance of interior and exterior journey. L'Engle roots her universe in magic and science, while Voigt's world-building is done through family and school drama, in a sometimes heartbreakingly realistic landscape. But both authors stitch their respective exterior worlds to character development, to kids who know themselves better as the books proceed, to interior journeys. But as a writer, when I sit with these books, it is almost impossible for me to separate the "adventure" from the "introspection." This is exactly what makes them so amazing, those tiny stitches, linking inward-gaze to outward vision.

These moments, these invisible stitches, can happen in any setting. A dysfunctional family vacation or a science fair can give way, equally, to self-awareness. A boy can come to better understand himself at his wizarding school, or a girl can learn about her family, herself, and her friends, as she navigates a time traveling mystery on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The trick, always, is to manage both worlds, to incorporate everything, to remember that middle schoolers aren't a single population. They're at least 3 populations, operating simultaneously, inside each classroom, around each lunchtable, within each student. Some days, I don't think I'm up to the challenge. I'm not sure how to manage it. But then I dig out my own diary, reach back to my most awkward self— and I find that more than anything, I want to write a book for her, for that kid. So I keep going. Because if memory serves, she really needs it.

### **Authentic, Engaging, and Effective Instruction in the Middle School Classroom: Voices from Teachers, Students, and Author**

Wednesday, May 11, 2011: 9:00 AM - 11:45 AM  
Orange County Convention Center, West Building,  
W306 Middle School Reading Special Interest  
Group of the International Reading Assoc.

This interactive workshop will offer effective and evidence based teaching practices for helping students engage in literature. The presenters in this session will provide hands-on activities and share experiences in classrooms that will invite participants to reflect on their own school efforts to achieve authentic, engaging, and effective instruction on both the school and classroom level

Lori Burgio and Jennifer Megonigal will take us through a "Book in a Day" lesson plan with classroom collaboration, students will be able to list the main characters from the book, and the part each played in the story. Students will also be able to describe the overall theme, setting and plot of the book. The "Book in a Day" plan requires students to work in pairs or small groups and read a specified chapter of *The Hunger Games*. When the reading is complete, students piece the story together, one chapter at a time. They will construct an entire book summary inclusive of character descriptions and roles using a graphic organizer in just one day. Subsequently, students will work in pairs using a graphic organizer to identify several examples of each literary character-conflict from the story: character vs., self; character vs. nature; character vs. character, and character vs. society.

Author Laurel Snyder will share her books, *Any Which Wall* (Random House, 2009), *Up and Down Scratchy Mountains* (Random House, 2008), and *Penny Dreadful* (Random House, 2010). As Middle School Language Arts Teacher, Ann Skippers shares engaging activities for integrating these books into the classroom.



# Adventures in Reading

## By Ann Skippers

### Lake Mary Preparatory School

Middle School students and classes often require techniques to reach the standards. Differentiation of instructional techniques is important for a variety of students to read, comprehend and begin to learn how to analyze literature. During a nine week grading period, sixth graders of different learning levels and styles, studied the works of Laurel Snyder. Throughout instruction different techniques of learning contributed to improving students' comprehension of improved their literary analysis techniques.

Differentiation took place on a variety of levels. It took place at the class level, in that students in three classes were divided and assigned books differently. Students were introduced to their books in a variety of ways. In one class, the students were placed into three literature circles groups-- each receiving a different title, *Any Which Wall* (Random House, 2009), *Up and Down Scratchy Mountains* (Random House, 2008), and *Penny Dreadful* (Random House, 2010). Another class also worked in three groups but each group was given the same title, *Penny Dreadful* (Random House, 2010). Whereas a third class was given the same title, *Up and Down Scratchy Mountains* (Random House, 2008), and worked as a class.

Differentiation also took place throughout the instruction. Students worked in whole group, pairs, small groups and individually while they worked to generate and respond to higher level questions. Students received instruction in identifying literacy elements and using higher order thinking questions to build their literacy analysis techniques and reading comprehension. Students had been working with Bloom's Taxonomy and studying different levels of questions throughout the school year. At the time of this project, students in all of the classes responded to and asked higher

level questions to support comprehension building. For example, in reading *Up and Down the Scratchy Mountain* students were asked:

- Would you camp out in the mountains for your friends?
- How do you think Lucy felt going into the jail with Wynston? How would you feel?
- Why did Steven not know what an adventure was?

These questions led to discussions that required students to analyze the text that they were reading. When responding to the second question students had to analyze Lucy's actions in the text by connecting her prior actions, her thoughts and feelings about Wynston, and her reasons for accompanying him into the jail. Through this process one student described Lucy as feeling guilty because she knew she was putting her best friend at risk. She connected to her own feelings by describing how she is different from Lucy and would have gone to the jail alone.

In order to support students' comprehension they did more than simply answer in-depth analysis and discussion where the students have ownership of the information being discussed. Not only are students analyzing the novel, they are analyzing the questioning process as well.

- What would happen if you were in Lucy's shoes and were in the storm; would you turn back or keep on going? Explain why.
  - Why did Wynston leave the palace if he may never find Lucy?
  - Explain how Lucy relates to *Maniac Magee*.



Differentiation also took place as students studied the literary elements of the texts. This instruction focused on two instructional techniques, 1) responding to essential questions and 2) using literature circle job descriptions to focus on different elements. In order to support the literary elements to be found in the books, the students were given essential questions to keep in the back of their mind as they worked, “What is a common theme found throughout each novel”, “How does the author highlight the characters’ strengths and weaknesses?”. By focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of the characters, students will begin to understand the connection between literature, their own lives and the message being conveyed by the author.

The literature circles were broken down further by job title.

- Literary Luminary – highlighting specific plot points,
- Vocabulary Enhancer – defining unknown words from each chapter,
- Character Captain – keeping character charts for each chapter in order to show the evolution of the character
- Illustrator – creating illustrated interpretations of each chapter
- Connector – making connections between their own lives and the lives of the characters.

Roles were assigned by analyzing students’ individual strengths and weaknesses to determine which role will improve their understanding of individual literary elements, as well as how they can demonstrate their strengths for the group. Within these circles a journal with their completed work was kept. In the journal the students completed different activities depending on the level of support needed. For instance, some literary luminaries completed a plot map for a chapter while others simply wrote a summary. Some character captains completed a time line of the characters development while others created illustrations of the character throughout the novel.

Finally differentiation took place during instruction that supported students’ synthesis of

information after reading the novels. These activities supported multiple levels of learning and multiple creative outlets to show understanding of literature. The class reading all three books created a Wiki page based on the book they read. These students created connections to other subject areas and demonstrated their knowledge by creating hyperlinks with summaries from the books. This level of students have published their Wiki pages and discussed their findings with the other groups in the class. They have been able to find common themes and techniques used by the author across her work.

Another class worked together to create a file folder game based on the book. The steps through the game, the game board, and the cards used all reflect their knowledge of plot, character and theme. The file folder games are exchanged between the groups as they play them in order to see the different interpretations of the same book. The third group also worked in small groups to demonstrate their analysis of literary elements. They created a poster version of a Facebook page for a given character. The students chose which character to analyze and the information placed on the poster. The status updates allowed a format to express their comprehension of the plot progression, while the surrounding information allowed a way for the students to express their understanding of characterization.

Differentiation within the classroom, as well as across a grade level, allows for a deeper and more meaningful comprehension of literature.



# Improving Intermediate Grade Students' Reading Fluency, Comprehension, and Motivation through the Readers' Theater Club

By Dana Solomon, Frisco Independent School District  
and Timothy Rasinski, Kent State University

After years of indifference in the reading field (Rasinski, 2003), the National Reading Panel (2000) re-identified reading fluency a critical goal in the elementary reading curriculum. Most literacy scholars define reading fluency as the ability to read the words in a text with sufficient accuracy, automaticity, and prosody to lead to good comprehension (Rasinski, 2006). Accuracy in word recognition refers to the readers' ability to read the words in a text without error in pronunciation. Automaticity refers to the ability of proficient readers to read the words in a text accurately and effortlessly so that the reader may use his or her limited cognitive resources to attend to meaning while reading. Prosody is the ability of a reader to render a text with appropriate expression and phrasing to reflect the semantic and syntactic content of the passage during oral reading. Simply put, fluent oral reading should sound like natural speech. Although fluency is often associated with oral reading, it is generally assumed that fluent oral readers are fluent in their silent reading as well (Reutzel, Jones, Fawson, & Smith, 2008). Indeed, research has demonstrated a strong relationship between prosodic oral reading and proficient silent reading comprehension (Pinnell, Pikulski, Wixson, Campbell, Gough, & Beatty, 1995; Daane, Campbell, Grigg, Goodman, & Oranje, 2005). Students who read with meaningful and appropriate expression when reading orally tend to have good comprehension when reading silently. Conversely, students who read with inappropriate expression during oral reading are more likely to have poor comprehension when reading silently.

Proficient readers, then, are capable of simultaneously decoding words and constructing meaning from the texts they read. As readers develop more automaticity decoding words, they move on to further develop abilities in expressive reading (Camps & Greenwood, 2003). More expressive reading has been shown to provide readers with deeper comprehension of texts (Tankersly, 2005, Henderson, Singer, & Fernanda, 1995).

Inadequate fluency in readers is associated with and is considered a cause of poor reading comprehension. Developments in fluency instruction have moved from repetitive reading tasks and word by word review in the early 1950's to modes for developing automaticity with words, phrases, and sentences (Corcoran & Davis, 2005). Further, developing fluency through expressive reading exercises such as poetry, prose, short stories, and readers' theater scripts may increase student comprehension of text (Kuhn & Stahl, 2008).

Research and scholarly literature support several specific instructional approaches for developing fluency in reading (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski, 1989; Rasinski, 2003; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). These include assisted reading, and repeated readings. Assisted reading involves a reader reading a text while simultaneously listening to a fluent rendering of the same text. Repeated reading involves the reading of one text more than once until a level of fluency is achieved in the reading. Research has demonstrated that assisted reading and repeated reading lead to improvements in fluency on the texts read by students that also generalizes to new

texts not previously encountered by students (National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003). Moreover, demonstrable and significant gains in overall reading achievement have been documented through these instructional methods (National Reading Panel, 2000; Rasinski & Hoffman, 2003).

We certainly believe that the concept of fluency encompassing accuracy, automaticity and prosody is appropriate. We also agree with the scholarly literature that identifies assisted and repeated reading as powerful tools for improving fluency. Unfortunately, many current programs for teaching fluency employ assisted and repeated reading in very mechanical ways where the intent is to improve students' reading speed. Such approaches are neither engaging nor authentic in nature for students. Very few times in life outside the classroom are readers required to read texts as quickly as possible. We feel that authentic and engaging approaches to fluency instruction are called for and we believe that such an authentic and motivating approach to fluency instruction can be found in the oral performance of texts (Rasinski, 2007). Students are more likely to practice or rehearse (repeated and assisted reading) if they know that they will be performing a reading for an audience. Moreover, such rehearsal is not aimed at reading speed, but reading with meaningful expression to help an audience of listeners better understand the passage.

Readers' theater is a performance of a written script that demands repeated and assisted reading that is focused on delivering meaning to an audience. Since there are no props, physical acting, costumes, or scenery in readers' theater, readers must use their voices to carry the meaning. Thus, the goal of this fluency instruction is aimed at improving prosody and meaning. The repeated and assisted practice involved in rehearsal will improve accuracy and automaticity in word recognition. Research has demonstrated the potential of readers' theater to improve reading performance (Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 2000-2001; Griffith & Rasinski,

2004; Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005; Young & Rasinski, 2009). Moreover, readers' theater has been found to be an engaging and motivational activity for students (Millin & Rinehart, 1999).

Previous studies of the impact of readers' theater on students' fluency, comprehension, and overall reading achievement have focused on younger students (grades 4 and lower). The present study reports on a classroom-based research study of the impact of fluency instruction using readers' theater on fifth grade students. This study continues the line of authentic classroom-based research on the effects of readers' theater to improve fluency and overall reading achievement. It is told from the perspective of the first author, Dana Solomon, a fifth grade classroom teacher in Texas, who made readers' theater an integral part of her reading curriculum for the first time in the 2008-2009 school year. Although we recognize several methodological limitations to the study, we also note the added authenticity and contextual integrity of research that comes from the realm of a regular classroom and lead by the regular classroom teacher.

I (Dana) taught fifth grade integrated language arts, reading and social studies in an elementary school in Frisco, Texas. Our 92 entering fifth graders were primarily average to above average readers and performed well overall on the fourth grade Texas state reading assessment. Our reading comprehension data was obtained from scores on the fourth and fifth grade administrations of The Assessment of Knowledge and Skills for Reading (TAKS). The Reading TAKS test is a silent-reading assessment that covers four main objectives for reading comprehension and analysis that include basic understanding, literacy elements, analysis using reading strategies, and analysis using critical reading skills. Each objective contains questions that examine a student's performance in the use of specific sets of reading skills considered essential for the successful reader. The passing rate for the test is decided once all scores state-wide have been tabulated but is typically around 70%. The passing score for the 2009 Reading TAKS was 69%.



We have comparative data on 89 of the 92 students tested (three students took accommodated versions of the TAKS which the state does not include in data reporting).

In fourth grade, all of our students passed the reading TAKS, and 65% scored a 92% or better (commended score) out of a possible 100% on the test. Commended performance indicates performance at a level above the state passing standard and shows thorough understanding of the knowledge and skills at the grade level tested (Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, 2008).

However, we found that 9% of students entering fifth grade were struggling readers at risk for failing to meet fifth grade reading expectations. Identified risk factors included passing the reading TAKS by a small margin, failing a previous grade level, and/or scoring consistently below grade level in reading fluency and/or comprehension of narrative and/or nonfiction text. These students would receive guided reading instruction and individualized tutoring one day a week as well as instruction from a reading specialist on campus. We also wanted to help these students find enjoyment in reading, and we felt readers' theater would add that dimension to our reading interventions.

In addition, my fellow fifth grade reading teacher and I had concerns about the dip in scores from fourth to fifth grade for many of our students. We compared scores from the previous year's fourth to fifth grade cohort, and found that students' commended rates dropped from 65% in fourth grade to 61% in fifth grade. In part, we believed this drop to be related to the increased rigor and volume of text within the fifth grade TAKS. Students are expected to read more text at increased levels of complexity with greater emphasis on critical reading and analysis of fiction and nonfiction text. Students need to develop more stamina and focus to tackle such dense material. Because of fluency's direct link to helping students read with more ease and understanding, we felt it was vital to target our students' fluency to increase reading

stamina and focus. The fifth grade reading TAKS requires students to analyze characters' thoughts, dialogue, actions, and relationships in order to draw conclusions about possible outcomes based on this analysis. Fifth graders are also expected to analyze information in factual accounts and draw conclusions based on the dialogue, actions, and relationships of real people in real settings. Many fifth graders—most in their tenth or eleventh year of life—are just beginning to think in deeper, abstract ways and still need to relate much of their learning to their own experiences (Piaget, 1950). Abstract thought must come into play in order to understand how someone else feels or will likely act based on their previous thoughts, words, or deeds. We felt that our students could benefit from a program that helped them get to the deeper levels of abstract thought that literary analysis demands.

After reviewing educational strategies for developing fluency and comprehension in readers, we found that instruction in fluency and comprehension development has changed from repetitive reading tasks and word-by-word review to more expressive repeated reading activities such as readers' theater where the expressiveness that readers attempt to embed in their reading reflects their understanding of the passage. Providing opportunities for struggling readers to develop expressive reading through performing readers' theater scripts has been shown to develop more positive associations with reading for these students along with further developing their fluency not only in automaticity in word and phrase recognition but also in the development of expressive reading, which in turn improves their comprehension of text (Rasinski, 2003).

### **Program Description**

Recognizing the slump in students' overall reading performance in 5th grade as well as recognizing the importance of reading fluency as the critical bridge from word recognition to comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005), I developed the Readers' Theater Club (RT Club), an after school

intervention designed to improve fluency and comprehension. The question that guided the development and implementation of RT Club was the following: How will targeting the fluency and comprehension of 5th grade readers through the use of readers' theater impact students' fluency, reading comprehension, performance on the state reading assessment, and their overall view of themselves as readers?

### RT Club Daily Agenda

I recruited our school librarian and my fellow 5th grade reading teacher to assist in supervising, instructing, and leading RT Club activities. RT Club was an after school activity that met on Mondays for 75 minutes. During this time students and teachers worked on the rehearsal and eventual performance of readers' theater scripts. Twenty-eight of our fifth grade students consistently participated on a voluntary basis in an after-school RT Club. Students met every Monday, excluding school holidays, in the school library to participate in RT Club activities. The club met approximately 28 times in seven months of the school year, from October 20th through May 18th of 2009.

Each Readers' Theater Club meeting included dramatics warm-ups, discussion of upcoming activities, practice with prepared scripts, critique by fellow RT Club members and RT Club teachers, and updates on upcoming activities, assignments and performances. Dramatic warm-ups included tongue twisters, freeze frames (acting out a prescribed scenario), and mirroring activities in which students mimicked the movements and statements of partners (In the beginning months, students also practiced Fry Instant Phrases to develop their familiarity with common phrases in written works).

Students then moved on to discuss readers' theater activities for the week with me and began working in groups on repeated reading activities. Students worked in groups of their choosing based on interest in reading materials. Grouping was fluid, and

students worked with various groups and partners throughout. I believe student choice in regard to grouping served to further motivate students in their participation. While teachers monitored RT Club student activities, we guided students in the use of expressive voice, clear pronunciation, use of emotion, and use of body language to deliver their dialogue from readers' theater scripts. We focused on various strategies during RT Club meetings to engage students with various needs/learning styles (Tomlinson, 1999). Use of puppets, bodily kinesesthetic movements, group critique, and self-reflection allowed club members various ways to express what they were learning. We recorded and discussed anecdotal notes of student activities and interactions during RT Club meetings.

During the close of each RT Club meeting, we discussed group critiques, upcoming activities, assignments, and performances for club members. In addition, students had the opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns about grouping, practice time, and/or assignments.

While planning RT Club lessons and activities, we reviewed the value of nursery rhymes for helping early readers to connect the rhythm and rhyme of these stories with verbal and written language.(Sadlier-Oxford, 2000, Cullinan, 1999, Maclean, M., Bryant, P. & Bradley, L, 1987). Students read nursery rhymes with partners, were encouraged to read nursery rhymes to their younger siblings at home, and performed interpretive readings of nursery rhymes in K-2 classrooms. Club members then read Dr. Seuss books and performed interpretive readings for fellow students at grades K-4 either in the school library or in grade-level classrooms. These performances were arranged with grade level teachers at specific times during the school day. Example stories included *The Cat in the Hat*, *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish*, and *Green Eggs and Ham*. Students performed these throughout the year as they were requested by other grade teachers to repeat their performances to classes not previously visited. Repeated script reading in groups during club meetings and in performances for other grade

levels provided opportunities to build automaticity and prosody in our students' reading. Students eventually transformed stories from trade books and instructional reading material into scripts to perform for various grade levels in our school, as well, which further developed their writing skills and critical thinking skills.

RT Club members practiced methods for developing scripts first from familiar fairy tales, then in the fracturing or modifying the familiar fairy tales. We used Cinderella Bigfoot, written by Mike Thaler and scripted by Jill Jauquet as a sample of a fractured fairy tale. We read the script twice and discussed various ways that we could fracture or modify fairy tales to make them silly, more modern, or more interesting in some way for our audiences. We reviewed "Tips on Scripting" from Aaron Shepard's Readers' Theater website (<http://aaronshp.com/rt/>). Students used these guidelines and teacher assistance to develop scripts from children's books, Dr. Seuss books, poems, and novels on the Texas Bluebonnet Book nominee list to perform for grade levels.

RT Club Agenda for the 2008-2009 School Year was the students' performance of nursery rhyme dramatizations for Kindergarten/First Grade classes and fractured fairy tale performances and Dr. Seuss book readings for grades K-2. In February through March, students developed RT scripts based on chapter books that had been nominated for The Texas Bluebonnet Award, an award given to an outstanding new children's book in the state of Texas. A committee first nominates these titles for the award and students in our state decide on the winner of the award. As these are books considered highly recommended by educators, we assigned all of our 5th graders to read five chapter books from the Bluebonnet reading list. RT Club students developed scripts based on Bluebonnet Books of their choice. From February through March, students developed, revised, rehearsed, and began performing their RT scripts based on Bluebonnet Books. Students continued performing these in April and May, as well. We closed out

the year with an awards ceremony and party for RT Club students. RT Club students voted on the award to go to each member of the club. Some of the award choices included Most Dramatic, Powerful Performer, and Outstanding Script-Writer. We had about twenty various awards from which students selected club winners.

We have included the following timeline for our Readers' Theater program.

Figure 1

#### Readers' Theater Club Timeline 2008-2009

September: Invite all 5th grade students to participate in after school Readers' Theater Club
October: Begin meetings/students practice prepared RT scripts, first student surveys completed
November: Students practice and perform nursery rhymes from Rasinski site, review script prep and design scripts based on fairy tales. Revise and practice scripts
December: Winter fluency assessments, students continue to revise, practice, rehearse, and perform scripts
January: Practice history plays for performance in 5th grade classes
February: Review and discuss academic progress of struggling readers
March: Perform at school-wide assembly, complete and review culminating student survey and questionnaire
April: Instruct students on development of book-talks based on children's books and novels, perform for grades K-5
May: Review and celebrate the RT Club year with students, have party with awards

### Data Collection and Analysis

We assessed fluency (words correct per minute [wcpm] on grade level passages) for all fifth grade students using the Flynt-Cooter Informal Reading Inventory (1998) at the initiation of RT Club in October. In the first week of March we assess fluency again using procedures and texts equivalent to those used in the fall. Results are summarized on Table 1.

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**Table 1**

#### Fluency Performance of Fifth Grade Students

Time of Assessment	RT Club Participants	Other 5th Grade Students
October	141 wcpm	130
March	179	164
Gain – October-March	38	34

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Data was also gathered from the Reading TAKS scores that were administered in March. As mentioned previously the TAKS is a silent reading comprehension test in which students read passages silently and answer questions that assess their understanding of each passage. Results of student performance on the TAKS is reported on Table 2.

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**Table 2**

#### Student Performance on the 2009 TAKS

Percentage Score	Percentage of Students Scoring at this Level	
	RT Club	Other 5th Grade Students
100	43	41
97-100	57	46
95-100	79	62
92-100 *	86	79
90-100 **	100	90

\* 92-100% = Commended Score

\*\* 90-100% = Passing Score

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In addition to actual reading performance, we reviewed student-completed reading attitude surveys and assessments for any changes of attitude/academic performance since enrollment in RT Club. Many students indicated an increased desire to read and expressed more confidence in reading orally. Students completed surveys in October and January. We have included several student responses to the question, "In general, how do you feel about reading?"

### **In general, how do you feel about reading?**

#### **October/November**

1. "Soothing"
2. "I think it is okay and sometimes really fun."
3. "Love it. I read all the time."
4. "I think it's really fun and interesting"
5. "I think it's the 5th funnest thing in the world"
6. No response

#### **January/February**

1. "I love reading."
2. "I like reading and usually do not want to stop reading my book."
3. "I wouldn't be afraid to read in public because I love to read."
4. "I feel good about reading. It makes me feel good inside."
5. "It's entertaining and fun."
6. "I like reading and how you can really connect to the author by their writing."

When asked to rate Readers' Theater Club on a scale of 1-5, with five being the highest score, 14 out of 18 students gave RT Club the highest rating. Four students gave RT Club a rating of 4-4 \_ and included the following comments: "I would've liked to perform more", "We had to write our own scripts and I would've liked more scripts given to us", "It got loud sometimes", and "It needs to be more dramatic." These comments serve as useful feedback for improving future readers' theater activities.

We asked classroom teachers to discuss anecdotal notes about student performance, i.e., fluency,

expression, and audience engagement. Other grade level teachers were impressed by fifth graders' enthusiasm and expression. A kindergarten teacher noted that our students were "excited and joyful" in their performance. Student audiences were engaged in the club member performances and, according to their teachers, many were anxious to take part in a Readers' Theater Club themselves. A fourth grade teacher commented, "Our students have been talking about your Readers' Theater Club and can't wait to join next year!" Teachers at other grade levels also noted that they wanted to include more readers' theater in classroom activities. We were asked by other teachers to share information about scripts, script writing, and American history plays with which to incorporate readers' theater in the classroom. I now serve as an administrator for another school in our district. The RT Club at my former school continues to meet with this year's 5th graders, and Robin Farris, the reading teacher, I partnered with last year, had this to say about this year's RT Club, "Our Readers' Theater Club, an after school program for 5th graders, meets weekly to encourage students to understand the importance of reading fluently, successfully developing their performance skills, and specifically targeting phrasing and expression. It has been a delight for all involved to nurture a safe, yet fun, environment where there is successful teaching and learning taking place. We have seen those involved become more responsible for their own improvement by actively engaging in the reading of passages, poems, and plays. This leads them into later writing and performing their own scripts, and finally, feeling confident and pleased about a job well done."

### **Conclusions and Reflections**

Readers' Theater Club provided opportunities for us to learn more about our fifth grade students as readers outside of the classroom. We saw first-hand how repeated reading, dramatics warm-ups, working on phrasing, transforming stories into scripts, and performing scripts for various audiences worked together to increase reading fluency and comprehension in our students, as well as

enthusiasm for reading itself. Students in RT Club made gains in fluency greater than students not participating in RT Club. Although the gain experienced by RT Club students was 4 words correct per minute greater than nonparticipating students, in terms of a percentage gain this equates to a 12% increase over the nonparticipants. Additionally, since the RT Club students were performing at a higher level of fluency than nonparticipants at the outset of RT Club their fluency was approaching a ceiling, additional gains in fluency are likely more difficult to achieve (Hasbrouck and Tindal [2006] note that year to year and beginning to end of year fluency gains tend to diminish as students become older and more fluent). Thus, the fluency gains made by students in RT Club are even more impressive.

In their fluency norming study Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006) report that fifth grade students gain from 22 to 29 words correct per minute from fall to spring (approximately 30 weeks). This equates to a weekly gain of .73 to .97 words correct per minute over the course of the school year. In our present study the RT Club students made, on average, weekly gains of 1.8 words correct per minute over the course of the study, approximately double the normal gains suggested by Hasbrouck and Tindal. Fuchs, Fuchs, Hamlett, Walz, & Germann (1993) further suggest that weekly gains of .5 words per minute for 5th graders should be considered realistic and gains of .8 words per minute per week considered ambitious. Again, RT Club students in the present study made gains that were more than double the ambitious gains suggested by Fuchs et al. (1993).

Similarly, gains in reading comprehension as measured by the TAKS were also impressive. Every student in the RT Club passed the TAKS assessment and 86% passed at a commended level. These levels of silent reading comprehension were clearly impressive and well above the level of performance for students who did not participate in RT Club. It appears likely that the authentic fluency instruction offered through RT Club added sig-

nificantly not only to students' fluency performance, but also to their ability to comprehend texts at a fifth-grade level.

Affective dimensions of reading instruction are also important. One way of measuring impact on affect on a voluntary after school program is to examine attendance. Attendance and student investment in this after school program was high. Weekly attendance rates were steady, and of the original 32 students that joined, 28 of those students remained in the program from October through May. Students expressed high levels of motivation to perform, and this element seems vital to maintaining student motivation. One participating student commented, "The thing I like best about readers' theater is being able to hang out with friends and performing in front of other kids." Another student said that she enjoyed "...acting, expressing emotion, improvisation, and making younger kids laugh." A fellow club member added, "Readers' Theater Club is a way kids can have fun while they are learning."

Readers' theater and associated activities that were part of RT Club appear to significantly increase reading fluency in most readers. Non-participating students began the year with lower fluency scores on average, which likely contributed to their lower average fluency scores at the end of the study. Our students' scores on the TAKS have never been higher, and we believe the interpretive and analytical piece of readers' theater has proven invaluable for furthering our students' abilities to draw conclusions based on their own analysis of characters. In answering how RT Club can help kids improve their reading, a student noted, "I think it can improve their reading when they want to put themselves in the character's shoes and learn to use more expression when reading their books." We believe readers' theater helps kids make clear connections between how characters feel and how they themselves would feel in similar situations. Using readers' theater to develop students' higher order thinking skills has been a discovery for us. It is simple, natural, and enjoyable for students to

participate in the kinds of activities that readers' theater promotes. When asked what they would say to convince a teacher to start a Readers' Theater Club, students had much to say on the matter. One fifth grader said, "The students would love it, and it's also fun for the teachers. The kids would be better readers."

The voluntary nature of membership likely provided a great deal of ownership for students participating in RT Club. Peer-to-peer activities offered positive associations with reading, and the mixed-ability grouping likely helped students to feel on level with their peers. Repetition of warm-ups, phrases, and scripts helped students to develop familiarity with texts. Performing scripts builds confidence for students as they must read under the pressure of performance. More formal presentations further build student confidence and positive connections with reading for pleasure and notoriety. Research shows that comprehension levels are associated with the increased use of expression and phrasing in reading (Daane, et al., 2005; Pinnell, et al., 1995).

Readers' theater provides students with authentic, repeated opportunities to practice reading orally with expression, but also, students must learn to read silently with expression. This is vital for comprehending standard reading passages and tests that students must navigate on their own. Along with the concrete data we have collected this year, we can see that our students were developing their abilities to interpret author intent and the core messages of texts, very complex processes for students so young. Including an after-school Readers' Theater Club in a school's extra-curricular activities serves to build positive relationships among teachers, students and their peers, and build stronger community within grade levels and the school at large. Students had positive comments about the social aspect of Readers' Theater Club, as well. "I will always remember the friends I made. All the friendships I had grew, too," one student added. A fellow participant said, "I will always remember that readers' theater helped me

with my fluency and helped me being in groups. Now I'm not that nervous when up on stage or performing in front of the class." Another student said she would always remember RT Club and "...the thought of my friends and doing what we like to do."

The growth in fluency, comprehension, critical reading skills, and enthusiasm for dramatics of Readers' Theater Club participants gives insight into the value of building more readers' theater activities into the reading curriculum. Seeing the positive results of our after school program motivates me to build still more readers' theater activities into our reading curriculum for further developing all of our students' fluency and comprehension skills. Perhaps less tangible are the skills students have built in order to collaborate and perform with many different personalities. In addition, our students grew in self-confidence through their performances. This self-confidence is arguably one of the greatest benefits of our program. We are unable to show this on a spread-sheet or data-chart. However, it is very clear to us that students need to believe in their own abilities to increase their achievement. After-school enrichment programs like Readers' Theater Club reveal to students what they are capable of accomplishing. They are reaching into themselves and finding inner strength and inner determination, leading them to be intrinsically motivated—the key that unlocks infinite doors to success for students.

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## Supporting Fluency in Middle School: High Interest Books By Melanie Koss

How do you get students to read more, read faster, and read better? Find them books that they just can't put down. In addition to rereading favorite familiar titles, here are some suggestions of brand new titles that are sure to be hits.

**Anything but Typical.** By Nora Raleigh Baskin. 2010. Simon & Schuster. (978-1416995005). Jason Blake is a twelve-year-old boy with autism who is anything but typical. He struggles with social situations and prefers to meet people on an online creative writing forum, Storyboard. He meets a girl on the website, and then freaks out when he realizes that he might meet her in person.

**After Ever After.** By Jordan Sonnenblick. 2010. Scholastic. (978-0439837064). In this sequel to *Drums, Girls & Dangerous Pie*, Jeffrey is now cancer free, but he still struggles with the after-effects of the chemotherapy, as does his good friend Tad. The two work together to survive the challenges of eighth grade.

**Calamity Jack.** By Shannon Hale. 2010. Bloomsbury. (978-1599900766). Told in graphic novel format, this sequel to *Rapunzel's Revenge* continues the story of Jack and Rapunzel with more twists on traditional fairy tales set in the American West. After his actions leave his mother in ruins, he is sent away with a stolen magical goose and his adventures continue.



**Candy Bomber: The Story of the Berlin Airlift's "Chocolate Pilot."** By Michael O. Tunnell. 2010. Charlesbridge. (978-1580893367). During World War II, Lt. Gail S. Halvorsen, a C-54 cargo pilot, shared candy with a group of German children and was touched by the response. He began to clandestinely drop candy in to the bombed city of Berlin, and is turned into a USAF-sanctioned operation. This nonfiction title tells the story complete with photos, letters, and diagrams.

**Girl Stolen: A Novel.** By April Henry. 2010. Macmillan Children's Publishing Group/Henry Holt. (978-0805090055). When sixteen-year-old Cheyenne's mother runs into the pharmacy to pick her up some medicine, her car is hijacked, with her in it! When the carjacker realizes that Cheyenne is the daughter of a wealthy man, the carjacking turns into kidnapping. Cheyenne needs to escape, but her plans are made harder because she is blind.

**Henrietta Hurnbuckle's Circus of Life.** By Michael de Guzman. 2010. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. (978-0374335137). Henrietta travels the world with her parents as a part of Filbert's Traveling Clown Circus, a small struggling circus company. After her father dies in a sudden accident, Henrietta is challenged to think about a new and different life.

**Keeper.** By Kathi Appelt. 2010. Atheneum. (978-1416950608).

When everything goes wrong for 10-year-old Keeper on the day of the Blue Moon, she decides to turn to her mother for help. The only challenge – her mother is a mermaid. With the help of Captain the Sea Gull and Best Dog, Keeper attempts to find her mother in the Gulf of Mexico with only a small rowboat.

**Mammoths and Mastodons: Titans of the Ice Age.** By Cheryl Bardoe. 2010. Abrams Books for Young Readers. (978-0810984134).

A scientific search ensues after two boys find a frozen baby mammoth in the arctic. The history and lives of mammoths and mastodons are explored, with descriptions of life in the Ice Age and the relationships of these animals with today’s elephants.

**The Search for WondLa.** By Toni DiTerlizzi. 2010. Simon & Schuster. (978-1416983101).

After her underground home on the planet Orbona is destroyed, Eva, a young girl raised by robots, begins a search to find other humans like herself. Once above ground, Eva’s quest is filled with encounters with strange creatures and multiple challenges. This book is especially appealing to struggling readers as it is a combination of graphic novel, novel, and online website. Special pages in the book can be held up to a webcam that causes an interactive map to appear on a computer screen.

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<p><b>Join Us!</b>                  Membership Application                  Middle School Special Interest                  Group of the International                  Reading Association</p> <p>Your                  Name: _____                  School: _____                  Home                  Address: _____                  _____                  Home                  Telephone: _____                  _____                  Email: _____</p>	<p>Please complete the attached                  survey and enclose a check for                  \$10 payable to:</p> <p>Billie Jo Dunaway                  4640 Secret River Trail                  Port Orange, FL 32129                  (We are a non-profit                  organization.)</p> <p>Are you a member of the                  International Reading                  Association? _____</p> <p>If so, Membership                  #: _____</p>	<p>Would you be interested in                  active participation in the plan-                  ning and development of the                  following projects/activities?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Annual Convention Program  <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Development  <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher of the Year Award  <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter Membership  <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter Officer  <input type="checkbox"/> Membership Committee  <input type="checkbox"/> Publicity Committee  <input type="checkbox"/> Web site development  <input type="checkbox"/> Newsletter</p>
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