Middle School Reading: From Reluctant to Strategic Reader

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Abstract
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Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Master of Education (MEd)

Department
Graduate Education

First Advisor
Wendy Richards

Keywords
Master of Education, thesis, middle school students, reading, reluctant readers, strategic readers

Subject Categories
Curriculum and Instruction | Education | Reading and Language

Comments
Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

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Middle School Reading:
From Reluctant to Strategic Reader

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From Reluctant to Strategic Reader

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Education 590
Literature Review
June 11, 2003
Abstract

Research shows that student attitudes towards school reading declines dramatically as students reach upper elementary grades (Mckenna, 1995), yet as these students reach middle school and high school they will be faced with increasing demands to be critical readers. Reluctant middle school readers must have reading experiences that are successful in order to change their attitudes towards reading. Reading teachers must equip their middle level students to be strategic readers in order to be prepared for the critical reading and thinking demands of middle school and high school. This means that reading instruction must be organized in a way that allows for students to have choices in reading, time to read, and opportunities to respond to what they have read. The reading environment must be flexible so that the instructor is able to focus on individual needs, but also utilize focused whole class activities that move avid, passive, and reluctant readers to be strategic and critical readers (Bintz, 1993).
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Introduction:

Middle school students are crazy, curious, and crabby. They can knock a teacher’s socks off with their creativity one minute and give her a blank stare of confusion the very next minute. In order to be a stimulating yet relational middle school teacher, one must establish high standards for all students, while always remembering that middle level students are living in that difficult land somewhere between childhood and teenhood. The National Middle School association asserts that affective middle school teachers must be dedicated to teaching curriculum that is challenging and relevant, but also to instructing in a manner that responds to the developmental needs of students between the ages of 11-15 (NMSA, 2001). This two-fold challenge is met by providing students with choices in their learning, by diagnosing individual needs, and by teaching in ways that target these specific needs.

Middle level students should be able to succeed with projects that require them to analyze information, to make evaluations, to draw conclusions, and to make applications to real life situations. In order to do these types of thinking, students must be able to not only read and comprehend material, they must also be able to read critically so that higher-level thinking and action can occur. However, how does a teacher help the student who struggles with basic reading skills become a critical reader?

The purpose of this literature review is to answer this question. In order for reluctant middle school readers to become a critical reader, they must have reading experiences that are successful in order to change their attitudes towards
reading. Middle level readers must be equipped to be strategic readers in order to be prepared for the reading demands of middle school and high school. This means that reading instruction must be organized in a way that allows for students to have choices in reading, time to read, and opportunities to respond to what they have read. The reading environment must be flexible so that the instructor is able to focus on individual needs, but also utilize focused whole class activities that move avid, passive, and reluctant readers to be strategic and critical readers (Bintz, 1993).

**Student Attitude Towards Reading**

Students’ attitudes towards school reading begin to decline in 4th grade and continue on a downward slope through high school (McKenna et al., 1995; Bintz, 1993). Middle school teachers are faced with the double challenge of teaching in ways that guide their students to critical reading and thinking while simultaneously fighting a seemingly downward battle with their attitudes towards reading, especially academic or school reading (McKenna et al., 1995; Worthy, 1998). As one considers how an individual becomes a reluctant reader, it is impossible to ignore the correlation between an individual’s ability to read and one’s attitude towards reading. McKenna, Kear, and Ellsworth (1995) conducted a nation wide survey on 18,185 elementary (grades 1-6) students’ attitudes towards reading. Their research found that recreational and academic reading attitudes are relatively high in first grade; however, by 6th grade reading attitudes generally fall to indifference. A negative attitude towards recreational reading is often related to reading ability and this “trend is most rapid for least able readers,”
(McKenna et al., 1995, p. 938) so the stronger the student’s negative attitude is towards reading the more likely it is that that reader is struggling with the task of reading.

In surveying reading attitudes, researchers used McKenna’s model of reading attitude acquisition, which suggests that “normative beliefs, beliefs about the outcomes of reading, and specific reading experiences” influence the reading attitude that an individual develops (McKenna et al., 1995, p. 939). As an individual has positive and negative reading experiences, one develops beliefs about one’s personal reading abilities and about the act of reading. Over time these beliefs form the individual’s attitude towards reading.

Beliefs about the outcomes of reading must relate in part to the ability to read. The necessity of this relationship is to a certain extent self-evident, but growth in ability is linked in turn, normatively, to one’s perception of the value of reading within a particular social context. If its perceived value is low, the development of reading ability will be constrained and beliefs about the outcomes of reading will tend to confirm a normative belief that reading has little value to begin with. This mutually confirming process of normative and predictive beliefs suggests the true complexity of the situation. (p. 939)

Students’ beliefs about reading influence their perceptions about themselves as readers and about how they value reading. These perceptions form attitudes that usually bring beliefs into being—this can result in positive or negative attitudes towards reading.
The work of McKenna et al. (1995) is significant because it clearly shows that as children progress through elementary school there is a tendency for their attitudes towards reading to decline. In order to address the needs of her reluctant readers, the middle school reading teacher must understand the attitudes and beliefs that her students have towards reading. In order to affect a negative attitude toward reading, a teacher must work at changing the beliefs that the reader has regarding the value of reading and his/her belief about him/herself as a reader.

Bintz’s analysis (1993) of student interviews revealed three types, or portraits, of teen readers: avid, passive, and reluctant. The avid reader is one who reads inside and outside of school and enjoys it. A passive reader is one who reads fluently but does not seek to read outside of required school reading, and a reluctant reader can be described as one who actively avoids reading (Bintz, 1993).

Avid readers are those who pursue reading both inside and outside of school with and for pleasure. These readers tend to have positive attitudes towards reading because of their beliefs that reading has value and that they are capable of being successful while reading (McKenna et al., 1995). Two factors that appear to be consistent for avid readers are the influence of a reading community and having an interest in a wide variety of reading materials.

A majority of students describe themselves as passive or reluctant readers. The passive reader tends to see reading as a “linear process... and they experience difficulty monitoring their own comprehension” (Bintz, 1993, pp. 608-609);
consequently these readers also demonstrate a difficulty connecting what is read in school to real life or personal applications. While it is common for a passive reader to seem apathetic towards reading, a reluctant reader may demonstrate apathy and hostility towards school reading. These readers tend to have a background filled with failures and frustrations with reading, which results in apathetic, unmotivated, and even hostile attitudes toward reading (Bintz, 1993).

**What is a Reluctant Reader?**

Before one can affectively teach her reluctant reader, a teacher must be able to recognize the characteristics that define reluctant reader so that instruction can be adjusted to meet the needs of the reader. Wilhelm writes that “Every teacher is faced with the problem of reluctant readers who are not active readers, and who show little ability or inclination to use active strategies of making meaning, even when explicitly instructed and encouraged to do so” (Wilhelm, 1995, p. 468). Reluctant readers are “passive and resistant” toward reading, and research shows that

Less proficient readers have been shown to read more slowly and less accurately than better readers. They read in local, piecemeal ways and do not make use of either extratextual information such as schematic knowledge, or larger units of intratextual information such as a sense of textual configuration and coherence. (p. 468)

The reluctant reader is one who tends to approach reading as a “decoding process” and as one who does not tend to appreciate reading as a “meaning making” process. This description is in sharp contrast to the picture of an
engaged reader who is described as “intensively creative, visual, and dramatic in nature” during the process of reading (Wilhem, 1995, p. 469).

As teachers examine how they can teach in ways that meet the needs of reluctant readers, they will need to consider which skills their students must have in order to be successful readers in middle school and beyond. An affective middle school literacy program must be able to help students continue to develop their basic reading skills and at the same time prepare them to be critical readers and thinkers. Lewin, a sixth grade reading teacher, writes that his students must be able to read for basic comprehension, but they must also be able to read critically. "I expect my students to be keen readers of the content information and to be skillful comparers of multiple sources. I also want them to become critical analyzers of texts” (Lewin, 1999, p. 20).

A Strategic Reader

If a middle school teacher expects her students to be “critical analyzers of texts,” what skills and abilities must a reader demonstrate in order to meet this expectation? Flood and Lapp (1990) address the challenge of teaching reading comprehension to “at-risk” students who struggle with reading. They describe competent middle school readers as “strategic readers” that “actively construct meaning as they read; they are self-motivated and self-directed; they monitor their own comprehension by questioning, reviewing, revising, and rereading to enhance their overall comprehension”(Flood and Lapp, 1990, p. 138). They lay out a generalized picture of what a strategic or critical reader will do.
Before Reading

- The reader will preview the reading material. This might include surveying titles, questions, visual elements, and any bold face print.
- The reader will build background which means he/she will look to draw from his/her prior knowledge that relates to the material.
- The reader will set a purpose for the reading.

During Reading

- The reader checks for understanding as he/she reads.
- The reader monitors comprehension.
- The reader integrates the new material with prior knowledge. He/she makes these connections while reading.

After Reading

- The reader is able to summarize and paraphrase the material that was read.
- The reader is able to make critical evaluations about the reading material. This might involve making comparisons and/or drawing conclusions.
- The reader is able to make application from the reading to real life or is able to respond to the material in a personal way.

From this description, it is clear that in order for middle school students to be competent or strategic readers, they must be able to demonstrate basic reading skills like comprehension and summary, but they must also be able to connect reading to personal experiences or to other sources of information (application) and be able to evaluate the material. Hence, a middle school reader must be equipped to be a critical reader. Before a teacher can address the concern of how...
she can help her struggling readers to become strategic or critical readers, she must have a grasp of what their strengths and weaknesses are in their basic reading skills.

The reluctant or struggling reader will have difficulty with one or more of the tactics utilized by a strategic reader; one may be struggling with basic comprehension and not even know where to begin when it comes to making applications or drawing conclusions about a text.

**Perceptions and Student Skills**

One concern Bintz (1993) and Worthy (1998) write about in relation to the abilities or skill levels of reluctant readers is whether teacher perceptions about abilities and actual abilities are compatible. Worthy interviewed her son and his friend when they were in 6th and 8th grades. Both of the boys could be labeled as reluctant readers because of their apathetic attitudes towards school reading; however, her conversations with the boys reveal a different picture than the description of a typical reluctant reader. As a result of their conversations, she concludes that when the boys discussed what they were reading for pleasure they demonstrated the ability to summarize, evaluate, and apply. A second theme that is evident in this initial interview is that the boys listened to each other’s recommendations and suggestions for reading. If these themes can be woven into school reading, many reluctant readers would become engaged readers (Worthy, 1998). An engaged reader is one who is connected to or interested in what one is reading (Schoenbach, 1999). An avid reader is usually an engaged reader, but an engaged reader is not always an avid reader.
Much like the research of Bintz (1993) suggests, the two boys' attitudes towards school reading continued to decline between 6th grade and 8th grade. When Worthy interviewed the boys a second time in 8th grade, they demonstrated apathetic attitudes towards school and out-of-school reading. However, Worthy states that both boys still read magazines and newspapers. Even though their attitudes appeared to be very apathetic towards reading in general, interest and relevancy of material were still key factors for motivating these 8th graders to read.

Bintz (1993) concludes that students often resist school reading because of their perception that they do not have a voice or a choice when it comes to reading in school. There are some reoccurring themes that run through the Bintz research. First, he questions the assumption that many secondary students are truly reluctant towards reading; this is primarily true as it connects to school reading. A second theme is that many reluctant or passive readers use survival strategies when reading in-school material but use critical strategies with their own out of school readings. It is interesting to note that although many of these readers develop short-term strategies to help them with school assignments, they do not seem to comprehend that these shortcuts may actually impede their development to become highly proficient readers. "I have come to believe that by resorting to shortcuts and survival strategies, students were participating in their own deskilling"(Bintz, 1993, p. 613).

As Worthy and Bintz surmise from interviewing adolescent readers, choice and opportunities for young readers to respond to what they are reading
greatly impact their attitudes toward school reading. Therefore the question can be raised: How does this influence the design of reading programs in middle schools?

**Middle School Literacy Program Models**

During middle school students are increasingly demanded to “learn from reading” by reading from textbooks, yet they are often not instructed in how to approach this type of reading. Currently, middle schools approach reading instruction in a variety of ways. In her article “Building Sound Literacy Programs for Young Adolescents” (1997), Irvin explores the need for literacy instruction to continue into middle school.

Irvin briefly describes five literacy program models that are common in middle schools. The first model that she describes is the example of a school that does not include reading courses in its curriculum. In this model, there are English classes but no additional courses in reading. English teachers are responsible for instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening and study skills. It is common for there to be very little or no direct reading or study skill instruction because there is simply too much curriculum to be addressed in one class. In this model, a reluctant reader will receive little or no individual instruction.

A second approach consists of including remedial reading courses in the curriculum for “low readers” who are clumped into remedial courses to improve comprehension and study skills. Often these courses are not designed to address individual needs, and “often little transfer occurs between what is learned in a
remedial reading course and reading that is required in content area
courses”(Irvin, 1997, p. 5). Students that do not test high enough on basic reading
tests take remedial classes until their scores go up. Unfortunately these courses
are often taught through whole group instruction that misses many of the
individual needs students have. Another weakness of this model is that it rarely
addresses the attitudes reluctant readers have towards school reading. In fact
remedial reading courses may serve to reinforce the students’ negative beliefs
about themselves as being capable readers and about the value of reading. If the
goal of a remedial reading course is to enable a struggling reader to pass a
standardized test, the resulting curriculum choices and instructional methods will
limit opportunities for student choice in reading selections and limit opportunities
to respond to reading (Worthy, 1998). The curriculum choices become more
focused on short slices of reading, whole class reading, and drill testing practice.
Resulting methods of instruction tend to be direct and not focused on the
individual needs of struggling readers.

Although some middle schools use remedial reading courses to try and
meet the needs of “low” readers, the most common reading instruction model is
the inclusion of developmental reading courses within the school’s curriculum. In
this model all students have reading instruction in 6th grade and some instruction
in 7th grade, and the courses tend to focus on building comprehension, study
skills, and increased vocabulary. This model has the potential to directly address
the needs of struggling or reluctant readers, but often developmental courses focus
on whole group instruction that does not meet the individual needs of readers.
A less common literacy model is reading instruction that is done “across the curriculum” in all content areas. Content area teachers are all seen as responsible for integrating reading instruction into their curriculum and making it a priority in their classes.

Sanacore (1990) explores this model in his article “Teaching the Lifetime Reading Habit in Social Studies” by suggesting how reading instruction can be woven into a social science classroom. He shows how a typical social studies class already contains activities like reading, giving speeches, and discussions. “These activities represent a natural literacy context for supporting pleasurable reading” (Sanacore, 1990, p. 238). Sanacore suggests that social studies teachers can include historical fiction in their curriculum, use a variety of non-fiction sources, and read aloud to students as ways of integrating reading into their curriculum. He adds that teachers should avoid assigning canned reading requirements like book reports. In conclusion, he notes that the key to content area reading instruction rests in offering students a variety of materials to read that connect to the theme or topic being studied (Sanacore, 1990).

The overview of reading instruction models set out by Irvin (1997) shows that there are some approaches that obviously do not provide a framework that best enable a teacher to meet the needs of reluctant readers. The two approaches that provide the best options for meeting the needs of reluctant middle school readers are reading across the curriculum in the content areas and the reading workshop model. As Ivey and Broaddus write, “Two critical responsibilities for
teachers are to match instruction to individual student development and to provide contexts in which students can become engaged in reading” (2000, p. 69).

The reading workshop approach to literacy instruction is growing in popularity in many middle schools. This approach usually results in teachers implementing reading workshops that focus on student choice, time for reading, and opportunities for students to reflect on their learning. With a reading workshop model a teacher has the opportunity to establish a flexible environment, which allows for individualized instruction but also allows for whole class mini-lessons and skill instruction.

Environment

Student Choice: Reading Materials

A reading workshop model provides a teacher with the flexibility to make reading time and student choice of reading material priorities in her instruction. As students gain confidence in making reading choices, an affective reading teacher will model ways in which readers can share their reading experiences with others in the class. While one primary focus of a reading workshop is to establish an environment that can help foster positive reading experiences for reluctant readers, it must also provide a framework in which a teacher can meet individual needs and challenge students to become critical readers.

A literacy program that is tailored to meet the individual needs of readers must establish an environment that includes a large selection of materials for readers to choose from. There are two essential elements to keep in mind when gathering materials for a reading class: variety and difficulty.
The first essential element is variety; there must be a variety of genres for students to choose from. Some readers will be drawn to stories while others will be drawn to books with colorful pictures and graphics. Students will come to reading with individual interests and strengths, and the reading selection should include materials that will capture the diverse interests of students. Some students are interested in a particular topic, others like to be scared, and others might be motivated by the visual images of a text. Middle level students need “[c]urriculum that is rich in meaning, one that helps students make sense of themselves and their world. This implies that the content of what is studied deals with substantive issues and values, is related to students’ own questions, opens doors to new learning, and is integrative in nature” (Arnold, 1997, p. 51).

In order for students to have successful reading experiences, they must have the opportunity to choose materials that interest them. Worthy (1998), Broaddus (2000), and Ivey (1999) all write about the importance of student interest in the materials they read and its potential for motivating reluctant readers to engage with reading material. “Regardless of ability or general inclination to read, interesting materials are needed to develop and sustain engaged middle school readers” (Ivey, 1999, p. 374). Ivey and Broaddus’s survey of over 1700 sixth grader readers reveals that students enjoy a wide variety of types of reading materials, including scary stories, magazines, adult popular fiction, and pictures books (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000).

Ivey (1999) provides suggestions for types of materials that can capture the interest of reluctant readers. Books that seem real and relatable to the lives of
middle school students can provide the hook to capture their attention. Humorous books and picture books can also be popular with both avid and reluctant readers.

The second essential element to keep in mind while selecting materials is to choose materials that range in difficulty. It is important to have reading materials available that are the appropriate instructional levels for all readers. “In order for students to get better at reading, they need opportunities to read materials they can read with 95% accuracy in word recognition” (Ivey, 1999, p. 374). The practical implication of this for a reading instructor is to have reading materials from a wide range of difficulty. There must be materials that are accessible for readers who are three or four years behind grade level and materials available that challenge the readers who are reading well past grade level.

Time to Read

Once students are given the opportunity to choose reading materials, they must be given time to read. The interviews of Bintz (1993) and Worthy (1997) reveal that as students advance through middle school, reluctant readers tend to spend less time reading outside of school. The research of Ivey and Broaddus (2000) echoes this; when they asked sixth grade students what they enjoyed about their language arts classes, the most frequent response was free time reading. This same group of students ranked silent reading time as “the best thing” in their language arts classes (2000). If middle school educators expect their students to be doing more and more reading, students must be given time to do it.

In “Redesigning Reading Instruction” (2000), Ivey makes a series of suggestions for how schools can implement changes that will make reading
instruction a priority throughout a school. Her first suggestion is for schools to “prioritize time for reading in the school day” (Ivey, 2000, pg. 43). The best way to engage reluctant readers is to give them ample amounts of time to read in school and that reading time needs to be given across subject areas and not just in reading class. Teachers need to read aloud to students and to provide time for reading in class.

Ivey (2000) also challenges the fragmented schedules that do not allow for chunks of time for reading. Many traditional junior highs still follow a seven period day where students move to a new class every 40 or 50 minutes. Setting aside 30 to 40 minutes for reading can be difficult to do in a 45 minute period. Students read when they are given appropriate amounts of time. Block scheduling provides class periods that run 80 to 90 minutes, which makes it easier to plan for a 40 minute block of reading time while still including other activities within the period. Some schools opt to leave scheduling flexible so that teams can decide the schedule that works best for their students.

Response to Reading

Research shows (Worthy, 1997; Bintz, 1993) that students often demonstrate critical reading skills when discussing material that is of interest to them. Teens listen to the reading suggestions of their peers and demonstrate the capability to evaluate and apply material. The reading workshop model should include opportunities for readers to respond in a meaningful way to what they are reading. In order for reluctant readers to have successful and engaging reading experiences, they must have opportunities to ask questions, share insights, express
opinions, and make suggestions. There are a variety of ways in which teachers can provide opportunities for response including organizing class structure, utilizing technology, and sharing read alouds.

Ivey (1999) challenges reading teachers to consider how they organize the structure of their classes in order to provide opportunities for students to respond to what they are reading. One structure that she suggests for a class with students with varying reading abilities is the “circle-seat-center” format. Students are grouped into three groups according to their instructional needs and rotate to three locations. The teacher meets with a group during circle time for guided work/practice on specific skills or word study activities. At seat time the group continues the skill practice or word activities modeled by the teacher during circle time. When the group moves on to center time, they work independently or with a partner on a focused writing or reading activity (Ivey, 1999).

This organizational structure has many benefits. It meets the reading needs of a wide range of students: it provides opportunities for students to work closely with their teacher and classmates but also allows for independent work. The circle-seat-center format also provides opportunities for students to make choices and share their reading responses. A benefit for the teacher is that she is able to set clear expectations for what all students should be doing while she can give focused attention to a small group of students.

Organizing the structure of a class period can help establish a collaborative environment in the classroom, but with today’s technology some teachers are pushing collaboration beyond the classroom. Doering and Beach
Middle School Reading 20 (2002), from the University of Minnesota, present an interesting example of student and teacher conferencing in their publication "Co-Inquiry Approach to Learning and Using Hypermedia." They describe a pre-service teacher project in which twenty-seven pre-service teachers used asynchronous web (WebCT) discussions with middle school students. Computer-mediated written communication was used to conference with students by teachers posing questions, answering questions, and working collaboratively with students to help them explore a particular famous person (Doering & Beach, 2002). The project allowed students to interact with their instructors even outside of the classroom, which "served to enhance the quality of teacher/student relationships and provide[d] for frequent collaboration on the project" (Doering & Beach, 2002).

At the completion of the project, the teachers reflected on the literacy practices that were utilized as a result of the project. One benefit of using the WebCT formant was that teachers felt that they and their students were more apt to display spontaneous thinking when they were writing in the free mode allowed by the format. Secondly, the format allowed teachers to invite others to participate in the discussion by providing positive feedback and invitations for the perspective and opinions of others.

In my own teaching I have experimented with using email as a means of fostering student responses to reading. Although it was somewhat time consuming to respond to individual emails, my students overwhelmingly preferred responding through email and enjoyed the opportunity to interact with their classmates and teacher about class reading outside of the class setting.
Another way in which students can be encouraged to share their reading responses is by having them share read alouds with the class. In this activity students select a passage to share with the class, they read it to the class, and then they share their reaction to the selection.

In order for a reluctant reader to gain the confidence to share a reading selection on his/her own, it is important for a teacher to model the process. “When teachers read aloud interesting books and demonstrate their own enthusiasm for reading, however, their zeal may become contagious” (Ivey, 1999, p. 375). Modeling read alouds can be beneficial because they can help raise student interest. “I have observed that when middle school teachers share books regularly, students become inspired to do the same” (Ivey, 1999, p. 375).

Utilizing individual instruction and establishing a learning environment that allows for student choice, flexible scheduling, and opportunities to respond to reading are essential elements of a reading workshop. Within the framework of a workshop a teacher has the opportunity to use whole class instruction to focus on building skills that will lead all of her students to be strategic readers. These strategies should be implemented so that reluctant readers can continue to build basic skills like comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, and so that avid readers can be challenged to develop critical reading skills.

The benefits of students participating in reading instruction that is collaborative and strategic are discussed in a study conducted by Anderson, Chan, and Henne (1995). In their study, ten sixth grade students with delayed literacy skills were instructed with a strategy instruction reading method that focused
utilizing collaboration, reading and writing as problem solving, flexibility, and 
self-assessment. Students were encouraged to view reading as a process rather 
than as a series of tasks that need to be completed. The students were given 
reading and writing instruction for two hours daily for fourteen weeks. During 
instruction, students frequently had opportunities to ask questions and respond to 
what they were reading by working collaboratively with a teacher and peers. The 
reading materials that were used were primarily non-fiction texts that were 
organized around themes or topics. Since students were encouraged to interact 
with the material and with classmates, the challenging material was not viewed as 
imimidating.

The results of Anderson, Chan, and Henne’s research concluded that 
students who were given the strategic instruction model made “significantly 
greater gains in reading comprehension than did the control group” (Anderson et 
al., 1995, p. 7). The control group continued their regular literacy instruction in 
daily reading and language arts classes. The results of the study also showed that 
the students in the experiments group improved their ability to summarize 
information and demonstrated more confidence in approaching challenging texts 
(Anderson et al., 1995).

This study illustrates that middle school students who struggle with 
reading can make significant gains in their basic skills, their critical reading skills, 
and in their perceptions of themselves as readers. The strategy instruction method 
used with these students includes the benefits of a reading workshop environment 
where students have time to read and collaborate with other readers in a
meaningful way, but it also helps reluctant readers build basic and critical reading skills by utilizing challenging materials and individualized instruction.

**Individualized Instruction**

In any given class of readers, a teacher will be faced with students who have a wide range of skills, abilities, and attitudes connected to reading. "Large scale assessments indicate that we have significant numbers of students across achievement levels in the middle grades who struggle with reading thoughtfully and critically" (Broaddus & Ivey, 2002, p. 6). Some of her students will read at a post high school level while others may barely be reading at a second grade level. How does a teacher effectively challenge her class without alienating one or more students? In order for a teacher to meet the challenges of instructing students with diverse literacy abilities and of preparing them for the demands of critical thinking which is necessary for middle and high school reading, she must find a way to balance individualized instruction and whole class direct instruction.

The workshop model provides the opportunity for teachers to meet the needs of individual readers through differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction is focused on building on the strengths of individual readers in order to equip them to be strategic readers. "One-size instruction never fit anyone, but it is time to discard the old patterns and redesign reading instruction with diverse students in mind" (Ivey, 2000, p. 42). Differentiated instruction requires a teacher to discover the strengths and weaknesses of each of her students, and then individualized instruction is focused on building the reader's strengths and developing skills in weak areas. In order to do this, a teacher must know her
students—their interests, strengths, and weaknesses—and help facilitate self-understanding of interests and strengths in students (Broaddus & Ivey, 2002).

In order for a teacher to get to know the literacy abilities of her students, she will need to use a mixture of formal and informal assessment. Informal assessment includes individual conferences with students, analyzing written student responses to reading, and listening to students read one on one. Broaddus and Ivey suggest using interviews and observation to gain insight into the individual needs of readers. “Interviews with a student or a parent can yield important information about the development of reading skills and interests” (2002, p. 8). Observations may be done by listening to groups of students reading together or by listening to a student read one on one. Once specific individual needs are determined, a teacher must utilize specific strategies that help a reluctant reader build up weak skill areas.

Wilhelm’s work (1995) with struggling readers and helping them connect reading to visual response provides an example of instruction that is specifically geared towards the learning styles and strengths of reluctant readers. Wilhelm describes his work with two 7th grade boys who read several grade levels behind many of their peers. Both boys seemed to be drawn to reading materials that contained many pictures. As Wilhelm began to include visual response activities in the whole class setting (activities like illustrating books and picture mapping), he built on these activities with the two boys by having them use drawing to reflect their responses to readings. Wilhelm discovered a way for the two
reluctant readers to have a successful and meaningful reading experience, and
individualized instruction made this happen (Wilhelm, 1995).

Differentiated, or individualized, instruction is important in meeting the
specific needs of reluctant or struggling readers; however, a reading teacher will
also need to utilize whole class instruction that focuses on equipping all of their
students to be strategic readers.

**Whole Class Strategies that lead from Basic to Strategic Reading**

In the following section, a number of reading instruction strategies will be
presented. Each of the strategies is designed to help a reluctant reader to build
basic reading skills but also to provide them with opportunities to develop critical
reading skills. Each of the strategies is also designed to provide reluctant readers
with reading experiences that are positive and encourage a meaningful response.
Along with building skills, reluctant readers need to build attitudes that see
reading as valuable and relevant to their lives, and they need opportunities to see
themselves as successful readers. The strategies explored here are using
embedded questions, using Reader’s Theater, utilizing non-fiction trade books,
and developing web literacy.

*Embedded Questions*

Reading teacher Weir (1998) writes about using embedded questions to
help her struggling middle school readers become confident and critical readers.
Weir begins the instruction process by modeling to her whole class how a reader
can ask questions, make predictions, and draw conclusions while reading. Weir
embeds questions within the stories and leaves space for students to answer the
question in the context of the story. While students each annotate their own copies of the story, as a class they discuss their responses to the questions and themes that emerge from the reading. As her students gain confidence in the process of annotating and asking their own questions, Wier provides opportunities for students to read on their own and then use their embedded questions, annotations and conclusions to design response collages that reflect important images, events, and ideas from the story. Weir's reluctant readers become competent readers who not only comprehend stories but also are able to demonstrate the strategic reader skills of “predicting, self-quisitoning, self-monitoring, rereading, and visualizing” (Wier, 1998, p. 166).

**Reader’s Theater**

It is difficult to pinpoint one specific definition for fluency, but Worthy and Broaddus summarize a fluent reader “must comprehend and interpret text and read with appropriate timing, expressiveness, stress and intonation” (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002, p. 334). Fluency is key to the reading development of a reluctant reader because it is essential for building comprehension levels necessary for increasingly difficult materials that students will encounter in middle school and high school. Middle level students who are weak in fluency tend to avoid reading, which is often connected to a fear of embarrassment or negative reading experiences from their pasts. This avoidance, typical of reluctant readers, can lead to a student having “less exposure to ideas and vocabulary in books and may loose intellectual as well as academic ground” (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002, p. 335).
Traditional approaches to addressing fluency can often serve to reinforce negative attitudes and experiences for reluctant readers. Traditional round-robin activities can put a struggling reader in a situation in which he/she will avoid reading in order to avoid standing out as a slow reader. However, another traditional fluency building technique, re-reading, has proven to be effective for improving word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. For this technique, a student reads and practices a short, manageable piece of reading and re-reads it until he/she achieves an appropriate level of speed and accuracy. Re-reading that is designed for performance is called Reader’s Theater (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002).

Utilizing Reader’s Theater in content area classes can help raise comprehension, improve fluency, and build subject specific vocabulary. Reader’s Theater provides students with the opportunity to engage in oral reading and practice the same material repeatedly, “therefore students can develop larger sight-word vocabularies, increased reading rate, and improved fluency” (Young & Vardell, 1993, p. 398).

When readers have the opportunity to practice reading a selection, they can focus on using their voices to alter how they will deliver the readings. When reluctant readers are asked to do a “cold read” in front of classmates, they are often concentrating so hard on not making mistakes that they do not focus on reading fluently (Worthy and Broaddus, 2002). “Worthy and Broaddus (2002) also highlight the benefits of utilizing Reader’s Theater to improve fluency and to tap into student interest. They note that Reader’s Theater is an activity that easily
allows a teacher to group students according to interest and not ability level. However, the teacher must still take the initiative to see that all readers have parts they will be successful with. Given the opportunity to work together collaboratively and the opportunity to practice, many reluctant readers gain confidence by participating in Reader’s Theater because “each success leads to increased self-confidence and motivation to repeat the success” (Worthy & Broaddus, 2002, p. 339).

Along with helping readers build comprehension and fluency, Reader’s Theater can also be used to open up opportunities for critical reading. Young and Vardell (1993) outline a process for adapting non-fiction trade books into Reader’s Theater scripts. A teacher can begin the process by modeling for students how a larger piece of writing can be cut down for a powerful oral reading.

Script Process:

1. Give students the opportunity to read the text or present a booktalk so that the material is familiar to students.

2. Choose a captivating section of a book.

3. Give a copy of the text to the students so that they are able to write on or cut up the text. It is helpful if the text is typed.

4. Delete portions of the text that are unnecessary. Try to focus on keeping the script concise but clear and unified.
5. Divide the text into parts. Dialogue can easily be broken into parts for separate speakers or the text can be adjusted to read like dialogue.

6. Add a prologue or a postscript if they are necessary for a smooth and easy-to-understand reading.

7. Provide students with the opportunity to practice.

Although the entire scripting, practice, and performance process can take up to a couple of weeks, it can serve as an interest raiser for students which may lead them to read additional reading material connected to the same topic.

Web Literacy

Along with utilizing Reader’s Theater as a means to engaging reluctant readers and building their basic reading skills, many teachers are looking to technology as a resource for motivating middle level students to read. Lewin (1999), a middle level reading instructor, examines how the web can be used effectively and how it can be used for developing reading comprehension.

A teacher must be discerning when using the web and look for web sites that are appropriate for the reading level or group of students and for sites that are appropriately related to the subject that is being explored. Lewin explains how he teaches students how to reformat text that is difficult to read and explains how this can help students modify text to make it easier to comprehend.

Lewin (1999) also discusses how the web can be used as a resource for critical or evaluative reading. For example, in one activity he has his 6th grade students compare and contrast websites that contain information about a particular
subject, and then he has the students write persuasive letters to the organizations responsible for the sites sharing their (the students') reactions to the sites.

Reading is paramount to learning and the web can be a tool to help teach reading, but it is not a replacement of a teacher. Students need to be taught how to use the Internet and have to be able to evaluate sites. Student interest, student access to resources, the adjustability of text, and the ability to push a reader to critical reading are all benefits of using the web. These strategies guide students to connect new material to what they already know (prior knowledge), ask essential questions, look for supporting material, and evaluate the material.

Sutherland-Smith (2002), a reading teacher from Australia, delves into the implications the web is having on reading instruction and explores how to prepare students to be web literate. "I argue that Internet technology has had a significant impact upon reading strategies, resulting in the need to reshape our thinking about classroom reading practice" (Sutherland-Smith, 2002, p. 662). In order to prepare students to keep up with the fast pace changes of a world plugged into the web, educators have the responsibility to prepare students to not be just literate in the traditional sense, but they must also be web literate. Web literacy is defined as "an ability to recognize and assess a wide range of rhetorical situations and an attentiveness to the information conveyed in the source's non-textual features" (Sutherland-Smith, 2002, p. 663).

In relation to building critical reading, web literacy requires a reader to constantly access, evaluate, and move text while at the same time being aware of and processing constant encounters with visual (non-text) elements.
How is reading web text different than reading print text? First, it "permits nonlinear thinking." In a traditional book, the order of the reading is usually linear, start to finish. Web reading is often multi-dimensional leaving it up to the reader to navigate the order in which information is accessed. The resulting implication is that a reader must learn how to do relational thinking, which means determining how ideas relate to each other and which ideas are more or less important.

"Web reading requires high levels of visual literacy skill to enable comprehension of multi-media components" (Sutherland-Smith, 2002, p. 665). A reader must be able to read critically in order to evaluate and analyze the relation between web text and the visual elements working with the text. The reader must ask questions like which images enhance the information being communicated, which images are distractions, what do these graphics or pictures really communicate?

One area of increasing concern associated with web literacy is that the lines between author and reader become foggy. Students are able to move text from the web and move it into their own documents, which can easily lead to plagiarism. Reading instructors who utilize the web must be vigilant in teaching their students to know the difference between properly using source material and misuse.

Sutherland-Smith states that teachers need to be developing and using strategies that teach students how to become critical readers of web material. She
concludes her article with several strategies that teachers can use to help their students be effective users of the web.

Web Literacy Strategies

1. Snatch and Grab: This strategy is similar to a traditional survey often used in connection to reading print text. A student focuses on specific words or phrases (that are chosen ahead of time) that relate to a particular topic. The student searches for sights that connect to those words or phrases and bookmark the sites that appear, at first glance, to be relevant. The student will later go back through the bookmark list and eliminate the irrelevant sites.

2. Searching with a purpose: A teacher can model for a class how to write a purpose statement that helps to limit the scope of a source search. Once a purpose for the search is determined, a student can brainstorm a list of questions to be answered by the information searched for.

3. Chunking: This is a brainstorming strategy that is meant to be done collaboratively. A group of students are given a topic and told to break down the broad topic into manageable sub-topics that can be searched by various members of the group.

4. Constant Evaluation: It is important that students are continually questioning and evaluating the material that they encounter on the web. Sutherland-Smith emphasizes the importance of teachers modeling an analytical disposition while working with web-based activities. It is also helpful to generate a simple tool for students to use to rank or rate web
sites. The tool can be used sporadically or can be used for each site that is used in a project so that students begin to form the habit of analyzing the sources that they encounter.

These are just a few strategies for a reading instructor to consider when using the web as a tool for working with middle level readers, and it is important to remember that “the web invites a nonlinear, interactive, non-sequential approach to reading by students and the multi-media elements add to the visual literacy skills they require” (Sutherland-Smith, 2002, p. 668).

“Some students will need at least at initially, very explicit, straightforward assignments; others can handle choices from a limited menu; others will be capable of initiating projects on their own. The aim is to move students, as they are able, to increasing autonomy”(Lewin, 1997, p. 51). One reason that more and more teachers are utilizing the web for reading instruction is the vast access to non-fiction reading sources. In order for middle level students to be prepared for the large amount of school reading that faces them content area classes, reading instructors are looking for ways to expose their students to a wide variety of non-fiction sources.

Non-Fiction Tradebooks

Young and Vardell (1993) discuss the benefits of utilizing non-fiction trade books, especially in content areas, in order to improve basic reading skills and to help struggling readers succeed with content specific reading. One advantage in using non-fiction tradebooks is the diversity of topics that are available. This diversity allows for a wider range of selections for students to
choose from, which means that a wider range of student interests and ability levels can be reached.

Secondly, trade books are often more visually appealing and relevant to the interests of middle level students than generic textbooks. The research of Wilhelm (1995) and Ivey (1999) both site the fact that reluctant readers are often drawn to reading materials that contain rich visual elements. The visual elements help these readers comprehend the text, which provides them with a positive reading experience.

The third benefit of using nonfiction trade books is that “they allow students to study topics in greater depth than do textbooks” (Young, 1993, p. 398). If a student has the opportunity to work with multiple nonfiction sources rather than just using one textbook source, one will have the opportunity to “synthesize information, compare viewpoints, and construct semantic maps” (Young, 1993, p. 398). This shows that using nonfiction trade books as resources can provide opportunities for reading that requires critical thinking.

**Conclusion**

When a teacher approaches her students with high expectations, she can and will teach in ways that meet the developmental needs and interests of her students. She can utilize organizational structures and strategies that foster individual instruction and whole class skill building. In doing so, she will help to equip her reluctant readers to become engaged and critical readers.

The middle school reading teacher will take the time to assess the individual strengths, weaknesses, and attitudes that her students have towards
reading. She will organize her learning environment so that students have the opportunity to choose reading materials that interest them, time to read, and opportunities to share their thoughts and reactions to what they are reading. Students should be given individualized instruction that targets their interests and skill needs, and whole class strategies that provide all students with the opportunity to read critically should also be utilized. These frameworks will support dedicated teachers who are ready to accept the National Middle School Association’s challenge to teach middle school students in developmentally appropriate ways and to “hold high expectations for all” (NMSA, 2001, p.11).
Appendix 1: Basic Skills Defined

*Comprehension*

Comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and fluency are three basic reading skills with which a reluctant middle school reader often struggles (Flood and Lapp, 1990; Ivey, 2000; Worthy, 1998). Comprehension refers to a reader’s understanding of the material he/she reads. The first level of comprehension is literal, which means the reader understands ideas that are directly stated in a text. One example of literal comprehension is a student’s ability to answer a closed question about a text. The second level of comprehension is interpretive. This level of comprehension involves the reader’s reading for an author’s intention. The reader draws conclusions and interprets implicit elements of the text to answer interpretive questions. Moving from interpretive comprehension to applied comprehension basically moves a reader from reading “between the lines” to reading “beyond the lines.” Applied comprehension requires the reader to make connections and draw conclusions between prior knowledge and the information presented in the text. Applied comprehension is subjective because of its dependence on an individual’s connection of material to personal experiences and interpretations (Herber, 1978 in Ruddell, 2000, p. 113).

Middle school students are often required to do tasks or projects that require the applied comprehension level. However, if a reader is struggling to comprehend even at the interpretive level, frustration is inevitable and a negative attitude towards reading will be reinforced. Therefore, a teacher must be able to
help build a reader’s comprehension skills while simultaneously teaching them how to be critical readers.

**Vocabulary**

Learning vocabulary, especially content specific vocabulary, is another basic building block many middle school readers are developing. Two primary purposes for continued vocabulary acquisition are to “remove barriers to the comprehension of a text” and to equip the reader to be able to independently continue to build his/her own personal language acquisition (Ruddell, 2000, 140). The strategic middle school reader is one who demonstrates the ability to acquire and comprehend new words when they are encountered in a text. The reluctant reader may struggle with acquiring new words and may “cope” with this challenge by simply skipping over the words or by avoiding difficult reading material all together. This is an example of Bintz’s (1993) “deskilling.” While skipping words may work in the short term, eventually limited word knowledge will put the reluctant reader seriously behind grade level. Once the habit of skipping words has been formed, it can be very difficult to break.

**Fluency**

A third and vital “basic” reading skill is fluency. “Fluency is the process of automatically, accurately and rapidly recognizing words” (Cooper, 2000, p. 165). Readers become fluent as they begin to build the number of words with which they are familiar. If readers have a limited number of words that they can easily recognize, their fluency will be significantly limited. Weak fluency is another source of frustration and seeming failure for many reluctant readers. By
the time readers with poor fluency reach middle school, it is not unusual for them to try and avoid reading out loud in front of a group. Disruptive behavior and hostile attitudes are understandable given students' fears of looking like fools before their peers.

Although comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and fluency are not an exhaustive list of basic reading skills, it is impossible for a reading teacher to help a reluctant reader become a strategic (critical) reader without addressing the reader's proficiency in these basic reading skills.
Appendix B

Glossary of Terms

assessment: “the act or process of gathering information about students in order to better understand their strengths and weaknesses” (Southwest Education Development Laboratory, 2003)

avid reader: readers who pursue reading both inside and outside of school with and for pleasure

basic reading skills: the fundamental skills that lead to basic understanding when reading a text, skills include comprehension, vocabulary building, decoding, and fluency

content area reading: reading that is associated with a content area class; reading science related material for science class

cooperative learning: “instructional model in which students work in a structured group with differentiated tasks to reach a common goal” (SEDL, 2003)

critical reader: a reader who is able to understand implicit meaning in a text, one who is able to draw conclusions, form valid judgments on a text, make applications to prior knowledge, use information to help solve problems or as a starting point for inquiry

critical thinking: “includes the ability to respond to material by distinguishing between facts and opinions or personal
feelings, judgments and inferences, inductive and deductive arguments, and the objective and subjective. It also includes the ability to generate questions, construct, and recognize structure of arguments, and adequately support arguments; define, analyze, and devise solutions for problems; sort, organize, classify, correlate, and analyze materials and data; integrate information and see relationships; evaluate information and data by drawing inferences, arriving at reasonable and informed conclusions, applying understanding and knowledge to new and different problems, developing rational and reasonable interpretations, suspending beliefs and remaining open to new information, methods, cultural systems, values and beliefs and by assimilating information” (MCC General Education Initiatives, 2002)

decoding:
interpreting the words in reading material (encoded by the author), thereby receiving the author’s message (Reader’s Edge, 2003)

differentiated:
instruction that is focused on building on the strengths of individual readers in order to equip them to be strategic readers
direct instruction: instructional method in which a teacher presents and controls the content, when a teacher "transmits" material to be learned to the learners (Van Dyk, 2000, pg. 158)

engaged: "a connection to something" (Schoenbach, et al, 1999); intellectual curiosity of efficient readers, who often pursue reading for enjoyment and to satisfy curiosity (Reader’s Edge, 2003)

middle school: refers to schools intended to educate students between the ages of 11-14; typically grades 6-8

passive reader: reader who sees reading as a "linear process... and they experience difficulty monitoring their own comprehension"; consequently they also demonstrate a difficulty connecting what is read to real life or personal applications (Bintz, 1993, pg. 608-09)

reading workshop: a phrase coined by the work of Nancy Atwell, a reading environment in which students choose what to read, have time to read, and respond to teachers and/or peers about what they are reading; a flexible schedule and skill based mini-lessons are also typical components of a reading workshop (Robb, 2000)

re-reading: a student reads and practices a short, manageable piece of reading and re-reads it until he/she achieves an appropriate level of speed and accuracy
reluctant reader: a reader who has an apathetic or hostile attitude towards the act of reading; often have literacy weaknesses and/or read behind grade level; but many reluctant reader’s skill are behind based on factors other than a specific reading disability; not all reluctant readers are behind grade level in reading skills

remedial reading: reading courses offered to students who do not demonstrate basic reading competency; the purpose of the course is to improve any reading deficiencies

course

response: one’s personal reaction and/or connection to what one has read communicated to a fellow reader

strategic reader: readers who are self-motivated and “monitor their own comprehension by questioning, reviewing, revising, and rereading to enhance their overall comprehension” (Flood and Lapp, 1990, p. 138); a constructivist would also say that the strategic reader constructs the meaning of a text as he/she reads

whole class strategy: instructional strategies that involve a class as a whole; intended to engage all the students of a class to participate in some way

web literacy: “an ability to recognize and assess a wide range of rhetorical situations and an attentiveness to the information
visual literacy: the ability to understand, evaluate, and produce visual images

conveyed in the source’s non-textual features” (Sutherland-Smith, 2002, p. 663)
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