Middle Schoolers Can't Succeed if they Can't Read

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Overview

The lower-achieving middle school reader often has a limited foundation in phonemic awareness and the accompanying skills. Students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and students with limited instructional experience generally require more interventions and proactive instructional methods to accelerate their learning. Areas of weakness in literacy for students can be identified as early as preschool, yet, after a student's early elementary school years, instructional practices typically focus on reading for the acquisition of knowledge as opposed to the acquisition of literacy skills (Tankersley, 2003). The primary classroom aims to prepare its learners to read by offering foundational reading skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding. However, sometimes this goal is not realized. Middle school students who have not mastered such concepts generally fail to grasp the larger comprehension concepts as they struggle through basic skills. Middle schoolers, like students in the primary school setting need practice with the strategies which can best support their growth as readers. The bottom line is that the act of reading is about thinking. Students in the secondary setting must master these fundamental skills to collect information from texts.

Engagement

A crucial component of any instructional practice is the student's ownership and urgency toward learning. Programs such as The Daily Five use a student-driven approach in which teachers facilitate learning, but the "heavy lifting" is left to the students. In this facilitation of learning, teachers guide students and practice routines which allow autonomy for learners as the teacher focuses on individualized instruction in small groups (Boushey and Moser, 2006).

For middle-school students in particular, the student buy-in required for student success is the engine propelling their accountability for growth. Given the differences between the adolescent learner and the primary learner, middle school teachers should consider ways reading can become an attractive adventure for students.

- Student choice sparks interests and saves some guesswork out of preparing materials
- When students find authentic connections to a text, the scholarly tasks associated with reading assignments become less arduous.
- Students maintain a vested interest in acquiring new skills when they perceive power by which they can choose portions of their work.
- Students reluctant to pursue reading opportunities for themselves may become more engaged when they participate in discussions with fellow learners, granting them "permission" to enjoy a text. Endorsements by teachers and other students function as a strong suggestion outside of the mundane mandated reading assignment.

Authentic conversation for connections

Read-aloud mentor texts in which teachers model their thinking and reflections about content can give students access to both grade-level texts and more challenging texts. During the lesson itself, students need opportunities to process the information they receive with peers or in a graphic organizer. Teacher identification of specific reading strategies and objectives are crucial to optimize this practice.

- Carefully plan your questions and prompts for students to discuss and exhibit learning goals at multiple points during the reading.

- Differentiate reinforcement activities: written responses based on a menu of questions reflecting higher order thinking.

Help learners acquire new vocabulary both through casual interactions and explicit teaching sessions. Despite a growing demand for individuals in the workforce to utilize communicate through a variety of methods in a global environment, the active vocabulary of students has diminished in recent years (Tankersley, 2003). Students of all ages benefit from "collecting" new words and domain-specific word in individualized journals, or in a whole group display as the words are addressed. This practice is not to be misconstrued for the prefabricated word wall. To ensure authenticity and relevance to students, this practice requires the classroom community to identify the words, examples of their use, and utilize them in writing and conversation.

Teacher guidance to support targeted skills

Students benefit from whole group mini-lessons which consist of a narrow focus on skills or concepts to be approached in the current area of study. These short, powerful lessons guide students toward application within the assignments they will use to practice those skills. After these short lessons, students in the classroom need opportunities for differentiated practice or small group instruction supporting their areas for growth.

This article will not suggest the center-based composition of the primary classroom, as the transitions and rotations may not be best for the time constraints of block scheduling. However, the article suggests student products to promote application of the skills targeted and reflection about their use:

- Projects and work created by students offer an additional level of accountability for students who may easily maneuver through simpler tasks. These thinking skills are rarely accomplished in a worksheet format.
- Graphic organizers, journaling, and other tasks that require students to develop the bulk of the product

Small group instruction is a crucial, yet frequently absent component of secondary school literacy practice. Time constraints and management concerns may deter middle school teachers from developing this framework within the classroom. A structure in which small group instruction exists requires clear expectations for both the group and the independent workers in the periphery, explicit practice of study skills, independence, and predictability for students.

Scheduling for small groups should prioritize the most delicate learners, allowing them to benefit from instruction devoted to their areas of need based on frequent monitoring of their progress. The sessions for the neediest students occur as close to daily as the schedule permits, ranging from 20 to 30 minutes per session.

Students with a firmer grasp of the content will also grow through targeted small group instruction. While the groups may meet with the teacher fewer times per week, small group meetings may be planned to focus on particular comprehension strategies as opposed to text level, or circles of students studying the components of a particular text. These strategy groups and literacy circles, like the groups discussed earlier, may change as students master skills or teachers find additional areas of need.

Matching plans to the students, not the other way around

Veterans and neophyte educators alike know even impeccably-planned lessons may fall flat in the classroom. In implementing the strategies described in this article, the reader must determine each strategy's fit for the individuals within the classroom including the instructor. Each of these practices can be tailored to support learning and teaching styles alike.

These strategies require consistent structure and practice with expectations. For example, a graphic organizer must be part of a whole group exploration and usage prior to being assigned for optimal adherence to its purpose. In addition, practice and feedback for the skills necessary to support independence with each routine will save time later in the instructional term.

Implemented with careful planning and understanding of the learners, matched plans facilitate teachers to create growth in students who have previously been unable to access literacy content. Utilizing foundational strategies often found in the primary setting with an age-appropriate delivery not only bolsters achievement but may increase confidence for students while lessening the heavy load for the educator.

References

Boushey, G., & Moser, J. (2006). *The daily 5: Fostering literacy independence in the elementary grades*. Portland, Me: Stenhouse Publishers.

Tankersley, K. (2003). *Threads of reading: Strategies for literacy development*. Alexandria, Va: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.