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Teaching Reading in Middle School

Tammy Savage

Laura Robb has put together a terrific book for teachers experiencing first-time jitters or experienced teachers looking for a way to inspire and motivate reluctant readers. Published by Scholastic, *Teaching Reading in Middle School* is subtitled “A Strategic Approach to Teaching Reading that Improves Comprehension and Thinking.” According to Robb, the research suggests that for students to read successfully motivation is required—from both the student and the teacher. For the student, this motivation lies in being able to be successful in the classroom during all types of reading. For the teacher, the motivation lies in knowing she will help her student develop a lifelong love of reading. The teacher’s tasks to accomplish this goal are to model reading strategies, constantly monitor the students’ reading levels and abilities, and provide books to encourage students to be readers.

The best way to accomplish these goals is to use Reader’s Workshop. A perfect complement to the middle school level language arts program, Reader’s Workshop, as described by Robb, is the jumping off point for students to practice and refine not only reading strategies and fluency, but their independence, time management skills, and classroom socialization. While the task of transforming disinterested, middle level non-readers to burgeoning, blossoming successful readers seems daunting, Robb keeps two goals in focus for the year: “To improve students’ reading and to deepen their involvement with books” (28). A glance into the workshop itself shows how a large class of eighth-

grade students can engage in reading activities in groups while Robb maintains ultimate control over what is happening to ensure productivity. Robb relies heavily on Nancie Atwell’s reading and writing workshop style.

While the workshop appears to imitate Atwell, Robb brings into focus some of her own treasured aspects. One such aspect is the read-aloud, simply giving her students the pleasure of being read to. This is an activity that falls off as students go from elementary to middle school. Robb explains that this is an activity she never misses. Reading aloud to the students is an excellent tool she has employed to increase their expression, language, and reading fluency as well as to introduce new genres. The read-aloud sets a tone for the workshop as students are engaged in short, productive reading lessons under the guise of listening to a captivating story.

One of the ways that Robb is able to understand and gauge what her students comprehend is by using reading response journals. She does an excellent job of showing examples of how to set up a response journal and what to include. Part of the motivation for students to engage successfully with a book is to be able to understand it. Robb’s sample response items (296-300) let the students decide what they choose to respond to in the book. Responses to such aspects of the book as selected quotes, “what characters value,” aspects of the plot, and characters’ personalities are examples of Robb’s response items, all to help the students connect to the text.

A reader of Robb's book may think that her ideas sound great but may question how to do all Robb suggests and manage behavior at the same time. Robb is obviously a pro at the workshop method and is willing to impart her wisdom with tips on managing group behavior (41-44). Group behavior guidelines are established early in the year, and Robb always includes her students in the process. The explanations include tips for students and for teachers. Thorough descriptions and student samples help make her points clear.

Along with this thorough job of explaining behavior management is a chronicle of Robb's daughter, Anina, and her transition to the workshop method of teaching reading to her 39 sixth graders West Side New York (52-53). Robb shares her daughter's reaction after trying a modified version one year and then going to a complete workshop method her second year: "I think," she told me recently on the telephone, "that doing a modified workshop the first year was a great way to start thinking about which elements to bring to so many students" (52). Knowing that the transition from a traditional teaching method to workshop is a scary proposition for many of us, I was glad to read Robb's account of the actual transition of a real teacher. It makes the thought not so frightening.

Once the fear of transitioning to a reading workshop style fades, the meat of *Teaching Reading in Middle School* lies in Chapters 3-9. The strength of these chapters is a careful and thorough explanation, interwoven with student samples and stories of reading strategies and how they work. What Robb makes clear right up front is the difference between teaching and practicing skills versus learning and using strategies. "I grew up on a steady diet of skill sheets, matching words and their meanings, filling in the blanks in close passages No teacher elevated the skill to the level of strategy by linking workbook practice to real books . . ." (60). This is the missing link in many methods of teaching reading. Robb does an

excellent job of supporting this point with research and theory:

Pearson et al. emphasize three important differences between skills and strategies (1992). Strategic reading means that the learner has a conscious, in-the-head plan for comprehending, while skills are used without conscious planning. As students use strategies, they become more and more aware of their reasoning process as they make sense out of print; skills seldom involve this kind of self-awareness. Finally, the strategies readers use change with the purpose for reading and the genre, while skills are not adaptable. (60)

Robb illustrates the point that strategies are durable tools and skills are a band-aid in her discussion of James, a fifth-grade student. James was a professional at filling out skill sheets, even going so far as to being able to predict and pick out a pattern of main idea in a book or story. However, when James was reading a book about a woman pharaoh, he became easily frustrated when unable to distinguish what was important: "This book isn't like those sheets I fill out in reading. There's facts and more facts. I can't decide what's important. They left out the story, and I can't keep the facts in my head" (60). The suggestion for helping James is simple according to Robb: he should practice reading strategies with real books, magazines, etc. in the first place, so that they carry over to other texts.

Reading strategies and how to use them along with student examples abound in these first nine chapters while the remaining chapters (10 and 11) deal with supporting struggling readers, assessment, and evaluation. Struggling readers challenge the teacher to find the right motivation for them to want to continue reading. Cross-grade

projects such as reading buddies are one way to create successful reading situations for struggling readers. Randy, a sixth grader, was able to find confidence as a reader by going to a third grade classroom as a reading buddy. With this project, Robb was able to have Randy increase fluency and comprehension using books at the reading level at which he was performing without making him feel uncomfortable (229-230).

The message Robb gives in the last chapter is that there are many available ways to assess and evaluate. The chapter is excellent in giving samples and especially in giving ideas for self-evaluation, response journals, and the difficult task of grading. Robb suggests making the experience of assessment a positive one by making sure students are ready for a particular assessment. Monitoring of progress is the goal of Robb's evaluation and assessment process.

The purpose of Robb's *Teaching Reading in Middle School* is to help teachers help students to be successful readers by urging us to think about and consider implementing the workshop method as a way to change how students think about reading. Along with showcasing this method, Robb delivers the message that knowing strategies is a life skill, whereas learning skills on a worksheet is a quick fix. *Teaching Reading in Middle School* is a great model for encouraging teachers to motivate their middle level students to read.

Works Cited

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