

NORTH CAROLINA MIDDLE SCHOOL ASSOCIATION  
**JOURNAL**

Kathleen Roney, Ed.D., Editor  
University of North Carolina Wilmington

---

Fall 2011

Volume 26

Number 1

---

**A Most Critical Need: Why All Middle Grades Educators  
Should Be Teachers of Reading**

By

**Vicki L. Luther, Ed.D.  
Macon State College**

---

**Abstract**

Reading is a fundamental tool in becoming a lifelong learner and a productive member of society. Yet for so many students, reading is a frightening and daunting task. These students have difficulty making sense of the printed word, and they enter the middle grades frustrated and struggling to keep up academically with their peers.

The purpose of this article is to give insight into why literacy skills are so necessary for each student to possess and why all teachers should consider themselves teachers of reading. Research in this article details how the lives of North Carolinians can be enhanced through literacy. Reading is an essential component that must be reinforced in every grade level. For years, the perception has been that reading should only be taught in the elementary grades, but far too many students are entering middle school with limited reading abilities and are grade levels behind. As we enter into the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we must be forward thinkers. We must realize how dire and critical the situation and must help all students who are in our care.

### **A Most Critical Need: Why All Middle Grades Educators Should Be Teachers of Reading**

As those in education are painstakingly aware, today's federal legislation requires that public school students meet a specified performance level of academic aptitude, and state assessments are annually given to ensure that these proficiencies are being met. This reform movement is intended to hold public schools accountable for the academic achievement of all their students. These mandates also signify that children should be reading proficiently by the end of third grade (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). Yet as teachers know, children do not always fall in line with "developmental mandates," and in classrooms today, many students reach the end of that pivotal third grade year and still struggle to be novice readers, much less expert readers. While it is true that students are "supposed" to learn to read by the end of third grade, as any educator can attest, what is *supposed* to happen is not always a representation of what *actually* happens.

According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment (2011), only 34% of North Carolina's fourth grade students performed at or above the *Proficient Level* in 2011, while 32% are reading at a *Below Basic Level* (NAEP, "Grade 4 State Results, North Carolina, Cumulative Chart for All Students"). Similarly, 26% of North Carolina's eighth graders performed at or above the *Proficient Level*, while 31% of the eighth graders assessed read at a *Below Basic Level* (NAEP, "Grade 8 State Results, North Carolina, Cumulative Chart for All Students"). Students who score below the proficiency level are considered to have only "partial mastery" of grade-level reading skills, which means that there are substantial numbers of students who are reading below grade level (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, p. 7). Although the state of North Carolina is very much in sync with national reading averages, the truth remains: Many students who enter the middle grades are struggling readers, and unless this is addressed, reading will remain problematic for these students through their school careers and throughout their adult lives. The ramifications are extremely detrimental to these individuals and to the communities of North Carolina in which they live.

#### **The High Costs of Struggling Readers; The High Costs for Struggling Readers**

It has been estimated that in North Carolina, approximately 53,800 students from the Class of 2010 dropped out of school prior to ever receiving a high school diploma (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011, p. 2). Although it would be absurd to assume that all dropouts do so because of a lack of reading and literacy skills, we do know that this is unfortunately, for many, a main contributor. Experts cite the lack of adequate literacy skills as a focal reason for dropout rates throughout the country (Kamil, 2003). As Unrau (2008) states, "We would not find it difficult to build a pretty strong case for the existence of an adolescent literacy crisis. We could point out that, during the transition to middle and high school, students at risk become increasingly more likely to leave school, either psychologically or by actually dropping out" (p. 13). Those who feel that the content is overwhelming are more likely to become disengaged in school. Some choose to physically drop out, while others drop out mentally and emotionally, just going through the motions and learning little from year to year.

When students do choose to drop out of school, it costs the state of North Carolina millions of dollars in lost revenue and human capital. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011), if half of the dropouts of the Class of 2010 had remained in school and graduated, state tax revenues would *annually* grow as much as \$28 million dollars due to increased wages, productivity, and higher levels of spending (p. 2). Without a high school diploma, jobs, especially ones that pay above minimum wage, can be extremely difficult to obtain, and those who drop out of school often find themselves without adequate means of support. Individuals who lack reading and literacy skills have enormous pressures and face seemingly insurmountable odds, and young people without an appropriate understanding of the printed word are “more subject to unemployment, crime, and gang affiliations” (Unrau, 2008, p. 13). In his book *Illiterate America*, Kozol (1985) details how difficult it is for persons who do not know how to read to function in society, stating that a lack of reading skills can greatly lower yearly wages for individuals and can limit advancements in the communities in which they live. While this information was pivotal when written over twenty-five years ago, the truth of these statements can be considered even more relevant in today’s society.

Yet the monetary deficiencies are only a part of the dilemma, as the cost of an individual’s self-esteem can be even more traumatic. Students with reading difficulties often suffer from low self-esteem and feelings of shame, and are frequently teased by their peers. These students begin trying to hide the deficiencies in their reading abilities and they often find ways to avoid reading. For these students, it is important that they not let others in on the shameful secret that they cannot read very well (Pressley, 2006).

When children realize that they are not proficient readers (a realization which usually occurs in elementary school), they start to question their intelligence, often thinking of themselves as less superior. By the time these learners reach middle grades, they may be years behind in their reading abilities and lack cognitive competencies such as reading comprehension, word recognition, and reading fluency (Vacca & Vacca, 1999). As years pass, these students become more and more disengaged and repeatedly have low motivation for reading (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Literacy struggles often follow poor readers into adulthood and the feelings of low self-esteem and inferiority do not quickly disappear.

### **All Teachers are Reading Teachers**

While this old adage has been said again and again, not all middle grades educators necessarily embrace the concept of being a teacher of reading. Quite often, middle grades teachers feel unprepared to give reading instruction to students and do not feel that there is enough time to teach anything but the subject matter in their specific content area. Many consider themselves teachers of content (i. e. science, social studies) instead of teachers of reading and literacy skills, since the overall perception is that reading is taught in the elementary grades (Gunthrie & Davis, 2003). A majority feel that only language arts teachers are equipped to teach such skills, yet the overwhelming truth is evident: Students need reading instruction and guidance in all subject areas, and teachers must remember that this is not someone else’s job; it is everyone’s job.

### **Know What You Teach**

Having a basic understanding of language arts instruction is extremely beneficial in becoming a most effective teacher of reading. An important step is to know “The Big Five;” these instruction strands, which are “drawn from the report of the National Reading Panel (2000),” are phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency (as cited in Reutzel & Cooter, 2009, p. 238). All of these reading components are essential and must be intertwined. Educators who have an awareness of critical literacy concepts and the general order in which these skills are taught are better able to determine what basic literacy skills are missing from a child’s reading development. Looking at the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCOS) for younger grade levels can give great insight to what the students were taught in prior grades and what concepts are still unfamiliar. Children who never gain mastery of the ‘basics’ cannot be expected to understand advanced content, and those who are lacking in any of these five components of reading will have difficulty reaching their full potential. Such basic skills include, but are certainly not limited to, letter/sound relationships (including consonants, vowels, blends, and digraphs), sight word recognition, word decoding skills, and syllabication.

It is important for middle grades teachers to remember that it is developmentally appropriate for many word analysis skills to be taught or reinforced *through* the eighth grade. For example, the teaching of prefixes, suffixes and root words, knowing how to look for context clues, understanding the meanings of compound words, comprehending text, and rapid vocabulary recognition are all areas that should be discussed, reviewed, and emphasized in the middle school classroom (Ruddell, 2002). All students can profit from such instruction, but this can be especially beneficial for the struggling reader.

### **Know Who You Teach**

Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are extremely diverse and come from varied backgrounds and home situations, which can make a tremendous impact on learning. Many students are living in poverty (Fass & Cauthen, 2007), and due to the recent economic downturn and the inflated unemployment rate in North Carolina, this is a trend which may last for years. Poverty greatly affects school performance; this is quite evident in reading achievement, and current research shows that there is a large gap in the abilities of “children from low-income and middle class families” (Allington, 2012, p. 3). Culture also plays a large role in students’ learning (Moll & Gonzales, 2004). Studies show that minority students “trail White students by a substantial margin,” yet the number of minority students enrolled in U. S. schools has “expanded rapidly” over the past thirty five years (Allington, p. 8).

Teachers must make the curriculum relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learner. If the information presented does not matter to students, they can quickly become disengaged. In today’s society, students have grown accustomed to instantaneous media; they know what interests them and what does not, and they quickly assess which information presented is important. Therefore, it is more imperative than ever for teachers to help students make personal connections to the subject matter. Today’s middle grades students are more technologically advanced than ever before, so the utilization of such resources can greatly increase students’ engagement.

Because 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners are so diverse, it is critical that teachers get to know them as individuals and not as a whole group. One way teachers can evaluate students' feelings toward school and individual subject areas, including reading and writing, is by conducting interest inventories. By asking students about their interests, hobbies, and possible plans for the future, the teacher can begin to understand what is important to each person in their classroom. Above all, teachers must know the learners' backgrounds, their prior knowledge and experiences, and their reading abilities and interests.

### **Reading in the Content Area Classroom**

Literacy skills are a significant part of each subject taught in the middle grades; therefore, if a child has any deficiency in reading, they are less likely to comprehend the information in the content area classes, causing grades to suffer. Educators must make it a priority to integrate reading, writing, and oral language into every lesson they teach. There is no one right way to help students who struggle with reading in the middle grades, and there are many strategies that teachers can use to effectively instruct students to become more competent readers.

While most schools still use textbooks as the primary source of instruction, this instrument does little for those with reading difficulties. A child reading at a third grade level will, undoubtedly, have difficulty decoding and understanding a textbook written for middle grades. While the textbook certainly has its place in the classroom, using texts such as newspaper or magazine articles, poems, or song lyrics related to the curriculum area can be extremely beneficial, as these texts are generally shorter in length and are often easier to read and comprehend (Meyer, 2010). Teachers can also read portions of the text aloud as students read along silently, and can also have the students read chorally, in pairs or in small groups. Allowing students to practice reading texts in a variety of ways helps them to develop fluency within a meaningful context (Miller & Veatch, 2010).

It is important that vocabulary is taught through explicit instruction. Students have difficulty reading text when they have not been exposed to new words and word meanings and need to be taught the vocabulary that is essential to understanding the text (Miller & Veatch, 2010). Children must be repeatedly exposed to content area vocabulary; they should be able to hear it, see it, and be given multiple opportunities to apply it. Comprehension is also critical, so students must be taught strategies that will help them gain meaning from the reading passages. Instructing them on how to activate prior knowledge of the subject, make predictions, determine the main idea, develop questioning skills, think aloud while reading the text, and summarize can be beneficial in helping the students understand the content (Allington, 2012). To ensure learning is taking place, teachers must assess frequently. There are many ways to assess students' knowledge, and many assessment tools take little time to administer. Simply asking students to write down three important facts they learned from their reading, for example, can provide great insight into their reading and comprehension abilities. Checking for understanding frequently is essential.

### **Conclusion**

All elementary, middle, and secondary teachers must feel responsibility for the reading achievement of the students in their care, and every teacher should have a general understanding of the processes involved in learning to read since the task is so invaluable (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). We can really assist students by continually thinking outside the box and allowing ourselves the ability to discover new and exciting ways to get students interested in reading. Not every idea is going to work for every child, so the more ideas we have, the more successful we will be at helping each individual student. Being able to reinforce appropriate practices will help our students become more independent readers and thinkers.

Teachers who help struggling readers are contributing to greater success in the classroom. Taking the time to orally discuss a reading passage or review vocabulary words does not take away from the subject matter; instead, it enhances the content and helps students understand it more readily. Successful teachers of reading have knowledge of the elements of reading, incorporate helpful strategies into their lessons, and, most importantly, have an awareness of the instructional needs of their students (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006). These traits can lead to great gains for the students and will most certainly make their futures much brighter.

### References

- Alliance for Excellent Education. (2011). *Education and the economy: Boosting state and national economies by improving high school graduation rates*. Retrieved from [http://www.all4ed.org/files/NorthCarolina\\_seb.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/NorthCarolina_seb.pdf)
- Allington, R. L. (2012). *What really matters for struggling readers: Designing research-based programs* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Biancarosa, C., & Snow, C. E. (2006). *Reading next—A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy: A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Fass, S., & Cauthen, N. K. (2007). *Who are America's poor children? The official story*. Retrieved from [www.nccp.org/publications/pub\\_787.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_787.html)
- Gunthrie, J. T., & Davis, M. H. (2003). Motivating struggling readers in middle school through an engagement model of classroom practice. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 19*, 59-85.
- Kamil, M. L. (2003). *Adolescents and literacy: Reading for the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Kozol, J. (1985). *Illiterate America*. New York: Knopf Doubleday.
- Meyer, K. E. (2010). A collaborative approach to reading workshop in the middle years. *The Reading Teacher, 63*(6), 501-507.
- Miller, M., & Veatch, N. (2010). Teaching literacy in context: Choosing and using instructional strategies. *The Reading Teacher, 64*(3), 154-165.
- Moll, L. C., & Gonzales, N. (2004). Engaging life: A funds of knowledge approach to multicultural education. In J.A. Banks & C.A.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., pp. 699-715). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2011). *The nation's report card: National assessment of educational progress at grades 4 and 8*. Washington, DC: US

- Department of Education National Center of Educational Statistics. Retrieved from [http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_2011/state.g4.asp](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2011/state.g4.asp)
- No Child Left Behind, Public Law 107-110 (2002).
- Pressley, M. (2006). *Reading instruction that works: The case for balanced teaching* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
- Reutzel, D. R., & Cooter, R. B. (2009). *The essentials of teaching children to read: The teacher makes the difference* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- Ruddell, R. B. (2002). *Teaching children to read and write: Becoming an effective literacy teacher* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Unrau, N. (2008). *Content area reading and writing: Fostering literacies in middle and high school cultures*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Vacca, R. T., & Vacca, J. (1999). *Content area reading*. New York: Longman.

---

**Vicki Luther** is an assistant professor at Macon State College, a University System of Georgia institution, where she teaches reading and literacy courses for both the Early Childhood Special Education and the Middle Grades programs. E-mail: [vicki.luther@maconstate.edu](mailto:vicki.luther@maconstate.edu)