From *A GUIDE TO THE READING WORKSHOP: MIDDLE GRADES*

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Chapter 3: What Does Research Say Adolescent Readers Need?

> "Allington argued and many other researchers have argued that above all, students need time to engage in reading in order to get better at reading."

Over decades of research (1977, 2002), Richard Allington has returned often to the three key conditions readers need to thrive:

1. time to read,
2. access to books they find fascinating, and
3. expert instruction.

The first condition, time to read, means examining middle school schedules to make sure students get time to practice. Allington argued and many other researchers have argued that above all, students need time to engage in reading in order to get better at reading. Arguing for time for independent reading in schools, Donalyn Miller (2015) likens the situation of students needing to read in order to get better at reading to learning a sport or an instrument. No one ever asks the coach why his players are practicing on the field, and no one asks the music teacher why students are playing instruments during practice times. The only way to get better at doing something is to practice doing it.

Gay Ivey and Karen Broaddus (2001) suggest that the goal of "creat[ing] skillful, versatile, engaged readers" (350) may actually be at odds with the way reading has been taught in old-fashioned middle school classrooms, where dozens of students inch their way through the same text at the same pace. They explain that too often, students are expected to read increasingly complex materials, yet they get little time practicing reading and little instruction in methods for deeply comprehending texts.

The second condition, access to books readers find fascinating, means increasing the range of texts that students access in school. Perhaps Ivey and Broaddus's biggest concern lies in their observation that students are expected to be independent readers, yet "they get limited opportunities to explore their own interests in reading, to read at their own pace, or to make their own decisions about whether or not to read a book" (350). Researchers champion independent reading because it supports students in getting stronger at reading. Ivey and Broaddus surveyed close to 2,000 sixth-graders and discovered another important reason to offer time for students to read texts they can and want to read: engagement. When asked, "Which reading activities do you enjoy most in this class?" 63% of students said time to read and 62% said the teacher reading aloud (360). The researchers concluded with an important suggestion:

> These results suggest the possibility that these fundamental features of instruction—having a rich supply of texts and many opportunities to experience text through independent reading and through teacher read-alouds—may be universal needs for diverse students across a range of contexts. (367)

We can create more research-based classrooms in middle school ELA, then, by increasing access to books and time spent reading.

To fulfill the third condition readers need to thrive, we also need to increase teachers' expertise in reading instruction. These [Units of Study for Teaching Reading, Middle School Grades] aim specifically to increase teacher depth and breadth of knowledge in the content of reading, and in methods of reading instruction. They aim to offer adolescents the kind of education that is directly in keeping with the goal of creating "skillful, versatile, engaged readers" (Ivey and Broaddus 2001).

THE ESSENTIALS OF READING INSTRUCTION

Above all, good teachers matter. It is important to develop teachers' abilities to teach by providing professional development and a culture of collaborative practice.

Again and again, research shows what most of us already know to be true: good teaching makes a world of difference (Allington and Johnston 2002; Duffy 1997; Rebell and Wolff 2008, 90; Rivkin et al. 2005; Darling-Hammond and Sykes 2003; Pressley et al. 2003; Guthrie and Humenick 2004). Bembry has found that students who spent three years in classrooms that provided high-quality instruction achieved scores on standardized reading tests that were 40% higher than the scores earned by students receiving lower-quality instruction (Bembry et al. 1998). That is a staggering statistic. It is also an important one, because many people believe that reading comprehension boils down to intelligence and that some kids are predisposed to understand complex texts and others simply aren't. Clearly the research suggests differently. As Allington writes, "It has become clear that investing in effective teaching—whether in hiring decisions or professional development planning—is the most 'research-based' strategy available" (Allington 2002b).

Shirley Brice Heath, Margery Bailey Professor of English and Dramatic Literature at Stanford University, has gone so far as to suggest that the single most important condition for literacy learning is having mentors who are joyfully literate people, who demonstrate what it means to live joyfully literate lives. Some lucky children grow up in households where families demonstrate the richness of a life of books, but many of our children rely on school to provide them with those literacy resources. And so it is not just nice—it is essential—that teachers bring their own love of reading into classrooms, talking about the books they love, sharing excitement over hearing an author speak, telling students that they can't wait to curl up with a book on a rainy Saturday while the rain pelts against the windows or the fire escape. As new global standards call for levels of intellectual work that many adults have never experienced, it is even more important that teachers are willing to become engaged in their own literacy, so they are able to say to students, "Let me show you a strategy that has worked for me." When teachers are public and transparent about their own efforts to outgrow themselves as readers, they can model that learning to read is a lifelong process.

Teachers grow stronger not only from their own experiences participating in adult reading groups and other sorts of literacy activities, but also from working within school-based learning communities. In his article "Improving Relationships inside the Schoolhouse," Roland Barth states, "One incontrovertible finding emerges from my career spent working in and around schools: the nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else" (Barth 2006, 8). It is critically important for schools to create communities of practice where teachers work together to learn from each other's best practices to position students to develop into skilled, proficient, expert readers and writers.

Learners need enormous amounts of time for actual reading.

Research supports the fact that teachers who successfully teach reading and writing provide their students with far more time for actual reading and writing. Allington and Johnston (2002) found that in the classrooms of more effective teachers, students read ten times as much as students in classrooms of less effective teachers. But in all too many schools, a ninety-minute "reading block" produces no more than ten or fifteen minutes of actual reading (Allington 2002b). Success in reading is directly related to the amount of time a person spends reading.

You may run into colleagues (or more likely, salespeople) who promise that a particular anthology or collection of short texts or online reading program would magically produce middle school students who read at and above grade level, and who are discerning at literary interpretation work, independent and wise in how they weigh

and evaluate reasoning in nonfiction texts, skilled at note-taking and writing to think, and aware when their comprehension falters. There is no such magical solution. If there were—if you could simply purchase strong readers—then everyone would have done that already. But just as you can't create a better baseball team simply by giving players a better playing field or neater uniforms, you can't create good readers with glossy packaging.

Nearly two decades ago, the commonsense correlation between students' reading achievement and the time they actually spent reading was called into question by the now much-maligned 2001 National Reading Panel, which was unable to find a direct correlation between the two. You can read a close analysis of the NRP's findings and problems in their research, in Krashen (2004), and you can learn more about the NRP and No Child Left Behind, and their links to corporate reading companies and adoptions, in Allington's *Big Brother and the National Reading Curriculum* (2002). In the wake of the NRP's recommendations, the National Assessment of Educational Progress exams showed that students' reading results flat-lined. In short, despite the NRP's single brief attempt to suggest that you could teach reading without students actually reading much, years of subsequent experience confirm what decades of research—and common sense—have held all along. Students need lots of time to read.

When you teach reading, you are teaching a skill—like driving a car. And when anyone teaches a skill, the learner needs to be doing the thing. As Grant Wiggins said, when he spoke at Teachers College a few years ago, you don't learn to drive by taking a car apart and studying every tiny screw and cog that goes into making the car. You need to practice driving. And in the same way, your students need to be reading. Study after study show that time to read matters. Krashen (2004) points out that 93% of the tests on reading comprehension that collect data on volume of reading show that kids who are given more time to read do better. Guthrie and Humenick (2004) found that reading volume predicted reading comprehension, and that dramatic increases in reading volume are important for rises in literacy proficiencies. John Guthrie and Nicole Humenick's study, "Teaching for Literacy Engagement," (2004) illustrates, for example, that fourth-graders who read at the second-grade level spend just half an hour a day reading, while fourth graders who read at the eighth-grade level spend four and a half hours a day reading. The NAEP Reading Report Card for the Nation (U.S. Department of Education 1999) shows that at every level, reading more pages at home and at school was associated with higher reading scores. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) also researched the relationship between the amount of reading done and reading achievement. They found that the amount of time spent reading was the best predictor of reading achievement. Taylor, Frye, and Maruyama (1990) found that time spent reading at school "contributed to growth in students' reading achievement" (360). The research on independent reading has led Bridges (2012) to make the assertion that "the research on the benefits of independent reading is consistent and unequivocal: silent, independent reading of meaningful, connected text boosts reading achievement" (1).

It is important to note that even when the activity students are doing in lieu of reading has been shown to be useful, warning signs should go up when nonreading activities consume more than a few minutes of reading time. For example, although activating prior knowledge before reading has been shown to be useful (Pearson and Fielding 1991), spending most of a reading block doing so is not supported by research—and that is just one example. Allington suggests that three to five minutes spent activating prior knowledge is probably sufficient (Allington 2002b).

After reviewing the amount of research on the need for students to spend a volume of time actually reading, Allington concludes, "So how much daily in-school reading might we plan for? I would suggest one and one half hours of daily in-school reading would seem to be a minimum goal given the data provided by these studies. . . . However my ninety-minute recommendation is for time actually spent reading" (2012, 47).

Research by Guthrie shows what this call for more time spent reading will look like in practice. Most level U–W books—such as *Bud, Not Buddy* by Curtis (U) and *When You Reach Me* by Stead (W)—can be read in four hours, suggesting readers can certainly finish one of those books in a week. Middle-level readers are expected to enter sixth-grade reading around a level V. For these students and others who read at levels within this range, this means that they should be reading about a book a week, if not more.

But Guthrie's research also has enormous implications for students who read at levels considered far below grade level in middle-level classrooms. If *Stone Fox*, a level P book containing approximately 12,000 words, is an accessible text for a reader (if the reader can handle it with fluency), that child will finish *Stone Fox* (and other books like it) in two to four hours. This suggests that if reading fiction is even just half of what the child reads, she will still complete *Stone Fox* or another level P book in three or four days. Similarly, if you have students who read below grade level and they are reading a book in the Magic Tree House series, they will finish that book the day it is started and be able to read seven of those books in a week. Those books contain approximately 6,000 words, and for this to be a just-right book for the reader, the child would need to be reading the book at 100–200 words per minute—hence the calculation that these books should take no more than thirty to sixty minutes to read. Students who read at these lower levels would therefore need to be provisioned with multiple books to read each week.

It is impossible to stress enough the need to create protected time to read.

Learners need access to books that allow them to do a high volume of high-success reading.

One fairly obvious implication of the research that shows the need to provide students with large amounts of time for actual reading is this: students need access to books of appropriate complexity so they can engage in an enormous volume of high-success reading. That is, students need access to lots of books that they can read with high levels of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. They need opportunities to consolidate skills so they can use them with automaticity within fluid, engaged reading. Readers need to work with texts in which they can orchestrate cueing systems so the magic happens and meaning is made. If a student holds a giant tome and stumbles through it, making swipes at some of the words, that's not reading.

Novelist John Gardner (1991) describes reading this way:

> It creates for us a kind of dream, a rich and vivid play in the mind. We read a few words at the beginning of the book or the particular story and suddenly we find ourselves seeing not words on a page but a train moving through Russia, an old Italian crying, or a farmhouse battered by rain. We read on—dream on—not passively but actively, worrying about the choices the characters have to make, listening in panic for some sound behind the fictional door, exulting in characters' successes, bemoaning their failures. In great fiction, the dream engages us heart and soul; we not only respond to imaginary things—sights, sounds, smells—as though they were real, we respond to fictional problems as though they were real: we sympathize, think, and judge.

It's not surprising that students need to engage in high-success reading. Who among us brings giant pharmaceutical books on a long airplane flight or reaches for novels full of words and references we don't comprehend? Adults rarely read a text that we can't read with 99.5% accuracy. We wouldn't read if we were constantly derailed by complexities that we couldn't assimilate, and kids aren't any different. Over sixty years ago, Betts studied readers and found that low error rates led to improved learning (1946). In that research, independent reading levels were texts that readers could read with 98% accuracy or better, and instructional-level texts were those that readers could read with 95–97% accuracy. Swanson et al.'s (1999) meta-analysis of 180 intervention studies showed that for learning-disabled students, one of the three conditions that allow for achievement is that the difficulty level of the task must be controlled enough that the learner can be successful. This is nowhere more important than for children who struggle. Too often, only the students who can read well are given lots of opportunities in school for high-success reading, and as a result they flourish. Kids who can't read well come to school ready for the promise of an education, and they're given impenetrable texts. They might as well be given sawdust.

Many studies support this conclusion. The exemplary teachers in studies by Johnston, Allington, and Pressley rejected district plans that required one-size-fits-all mandates, wherein all students read the same texts and answer the same questions every day. These teachers instead recognized that such mandates contradict everything that is known about effective teaching. If need be, they spent their own money to provide multilevel texts. In schools where readers are thriving, we see not only ELA teachers, but middle school social studies and science teachers filling their classrooms with engaging trade books, and the result is that more students of all reading levels are engaging with content as well as with literature. Allington writes, "A primary outcome of these exemplary teachers was the acceleration of literacy development in their lowest-achieving students" (Allington and Johnston 2002; Pressley et al. 2001). While students at all achievement levels benefited from exemplary teaching, it was the lowest achievers who benefited most.

Allington (2015) argues that because readers who struggle with reading struggle in different ways, there is no reason to expect that "a single intervention focus" will be appropriate for all of those students. Instead, he says, the answer is getting rid of one-size-fits-all curriculum plans. He asserts, "What now seems clear is that more effective teachers who are experts in teaching students are not only the best hope for improving academic achievement, but they remain the only solution for improving achievement that research supports" (15).

Students need to read books they can read with fluency whenever they read.

As you tackle the reading work suggested in these units of study, you'll begin to realize that its scope reaches across disciplines. For students to learn science, they need to be able to read science texts—not one science text, but a lot of science texts. To learn about history and geography, they need to read a lot of social studies texts. At some point, you'll want to put some energy into building up nonfiction collections related to your big topics in social studies and science. When your kids go on to high school and college, you want them to be adept at finding and reading a bunch of texts, some easy and some harder, some print and some digital, on any topic they will need to be knowledgeable in, even if their class only offers one or two texts.

Fortunately, publishers have made nonfiction a focus for the last few years, and there are fantastic nonfiction texts for middle school students on the solar system, on biomes, on cell division, on the American Revolution, the Civil War, Civil Rights, and so on. When you are building collections, remember what Allington reminds us of in his article aptly titled "You can't learn much from books you can't read" (2002), which is that most kids by this age read nonfiction two levels below the level they read fiction, and most nonfiction texts in middle and high school are two levels above. When you are building background knowledge, it's helpful to read a lot of accessible texts quickly. That knowledge, Allington shows, will help readers then access harder texts.

Stock your content classes with great books, and your students will become skilled at content science and social studies research, and fascinated by that content. Include plenty of texts for readers who read below grade level to ensure that these students are given access to content. Allington (2015) notes: "Struggling readers need books they can read—accurately, fluently and with strong comprehension—in their hands all day long in order to exhibit maximum educational growth" (74).

Learners need to read increasingly complex texts, and as part of this, they need to be stretched by being engaged with texts that are appropriately complex for their grade level.

You'll want to make sure that your readers are spending some time reading texts at the outside edge of their zone of proximal development. There are two main ways that you'll tackle this work in the units of study. One way you'll edge students into harder texts is that you attend to book choice, so that students are consistently reading lines of books, and moving themselves up levels of complexity within those lines of books. A sixth-grader who loves and reads a Gordon Korman adventure series in September wouldn't still be reading that same series in the spring, and when the new book in the series comes out when he's an eighth-grader, he can still read that book, but by

then it will be fast weekend reading. In school, by then, we hope he's reading *Maze Runner and Peak*—he may be reading the same kinds of books, but his teachers will have carefully assured that he has moved up levels steadily, mostly through book recommendations and courses of study.

The other main way that you help students work in texts that challenge them will be through your read-aloud work, when you often (though not always) read texts that are just above most of your students' reading levels. Then, too, if students cannot read challenging texts independently, giving them access to digital recordings allows students to benefit from hearing, thinking, and talking about these texts (Elley 1989; Fountas and Pinnell 2012; Ray 2006). Shanahan et al. (2012) liken developing reading muscles to lifting weights.

It is especially important that students develop their vocabularies, not only by learning the domain-specific words that they are apt to encounter in content-area classrooms (erosion, adaptation, ecosystem), but also through immersion in academic language (estimates, culminates, distinguishes, and classify). Figurative language, too, is a hallmark of more complex texts, and students need to wrestle with the meaning of metaphors, similes, and personification. When students are given access to complex texts, they also are immersed in complex sentence structures, including longer sentences that contain subordinate clauses and embedded phrases. Complex texts are often organized in more complex ways: in narratives, time doesn't usually unfold sequentially but may be marked by flashbacks and flash-forwards, as well as by gaps in time and series of digressions. The combination of your instruction, partner discussion, and strategic rereading in minilessons will help your students see more in these texts.

To help students develop the muscles to handle complex texts, you'll want to provide students with the instruction necessary to deal with complex text structures, shifting perspectives, figurative language, and the like. This instruction will involve opportunities to engage in repeated readings, to work in pairs, to pause often as they read to summarize and discuss meaning, and to explore word meanings (Shanahan et al. 2012). In part, learning to tackle increasingly complex texts involves not just reading skills, but an effort-based stance on learning. Shanahan suggests that learning to read is similar to undergoing physical therapy. He writes:

> Initially, such therapy is often painful and exhausting, and it's tempting to cheat on the exercises a bit. Physical therapists have to focus not only on the muscle groups that need to be strengthened or stretched, but also on the patient's motivation. They need to keep the patient's head in the game, because working past the pain is beneficial. Similarly, it can be tough for students to hang in there and stick with a text that they have to labor through, looking up words, puzzling over sentences, straining to make connections. Teachers may be tempted to try to make it easier for students by avoiding difficult texts. The problem is, easier work is less likely to make readers stronger. Teachers need to motivate students to keep trying, especially when the level of work is increasing. The payoff comes from staying on track. (Shanahan 2012)

The challenge is to be sure that these harder texts are fascinating enough to stir up students' engagement, nuanced enough to reward their deep thinking and rereading, and relevant so that students see the value of working hard at reading.

Learners need direct, explicit instruction in the strategies and skills of proficient reading.

Research shows that good readers are strategic (Pressley and Afflerbach 1995). Explicit instruction in comprehension strategies can make a dramatic difference in lifting the level of students' reading. Dole et al.'s (1996) study, "The Effects of Strategy Instruction on the Comprehension Performance of At-Risk Students," "demonstrates the value of strategy instruction in comparison to other effective instruction and the specific value of strategy instruction for far transfer." The results "demonstrated the value of strategy instruction when the goal was to understand particular texts and especially when the goal was to understand independently read texts" (82). The 2000 National

Reading Panel strongly supports instruction in comprehension strategies, suggesting that the teaching of even one comprehension strategy can lead to improved comprehension and that teaching a repertoire of strategies can make an even larger difference (National Reading Panel 2000). Allington's research yielded similar findings, noting that "exemplary teachers in our study routinely gave direct, explicit demonstrations of the cognitive strategies that good readers use when they read" (2002, 743). It is important that strategy instruction teach students what the strategy is, when it is used, how it is used, and why it is worth using. This is important information because many teachers think of teaching as little more than assigning and assessing work.

Assigning students a task—say one that resembles those on high-stakes assessments—and then assessing their abilities to do that work should not be confused with instruction. When imagining instruction, think instead of a progression of work that goes from "watch me, let me demonstrate" to "now you try and I'll support you." Many researchers have detailed this form of strategy instruction; among them are Duke and Pearson (2002), who point out that strategy instruction involves:

- Naming and describing the strategy: why, when, and how it could be used
- Modeling the strategy in action
- Using the strategy collaboratively
- Guiding practice of the strategy, gradually releasing responsibility to the student
- Providing opportunity for using the strategy independently

As Rosenshine (2012) found, "The more effective teachers do not overwhelm their students by presenting too much new material at once. Rather, these teachers only present small amounts of new material at any time, and then assist the students as they practice this material" (13–14). Duke and Pearson (2002) make an important caveat in "Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension," stating, "It is important that neither the teacher nor the students lose sight of the need to coordinate or orchestrate comprehension strategies. Strategies are not to be used singly—good readers do not read a book and only make predictions. Rather, good readers use multiple strategies constantly" (210). Allington (2002b) discusses this same point when he writes, "The instructional environment must foster independent strategy transfer and use. A real concern is that when instruction becomes too explicit too much of the time, children never acquire the independent strategy transfer and use. Use of a strategy in a highly structured, teacher-directed setting is not the same as knowing how and when to profitably and successfully use the strategy when reading independently."

Learners need opportunities to talk in response to texts.

It was Vygotsky (1978), more than anyone, who staked out the theory that accounts for the crucial role of social interactions in supporting learning. The key element in his theory of learning is that "all the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (957). The words that we say in conversation, the kinds of thinking we do in collaboration, become internalized.

Talking and writing both provide concrete, visible ways for learners to do the thinking work that later becomes internalized and invisible. Think about it—if you want to gain insights on your teaching, your family, or your life, what do you do? You meet with someone to "talk things over." If you want to become better at doing something, you bring in a coach, a tutor, or an advisor. Whoever the person is, what you will do is talk. In think tanks, study groups, inquiry projects, graduate courses, seminars—what do you do? You talk. Talk is the medium in which we all outgrow ourselves, over and over again.

Because teaching reading is teaching thinking, it is not surprising that social relationships are critical to a reading workshop. Conversations are especially crucial, because data suggest that few American students are growing up to be thoughtfully literate. The related finding is this: If one looks at what students spend their time doing in

school, it is very easy to project the skills that they will master. If students spend their time answering low-level literal questions, filling in blanks, and recalling facts, then that will be the kind of thinking they can do well. And all too often, that is exactly what is being asked for and what is being learned in American classrooms.

The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce (2007) describes the candidates that the best employers in the world will be looking for this way: "Candidates will have to be comfortable with ideas and abstractions, good at both analysis and synthesis, creative and innovative, self-disciplined and well-organized, able to learn quickly and work well as a member of a team and have the flexibility to adapt quickly to frequent changes." One of the most powerful ways to teach children to think is to teach them to engage in thoughtful discussions, and especially discussions that incorporate thinking under, between, and around texts. In Allington and Pressley's research on exemplary teachers, they note that the nature of talk was fundamentally different in the classrooms led by exemplary teachers. These teachers fostered more student talk—teacher-student and student-student. The talk was not chatter, but problem-posing, problem-solving talk.

More recently, Tony Wagner, author of *The Global Achievement Gap* and *Creating Innovators,* has researched the skills most needed in today's workplace. Of his seven essential skills, one of the most prized is communication. "The biggest skill people are missing is the ability to communicate: both written and oral," says Annmarie Neal, then Vice President for Talent Management at Cisco Systems, and one of the executives Wagner interviewed in his research. Similarly, in *Outliers*, a study of the qualities that lead to success, Malcolm Gladwell emphasizes the power of discourse—the ability to speak well about a subject, to interact with others. Gladwell calls this social intelligence, and he documents how it gives one capital in academics and in the world.

Talking well, like writing well, does not emerge ex nihilo, and it is helpful to explicitly teach students to make claims that are grounded in the text, to supply evidence for those claims, to talk between the example and the claim, to uncover assumptions, and to explore ramifications. Teaching young people to talk has a great deal to do with teaching them the skills of writing to think—and both are essential. For this reason, reading workshops not only support talk, but also teach talk. Readers are generally matched to a partner or club across a unit of study—someone who is able to read and is interested in reading similar books. Partners tend to read independently for most of the reading workshop, but in the last few minutes, they compare notes, raise and pursue questions, and learn to see the text through each other's perspectives. In most units, readers work in small groups—inquiry groups or book clubs—so their talk can encompass not only a partner, but also other voices and other perspectives.

Learners need support reading information books and building a knowledge base and academic vocabulary through information reading.

By the time students are in middle school, two-thirds or more of their curriculum will be in content classes. When they go on to high school, large swathes of their learning will be in history, science, economics, and the like. What's tricky to figure out for the ELA teacher, then, is how much nonfiction work to do in ELA. Clearly students need instruction in nonfiction reading, and lots of time to read nonfiction. The question becomes—where will this happen?

Research suggests that until recently, students have not had enough access to information texts. One study of first-grade classrooms found that, on average, informational texts constituted less than 10% of classroom libraries and were supported by only 3% of materials displayed on walls and other surfaces in classrooms. This study also showed that first-grade classrooms studied informational texts for only an average of 3.6 minutes a day. Lower-income children logged just 1.9 minutes a day of exposure to informational texts (Duke 2000). A study by Goodwin and Miller supports these findings, suggesting that the average child in the United States spends just four minutes a day reading nonfiction.

One of the reasons that it is critical for students to increase the time spent reading nonfiction is that the strength of a student's general knowledge has a close relationship to the student's ability to comprehend complex nonfiction texts. When Nell Duke was at Teachers College in the last few years, working with principals, she spoke about the significance of students' knowledge to success in learning, in secondary classrooms, and in college. We have come to realize that too often, teachers think of themselves as the source of this background knowledge, when in fact, we can teach students in middle school that learners build their own background knowledge, by diving into a subject and reading as much as they can—and that no text is too easy when you are building up background knowledge.

Students who read a great deal of nonfiction gain knowledge about the world, as well as about vocabulary. Cunningham and Stanovich (1991) state that "the analyses of ability-exposure discrepancies . . . seem to indicate that even the child with limited reading skills will build vocabulary and knowledge structures through reading" (271). A similar study conducted by Krashen (2004) found that "conscious language learning does not appear to be as efficient as acquisition from input" and that "spelling and vocabulary are developed . . . by reading" (454).

English classrooms in middle and high school once prepared students mostly for other English classes they would take in the future—hence an almost exclusive focus on literature and literary essays. Now, however, we see ELA classrooms as increasing students' preparedness for the variety of reading and writing tasks they may face. We think about increasing flexibility by reading and writing in a variety of genres, and increasing stamina and independence by reading a lot. That means that most ELA classroom now explicitly teach nonfiction reading and writing. The problem is that ELA is also the only part of the curriculum where students encounter literature.

Our suggestion, then, is that ELA teachers teach a tight nonfiction unit of study, and that social studies teachers consider the kinds of nonfiction reading challenges posed by the texts in their discipline and give students opportunities to increase their nonfiction skills as well. This means building up nonfiction collections related to topics and subtopics in social studies, increasing expectations for how much students will read, and collaboratively studying nonfiction instruction.

Learners need assessment-based instruction, including feedback that is tailored to their specific strengths and needs.

Assessment matters for the efficacy of your instruction. You'll have at your fingertips a variety of assessment data produced every day in your class, including reading logs, reading notebooks, and partner discussions. You'll also have access to kids' state testing data, which will alert you to students who are not yet at proficiency. You may also decide sometimes to give a performance assessment, such as tasking students with a brief and specific writing-about-reading prompt on a short text, and comparing their work before and after the unit.

Frankly, you'll have more assessment data than you'll know what to do with. What you'll need to do is think carefully about how you'll study all of these markers of progress, and how you'll engage students in studying their own progress. You'll find, in the units, attention to teaching students to keep records of their reading, so they can regularly assess how reading is going, and consider their book choices, the times when they are reading, and so on. You'll teach students to share their reading notebooks, to reflect individually and with others on how they can deepen their work. You'll teach them to plan for their partner discussions, so that they engage in specific and challenging work. The biggest goal, then, with assessment in middle school, is to get students involved.

As you engage students in assessment, you'll find that you, too, have more information about your students, and you can pull students into conferences and small groups, or schedule brief meetings outside of class. You'll also find that you develop a research mindset. A research mindset makes teaching fascinating. As the kids read, and jot, and talk, they are researching Katniss, or Harry, or ethical food production—meanwhile, you are researching

them. You'll invent ways to study kids' work, to research and reflect and discuss and imagine what powerful work entails. You'll wrestle with what the pathways toward good work can look like, and help kids progress along those pathways. Assessment, then, like teaching, isn't meant to be outsourced. And assessment isn't something that occurs once or twice or three times a year. Instead, assessment is sewn into the fabric of our teaching. In this series, you'll see that units of study tuck in significant moments when students can self-assess and reflect on their growth, especially at the end of bends and the end of the unit.

Assessment will be most critical when you have students who read below grade level. Readers who struggle cannot wait even a week before we begin to show them that reading can make sense for them, and they can get better as readers in a palpable, observable fashion. When we do this, readers can make multiple years of growth in just a single year. The first step is for the most knowledgeable person around to assess these readers to find what the reading work is that a particular student can do with success. If this is a seventh-grade child who needs to be reading books at the level of Dragon Slayers' Academy, then absolutely nothing is gained by taking him instead to the last Harry Potter. Halfway measures are good for naught, because with texts he can't read well, the student still won't feel everything clicking together into reading and still won't have the chance to read in ways that allow him to learn from reading.

If the various stakeholders who are invested in this student—the people who care about him—disagree, then these adults need to come together and talk longer and think harder so that a single, coherent plan is made that will allow this student to be a successful reader (with the texts that are within reach) and then to move forward in giant steps. It is critical that students who read below grade level are reading books within their zone of proximal development, not just during reading time, but across the day. Many suggest that at least 90% of their reading time should be spent on books that are easy for them, books they can read with 99% accuracy, and, perhaps as much as 10% of the time, they can be reading books that they read with 96% accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

During intervention time, students who struggle with reading need help that is assessment-based, tailored to their particular needs, and in sync with what is happening in the classroom. It cannot be that all students who struggle with reading receive the same one-size-fits-all help during this intervention, because what we know about each one is that they are more different, one from another, than most readers are.

For any learner to grow stronger, that learner must be provided with informative, responsive targeted feedback.

Hattie's research perhaps best supports this claim (2008, 2016). He reviewed 180,000 studies involving 20 to 30 million students and found that of 100 factors that contribute to student achievement, providing learners with feedback rates in the very top 5–10% of influences. The feedback is especially valuable if the teacher helps the learner know where he is going, what progress he has made so far, and what specific activities he can do next to progress toward the goal. Ideally, learners also receive help in refining and seeking more challenging goals. This is what conferring—working one-on-one with an individual student—is: listening and looking to understand a student's work and intentions and then helping that student take all of the instruction that is in the air and use it in ways that connect precisely to him, making sure he is working with direction and feedback.

Know that workshop is set up to give you time to meet with students. While they read, you pull alongside them for conferences, or convene a couple of small groups near you. You won't have unlimited time to meet with students, or to plan for this work. It helps enormously to predict the kinds of challenges students will struggle with, and be ready to support them. In the units of study, you'll find help for this work in sections devoted to conferring and small-group work. We can't predict precisely how each of your students may need support or may need you to offer next steps. But the truth is, when you've taught reading across hundreds of classrooms, you begin to see

profiles of readers, and categories of challenges. When you read hundreds of YA texts, you also begin to see ways that these texts grow in complexity. All of this knowledge can be poured into your planning, so that you begin a unit of study not only ready for your minilessons, but also prepared for a series of high-leverage conferences and small groups.

Of special considerations for middle school readers—the need for increased motivation and engagement is crucial.

Anyone who has taught extensively in middle school, or spent a lot of time in middle school classrooms, knows that to teach middle schoolers, you have to love them. You have to love their quirkiness and their mood swings, their changeability, their self-consciousness, their odd spurts of growth and their odd periods of silence. You have to know that partner and club work is fraught with social tensions, that reading is sometimes escape for them, that they have very little power over their lives and the decisions that shape them.

A lot of the research that will help you with middle school is going to happen in your classroom, with your particular students. You'll study their cultures and their histories, their communities and their circles. You'll come to know the issues that preoccupy them, and the books that might help them. And they'll change from year to year—all of it will change. The devices they use, the music they listen to, the discourse they hear in the news and in school, all of it will change. To love middle school teaching, you have to embrace the shifting terrain that is middle school. Underneath these shifting sands, there will be some rock-solid ground that will always support you. Here are some of these stable structures.

One stable structure in your classroom will be the consistent need to stay focused on engagement and motivation. You can't do the work for kids; you have to coach them to work themselves. As students move up grade levels, their engagement and motivation tend to decline, just as the work gets harder and harder (Allington 2015; Biancarosa and Snow 2006; Ivey and Johnston 2013; McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth 1995; O'Brien and Dillon 2014; *Academic Literacy Instruction for Adolescents*). In their 2006 report "Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy," Biancarosa and Snow argued that a decline in motivation actually makes literacy instruction more difficult for older students:

> Ensuring adequate ongoing literacy development for all students in the middle and high school years is a more challenging task than ensuring excellent reading education in the primary grades, for two reasons: first, secondary school literacy skills are more complex, more embedded in subject matters, and more multiply determined; second, adolescents are not as universally motivated to read better or as interested in school-based reading as kindergartners. (2)

McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) also found that reading motivation tends to drop from first to sixth grade. One reason that motivation drops may be that opportunities for engaging reading drop. Allington (2015) asserts that reading activity tends to decline, that sixth-grade students begin to read less and by twelfth grade, "only one in every five high school seniors reports reading a book voluntarily" (93). Along with less time to read, students also often get less choice over what they read. But when they do, authors like J. K. Rowling and Suzanne Collins are turning millions of kids into readers. We need to capitalize on that movement. We won't do that by taking young adult readers out of *The Hunger Games* and putting them into *Death of a Salesman*. When you choose your read-aloud texts, and consider books for clubs and classroom libraries, look to the greatest young adult literature. Think about engagement.

Think, as well, about the tasks readers will fulfill, and consider how to turn these into tasks readers set themselves. There is a lot of support for this instruction in the units of study. We suggest a constant diet of being read to, of learning new interpretation skills, of reading, annotating, and talking, and regular times to reflect. It's a reading curriculum similar to what students will do in college. Ivey and Broaddus (2001) argue that the curriculum most middle school students receive is at odds with their becoming mature, independent, engaged readers. O'Brien and Dillon (2014) agree, asserting that students in later grades shift to experiencing "reading-as-subject" (45). They

argue that younger students experienced reading as a great adventure, but to older students reading "becomes a set of tedious tasks leading to the demonstration of narrowly defined competencies—grades on homework assignments, quizzes, and tests, and meeting standards" (45).

For some of you who are reading this, we need to say explicitly that we suggest you take most or all of what are currently all-class novel studies, and you turn those into genre studies, with anchor read-aloud texts and book clubs.

A particularly noteworthy study related to this point is from Ivey and Johnston (2013) in which they studied eighth-grade students at a middle school whose teachers prioritized engaged reading. The teachers stopped teaching whole-class novels in favor of "student-selected, self-paced" reading of a collection of materials, primarily contemporary, "edgy novels." There were 150–200 titles in each classroom with one to three copies of each book. The collections were rotated across classrooms every nine weeks so students would continually have access to new texts. Teachers engaged students in conversations about their reading and also spent time introducing students to new books. The authors describe the typical eighth-grade English class in that study as beginning with extended amount of time for students to read their chosen books and engage each other in conversation about the books, then time to listen to a read-aloud of a young adult novel by the teacher, and then time to write. Students were interviewed about their reading at the end of the study.

Ivey and Johnson (2013) found that the results of the study were beyond those that could be captured on typical quantitative approaches to engagement. They also asserted that gains in reading test scores were not the only way to evaluate the results of this program. Students reported being more purposefully absorbed in the texts they were reading, "stretching themselves to their limits," and purposefully helping themselves when they encountered difficulty, such as by talking to a peer about it. The authors assert that "while constructing meaning from text, students were also using text to construct meaning in their lives" and that the students showed an expanded sense of agency, and this makes it possible for them to "imagine narrative futures for themselves" (270). They also argued that the act of reading itself supported students in becoming more strategic readers:

> Strategic behavior for these students, though, appeared to be less the result of strategy instruction than a response to their own need to make sense. Their reading processes suggest that although it is possible to teach particular strategies, instructional time might be better spent supporting engaged reading, a context in which students are more likely to actually become strategic. (273)

Every teacher has a book he or she would rather die than give up teaching. Fine, it's great to inspire students with your love of a book. Let them inspire you as well, with the books they love. The kids are more important than any single book, and even though they may say to you that they "loved" *Of Mice and Men*, it is not Steinbeck who created a generation of teen readers. That was Suzanne Collins. Turn your students into readers, and they will be unstoppable.

To learn more about The Units of Study for Teaching Reading, Middle School Grades, visit our website: http://www.heinemann.com/unitsofstudy/middleschoolreading

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