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# Balance in a Middle School Reading Program

by Ken Helinski

Does your middle school reading program provide:

1. A balance between **required reading** selections and **student choices**?
2. A balance between **instructional time** on reading strategies, "how to read," and **actual reading time**?
3. A balance between **narrative** and **expository** selections from a wide **variety of genre**?
4. A balance between **group instruction** and **individualized attention**?
5. For the balance and integration of **all language arts skills**?
6. For and anticipate the students' **social needs**?
7. Guidance and resources for **matching students with books**?

Excited — insecure — not sure of the next turn — sudden highs and lows — do the words describe a person on a rollercoaster ride, or your adolescent students every day? The **needs, interests** and **abilities** of children aged 10-14 change rapidly. Decisions about clothes, music, and friends, as well as reading choices, become part of the struggle for their independence from parents and teachers. Although middle school students have a need for independence, they often shrug the concomitant responsibility of becoming independent readers and learners. Teachers and parents often have to "go into battle" to

get homework and classroom assignments finished. The struggle is all part of the need for the student to develop his or her own identity. **A balanced middle school reading program can provide a "safety bar" to ease the "ride" through adolescence.**

During the developmental years, children's reading interests and choices often change. Girls turn from fairy tales and animal stories to romance. Boys' choices may change from nature and detective stories to sports and adventure selections which offer more action. Both boys and girls feel a need to read about characters who share the problems, struggles, and concerns the students are currently experiencing. Students are often bored by content area reading selections because of lack of action and purpose. It is not unusual to observe a student reading a novel while the class is reading in round robin style from the social studies or science book. Middle school students seem to prefer narrative text over expository material. Most adolescent students enjoy going to the school library and making their own reading choices.

Sixth through eighth graders also demonstrate a wide range of abilities. Their reading level can vary from second to twelfth grade. The higher level student is capable of abstract thinking and advanced analysis, while others are still struggling with word attack skills and literal comprehension.



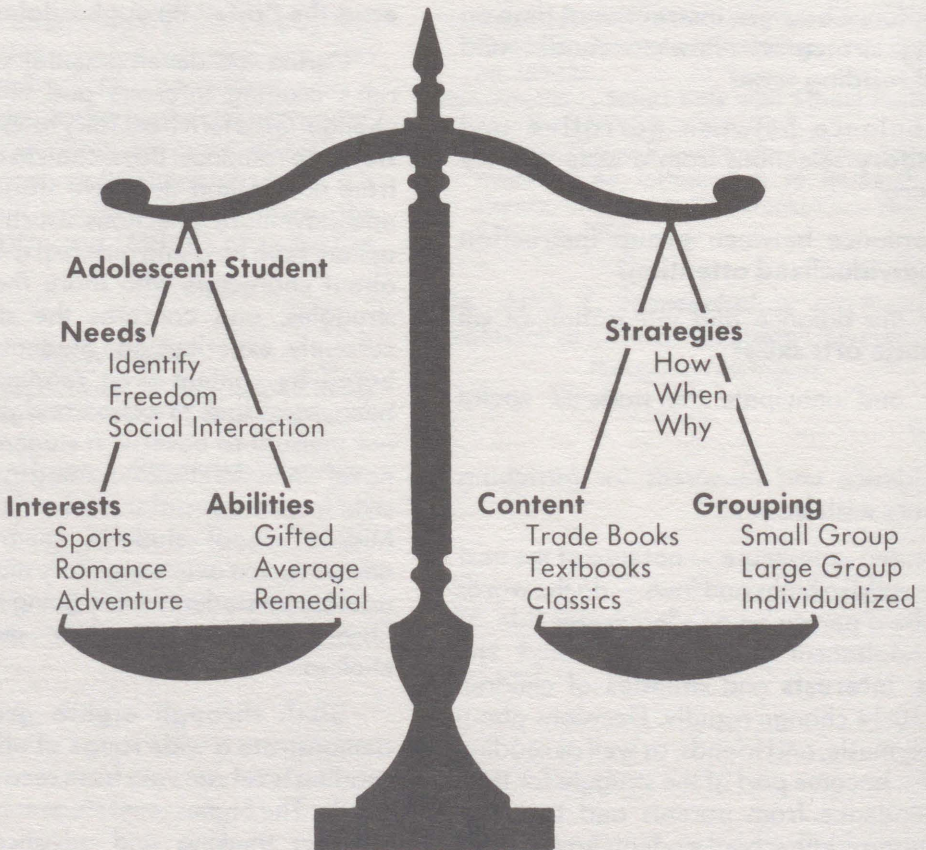
During this difficult, confusing age, students need guidance and role models to help them develop into healthy adults, readers, and learners. Balancing the **students' need for independence** with the **teacher's responsibility to provide instructional strategies** for the student determines the success of the program. The master reading educator guides the students through a balanced diet of **reading for pleasure** (high interest student choices), **reading for cultural literacy** (classics), and **reading for information** (content area reading). The middle school teacher can do this by **allowing some student choices** for recreational reading,

**requiring some reading** in the classics, and **providing sufficient instruction and application** in the how, when and why in reading expository text as well as literary analysis.

The proper balance of love, understanding, individual attention and patience will also be needed to compensate for the range of abilities and for "adolescents acting like adolescents."

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## A Balanced Reading Program for Adolescents



**Strategic, Motivated,  
Life-Long Readers**