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## Should Reading be a Core Class in Middle School?

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## Should Reading be a Core Class in Middle School?

### Introduction

In 2019, the *Washington Post*, in reference to the Program for International Student Assessment, reported that “teenagers in the United States continue to lag behind their peers in East Asia and Europe in reading” (Moriah-Balingit & Vandam, 2019, para. 1). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed that only 34 percent of students at the final level, grade 8, of Middle School were at or above proficiency in reading. It also indicated that 15 percent of Black students and 22 percent of Latinx students attained proficiency in reading as opposed to 44 percent of White students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2019). Over a decade ago, similarly dismal statistics led scholars to the same conclusion: “the reading crisis is one of adolescent literacy.” Furthermore, this “crisis could as well be called the achievement gap” (Snow 2004, p. xx) when the achievement levels are examined through the lens of race, ethnicity, and household income levels. Yet, the teaching of reading, the multifaceted skillset used to construct meaning from text (Garrod & Daneman, 2003, p. 6), has been relegated to a secondary position in Middle Schools across the US public-school system. Reading has been recognized as a core or foundational aspect of the Middle School curriculum, but it is not taught as a core subject.

A core class is mandatory for all students, as it is critical to overall educational success. The core subjects taught in Middle Schools are Language Arts, Social Studies, Mathematics, and Science. Reading instruction is integrated into those subjects, but they do not focus on the development of reading ability. Consequently, reading instruction receives insufficient attention, but this could be remedied by making reading a core class at the middle level, one that provides explicit instruction in reading based on curriculum standards and assessments. Reading includes

the connected components of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Students “have to be taught how to read” (Garrod & Daneman, 2003, p. 1) and require instruction and practice to become proficient and advanced readers. It is critical that middle students, regardless of their Lexile measure, have a class dedicated to instruction on the development of reading skills. The Middle School’s diverse student population includes students at different cognitive levels and academic achievement who required reading instruction (National Reading Panel [NRP] and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000, p. 40).

### **Reading and the English Language Arts Competition**

It is important to note that this paper is not proposing the separation or exclusion of reading from Language Arts. The integration of reading with the other areas of Language Arts is critical to the learning of students as it centers on the integration of six areas: reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and visual representation (The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and International Reading Association (IRA), 1996, p. 6). Thus, Language Arts is an integrated approach and could be the place where reading skills are practiced through a wholistic language experience or where all six areas are practiced harmoniously. Nonetheless, “these six areas are notably different from one another” (NCTE & IRA, 1996, p. 6) in various aspects, such as function and cognitive processing, which highlights the importance of reading as a core class at all grade levels. Reading instruction requires significant time and often competes with other aspects of instruction in Language Arts classes.

**Time for reading.** Many middle teachers crave time to provide good quality reading instruction. As noted by middle teacher Kevin Hodgson (2011), “reading instruction gulps up more and more time from the writing.” Similarly, Jeremy Hyler (2011, para. 2) lamented that

“Being a language arts teacher, I barely have time to breathe because of everything I have to get through. Maybe my colleague is right, reading should be separated again into a separate class.”

Though reading has been and is taught separately in some Middle Schools, reading is not a mandatory class for all middle students. Some Middle Schools offer reading programs to students, but often these programs are interventional or offered to one or two grade levels.

Additionally, many schools allow teachers to decide how they divide instructional time between the components of Language Arts, an approach that can marginalize reading. Marley (2017, comment # 3), a middle teacher, indicated that “I currently struggle with the same issue of trying to figure out how to best teach reading and writing in only one period a day.” Time obviously created instructional issues for these teachers. Such issues could have also arisen from lack of expertise in reading instruction, which a specialist reading teacher would have acquired. Reading as a core class is aimed at remedying such problems related to expertise and time. It is a platform that would provide reading teachers sufficient time to implement successful reading instruction to support rather than compete with the integrated approach to Language Arts, which teaches students how to develop their reading skills in conjunction with the other areas of Language Arts.

**Structuring reading as a core class.** There are various ways that reading classes could be structured, but it is critical that there are standards-based structures to facilitate high quality instruction. When structuring reading class, it is important to consider both the prerequisites of reading comprehension and strategies of comprehension. Prerequisites of comprehension include the ability to decode fluently. Part of the process of learning how to decode words fluently involves phonics and phonemic awareness skills and vocabulary development. Although phonics and phonemic awareness are usually taught at the elementary level (NRP & NICHD, 2000, pp. 2-

41 & 2-93), its inclusion in the reading core class framework is important as there are Middle School students who need this kind of instruction. When students are able to decode fluently, they are better able to focus their attention on comprehension (Pressley, 2001, p. 3).

Similarly, teaching vocabulary strategies, such as morphological analysis, can benefit the reading comprehension of Middle School students. As indicated by Templeton (2012, p. 101), “Students’ knowledge of morphology can play a critical role in vocabulary development, and by extension, reading comprehension.” Learning about how to analyze words or identify the meaning of different morphemes such as prefixes and suffixes is beneficial to Middle School students as they can use this knowledge to help them process unfamiliar or challenging reading materials in various subjects. Studies have also shown that morphological instruction benefited the reading comprehension of Secondary School students whose primary language is not English. Badawi (2019) for example, found that “explicit morphological instruction was effective in developing EFL secondary school students’ morphological awareness and reading comprehension” (p. 176). Considering the diversity in language and ethnic background of the student population in the United States, morphological instruction is even more critical to helping ethnic minority students, many of whom migrated to the United States or do not have parents whose primary language is English.

At the same time, a literature-centered approach that involves cognitive strategies to promote comprehension could, for example, be a critical part of the structure of core reading classes. With this approach, teachers would provide explicit instruction on cognitive strategies that consider the structure and features of a selection of challenging but appropriate fiction and non-fiction prose that also provide information that can develop their background knowledge. Students would read such texts in class on a schedule. It would be beneficial to students if an

emphasis is placed on what Shanahan (2019) has described as teaching students how to “negotiate the linguistic and conceptual barriers or *affordances* of a text” (para. 6). An affordance “is any resource or support the text offers to readers that can help to facilitate communication or understanding” (Shanahan, 2019, para. 9). In other words, the features and structure of a text are indispensable to developing comprehension.

Curriculum standards, along with challenging but appropriate reading materials and a daily schedule, could increase the opportunities for teachers to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of learners. While Language Arts teachers have tried to effectively address the development of reading skills through different instructional methods and strategies, their struggle to provide sufficient reading instruction shows that they need robust support. Reading as a core class could buttress instruction in Language Arts and other classes.

**Reading and literacy.** Although reading as a core class focuses on the development of reading, it has positive effects for student growth in the other language arts, such as writing, viewing, speaking, and listening. Reading classes can accommodate various instructional strategies, including read aloud, book reviews or reports, and discussions beneficial to student growth in other language arts. Furthermore, studies on the relationship between reading and writing have indicated that reading significantly influences writing, even more than writing influences reading, or “reading exerts a relatively larger influence on writing factors than the influence of writing on reading factors.” The researchers have also indicated that “children apply the knowledge base used in reading to their writing across all levels of language, but this developmental pattern is not reversible (i.e., with the exception of sentence reading, children do not apply their knowledge of writing to improve their reading)” (Ahmed, Wagner, & Lopez, 2014, p. 13). These findings not only speak to the significant influence that reading has on

writing; they also suggest that reading may be the greatest facilitator of literacy. This is one of the main reasons why having it as a mandatory structured class for all Middle School students is crucial.

### **Progress Monitoring in the Core Reading Class**

Similar to the four compulsory core subjects in Middle Schools, reading consists of various components, such as fluency, comprehension, analysis, and evaluation, that students must work on developing. A core reading class would allow teachers to effectively and efficiently monitor student progress based on valid and reliable data that can advance their reading skills in its various aspects. Though student progress monitoring has its origins in special education (Deno, 2003, p. 189), Safer and Fleischman (2005) have noted that it “is a practice that helps teachers use student performance data to continually evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and make more informed instructional decisions” (p. 81). Instead of facilitating only the monitoring of skills pertaining to a lesson or unit, student progress monitoring facilitates the monitoring of all the skills that students need to acquire in the long-term, including the end of a grade level. With this approach teachers can make necessary adjustments to instruction that will help their students acquire those skills (Safer & Fleischman, 2005, p. 81). However, student progress monitoring for reading can be greatly compromised when reading instruction is largely provided through content area classes because of various factors, including instructional goals and time limitations.

**Reliability and validity of reading assessments.** In content area classes, the development of reading ability is usually a secondary goal of teachers, who often have insufficient time or possess little knowledge of reading instruction, which includes assessment thereof. Within such contexts, students may not receive instruction on what they are being

assessed on and measurement of their reading progress may be based on inappropriate and unreasonable content area expectations or standards. Consequently, invalid and unreliable data on a student's reading development may be documented and used to inform instruction and policy. Indeed, assessment results on a student's reading level could be reliable, but as Catherine Close (2018) has indicated, reliability or the degree to which an assessment produced the same results when repeated, does not necessarily equate to validity, which is the degree to which an assessment measures knowledge or performance that should be measured. An assessment designed to test comprehension, but tests fluency could produce the same results when repeated, even though it is not accurately measuring comprehension. Even when reading instruction is provided as an intervention in content area classes, student progress monitoring can be compromised as assessment may predominantly measure content knowledge or only concern a fraction of a student's reading development, which can be either positive or negative growth.

Having core reading classes provide a long-term opportunity for reading teachers to monitor student progress as they attend to "skills that the student must learn by the end of the year, rather than just the particular skills a teacher may be teaching that week or month" (Safer & Fleischman, 2005, p. 81). With a core reading class, the primary focus of teachers would be instruction that is well prepared, organized, and implemented, thereby increasing the likelihood of both reliable and valid assessment results that can be used to advance student reading. Furthermore, when students are able to identify their strengths and weaknesses, they are better able to improve their knowledge, and are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning as their knowledge is documented and used as evidence of what they know and are able to do (Cauley & McMillan, 2010).

**Optimizing progress monitoring in reading.** Reading as a core class can also optimize progress monitoring because it affords teachers more opportunities to adjust lesson sequencing to help students meet learning objectives. Not only does lesson sequencing “allow teachers to anticipate difficulties and problem areas” in student learning, it also prepares students “to absorb new material” (Bilash, 2009, para. 5) and helps them to understand their progress because teachers have a clear and orderly assessment plan in place. When teachers have clear goals, objectives, and assessment plans, they are better able to monitor progress to help students become successful. Student progress monitoring is essentially a map that helps students and teachers to get to their destination, that is, the meeting of goals and objectives effectively and efficiently.

On average, middle students do not yet possess the level of cognitive development and foundational knowledge to independently apply the knowledge of reading in content areas to effectively develop their reading ability. They often struggle to understand texts in content classes because they have not acquired sufficient foundational reading skills that would help them to leverage the meaning of text through its various affordances. As several scholars have noted, “disciplinary literacy, a potentially powerful idea, cannot replace general strategy instruction,” since “adolescents who struggle with reading and writing do not possess the foundational skills and strategies necessary to learn proficiently” (Faggella-Luby Graner, Deshler, & Drew, 2012, p. 69). Reading as a core class is aimed at equipping all students with the foundational knowledge that they need to develop their disciplinary literacy. When we depend on content classes as the provider of reading instruction, we are also undermining equity in the way that we educate our students.

### **Equity and the Core Reading Class**

Educational inequity is one of the main factors that has affected teaching and learning across the United States. In 2019, on a scale of 500, the average reading score for White students was 272, while the score for Black students was 244 and Latinx students 252 (NCES, 2020, p. 75). Core reading classes in Middle Schools would help to ensure that all students receive robust standards-based reading instruction consistently. Core reading classes could emphasize texts that are congruent with grade level reading standards that are assessed and evaluated. Some students receive insufficient reading instruction or are not exposed to their grade level texts because they are deemed incapable of understanding them. Differentiation strategies and intervention are critical and have been used to some extent to address the learning needs of students, including struggling readers. However, core reading classes would use a structured framework that can strengthen differentiation and intervention to gives middle students a “significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps” (Every Students Succeed Act, 2015, S. 1177-13).

**The reading class curriculum.** A mandatory curriculum based on grade level standards used to guide instruction for all students is an important part of reading as a core class. Grade level texts serve well as baseline reading tools. In addition, struggling readers can benefit from reading texts that present significant opportunities for the advancement of their reading skills (Shanahan, 2019). This approach helps to provide a fair opportunity for all students to learn and perform satisfactorily on assessments. Researchers have long indicated that both proficient and struggling readers benefit from reading practice time, that a “reading class contributed significantly to students’ reading achievement,” and “even among primarily good readers, time spent reading at school made a difference in terms of students’ growth in reading” (Taylor, Frye,

& Maruyama, 1990, pp. 357, 360). In addition, the NCES (2013, p. 15) indicated that reading practice significantly contributes to reading achievement. Thirteen-year-old students who read for fun almost every day, for example, obtained higher reading scores. The underlining implication is that reading practice influenced their reading achievement, even more so as they got older. At the same time, it is important to note that teacher-led reading is highly effective because, in “learning the content of the texts, one usually does better reading with social support than on one’s own” (Shanahan, 2018, para. 21). As early as the 1920s, Lev Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) explained, in his zone of proximal development concept, that students are better able to reduce the gap between “actual development” and “potential development” and become independent learners when guided by adults and when collaborating “with more capable peer.”

**Cognitive development and reading instruction.** On average, students at the middle level, 10 to 14-years-old, are in the early stage of formal thought, which is largely “hypothetico deductive” (Piaget & Inhelder, 1958, p. 251). At this level, reasoning involves postulations rather than facts or actual occurrences. Hence, the emergence of abstract thinking usually starts to develop in young adolescents. Middle students, therefore, need more guidance in learning than they would at the high school and collegiate levels. Piaget’s formal operation stage provides an understanding of the cognitive development expected among young adolescents, influenced by various factors, including the level of support from the social environment. The home environment of many students may not provide sufficient help to enable the ongoing development of their reading (Teale, W. H., Paciga, K. A., & Hoffman, J. L., 2014). Many students, such as English Language Learners, need strong and continued support to improve their literacy.

**A long-term approach to reading development.** Significant improvement in reading achievement among Middle School students requires long-term planning (Teale et al., 2014). Reading as a core class is a long-term approach aimed at the development of student reading comprehension skills in a stable and substantive manner. Though reading workshops are offered in many schools, it has been strongly criticized by scholars as a laissez-faire approach because it lacks robust instruction and texts that provide students with substantive opportunities to advance their reading comprehension (Schwartz, 2020). Reading intervention classes are insufficient in addressing the needs of all Middle School students. These classes are usually short-term and are usually provided to students who have disabilities that affect their learning. Consequently, many students struggling with reading do not fit into a disability category and do not benefit from reading workshops or intervention opportunities. Core reading classes could, however, remedy this inequity by providing an inclusive class that primarily focuses on reading instruction in an organized, standards-based, and sequentially taught manner over the course of Middle School.

**Trained Reading Teachers.** Reading teachers must be trained and equipped with the pertinent knowledge and skills to effectively and efficiently facilitate the development of the reading skills of a diverse Middle School population, which includes students of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Teachers in content area classes are often unable to help struggling readers because they do not have “considerable knowledge and skill” in the teaching of reading, “acquired over several years” (Moats, 1999, p. 11). Reading teachers should be able to viably organize and implement reading instruction based on curriculum standards, successful research-based strategies, and the needs of students. The complexity of reading “varies depending on the reader’s characteristics” (Glass, 2015, para. 1), but all students can have significant benefits from

a reading class with a trained reading teacher, who understands the different aspects and levels of reading regardless of the Lexile measure of students.

### **Student Motivation and the Core Reading Class**

The inclusive nature of reading as a core class could significantly increase student motivation through its promotion of a positive school environment. The school environment is one of the main ways through which education professionals can increase students' motivation to learn (Anderman & Midgley, 1998). Students are motivated both intrinsically and extrinsically to learn. Di Domenico and Ryan (2017, para. 2) have noted that "When intrinsically motivated, people engage in an activity because they find it interesting and inherently satisfying. By contrast, when extrinsically motivated, people engage in an activity to obtain some instrumentally separable consequence." Intrinsic motivation is a deep personal investment in or desire to do something irrespective of external influence, while extrinsic motivation is an individual's commitment to do something because it is necessary to achieve a particular goal. Thus, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, educators have the most leverage over the extrinsic motivation of students (Anderman & Midgley, 1998) because it is largely influenced by the school environment. The environment can greatly influence an individual's interests, goals, and view of the world (Deci, 1971, p. 105). Students' intrinsic motivation to learn are impacted by the multiplicity of ideas and feelings that they bring to school. But these are developed and reshaped as they interact with the value system of the school and with the individuals thereof.

The designation of reading as a core subject is an extrinsic motivator that would send a clear message to students that it is critical to their academic progress and achievement. Students do not always like the core subjects, but many, perhaps most, of them are aware that they are an

indispensable part of the curriculum that will, in large part, determine whether they graduate or progress to college. As a result, they are more motivated to achieve success in these subjects. Reading as a core could promote the same understanding or perception of necessity that facilitates student motivation. This is not to say that students are not motivated by the importance of reading. However, the fact that all students are required to do core classes strongly communicates to them that these classes are a necessary part of their education, a reality reinforced by standardized assessments such as the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) tests, administered for Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science throughout Middle School to test what students know under the direction of The Outstanding Schools Act of 1993 (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [DESE], 2019).

**Mitigating student embarrassment.** Other factors, such as the classroom setting, play an integral role in motivating students to develop their reading ability. Many students need reading intervention or support because they are reading below grade level. But many of these students also have a negative attitude towards reading because they are either embarrassed by or stigmatized for being a part of special reading classes. These students often attend special reading classes or reading workshops to receive support at the expense of enrollment in other classes, which are available to proficient readers. In some Middle Schools in the Midwest, for example, students attend reading workshops five times every two weeks. This sort of arrangement not only provides these students with less time for reading instruction, it can also demotivate them. Although reading intervention is required in some instances, core reading classes could significantly mitigate the embarrassment that some students feel because of the separation from their peers for reading instruction. This kind of separation is an example of ability grouping that around the world has had serious repercussions for student motivation and

engagement in the learning process. The practice of “ability grouping lowers self-esteem and reduces motivation among poor readers, restricts friendship choices” and “widens the gap between poor readers and good readers” (Vaughn, S., Hughes, M., Watson Moody, S., & Elbaum, B, 1999, p. 399). Ability grouping in British secondary schools, for example, revealed that many teachers “recognize the damage to pupils’ confidence” (Mazenod, A., Francis, B., Archer, L., Hodgen, J., Taylor, B., Tereshchenko, A. & Pepper, D., 2018, p. 13). While it is critical to provide special reading support for struggling readers, it is essential to mitigate the negative effects of such instruction.

**The inclusive framework of reading as a core.** Due to its inclusive framework, reading as a core class has great potential to motivate students to build their reading skills. The instruction in reading as a core can be differentiated and thereby aid student engagement in developing their reading skills. If done appropriately within the core class, students generally view differentiation positively. As Fenner, Mansour, and Sydor (2010, p. i) found in a study on Middle Schools, “differentiated strategies allowed students to become motivated according to their ability.” Differentiation is expected by students as it is routinely implemented in core classes. Differentiation can also take a variety of forms through content, process, and assessment to further mitigate any embarrassment or demotivating effects it might have on students. Essentially, differentiation is indispensable to the success of reading as a core class, a class that would be guided by a standards-based curriculum and highly successful research-based strategies.

### **Conclusion**

It is widely recognized by teachers and education researchers that the ability to read well is one of the foundations of success in the classroom and in life in general. But developing the

skillset to read well requires the knowledge of how to navigate unfamiliar literature or texts and opportunities to read consistently under guidance from teachers on an ongoing basis. Teachers who have specialist training in reading instruction are expected to be better equipped with the knowledge and skills to help students attain reading goals that are essential to their educational development. The conception of reading as a core class is an opportunity to improve reading achievement in Middle Schools that will complement other classes, including Language Arts. Students would receive sufficient time to focus on honing their reading skills, which are critical to the development of their knowledge across content areas. The democratic benefits of teaching reading as a core can be understood through its benefits to society, achieved through students with highly developed reading skills.

Reading as a core subject also offers an equitable approach to the teaching of reading by providing all students the opportunity to build reading skills in a positive learning environment. Reading as a core affords teachers and students the opportunity to monitor the progress in reading effectively and efficiently. Experimental research could verify its facilitation of high levels of reading achievement for the diverse populations of Middle Schools. Based on document analysis, however, reading as a core class has a strong potential to position all middle students to benefit from a standards-based curriculum designed around long-term learning objectives to help them to function in school and society.

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