Closing the Fluency Gap in the Middle Grades

The scene is repeated every day in middle grade classrooms across America. Johnny—or Joachim, or Jin, or Jamal—labors through his textbook, slowly sounding out the syllables as though each word stands alone. But he can’t connect the words. If you ask him what he has read, he has no idea. Because he lacks fluency, comprehension suffers.

Building fluency is a major issue with struggling middle grade readers, who may have done well in elementary school but find themselves stymied by more demanding middle school texts. The solution is not to ask an over-scheduled English teacher to pull together a few lessons based on learning strategies. Only a whole-school approach can effectively alleviate the crisis of comprehension that students face, and principals are uniquely placed to provide the direction and support needed to make every teacher a foot soldier in the war against illiteracy and sub-literacy.

Developing Readers
For 10 years, the Johns Hopkins University Talent Development Middle Grades Program has provided professional development for reading and English language arts (RELA) teachers in Student Team Literature, a research-based curriculum that features before-, during-, and after-reading strategies and focuses on vocabulary and fluency development. Over the years, an interesting cross-pollination has developed as RELA teachers have shared their strategies with science, math, and social studies teachers, who then began to apply them across the curriculum.

The success of the subject-area teachers with Student Team Literature convinced Hopkins facilitators that RELA teachers weren’t the only ones who could help underperforming readers, and that exhaustive technical knowledge of reading was not required. Teachers needed only to consistently implement several strategies in their classes to help students become fluent readers.

Before-Reading Strategies
No matter what the subject, students need to connect new information to prior knowledge. The Student Team Literature approach prepares students for new information by previewing, predicting, and setting a purpose for reading. Students examine covers of trade books, read captions and pull-out quotes in textbooks, and skim pages to predict what the reading selection is about, or what will happen in a particular section. Significant class time is also spent discussing new vocabulary. Because young adolescents have larger speaking vocabularies than their reading skills might indicate, they often see for the first time in print words that they have used or heard others use. By defining these words in their own “kid language,” students find them more easily remembered than definitions gleaned from dictionaries.

During-Reading Strategies
Another important strategy used by Talent Development schools is partner reading, in which the teacher selects a pivotal passage that students read silently and then aloud to a partner. This gives them two chances to ensure comprehension, which is especially important when students encounter challenging texts, have reading deficiencies, or are learning English as a second language. As teachers circulate and listen to students reading aloud, they can...
identify and correct problems. The goal of partner reading is to practice fluency and teach students to independently apply strategies that enable them to understand what they read. In contrast to round robin reading—in which one student after another reads aloud—partner reading engages all students all the time.

Other strategies to encourage reading comprehension include chorale reading (reading a short passage aloud in unison), echo reading (reading aloud after the teacher models correct phrasing), reader’s theatre (allowing a small group of students to sit at the front of the room and “perform” a text), and annotated text (in which students highlight, underline, or scribble marginal notes on photocopied text pages or sticky notes).

After-Reading Strategies

Partner reading is followed by partner discussion, which gives students an opportunity to clarify meaning and return to the text to support assertions. Students then feel more able to work individually in answering questions about comprehension, and to participate in whole-class discussion.

After reading, students demonstrate mastery of new vocabulary by creating what Student Team Literature calls meaningful sentences, which include context clues that demonstrate a firm understanding of the meaning of new words. The words cannot be replaced in the sentences by any other words that are not synonyms. This helps students remember definitions without having to memorize them.

One of the most frustrating aspects of teaching is having students who cannot read required texts because they read well below grade level. In addressing this persistent problem, principals can draw on the Student Team Literature strategies to help students increase fluency and comprehension. As they do so, reading becomes a pleasure, not a pitfall.

One teacher, after implementing these strategies, overheard a fairly tough, streetwise 12-year-old student commenting: “I thought this reading was going to be a drag. But I think I may go to the library and check out another book.”

And isn’t that our goal as educators?

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For additional information about the Student Team Literature curriculum and the Talent Development Middle Grades Program, go to www.csos.jhu.edu/tdms/.

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