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Choice and Rigor: Achieving a Balance in Middle School Reading/Language Arts Classrooms in the Era of the Common Core

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———————————— **Abstract** ————————————

While the advantages of reading workshops are well known (Atwell, 1998), there is currently a debate among scholars, practitioners, and politicians about the use of instructional/ independent level texts in light of the Common Core Standards' end-of-year requirement for students to be reading at grade level (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Particularly in middle school, where motivation to read often declines, a workshop approach can help students develop and strengthen their interest in reading. A classroom survey completed by middle school students in a suburban school district in the Midwestern United States illustrates students' positive response to a reading workshop approach (Atwell). However, students must also be able to read grade-level text proficiently. Using a combination of workshop and instruction with grade-level texts will help support students in reaching the end-of-year standards required by the Common Core.

Creating spaces for literacy

While working as a literacy coach in a suburban school district in the Midwestern United States, I listened as students entered their reading class, having animated discussions about the books they were reading. Many were reading The Hunger Games (Collins, 2008) and making excited utterances about the way the plot unfolds. As a literacy coach I work with sixth and seventh grade teachers implementing a reading and writing workshop model (Atwell, 1998). Although district elementary teachers began workshop implementation in the previous year, it was new to the middle school. Some teachers were excited about the new model of teaching while others were skeptical. Previously, they used a traditional reading/language arts approach in which whole-class novels and reading anthologies were used for reading instruction. Shortly after the transition to the workshop model, teachers were required to implement the Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), and students were expected to read grade-level texts by the end of year. At the end of third quarter, teachers decided to distribute surveys to sixth-and seventh-grade students to explore their attitudes and experiences related to English/Language Arts. The surveys revealed that students were motivated by the workshop approach for many reasons; however, teachers recognized that they needed to support students in new ways to meet grade-level standards required by the Common Core.

Common Core Standards and Middle School Readers' Workshop: Finding a Balance

For struggling readers, teachers may feel caught between the Common Core Standards' (NGA & CCSSO, 2010) requirements that students read complex text within grade-level bands while ensuring the texts are also accessible. While not diminishing the importance of increasing the rigor that is required of students, we must also be attentive to building motivation and self-efficacy. Particularly at the middle school level where students' interest and motivation to read often declines, workshops can add to students' interest in reading. As students read more, they gain experience, and it is reasonable to expect that achievement will increase (Guthrie, 2004). When students choose the books they read, motivation and engagement increases. Having the

opportunity to collaborate with others reading the same book, or texts with similar themes, provides for more in-depth exploration of the books. The deeper discussion that often results offers additional practice with close reading.

As noted in Appendix A of the Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), many students have been reading texts that do not reflect the complexity required of students entering college and the workforce:

> In brief, while reading demands in college, workforce training programs, and life in general have held steady or increased over the last half century, K–12 texts have actually declined in sophistication, and relatively little attention has been paid to students' ability to read complex texts independently. These conditions have left a serious gap between many high school seniors' reading ability and the reading requirements they will face after graduation (p. 2).

Strategic scaffolding is important as students encounter difficult text: "The general movement, however, should be toward decreasing scaffolding and increasing independence both within and across the text complexity bands defined in the Standards" (p. 3). Considering the requirements set forth in the Common Core Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010), and the wide variety of reading levels found in today's middle school classrooms, how can we support students in reaching this goal?

The International Literacy Association's Common Core State Standards Committee published Literacy Implementation Guidance for the ELA Common Core State Standards (ILA, 2012). The issue of challenging texts requires students to read grade-level texts, emphasizing that the new, rigorous and challenging requirements will help students reach "more advanced literacy achievement levels" (p. 1). Nevertheless, they also highlight the resulting complications in meeting this outcome, noting "merely adding more challenging texts to the curriculum will not be a sufficient or effective response to this requirement" (p. 1). The Committee highlighted that the levels of text students are required to read refers to reading levels at the end of the year.

> However, this does not mean that all assigned reading should be at these levels. In order to help students attain the necessary end-of-year levels, teachers need to establish an ambitious itinerary of rich and varied narrative and informational texts, including some texts that are easier than the Standards specify (ILA, 2012, p. 1).

This is important for all students, including those who are reading below grade level, because it offers readers opportunities to enjoy a wide variety of texts. By providing reading experiences that are positive and motivating, teachers encourage students to read more, not less. As students engage in text-based discussions and listen to others, they use these positive experiences to meet the end-of-year grade level expectations set out in the Common Core State Standards.

Readers' Workshop at Goodfield Middle School

The English/Language Arts teachers at Goodfield Middle School (a pseudonym) observed that student motivation tended to be lower than the enthusiasm often found in elementary schools. Goodfield has an enrollment of approximately 800 students. At the time the surveys were distributed, 39% of the student body was classified as low income; the ethnicity of the student body was 69% white, 20% Hispanic, 6% African American, 3% Asian, and 2% American Indian and multiracial. The district required teachers to move to a workshop approach. While teachers acknowledged the lack of motivation to read among many students, several teachers were hesitant to give up the traditional approaches to which they were accustomed, while others were interested to learn about this new model of instruction. Guthrie (2008) points out, "Teachers learn early in their careers that the more students read, the better readers they become, and it has been shown that reading engagement predicted reading achievement internationally, and in the United States" (p. 3). Therefore, finding ways to extend student interest and engagement into middle school is essential. This is one of the reasons the district implemented a workshop approach.

Prior to the beginning of the year, teachers met in grade-level teams to design and structure readers' workshop (Atwell, 1998) in order to provide consistency within each grade level. Workshops began with a class read aloud, which provided the opportunity for students to listen to and discuss texts at a variety of difficulty levels, followed by mini-lessons. After the mini-lesson and guided practice, students engaged in independent reading as the teacher conferred with individual students about their books (Atwell, 1988; 2007).

Full inclusion classrooms at Goodfield typically had students reading several years below grade level, which presented challenges for teachers prior to the workshop model as texts were inaccessible for a large portion of the class,

yet not challenging enough for others. The workshop approach allowed students to read books that were at their independent reading level, resulting in many engaged and confident readers (Atwell, 2007). At Goodfield, each class had an extensive classroom library that contained a wide variety of genres at a broad spectrum of reading levels. Early in the year, students were supported in identifying text selections for independent reading. Students had time to discuss books with others reading the same book.

Book clubs were introduced midway through the first semester (Daniels & Steinke, 2004). The book clubs began with teacher scaffolding but soon progressed to student-led discussions. Choice in book selection and appropriate reading level is essential if students are to be engaged in what they are reading (Atwell, 2007; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Once students were introduced to book clubs, they were reading two different books: 1) an independent reading book without restriction to genre or theme and 2) their book club books, which provided choice but were based on themes. The choice of book club books was more limited in scope than the independent book. A typical format for the workshop used at Goodfield is provided below.

Students' Views on Reading Workshop at Goodfield

All sixth and seventh grade English/Language Arts teachers were required to change from a traditional format to a workshop format, meaning that all teachers transitioned to workshop during the year in which this survey was distributed (2009 - 2010). There were five teachers in grade six and four teachers in grade seven, with approximately 280 students and 260 students respectively. The school serves grades 6 – 8 with just over 800 total students. Students returned to a traditional English/Language Arts format in grade 8 so that they could better transition into high school English. Toward the end of the first year of workshop implementation, the sixth and seventh grade teachers designed a survey that was discussed in their professional learning community (PLC) grade-level groups. They decided that it would be an option to ask their students to complete the class climate/goal surveys that included prompts related to what they liked about the workshop format. Students were free to write negative comments. One student out of a total of 240 who took the survey wrote a negative comment; the remaining was either positive or unrelated to workshop. It was made clear to the students that these would not be graded.

Table 1: *Workshop at Goodfield*

Time (Based on 70-minute block)	Workshop Component	Reading Level of Text	Frequency
7:30 – 8:30	Read Aloud (Whole Group) (Teacher choice – novel or informational text; based on interest)	Independent, instructional or grade	Daily
8:30 – 8:45	Mini-Lesson (Whole Group) (Skills and strategies appropriate for read aloud book)	Independent, instructional or grade	Daily
8:45 – 9:15	Independent Reading Reading/ Conferring/Collaboration (Schedule with students in advance)	Independent	3 days (Rotation for conferring)
	Book Clubs **(Based on themes; choice within themes)**	Independent and Instructional	2 days
9:15 – 9:45	Sharing/Collaboration Time	Varied	Daily

The purpose of the survey was to gather students' perspectives on Readers' Workshop near the end of the first year of implementation. Responses on the surveys were similar in both sixth and seventh grades. There were 57 students who took the survey in sixth grade, and 83 students who took the survey in the seventh grade. In order to determine students' thoughts about the workshop, an informal coding scheme was used to classify responses to the question, "What I like most about Readers' Workshop is _____." Comments were categorized according to four themes: (1) having an extended period of time to read a self-selected book, (2) being able to read a best fit book, (3) participation in a book club with choice in book selection, and (4) extraneous comments that were too general to categorize or were unrelated to the prompt.

Seventy-six percent (N=119) of the sixth grade students and 58% (N=44) of the seventh-grade students made comments that what they liked the most about Readers' Workshop was related to the amount of time they were able to read a self-selected book in a quiet, relaxing environment. Comments such as "I love reading and I get to read a lot," "all the time to read," "that I get to read awesome books," and "I can get absorbed in a book and not get interrupted" demonstrate students' support of having time to read and become engaged in a book.

The first theme identified how the ability to self-select books increased student motivation to read (Atwell, 2007; Stairs & Burgos, 2010). Part of the motivation for choice in book selection is the ability to choose books both interesting and at their independent reading level; this is particularly important in inclusive classrooms such as those at Goodfield. Having the ability to select their books, read them independently, confer with a teacher during the workshop, and to experience success builds confidence while teaching students to see themselves as readers.

The second theme related to being able to choose a book that was at an appropriate level. Responses were classified into this category only if there was specific mention of a "just right" book (Atwell, 2007). Many responses in the first theme addressed self-selecting books but didn't include a specific reference to "just right" books; these responses were only included in the first category. Only 1% (N=2) of sixth graders specifically said a "just right book," while the percentage increased to 10% (N=8) in grade seven. It should be noted that students were guided in how to select books early in the year.

The third theme represents student overall interest in book clubs. Nine percent of sixth graders and 12% of seventh graders favored book clubs, specifically mentioning choice in selection. As might be expected in middle school, several students commented about their interest in collaborating and discussing books with others. Among the reasons for liking book clubs, students wrote, "I get to read a lot of different genres," "I like the African and Asia book clubs," and "I like how you get to choose from a selection of books for book club instead of having to read a book that we don't want to read." At Goodfield, workshop teachers worked with social studies teachers collaboratively to incorporate literary non-fiction into both classes, thus supporting literacy in the disciplines.

The final category, general comments or negative responses, represented 17% (N=44) of the respondents in sixth grade and 23% (N=19) in seventh grade. Of the total responses, only one was a negative comment – "I can get out of it." The rest were unrelated to readers' workshop or they were too general to be categorized.

Taken as a whole, both sixth and seventh grade responses demonstrate that having choice, extended time to read, and participating in book club discussions with peers were valued by students. Having time and choice (including a range of reading levels) in individual reading and book club selections, were cited as positives for this approach by 91% of the students who completed surveys for both grades.

A Peaceful Co-existence – Achieving a Balance

Although the English/Language Arts teachers at Goodfield sought to motivate students through workshop approach and choice. Teachers do need to ensure that students explore other genres if they are not self-selecting a variety of genres as encouraged by the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, [NGA & CCSSO] 2010). Therefore, using a combination of the elements of workshop, scaffolding, reading complexity, and grade-level texts will motivate and enhance the self-efficacy of students who struggle and prepare them for college and careers.

One way to incorporate grade-level texts is to use them during the read aloud component of the workshop. Using higher-level texts during read alouds exposes students to more advanced text structures and increasingly difficult vocabulary. The process should be modeled, and the texts used for read alouds should include a range of texts that incorporate student interests. Linked text sets (Elish-Piper, Wold, & Schwingendorf, 2014) include a wide range of print and media such as music lyrics, poetry, and picture books, in addition to the traditional literature and canonical texts. A Readers' Workshop also provides for the use of a wide variety of texts that are responsive to experiences of adolescents. Devoting read alouds to a range of texts, providing the necessary modeling with complex text, and demonstrating how to read and interrogate texts, provides explicit and targeted instruction that will make previously inaccessible text accessible.

A second way to incorporate grade-level texts into the workshop is with the book club component. The collaborative, discussion-based format of book clubs allows students to investigate their own questions and wonderings while learning from others in their groups. With teacher support and demonstrations, students become increasingly comfortable with more difficult text structures and vocabulary. These practices allow for the gradually decreased need for support as students gain experience and become proficient with grade level texts. Using a themed approach to book clubs, students begin with easier texts related to a specific theme and build to more difficult texts on the same theme, which provides the type of scaffolding needed to support students as they work towards independence with grade level texts. Moss, Lapp, and O'Shea (2011) describe how the use of tiered texts helps support students in their ability to read complex texts. The use of tiered texts is one way to help ensure that students are provided with scaffolding in their journey to read grade-level materials. Teachers can purposefully design book club cycles throughout the year using tiered texts. Choice can be maintained if there are several themes that students choose from when selecting book club topics.

Using the work of Elish-Piper et al. (2014) and Moss et al. (2011), teachers can select texts that are appropriate for students' backgrounds and interests, and increase difficulty as they gain experience with the easier texts. In the book club component of workshop, each "cycle" consists of a theme with tiers of texts that move from simple to complex. Since there are a variety of themes, students are still provided with choice. This configuration could be set up by quarters or in cycles. In their work on linked text sets, Elish-Piper, Wold, and Schwingdorf (2014) suggest framing text sets around an essential question. With the purposeful selection of an essential question, collaborative conversations evolve around the questions. While this modification to book clubs may diminish the free choice aspect of book clubs, it provides students with scaffolding necessary to meet the requirements of the Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). A suggested revision to the workshop to include grade level texts is provided below (Table 2).

If we understand the valuable components of workshop model (Atwell, 1998), including the necessary modeling and scaffolding with grade-appropriate texts, teachers will achieve a balance that will build middle school students' interest and motivation to read while helping them gain independence with grade-level texts. Rather than the pendulum effect of workshop versus more

Table 2: *Revised workshop model*

Time (Based on 70-minute block)	Workshop Component	Reading Level of Text	Frequency
7:30 – 8:30	Read Aloud (Whole Group) (Grade-level text)	Grade level	Daily
8:30 – 8:45	Mini-Lesson (Whole Group) (Strategies based on appropriateness to read aloud text)	Grade level	Daily
8:45 – 9:15	Independent Reading Reading/ Conferring/Collaboration (Schedule with students in advance)	Independent or Instructional	3 days (Rotation for conferring)
	Book Clubs (Scaffolded from independent to grade -level text)	Independent, Instructional and Grade	2 days
9:15 – 9:45	Sharing/Collaboration Time	Varied	Daily

traditional approaches, teacher can thoughtfully apply a combination of workshop approach and strategic instruction in middle school settings as they prepare students for transition into more complex disciplinary literacies in high school.

The combination of workshop instruction devoted to strategic scaffolding of reading complex and grade-level texts in middle school language arts classrooms may provide a much-needed balance, particularly with students reading far above or below grade level. The use of complex and challenging texts during read alouds will support student learning and build independence and familiarity with text structures. Throughout the school year, students can increasingly work with such texts independently in order to meet the year-end standards.

About the Author

Dr. Nancy Stevens is an assistant professor of literacy in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. She teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy. She obtained her Ph.D. in Educational Policy and Leadership (literacy emphasis) from Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Prior to earning her Ph.D., she worked for over fifteen years in both private and public K-12 schools, working primarily in adolescent literacy. She is an active member of several literacy organisations including the Wisconsin State Reading Association, International Literacy Association, Literacy Research Association, and Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers. She has presented at local, state, and national conferences and has articles published in state and national journals.

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Appendix

Survey

What I've improved on so far in 6th grade:

Before I: _____

_____

Now I: _____

_____

Reading Goal: _____

_____

Writing Goal: _____

_____

One thing I really like about Readers' workshop is: _____
_____

One thing I really like about Writers' workshop is: _____
_____

Some things I do not like (wish I could change) about readers' workshop are:
_____
_____

Some things I do not like (wish I could change) about writers' workshop are:
_____
_____