

Reading in the Middle

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

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Content Area Instruction and the Common Core Standards

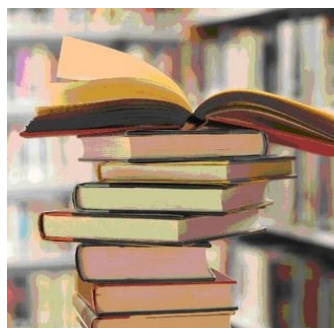
The focus of this issue of *Reading in the Middle* is to continue our discussion of the Common Core State Standards in the middle school classroom.

Vicky Zygouris-Coe focuses in on Disciplinary Literacy in Science. Her column points describes key skills and strategies for helping students with close reading in science.

Melanie Koss highlights novels written in multiple perspectives. These the complexity of these novels fit the standards of the Common Core. Teachers can use this list to support the implementation of complex text.

The main focus of this edition is to highlight the Middle School Reading Special Interest group's upcoming presentations at the International Reading Association Conference. The presentations will focus on building teachers knowledge on about texts that support teaching under the Common Core State Standards and strategies for integrating writing instruction throughout your instruction.

First read Erica Perl's tips for writing. "Erica S. Perl is an award-winning children's book author" who shares her love of writing and tips for writing with teachers and stu-



dents throughout the country.

Then, read about Laura Robb. "Author, teacher, coach, and speaker, Laura Robb has completed 43 years of teaching in grades 4-8. She presently coaches teachers in reading/writing workshop."

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The purpose of this group is to provide a network for middle level teachers to share information, ideas, activities, strategies, and techniques. 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



Eye on Disciplinary Literacy

Column by Vicky Zygouris-Coe, Ph.D., University of Central Florida

Topic: Disciplinary Literacy in Science and the Common Core State Standards

In 2014, 45 states, the District of Columbia, four territories, and the Department of Defense Education Activity will be implementing the Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are designed to focus on student college and career preparation, are clear, specific, rigorous, coherent and are also internationally benchmarked. The CCSS focus on results, present an integrated model of literacy roadmap, but do not specify how to teach. Instruction is left up to the teachers, the informed practitioners.

What are key shifts of the CCSS? Students are expected to do the following:

- Read more complex texts.
- Read more informational texts.
- Read, comprehend, analyze, and argue about ideas across multiple texts.
- Learn how to do close reading of texts (staircase of complexity).
- Answer text-dependent questions.
- Build a strong general and domain-specific vocabulary.
- Write to argue, analyze, and synthesize.
- Build literacy and content knowledge and skills in tandem.
- Collaborate, problem-solve, and negotiate meaning with others.

- Engage in evidence-based arguments (orally and in writing).
- Become prepared for college, career, and workforce demands.

Based on this short, but demanding and complex, list of knowledge and skills students need to know and be able to do, what type of instruction will they need to have? Instruction that is rigorous and discipline-specific instruction that teaches them how to read and think about disciplinary texts, and instruction that promotes metacognitive thinking. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on science and what it means to teach science in middle grades through a disciplinary literacy framework in the era of the CCSS. I will also raise related instructional questions and will offer suggestions for reflection.

Science is the process of discovering how the world works and not just a collection of facts and theories. Questioning, inquiring, searching for evidence, analyzing evidence, and evaluating facts and ideas that are supported by evidence are core goals and processes in science. Reading and writing are not foreign to scientists who spend most of their time reading (text and data) and writing (about text and data). The ability to read science materials/texts requires the student to read procedural information, graphical displays, and mathematical expressions. One of the challenges science teachers face is how to foster these disciplinary skills without

sacrificing content.

If you wish to strengthen your students' comprehension of science texts and knowledge of science, consider teaching them about text patterns in science texts. Major text structure patterns in science texts include the following:

- Classification
- Process-description
- Fact-statement
- Problem-solution
- Experiment-instruction
- Combination of all of the above

In addition, teach students how to read and comprehend texts at a deep level, generate questions, plan and carry out investigations, analyze and interpret data, engage in argument about science, develop and use academic vocabulary, write, and communicate ideas and information in disciplinary-specific ways. For students to become competent in science, they need to develop knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that are specific to the discipline (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

To teach in a disciplinary-specific way and in a way that promotes critical understanding requires a learning framework that goes beyond strategy instruction. Think about your role and the role of your students in the learning process. Reflect on your instruction—what will you need to change, improve, adjust, or eliminate in order to meet these demands on students so that all can

learn and succeed in your classroom? Are you teaching in a way that helps students connect scientific ideas and concepts? How do you plan to use close reading in your classroom? Do you teach students about text structure of science texts? In what ways do you build students' academic vocabulary? What do you do to teach students how to generate good questions? How much time do you spend teaching students how to use evidence from texts to support their conclusions? What role does academic discourse play in your classroom? How about collaborative learning? And, what do you do to teach students to monitor and self-regulate their own understanding? Is your classroom environment conducive to science learning and does it motivate students to want to learn more about science?

Developing students' disciplinary literacy knowledge, skills, and processes in science are no small feat, and it cannot be achieved through a set of strategies or instructional "add-ons." To prepare students for college and career readiness, we have to make sure that we are teaching in ways that are specific to scientific inquiry.

The world as we have created it is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking.—Albert Einstein

References

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Shanahan, T. & Shanahan C. (2008). Teaching disciplinary literacy to adolescents: Rethinking content-area literacy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 78, 1, 40-59.

Zygouris-Coe, V. (2012). Disciplinary literacy and the common core state standards. *Topics in Language Disorders*, 32(1), 35-50.



Call for Manuscripts

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 reading, serves as a forum for expressing varying viewpoints on middle school reading, and promotes an interest in further research in the field of middle level reading. 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 for articles is February 15, with Spring publication scheduled for May/June.

***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 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.

Complex Texts: Novels with Multiple Perspectives and/or Narrators

Column by: Melanie D. Koss, Ph.D., Northern Illinois University

On everyone's minds, these days is the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and how we can best incorporate them into our teaching. One of the critical components of the CCSS is the idea of measuring and focusing on text complexity. Text complexity can be defined and measured in a multitude of ways, including looking at the variety of perspectives told in a piece of literature. The use of multiple narrators or the telling of a narrative from multiple perspectives adds a level of text complexity by developing students' critical thinking skills through reading and interacting with multifaceted texts. The following titles incorporate different points of view through the use of multiple narrators and/or multiple perspectives and can create more challenging reading experiences for students.

Because of Mr. Terrupt by Rob Buyea. 2010. Random House. (978-0375858246).

Seven fifth grade students share their own perspectives of fitting in and learning about their lives due to the influence of their new teacher, Mr. Terrupt. When a prank goes awry, students realize just how much they have learned from their teacher and their peers. Told in short chapters and alternating narratives and organized by months of the school year, characters share a bit about their home lives and backgrounds that set them apart. It is only by the reader connecting the narratives that the whole story is revealed.

Candymakers by Wendy Mass. 2010. Little Brown Books for Young Readers. (978-0316002592).

A candymaking contest is on, providing the chance of a lifetime for four lucky contestants. Logan, Miles, Daisy, and Philip all have their own reasons for competing and wanting to win. But what happens when the factory's secret ingredient

is stolen? Each of the four children tells their perspective in alternating chapters as they work to solve the mystery. Stand-out features include rich descriptions and strong character building, as well as a growing pace with a satisfying conclusion.

Criss Cross by Lynne Rae Perkins. 2005. Greenwillow. (978-0060092740).

There are small moments in everyone's lives that, unknowingly, alter the course of our futures. Over the course of a summer, Debbie and Hector wish something interesting would happen, and realize that they are facing a crossroads that will more their lives forward. Using narration, poems, question-and-answer formats, photographs, and drawings, the story and its characters are quietly interconnected.

Every Soul a Star by Wendy Mass. 2009. Little Brown Books for Young Readers. (978-0316002578).

Thousands have gathered at Moon Shadow campground to see the rare event of a total eclipse of the sun; perhaps a once in a lifetime experience. Among the watches are three unrelated teens whose lives are about to become intertwined forever. Told from the three teens voices and perspectives, this interconnected novel tells about making new friends in unlikely places and believing in oneself. Included in the book is an author's note with additional information about eclipses.

Flipped by Wendelin Van Draanen. 2001. Knopf Books for Young Readers. (978-0375811746).

Juli and Bryce met in second grade. He ran, she flipped. That hasn't changed. Now in eighth grade, the two are still opposing and connecting magnets.

Through farcical misunderstandings and missed opportunities, this tale of romance is told via alternating chapters narrated by Juli and Bryce.

Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village by Laura Amy Schlitz. 2007. Candlewick Press. (978-0763650940).

Life in an English manor in 1255 is explored by this series of interconnected monologues by different individuals who would have made up life in a medieval village. Twenty-three characters, such as the falconer's son and the villain's daughter, take turns, in unique voices and style, telling their experiences. Rather than a collection of facts, each character shares personal stories, memories, and desires, pulling together a complex overall look at how different individuals come together to create a whole. Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Includes historical notes and essays, and is illustrated by watercolor and ink drawings inspired by medieval Bible illustrations.

Moon Over Manifest by Clare Vanderpool. 2010. Delacorte Press. (978-0385738835).

A multilayered mystery unfolds in Moon Over Manifest, weaving together the history of a town from WWI through the Great Depression. In 1936, Abilene Tucker's father sends her to live with her father's friend, The Pastor, in Manifest, MO while he finds work with the railroad. The story of The Pastor and her father's friendship is revealed through Abilene's narrative mixed with WWI-era newspaper columns, soldiers' letters home, and stories told by related characters. Mysteries uncovered include elements of the KKK, bootlegging, murder, and the real reason Abilene's mother had to go away.

Schooled by Gordan Korman. 2008. Hy-



perion Books. (978-1423105169).

Cap Anderson grew up with his hippe grandmother on a farming commune. He’s never seen television or interacted with the outside world, and he has always been homeschooled. Until the day his grandmother gets injured and Cap is forced to move to town and attend the local middle school. Cap is smart, but ‘unschooled’ in all things middle school. He is the perfect target for bullying, but his reactions to pranks are unexpected and memorable, and show that conformity is not always the name of the game. Cap alternates with other characters, including the social worker, the bully, the bullied, a football player, and others that interact with Cap at school in some way.

The View from Saturday by E. L. Konigsburg. 1998. Atheneum Books for Young Readers. (978-0689817212).

Mrs. Olinski pulled together an award winning sixth grade Academic Bowl team, but no one knows how she chose the four winning students and how they worked so well together. Alternating short stories told by the four team members help the story on these four unlikely students working together to not only achieve academic success, but solve the mystery of why they were pulled together and how their create such a winning combination.

Wonder by R. J. Palacio. 2012. Random House. (978-0375869020).

Born with a significant facial deformity, August (Auggie) Pullman has never attended school. Until now. Auggie will be entering fifth grade at a nearby school, and he just wants to fit in. But it isn’t easy to blend into the crowd when your looks make you stand out. Told from the points of view of Auggie, his sister, his classmates, and others, the full picture of Auggie’s experience comes to life. Exploring compassion, bullying, sticking up for what you believe in, and ultimately, acceptance, Wonder is a book that will stay with you long after you put it down.

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
- The SIG presents an interactive professional development session as part of the Annual Convention of the International Reading Association.



IRA 58TH ANNUAL CONVENTION
MAKING A DIFFERENCE | SAN ANTONIO
APRIL 19-22, 2013

Using Literature to guide writing instruction in the middle grades

Saturday, April 20, 2013: 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Grand Hyatt

Room: Bowie C

Nance S Wilson
Lourdes University
Sylvania, OH

Erica Perl
Author, *Random House Books*

Laura Robb
Consultant/Language Arts Teacher/Scholastic & Heinemann Author
Winchester, VA

Description:

This session demonstrates how middle grades teachers motivate middle school students to write using literature. Teachers, authors, and middle grade experts come together to present interactive demonstrations for interweaving reading and writing instruction. Attendees will gain classroom strategies for motivating and engaging middle grades students to deal with text complexity and academic vocabulary in reading and writing.



Write What You Love

By Erica S. Perl

They say, “write what you know” but I always say, “write what you love”. After all, writing anything – a book, a poem, a paragraph – takes effort and time and guts. If you’re going to do it, and I do think that everyone should, you owe it to yourself to write about something that you’re truly passionate about. It doesn’t have to be something “big”. I have been known to write passionately about cookies. And animals. And sometimes people, real and fabricated, for whom I fall so deeply in love that I won’t let them leave my stories even if they want to.

It was certainly that way with Ace, the grandfather in my book, *When Life Gives You O.J.* Ace started talking to me one day, and I happily went along for the ride. It was like a fabulous reunion with my relatives, most of whom are no longer around to press danishes on me. Ace is loud like my Grandpa Benny was. He’s opinionated like my Grandpa Alan was. He collects rubber bands like my Grandma Dearie and deep down underneath it all he’s sweet like my Grandma Florence. He speaks Yiddish like my Great Grandpa Meyer and Great Grandma Molly and Great Uncle Mac (who, at the age of 96, proofread the book). And Ace calls Zelly ‘Kid’, just like my Grandpa Benny used to call me.

As a result, *When Life Gives You O.J.* practically begs to be read aloud, which is one of the things I love about it. I will do my Ace voice at the drop of a hat, and I’m always excited to hear teachers and kids try out theirs. I also love to hear kids create new voices for their own characters, especially character who – like Ace – are Frankenstein’s monsters of borrowed parts from people they know. Their best friend’s laugh. Their mom’s raised eyebrow. The tuneless hum of their school bus driver. This is a secret of writing fiction I love to tell kids: it involves research. I just don’t call it that. If I slip up and use the dreaded “r” word with kids, it’s all over. (Don’t even get me started on that other “r” word... revision).

What do I tell them instead? Actually, I don’t tell them anything. Instead, I like to take them on a walk. A nature walk, of sorts. Only what we’re studying today is human nature. We walk down the hall, notebooks in hand. We hang out. Sometimes we draw, or pretend to draw. Mostly we look and listen. We swap our “r” word for the kid-friendly “s” words: Sneaking. Snooping. Spying.) We eavesdrop on public conversations in public spaces (even writers have their limits). We write down dialog verbatim, phonetically, spelling things wrong deliberately to accentuate inflection and resisting the impulse to fix grammatical inconsistencies. We return to our classroom to download all of our observations, the details still hot out of the oven. These details will inspire, inform, and invigorate our fiction. Because it is true what they say: you can’t make this stuff up. Or rather, you can, but your fiction will be better if you don’t.

It was a picture book that shifted things for me. I wrote a book called *Dotty* about a girl named Ida whose imaginary friend outlasted those of all her classmates. In it, Ida is mocked in the most insidious way by her so-called friends (a girl named Katya teases that Ida’s shoe is untied, when in fact she is calling attention to the “leash” Ida still carries). I find it interesting to watch the way children react to this scene. They’ll tell you why Katya was out of line, and also why Ida’s satisfying reaction was also a bad choice, but you can see their gratitude for telling it like it is about playground bullies. Again, this was also a write what you’re passionate about moment for me – I loved reclaiming the moment by revealing what it is like to be a kid who is considered babyish by her peers. After all, I was that kid. It was personal for me.

Wait a second. How did we get onto bullying? This was supposed to be about funny books. Right. Let’s talk about *Chicken Butt!*

Chicken Butt! was a turning point for me in a different way. Sure, it’s fun to have a book kids scream for by name and laugh so hard over they sometimes wet themselves (I take it as a compliment). No one is a reluctant reader when it comes to a book with a name like *Chicken Butt!* BUT I take the silly stuff seriously, and I realized I needed to show people the power of the Butt, if you will, to keep it from getting written off as just a joke. This also tapped into another write-what-you-love: I love theater so I love writing things, like plays and scripts, that can be performed.

So I started to do the book as *Readers’ Theater* – it is essentially a four act play with three characters, easy to do with a large group provided you have a big screen to project the images on – and I started to encourage kids after every rhyme to come up with alternatives. As in: “You know what? *Chicken Nut!* *Chicken Gut!* *Chicken Hut!*” :You know why? *Chicken Spy!* *Chicken Fly!* *Chicken Die!*” With a teacher at the ready writing down every rhyme, a class full of kids could conjure up a boatload of rhymes in no time flat, and then be perfectly poised to write their own joke/story/poetry books.

With *Chicken Butt!*, I began to see my stories as jumping off points for student creativity as much as an outlet for my own. So when I wrote *When Life Gives You O.J.* (and the sequel, *Aces Wild*, which comes out in June, 2013), I gave some thought not just to what kids would make of it, but what they could do with it. Turns out the answer is: a lot.

The first idea I suggested, which kids took off and ran with, was creating your own *O.J.* The next thing I knew, I was receiving them (and photographs of them) from classrooms, as well as individual kids. Libraries did “make your own pet” activities based on *O.J.* and

encouraging kids to make all kinds of animals (even lizards and giraffes) out of a wide range of recyclable items, not just juice jugs. Just this week I heard from a teacher and a librarian who took this idea one step farther by having students write in the voices of their animals. The class is also considering using their animals to spotlight animals up for adoption at their local animal shelter, and raising money using the jugs as “doggie banks.”

I have also encouraged the use of *When Life Gives You O.J.* as the basis for a math and economics project. What does it cost to keep a pet? How would you budget money and time for it. If you had to care for it like Zelly takes care of O.J., how long could you keep it up. It also makes a fabulous middle school classroom debate topic: is Zelly’s decision to take Ace’s advice likely to result in success or not. And, even if it seems likely, is it worth it when there’s a strong risk of total public humiliation if anyone sees her (and, in a small town, how could they not?). You can also do amazing Venn diagrams with the book, seeing how you overlap with Zelly, Ace, Allie, and Jeremy (as well as how they do and don’t overlap with each other) and creating a Venn diagram for your own family or characters in other books.

When I meet with kids, either via Skype or in person, to talk about my books, I try to emphasize several things. First, if you want to be a writer, you need to write. Kids love to talk about the books they want to write. I say, go for it! Put those ideas to paper! Second, I emphasize the importance of taking risks in your writing – putting characters in tough spots and not throwing them a lifejacket (when I teach writing, I bring in lifesavers candy to make this point). Third, I try to make writing as accessible as possible. Kids who don’t like to write are more likely to do so anyway if the stakes are lower. Drawing and making audio recordings of stories, poems, dialog and lyrics are great entry points, and I am proud to say that I make use of both techniques as methods to get my ideas flowing.

And fourth, of course, is write what you love. It’s the “dance like no one’s watching” approach to writing. Write about stuff that blows your mind, or scares you to death, or makes you collapse giggling. Shake your literary (chicken) butt – and yes, I’m talking to you, grown-ups as well as kids - because no one can dance your dance, or tell your stories, better than you. Or have more fun doing it.



Short Biography: Laura Robb

Author, teacher, coach, and speaker, Laura Robb has completed 43 years of full time teaching in grades 4-8 and published more than 18 books. She presently coaches teachers in Powhatan School in Boyce, Virginia, and in Staunton and Amherst, Virginia. In addition, Robb returns to the classroom for a semester in the winter and teaches in grades 1 to 8 and selects three different grades to work in each year. She has also started an innovative approach to staff development by initiating follow-up workshops via a video conference for teachers who need support and encouragement in school districts across the country.

Robb graduated Queens College, part of the city university system in New York City with a BA in English and French Literature. A member of Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society, Robb graduated Queens College Magna Cum Laude, and received her Masters in and Instruction, Summa Cum Laude, from Shenandoah University, in Winchester, VA. Robb recently received an honorary doctorate from Shenandoah University for her work in literacy as well as the literacy award for supporting teachers from the Nassau County Reading Council.

Robb has written more than 17 books for teachers about reading and writing. Her most recent Scholastic titles are a sec-

ond edition of *Teaching Reading in Middle School*, *Teaching Nonfiction Writing*, and *Assessment Tools for Differentiating Reading Instruction* which includes a CD with 100 assessment forms. She's also published a 500 page binder, *Teaching Reading: A Differentiated Approach* and the book, *Differentiating Reading Instruction* which shows teachers in grades 4 and up how to meet the diverse needs of classes with mixed reading levels. Grade four and five teachers will find the *Reading Strategies Toolkit: Nonfiction* helpful for teaching students how to read nonfiction; it also contains differentiated work for students. Presently, Robb is working on the teaching guides for *XBooks* for the School Library Group and a new professional book, *Teaching Adolescents to Comprehend Short, Complex Texts*—both for

Scholastic

For Heinemann, Robb has published *Teaching Middle School Writers: What Every English Teacher Needs to Know*. Coming soon is Robb's First Hand Project for Heinemann: Smart Writing: Practical Teaching Units for Middle School Writers which aligns with the common core writing standards. She's also published a book on staff development and early literacy for Heinemann.

Robb has designed Classroom Libraries for Scholastic for stu-

dents in grades three though nine. Her mission is for every school in this country to have a school library, a certified librarian, and classroom libraries with 500 to 700 books and other reading materials; she works with school districts to set and achieve these goals.

Robb has also created materials for students with The Great Source Education Group. She is the lead author for *Reading Advantage*, an intervention program for students in grades 6 to 12 reading three or more years below grade level. In addition, Robb has co-authored a *Reader's Handbook* for students in grades 4 and 5 and grades 6 to 8.

Robb completed a three-year term on the National Council of Teacher's of English's Commission on Reading. Nominated by her peers in education to serve on the Commission, Robb was also invited to write a chapter for a book that NCTE published called: *What Research REALLY Says About Learning to Read*. Robb, with five other NCTE Commission members met with staffers and congressmen on Feb. 3, 2009, to discuss the teaching of reading: Robb discussed differentiation and access to books for middle grade and middle school students.

Robb is a keynote speaker at conferences all over the country and in Canada. She speaks annually at conferences sponsored by the National Council of Teachers

of English and the International Reading Association. Robb also trains teachers on differentiating reading instruction so that teachers can reach and teach every learner in a class.



Application to Join the Middle School Special Interest Group of the International Reading Association

Name: _____

School: _____

Home Address: _____

Home Telephone: _____

Email: _____

Please complete the attached survey and enclose a check for \$10 payable to:

Billie Jo Dunaway
4640 Secret River Trail
Port Orange, FL 32129

(We are a non-profit organization.)

Are you a member of the International Reading Association?

If so, Membership #: _____

<https://sites.google.com/site/middleschoolreadingsig/>

msrsig@gmail.com



IRA 58TH ANNUAL CONVENTION
MAKING A DIFFERENCE | SAN ANTONIO
APRIL 19-22, 2013

Examining the Middle Grades Canon

Saturday, April 20, 2013: 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM

San Antonio Convention Center

Room 203AB

Nance S Wilson
Lourdes University
Sylvania, OH

Melanie D. Koss
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, IL

This interactive session will provide attendees with the opportunity to discover the texts most commonly taught in middle grades throughout the United States. The session will include book talks, hands-on opportunities for textual complexity analysis, and introductions to new texts that connect to those already in use.

This interactive workshop will offer participants opportunities to become familiar with current texts used in the middle grades classroom. 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 with current materials and the Common Core Standards. Participants will have hands-on opportunities to evaluate the text complexity of the texts as well as learn about additional texts to provide multi-text experiences for students.

Traditionally, books deemed as classics are taught in the high school English classroom. The reasons for this are many, including the often-mentioned reason that the classics, or books that are considered to be members of the canon, have stood the test of time (Bushman & Haas, 2006; Crowe, 2001; Santoli & Wagner, 2004). This is reinforced by the traditional nature of the English curriculum, wherefore teachers are most comfortable teaching what they, themselves, are familiar with and have been taught (Bushman & Haas; Crowe; Santoli & Wagner), added to the fact that the public expects and demands that the classics be taught, again because that is what is familiar and accepted (Bushman & Haas; Santoli & Wagner). Some also argue that the classics are classics because of their quality (Crowe) or because they examine the human condition in ways that are challenging, complex, and deep, something that other, non-classic texts cannot be counted on to do (Crowe; Jago, 2001, in Knickerbocker, 2002). One last often-cited argument is that the classics are taught because of cultural literacy, or that teachers fear they may be depriving students of information everyone else may be reading or learning, if they veer away from teaching the status-quo (Bushman & Haas; Santoli & Wagner). So, due to the new Common Core State Standards and issues of text complexity, what should middle school students be reading? A developmental viewpoint is taken by many researchers and theorists, who believe that adolescent literacy development is a crucial factor in determining what reading materials are appropriate for readers (Carlsen, 1980; Herz, 1996, in Knickerbocker, 2002; Knickerbocker, 2002). These researchers believe that cultural background, developmental level, and school ability all affect what is useful, interesting, relevant, and readable for students, and that each classroom has a wide range of students. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all mentality of prescribed books to cover may not be the best approach for teaching students to read critically and for fostering a love of reading.