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The Importance of Middle School Reading

Laurel Anne Ward

While at Cedarville, I majored in Chemistry and took Composition my Junior year. Since that time, I have graduated and am currently working at a crime lab as a Forensic Chemist.

Ponytail. This one hairstyle summarized my junior high experience. Now that I had graduated from elementary school, I was responsible for styling my own hair. No more of my mom's perfect braids, buns, or inside-out-anything, but I wasn't going to just leave my hair style-less. I knew how to do a ponytail—so that's what I did. Junior high functioned as a transition time for me, as well as many other American teens and tweens, between grammar school and high school. We all were in the midst of transition. Braces, growing-out bangs, big feet, awkward social interactions—but middle school functioned as a time of educational transition as well.

In middle schools across the country, students often transition from loving reading to hating it and I was no different. I began middle school enjoying the adventure of a book yet by the end of middle school, I begrudgingly read an assignment with only the hope of coming to the end. A 1995 survey performed regarding middle school students and their attitudes toward reading found the shocking conclusion that “middle school students are known for negative attitudes and resistance toward reading” (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995). This resistance to reading dominates among this age bracket. In a personal interview, I asked a college student to compare his enjoyment of reading in middle school to that of elementary school. To this he replied that he enjoyed reading in elementary school because it was fun and he found it interesting. Yet in middle school he felt inadequate in his reading skills and hated reading (Morris, Personal interview). Middle school was a distinct change in his perception of reading, changing from enjoyment to

resistance. A study published to aid middle school reading teachers, showed that “two thirds of fourth graders use the library at least weekly compared to 24% of the eighth graders,” (Bintz 13). This statistic shows how use of the library manifests middle school perceptions of reading. From personal experience in middle school and high school, I found the library intimidating and full of books which I was confident were uninteresting. In addition, I did not perceive reading as enjoyable because I had trouble comprehending the book if it was not a story. Therefore, I often disliked and avoided reading experiences.

Researchers and analysts have spent countless hours investigating the fear and resistance to reading in middle school students but have not completely solved the problem. This fear and aversion to reading in middle school is a significant problem and one that teachers need to continually address and monitor. Middle school exists as a time of transition, yet the love of reading dies because teachers do not instruct the students how to transition from children’s literature to adult literature—this problem manifests itself in the inappropriate reading level of assignments and the lack of interest by students in reading in general.

Some teachers seem to believe the transition between children’s literature and adult literature should transpire via immersion, a sink-or-swim approach, and therefore assign material above the students’ reading level. I remember coming home from school with a newly assigned reading, excited to start and accomplish an adult book—Livy’s *The History of Rome*. I showed my mom the new book and told her when the first progress checkpoint was due. As a team, she and I calculated the number of pages in the book, divided by the number of days I would have to read them and wrote a schedule on an index card. My teacher asked my class to mark any “Timeless Quotes” we found as we read, whatever that meant. I propped the pillows on the couch into the prime reading position with highlighter in hand and hoped to finish by dinner. I checked the schedule we made: fifty-five pages tonight and fifty five pages tomorrow night...I flipped through the book to the page on which I was to end. Feeling daunted, I stared at the width of the section I had to read--my confidence faded. As the time ticked by, I became discouraged as I did not comprehend my reading and knew I had so much left to read, hopeless to understand those pages any more

than the ones I had already read. Roman historian's droning felt too overwhelming for a middle schooler; I felt frustrated, defeated, and alone with many more pages to read.

Even though I felt defeated and alone, I was fortunate to have the constant encouragement of my mother. Many students do not have a support team telling them to persevere and are, therefore, really alone in their effort to conquer the skill of reading. Even with the support that I had from my mother, I still felt like I was drowning and the four years of high school looked dismal. How much more disheartening this would be for a student who struggles alone! This type of experience crushes a middle school student and destroys his confidence as a successful student. It makes him feel unprepared for the assignments to come later in the year. Serious implications can impact the remainder of the student's academic career—if a student thinks she will fail, she will hesitate to try new things, have low self-esteem, and settle in many areas in her life where she could excel. In contrast, if she thinks she can succeed, she will more likely thrive, try new things, push herself, and grow as a confident individual. All easily have roots in a student's perception of their academic success. All of these contribute to a student's feelings of defeat, often starting in middle school.

Students cannot only feel overwhelmed by assignments, but even when the readings are level-appropriate they can experience a difficulty transitioning to adult literature due to disinterest. This rings especially true for male students. In a survey by Cedarville University English Composition class which interviewed over 55 students regarding their past experience in literacy, male students rated the enjoyment of the assigned readings in school as a two on a one through ten scale. When I asked one particular student why he didn't like them, he responded, "Because they were boring! If they had let me read about cars or other things I was interested in, I would have been so much more engaged," (Heinig, Will, Personal interview). Surveys have found that many students respond similarly. A more in-depth survey in 2001 of thousands of middle school students found the same conclusion (Gay and Broaddus 350)—middle school students do not like to read because they find their assigned reading boring and then they associate those feelings with reading in general. These preconceptions of reading permeate the rest of their studies including high school and collegiate classes.

Because the students dislike reading and assume they are going to not like it, their lives really suffer. Because students are uninterested in their readings, they are much less likely to read on their own, therefore hindering their writing abilities, vocabulary, and sentence structure. If left unchecked, these consequences will eventually limit their view of the world and their personal experience.

A student's solidifying aversion to reading has serious consequences. It can not only affect their further studies as mentioned above which has ramifications of academic success and extrapolated personal ability to succeed but it also hinders them from being taken seriously as adults. One's ability to read and write often impacts how others perceive them. Although physical interaction plays a significant role, the ability or desire to read affects one's ability to learn beyond his graduation from an educational institution. One who loves to read and continues to read beyond graduation can then communicate in an ever changing world with current knowledge about events or ideas. They can then understand others' ideas and therefore formulate their own idea in response. One who hates to read and avoids reading after graduation remains trapped in the knowledge of an ever-fading past. This permeates to the social and public atmosphere as well as the business or work atmosphere. As an advancing society, companies are constantly creating new inventions, instrumentation, methods. The incipient love or aversion to reading all begins in the transition period of middle school.

Teachers must take action for the student to successfully complete this critical transition; if they do not, the teacher not only is responsible for their student not reaching maximum potential, but the teacher also risks corrective action from their administration. Most people who enter a career of teaching do so because they enjoy helping students grow. They enjoy seeing students understand new concepts and discover their world more fully. If students emerge from their class hating reading, then the teacher has hindered the student's ability to succeed in the future, whether academically or not. This primarily motivates teachers. Granted, some teach because it will pay the bills or because they only have to work nine months a year and are not primarily motivated by students' success. Ironically, these teachers must take the most action in solving this problem because they have the same standards to meet but have

fewer factors motivating them. Their initial motivation is at stake because schools often assess the quality of their teachers based upon the net improvement of the students each year. Even teachers who only teach because it pays the bills must prove that their students improve from the beginning of the year to the end, a feat that is challenging to accomplish if their students struggle with the course difficulty and are uninterested. If students do not improve, the teachers risk losing benefits, bonus pay, or even their job depending on each school's administration. Teachers play a critical role in solving this problem. If teachers fail to solve this problem, both they and their students suffer.

One possible solution could include the parents reading with their children. This would certainly help the child, not only in their reading abilities but also in a sense that they can succeed and will have a support team to help them do so, even if that takes a great deal of work. This, in fact, would be the most biblical solution. Unfortunately, this is not as easy an answer as it would appear. Too often, students come from single parent homes where that parent must work, sometimes even multiple jobs. Even if the student has both parents, in the typical American household, the parents do not have time nor are interested in doing middle school reading assignments. Although this solution would help, no one would implement it.

Another possible solution to this problem is to use comprehension questions to assess the student as the assignment regarding the student's reading and comprehension. After all, this will teach the student to look for key elements in the text and learn how to see the big picture of a story. It will also allow the students to determine major themes to that particular text versus subthemes or minor events. One could argue that they will need this type of reading for collegiate work especially in the sciences. Textbooks are often aimed at communicating main points, which are supported by subpoints, examples, and applications. Similarly, upper level essays and arguments often pursue this same goal. If the student can learn how to identify major points to an argument, essay, textbook, etc., then they are well equipped to gather the information they need in order to succeed in their field. Although this may be true—the student could indeed learn to identify pertinent information while sifting through less critical material—this is the very thing

that kills the joy of reading in middle school. Without the joy of reading or at the very least an appreciation for it, the student easily develops a dread of reading and learns to read merely for facts alone. In his book *Learning 'schooled literacy': The literate life histories of mainstream student readers and writers*, Rick Evans tells the story of a composition student named Kelly. In her perception of literacy, specifically reading, from a very young age through college, Kelly reflects that she learned to only read for facts. She used this method to read for tests, essays, anything her teachers assigned. She read in order to glean the pertinent details from the text, rather than enjoying the experience as she gathered the information. Reading became a very robotic, impersonal, end-goal oriented task. Although this served her well in middle and senior high school, even college, it grew into a distain for reading. She no longer enjoyed reading or going to the library as she did when she was younger. Reading merely for facts without the experience destroyed her love of reading and even caused her to avoid it (Evans 317-340). This is a serious consequence of mere comprehension oriented reading. Any educational goal focused solely around comprehension will be effective for a time, but will ultimately lead to animosity for reading. There is a solution that will work however. Teachers can easily transfer students from children's literature to adult literature by cultivating a love of reading through fun activities. If they do this by recapping past reads, exploring current reads, and developing a goal for future reads, they can keep reading assignments appropriate and even grow students' interest in reading.

Teachers can monitor assignment difficulty and maintain student interest by recapping past reads with fun partner and class activities which shepherd the students into discussing what they have already read. Libby Heinig, a middle school language arts teacher in Plain City, OH, implements partner activities that do this. She often assigns the students reading partners and provides a fun casual environment for them to discuss the books which they are reading. She never assigns the class to all read the same book, but rather gives a genre requirement and allows the students to choose their own. Granted, a class of thirty each with a different book makes it more difficult for a teacher, but the students perform better under these circumstances. They do not have complete freedom of books though. Each student must ask Mrs. Heinig to approve his choice.

If he has trouble finding one such book, they will go to the library together or scroll through the possible eBooks until they find one of proper difficulty and which he desires to read. Also, Mrs. Heinig has bean bag chairs, blankets, and other fun lounging accessories scattered throughout the classroom for the students to use while they talk to each other about what their books. They discuss why certain characters act certain ways as well as tones they noticed throughout their book. Each of these infuses fun into reading even for non-readers--it is an unusual atmosphere and students love it. Letting the student choose her own book and providing a fun place for them to read and discuss, allows the teacher to monitor the difficulty of the book and develop student interest in reading.

Another way that teachers can combat inappropriate difficulty and literacy apathy through past reads is to help students with words which they read and did not understand. They can accomplish this through dictionary exercises, breaking down words as a class to their roots, or even memorization by means of illustrating the definition. Turning these ideas into games such as speed drills in a dictionary or class versions of Pictionary also accomplishes these goals. Libby Heinig uses a game she calls “Stump Your Classmates” to help her students learn words they did not know in their reading. Her students know to hunt for words they don’t understand or words they think their classmates would not understand while they read their books. For the activity in class then, she instructs a student to write one of these words on the board. The student then calls on his classmates who can guess what the word means. If a student in the audience can explain it, they get a piece of candy. If no one in the audience knows the definition, the student in the front explains it to the class and has successfully “stumped his classmates,” earning a piece of candy for himself. She says that this allows middle school students to be experts on words they have looked up and also causes them to tackle words they don’t know while they read (Heinig, Libby, Personal interview). Games like these allow students to tackle unknown words, helping them to conquer their particular reading level as well as develop a love of reading.

Teachers can also keep assignments level appropriate and foster a love for reading by exploring current reads with their students. The best way for them to accomplish this is to promote reading in the classroom. The teachers can “talk up” books that they

have recently read (Heinig, Personal interview) and tell students in front of the class that she thinks the student should read a certain book because the student would really enjoy it. The more a teacher tells her students about books that she is reading and really likes, the more it fosters a desire for the students to read those books as well. This amplifies many times if a student does read the teacher's suggestion and loves it, because they in turn will promote it to other students. Promoting a book allows a student to take pride in their reading and makes them want to keep reading. Teachers can also devote class time to reading. Even if this only occurs once a week, giving middle school students time to read allows even non-readers to "get into a book" (Libby Heinig, Personal interview). Once a student is involved in a book, then they prove more likely to continue reading, which is the teacher's initial goal. Because starting a new book often intimidates students, scheduling reading time in class combats a sense of overwhelming difficulty. It provides a safe environment where students only have to read a few pages; they do not need to finish the entire book. Both of these methods foster a love for reading as well as keep the difficulty of assignments at an appropriately manageable level.

Finally, a teacher can grow a love for reading in his students by developing a goal for future difficulty appropriate reading. An easy way to do this is for teachers to create a place for their students to note book titles that sound interesting to them—most likely these are books which their peers have promoted to them. If the students have a special place which gives these future reads a place of honor, then the anticipation of reading these books builds, adding to the overall enjoyment of reading. Another way to promote future reading is to take the students to a book fair where they can pick out a new book to buy. According to Libby Heinig, middle school students read more passionately when they personally own the book. A student interviewed for the ENG-1400 composition survey stated that she too was most excited about reading when her teacher took her to the school's book fair (Archambault, Personal interview). The concept of a new book somehow instills passion. This is also true in my personal experience. I found books from school somewhat interesting but if I read a book that my parents bought especially for

me, I could finish that book much more quickly. Planning to read in the future through investment and ownership can help solve the problem facing middle school students.

Although transitioning students from children's literature to adult literature is a difficult task and one that suffers in the American educational system, teachers have the ability to combat this problem and even reverse it into something that will last throughout the student's life. They can cultivate a love of reading through recapping, exploring, and setting goals with their students, starting with the student choosing their own reading. Some may question whether a middle school student's choice of reading will really prepare them for the difficult mandatory reading assignments they will face in high school, such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Odyssey* their freshman year or *Beowulf* their senior year. If they have only read books such as the *Hunger Games* or middle school novels, they are no way prepared for dissecting advanced classics and more challenging Shakespearian language.

Libby Heinig addressed this very topic when asked in an interview. She replied, "The goal is for them to have a love, or at least an appreciation, of reading by then—for them to know how to read well and see the overarching method of reading literature." She also discussed how she introduces classics and similar literature in her historical fiction genre. "We discuss what makes a book a classic." She encourages her students to choose a book, even an abridged version, of a more difficult and renowned work of literature. By doing this, she does indeed prepare her students for the difficult reading assignments of high school, but does not burden them with readings beyond their ability. Also, they get to choose which classic they read, which therefore maintains their interest despite the challenge.

Students emerge from Libby Heinig's class loving reading. They are fully confident in their ability as a student which then spurs them on to success in more challenging tasks, academic or otherwise. They are better prepared for life after high school because they know how to read, producing many beneficial consequences. This method was a success in her classroom and can therefore work around the country.

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