Adolescent Readers in Middle School

Almost seven thousand students drop out of high school every school day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006), and many of the students who stay in school have difficulty meeting the literacy challenges of the curriculum.

The current crisis in adolescent literacy is well documented. There is a significant disparity between the education our students receive and the demands of life in the 21st century. Traditionally, education aims to raise standards by any means, but we are coming to see that preparing students for tests and preparing them for life beyond school are very different goals.

Eight million students between 4th and 12th grade struggle to read at grade level (NCES, 2003). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results show that students' literacy levels have remained constant for the last twenty years, at a time when the demands of literacy have become increasingly complex (Kamil, 2003; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Many students who graduate are ill prepared to meet the demands of college and the workforce, with approximately 40% of high school graduates lacking the literacy skills employers seek (Achieve, Inc., 2005). 70% of the students who stay in school require some form of remediation in our middle and high schools.

Our challenge is to ensure our students have the skills they need to be literate in a rapidly changing world. The stakes are high both in terms of individual quality of life and national economic competitiveness. The overriding thing we must keep in mind when talking about adolescent students is that their literacy needs are highly varied; therefore, the kinds of rich and engaging literacy practices required must also be varied and go beyond one-size-fits-all recommendations.

The Common Core State Standards are designed to address the issue of low literacy rates by raising expectations and emphasizing the need for students to engage with more complex texts. While this may address the problem in the future, the reality is that, if nothing is done, 50% of our current 6th graders will not graduate college or career ready.

There is an urgent need to put in place professional development and systemic support for middle school teachers to ensure all students leave middle schools with the literacy skills they need to succeed in high school.

Reading and Middle School Students

Recent initiatives have led to a steady increase in 4th grade reading scores since 1999. This has not led to an increase in the literacy levels of 13 and 17 year olds – which have remained static for the last 37 years (Rampley, 2009). Why do middle school readers struggle? The problem is not that they can't read, but rather that they struggle with comprehension. Forty years of research have documented the concern about students who enter middle school without the comprehension strategies needed to successfully engage with the more complex texts and content.

Older struggling readers can read words accurately, but they do not comprehend what they read for a variety of reasons.

> The students proceeded to confess that they almost "never truly understand" the concepts they read about and rarely understand the concepts teachers lecture about in class. They described a string of experiences across content areas that could only be characterized as "doing time" - attending, doing assignments, working for grades - to get them through high school.
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> Beers, K., Probst, R., Rief, L., 2007

New York City Department of Education Middle School Quality Initiative

The MSQI goal is to establish models of middle-grade schools serving our typical students that are making dramatic progress in increasing the number of students completing eighth grade reading on or above grade level. The initiative is a comprehensive literacy strategy serving 90 middle schools and supports schools in:

- Implementing a strategic tiered assessment strategy

- Strengthening instructional expertise of ELA and content area teachers

- Strengthening teacher teams

- Implementing strategic interventions

- Scheduling to extend the time students are engaged in literacy

- Providing both network-wide and school-based professional development

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As the texts become increasingly complex, multimodal, and necessary for discipline-area learning, middle and high school students must adapt by using more advanced, specific strategies for deeper understanding (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Research as part of the New York City Department of Education 2012-2013 Middle School Quality Initiative showed that 1,444 of the 3,206 students tracked in Cohort One were identified as severely at risk. Analysis of their assessment data showed the majority read fluently and were able to retell but lacked the comprehension strategies to engage deeply with the texts. Another 25% of the students reading just below grade level also struggled with comprehension.

Twenty years ago we knew there were "no easy answers or quick fixes" (Moore et al., 1999 P.4) and the same is true today. What we have in 2013 is a growing body of research and widespread agreement in the reading community about both the problems of struggling readers and a range of strategies and approaches that can address their needs. We also know there is no one program that will teach all students to read but there is a range of

approaches that have been shown to be effective.

What does work for struggling adolescent readers?

Reading Next (2006) and a Time to Act (2010) both make recommendations for change designed to bring about improved outcomes for adolescent readers. They include both systemic changes at the school level and instructional shifts at the classroom level. The introduction of the Common Core State Standards in ELA has implications in terms of the instructional shifts required of teachers and their expectation for students as learners. Together, these documents provide direction for the work that needs to be done to improve the literacy outcomes for our adolescent readers.

What is very clear is the need for job-embedded, intensive professional development. The gaps between the needs of the students and the expertise of most middle school teachers is too great to be addressed by more rigorous standards and new curricula alone. There needs to be a deepening of teachers' understanding about the reading process, and effective literacy practices across

content. The typical one or two-day workshops will not be enough. There is a real need for professional development that is comprehensive, ongoing, intensive, and designed to improve teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement.

Middle school students need extended time engaged with texts across disciplines.

Just as struggling readers are faced with increasing challenges, the time students are engaged in text tends to decrease. In most middle schools the students have a 45-minute Language Arts block. There is a need for students to be engaged for at least two hours (but preferably four hours) daily (Biancarosa, C., & Snow, C. E. 2006). Data gathered from the New York City Department of Educations' Secondary Literacy Pilot (2010) and the Middle School Quality Initiative (2011-13) showed that students were often spending as little as 10-20 minutes interacting with texts. Many of the content-area teachers were concerned that the texts were too difficult for the students so they either read to the students or summarized the content for them.

# Results from a Bronx Middle School in the New York City Department of Education Middle School Quality Initiative

Percentage of 6th grade students at or above grade level.
Total population: 196 students

September 2012
At or above grade level
20%

January 2013
At or above grade level
32%

June 2013
At or above grade level
47%

Percentage of 7th grade students at or above grade level.
Total population: 305 students

September 2012
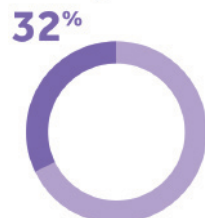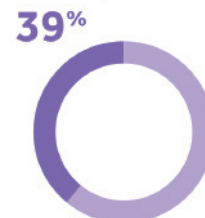At or above grade level
32%
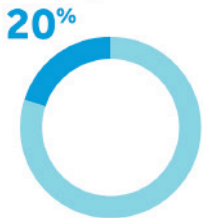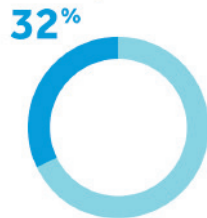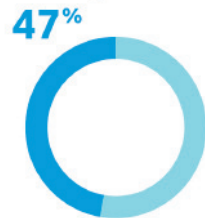
January 2013
At or above grade level
39%

June 2013
At or above grade level
53%
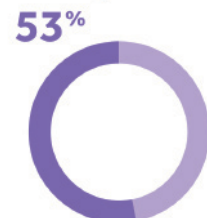
The results on this page are for students from September 2012-June 2013. Student progress is tracked through the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP), a nationally normed cloze comprehension assessment.

The end result is that while students may be given access to the content, the students who need the most practice on text were getting the least.

While some of the time on text will happen in the English Language Arts classroom, instruction in Science, History, and other subject areas is also important in increasing students' time on text. The instruction needs to be text centered and informed by instructional principles designed to convey content and also to practice and improve literacy skills (Biancarosa, C., & Snow, C. E. 2006).

There is a need for professional development for teachers across the disciplines to support them in shifting the focus from just teaching content to also teaching the reading and writing practices specific to their discipline area.

Middle school students need explicit teaching of comprehension strategies within a comprehensive literacy program.

In many middle schools, particularly those in large urban areas, nearly 80% of the students are struggling with reading, and, while there needs to be effective interventions in place for students at risk, interventions alone cannot address the issue for most of the population. There is a need to ensure there is effective teaching of literacy within the ELA classroom. Without ongoing literacy instruction, students who are struggling in reading will never catch up (Heller, R., and Greenleaf, C. 2007).

One of the challenges facing middle schools is the gap between the students' need for differentiated instruction and the skills of the teacher. Teaching in the ELA classroom needs to address the explicit teaching and monitoring of comprehension strategies. While there is no one approach that surpasses all others, any approach used should include:

- Explicit modeling of how the strategies work
- Guided or scaffolded practice with increasingly complex texts
- Developing students' metacognition of their use of strategies
- Opportunities to practice independently

Students need to know why particular strategies are important and have opportunities to use them in multiple contexts with a diverse range of texts.

There is a need for professional development for middle school ELA teachers in the teaching of reading in general and in particular, the teaching of comprehension strategies.

Middle school students need to be taught the discipline-specific reading strategies needed to read in the content areas.

In the late 1990s, the need for literacy strategies to be taught across the content areas was highlighted, along with the belief that adolescent readers needed general comprehension strategies that they could then apply across a broad range of subjects and texts.

The introduction of the Common Core State Standards for Literacy in content areas and the work in the discipline literacy field point out that generic comprehension strategies are not sufficient to deal with the diversity and complexity of texts across the content areas. To become competent in a number of academic content areas requires more than just applying the same skills and comprehension strategies to new kinds of texts. It also requires skills, knowledge, and reasoning processes that are specific to particular disciplines.

Students, therefore, must develop the knowledge and reasoning processes that are specific to particular disciplines.

Therefore, students must develop the specific reading strategies that differ across disciplines (ACT, 2006).

Teachers in the content areas will need to deliberately integrate the teaching of literacy with the teaching of discipline content in appropriate ways. Middle school teachers need to understand:

- Each discipline possesses its own language, purposes and ways of using text
- There are special skills and strategies needed for students to make complete sense of texts from the disciplines
- As students begin to confront these kinds of texts (especially in middle and high school), instruction must facilitate their understanding of what it means to read disciplinary texts

Content area teachers play an important role in deepening adolescent readers' discipline-specific strategy use that will help students learn from complex discipline-based print and electronic materials (Draper, 2010; Moje, 2008).

There is a need for ongoing professional development for content area teachers in the discipline literacy strategies specific to their field.

Middle school students need teachers who work in teams and collaborate across disciplines.

Providing opportunities for teams of teachers who share a cohort of students to come together to talk about the students and align their practices is important in developing a whole-school commitment to improving adolescent literacy. It is the school leaders who play a crucial role in establishing the infrastructure that allows time and creates the expectation that teachers will meet to discuss students and plan together (Dufour and Marzano, 2011).

As students move from elementary school where they had one teacher who taught a range of content areas to middle school where they move from teacher to teacher, the curriculum often becomes fragmented.

Teams of teachers planning together can help create consistency of instruction across subject areas.

Teachers need professional development in collaborating around student work.

Middle school students need opportunities to collaborate around complex texts.

Talk and comprehension go together. Collaborating in text-based discussion deepens students' comprehension. As students engage with increasingly complex texts, the need to talk about what they are learning increases. These conversations help students synthesize material, integrate new learning into their schema, share insights, and seek clarification. Text-based collaboration means that when students work in small groups, they should not simply discuss a topic, but interact with each other around a text. The small group context provides opportunities for teachers to scaffold or guide student interactions and monitor student comprehension. It is a way of ensuring the diverse range of reading abilities in the middle school classroom are met.

By providing opportunities for students to have rich and rigorous conversations around a common text, teachers can ensure students' discussions stay deeply connected to the text and that students develop the habit of citing textual evidence. For the majority of middle school teachers this is one of the instructional shifts needed to ensure that their students can meet the more rigorous expectations of the Common Core State Standards.

There are many ways of implementing text-based discussions and reciprocal teaching is one. Reciprocal teaching is a scaffolded approach to students learning and applying comprehension strategies.

It has been very successful as an intervention for struggling readers, as well as assisting all students in deepening comprehension.

The purpose is to facilitate a group effort between teachers and students in the task of constructing meaning through using the strategies of:

• Predicting
• Clarifying
• Questioning
• Summarizing

Students working in small groups talk their way through the text as they collaborate to deepen comprehension and self-monitor their understanding of the text (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002). Once introduced in ELA, the approach can be applied in reading in the content area classrooms.

There is a need for ongoing professional development in effective literacy instruction in general and particularly, small group differentiated instruction.

Middle school students need to be introduced to academic and domain specific vocabulary.

Many adolescent students begin to struggle with reading comprehension because they lack the vocabulary to understand the increasingly complex academic texts they meet in middle school (Buly & Valencia, 2002; Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007). As a result, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000) advocates direct vocabulary instruction as an effective instructional method for enhancing students' reading comprehension in middle schools. Academic vocabulary includes those words that students will come across in all sorts of complex texts in many different disciplines. Often teachers will ignore these words and instead pay more attention to the technical words that are unique to one discipline. In fact, materials should help students acquire knowledge of general academic vocabulary because it is these words that will help them access complex texts.

The preliminary results for Word Generation, an academic vocabulary program developed at Harvard University and implemented in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, San Francisco Unified and New York City schools, show significant student gains. This program builds on research and uses multiple exposures to academic vocabulary used in context.

Research has found that students are more likely to retain the new words they learn if they are exposed to them multiple times (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). Students are also more likely to retain the words when they are introduced to them in meaningful contexts rather than by simply learning the words (Stahl, 1999). Any literacy program for middle school students should include:

• Multiple exposures to academic vocabulary across content areas
• Students actively engaging with and using the vocabulary in the context of meaningful discussions
• Promotion of "lexical dexterity" in that, in any given instance, it is not the entire spectrum of a word's history, meanings, usages, and features that matters but only those aspects that are relevant at that moment (CCSS Appendix A)

There is a need for professional development for middle school ELA and content area teachers in effective teaching of academic and domain-specific vocabulary.

Middle schools need to have an assessment strategy that tracks students' growth in reading and identifies their strengths and learning needs.

While many middle schools have a wealth of assessment data, very little, if any, provides information on students' reading. There needs to be a schoolwide framework that includes both summative and formative assessments. The quality of school-based assessment needs to be judged on the evidence of the interpretations and decisions teachers make, the effectiveness of the actions they take, and their success in developing the assessment capabilities of their

Performance on complex texts is the clearest differentiator in reading between students who are more likely to be ready for college and those who are less likely to be ready.

ACT, 2006

The end result of the lack of emphasis on comprehension instruction has been that many students entering middle and high schools are efficient decoders with poor comprehension skills.

NAEP Report, 2008

students. Above all, assessment for learning must be underpinned by the belief that every student can improve.

The assessment landscape is changing dramatically with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in ELA. Formative, ongoing assessments associated with assessment for learning need to be performance-based and should be embedded within the classroom curriculum (Au and Valencia, 2010).

Good performance-based assessment tasks focus on making students' thinking visible to both teacher and student. They should help develop understanding of the strategies and patterns students have constructed in order to make sense of the content. The tasks should unlock the approaches used by students and the information should be used to help them become more aware not only of content, but how they are learning it.

The assessment should help build students' assessment capabilities to enable them to take increasing control of their own learning. Adolescent students are more likely to become independent learners when they develop the ability to monitor their own work. To do this well, the performance-based tasks need to help students (and teachers) understand:

- What high quality work looks like (examining examples and models of quality work)
- What criteria define quality work (rubrics)
- How to compare and evaluate their own work against such criteria

The assessment tasks should engage and motivate students by being interesting enough for students to want to participate and encourage and motivate students by emphasizing progress over achievement. Students need to engage in the learning even though it is difficult.

Assessments should be designed to measure progress, as well as achievement. Any one assessment can only provide a snapshot of achievement on a particular task. The tasks need to address a number of standards, and the

standards should be assessed over a range of tasks.

Students' performance will vary from day-to-day depending on:

- The nature of the assessment task
- The conditions in which the assessment is undertaken
- The purpose of the assessment
- The student's engagement and motivation

For teachers to make a valid and accurate measure of progress over time, they need to analyze information from a range of assessments that can be used to plan from and report on student learning. With the use of any assessment information, it is important that there is a clear understanding and explanation of the philosophy which underpins. If a task is not used as it was intended, the information it provides risks being unreliable and/or invalid.

An important characteristic of quality assessments is that they are reliable. Inconsistency in assessment needs to be reduced to a minimum. Effective assessment is inextricably bound up with the twin ideas of quality information and defensible decision making.

There is a need for ongoing and intensive professional development to support evidence-based best practices in middle school literacy assessment (International Reading Association, 2012).

Conclusion

While there is evidence that progress has been made in middle school literacy over the last decade (International Reading Association, 2012), it has not been made at the pace needed if we are to ensure our current middle school students will graduate ready to face the literacy challenges of living and working in the 21st century. There is clearly a need to improve adolescent literacy and enough information in the literature to indicate what needs to change. What is needed is professional development for middle school teachers that is embedded in their daily practice with opportunities to learn and reflect on new ideas.

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