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What Went Wrong: Middle School Students and Alliteracy

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Abstract

This article is based on a two year study with an inquiry into why students stop reading at the middle grade years. The study attempted to clearly identify those factors which led to a decline or halt to reading both for pleasure and academics at the middle grades level. Alliteracy occurs when students are capable of reading, but choose not to read. This is a common problem and although some students rebound and later continue their interest in reading for pleasure, others never reclaim a love of reading and even struggle with class assignments. The article closes with suggestions based on findings to remedy the alliteracy in middle grade schools.

What Went Wrong: Middle School Students and Alliteracy

This article is based on a two year research study with an inquiry into why students stop reading at the middle grades. The study attempted to clearly identify those factors which led to a decline or halt to reading both for pleasure and academics at the middle grades (6th through 8th grade – this will vary based on the school district). Alliteracy occurs when students are capable of reading, but choose not to read. It is also known by the terms, “nonreaders, literate nonreaders and reluctant readers” (Beers, 1996, p. 30). This is a common problem at the middle school level and although some students rebound and later continue their interest in reading for pleasure, others never reclaim a love of reading and even struggle with class assignments. The article closes with some suggestions based on findings to remedy the alliteracy in middle school.

Bailey¹, a study participant, was like many of the young undergraduate secondary education students I have had in the last three years. She had always done well in school and now wanted to be a teacher; in this case, a history teacher. As a child, her family supported reading in the home and often took trips to the public library. In elementary school, she thrived and described herself as an avid reader during this time. She spoke of reading programs she participated in and various forms of motivation, which were available for her to encourage reading. During her transition to middle school, this love of reading began to falter and wane. By the time she was in seventh grade, she was alliterate (also spelled aliterate); perfectly capable of reading, yet refusing to do so. She blamed a busy schedule as the reason for her decline in reading both for pleasure outside of school and of her commitment to completing reading assignments for school. Bailey is a recovered reader and now as an adult, enjoys reading again. Her story is one I hear multiple times a semester in my adolescent literacy course. The list of reasons provided by my students that had experienced alliteracy vary in specifics, but all fall within four or so common themes: (a) school became too serious and academic, (b) lack of choice, (c) dislike of the teacher and/or (d) material and time constraints due to extracurricular activities.

The Study

Over the course of four semesters and two summer session courses, I instructed an undergraduate adolescent literacy course which was required for all secondary education majors. During this time, I had approximately 300 students. At the start of each course, students were required to survey their own reading practices including the middle school years. Those who self-identified as students who participated in alliterate behaviors in the middle grades were invited to take part in interviews for the study. Each class averaged 25 students and for each class, there was an average of three students who self-identified. Of those who self-identified (30 students in total), ten students responded to the invitation to participate in the study and participated in extensive interviews (ranging from 30 minutes to one hour) about their reading history with particular focus on the middle school years. As a requirement for this course, all students were required to write a short three to five page paper documenting their personal history related to their literacy development. Several other students who were not comfortable with or did not have the time to devote to the interviews did provide their papers documenting their alliteracy experience. There were 12 students who donated their papers as artifact documents. The primary age range of these students was between 19 and 22, although I had one student who was 33 volunteer as well. There was an almost equal balance between young men and women who volunteered. All participatory students attended different elementary schools across New York State.

Of the students who participated, one self-identified as Hispanic and the remainder Caucasian. All students self-identified as working class to upper middle class socioeconomic status. This allowed each student a mainstream social and family capital background which would lead to a successful elementary school literacy experience. This, in most cases of those interviewed for the study, eliminated situational resistance (nonparticipation due to content curriculum materials which do not speak to the individual's culture and background) as a potential factor for why the students became alliterate.

¹ Here and throughout pseudonyms are used when identifying participants.

Volunteer students participated in a series of unstructured interviews. While there were some guiding questions, the interviews were unstructured to allow exploration of the different literacy histories. These participants offered a unique view as they were able to reflect on their early alliteracy experiences with the knowledge that comes from successfully navigating the educational system as college students in a teacher preparation program.

Although school contexts do change rapidly, these students (except one) are young enough to be considered representative of the digital natives and “on demand” teens that are currently in the middle level schools. These students had access to the internet (in many cases high speed internet) and other technologies which allow for the “on demand” lifestyle (items such as digital cable recorders, text messaging cell phones and high speed internet). An older population of students would not be able to represent this population as these advances in technology would not have yet been present during their school years.

For the purposes of this study, I asked the students to define “reading.” This allowed students the opportunity to include multimodal literacies, which I as a literacy instructor would incorporate in my understanding of “reading.” Few of the students however, defined “reading” in a multimodal perspective and instead focused on traditional reading of text in the form of printed materials such as novels and magazines. Perhaps, this is indicative of the setting of the study as the study was conducted through the context of a literacy class in which the students examined traditional school literacies early in the semester when the study interviews occurred.

Literature Review and Critique

Much has been written on the decline of middle school students’ reading habits with a primary focus on how to keep students engaged rather than focus on the causes (Beers, 1996; Feirson, 1997; Follos, 2007). These motivational articles are important and noteworthy, but they offer a temporary solution and do not target the impetus for the issue and only focus on the resultant behaviors. It appears that the norms of thinking of middle level students as out of control or too full of energy (as described in one student interview) clouds the true nature of the situation. The problem, despite the teacher guides on how to engage students, is a worsening issue. According to the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) report, “To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequences” (2007), teens are reading less and for shorter amounts of time and reading is a declining activity. “Nearly half of all Americans ages 18 to 24 read no books for pleasure” (p. 7), a habit developed during the middle grades years. The report also notes that even when young adults are reading, they are also engaged in other media activities at the same time. This perhaps is a result of a multimodal, multitasking generation where, “58% of middle and high school students use other media while reading” (NEA, p.10). On average, nine-year-old readers read more often than middle grades readers and the percentages for “avid readers (‘almost every day’) slumped for 13 and 17 year olds” (NEA, p. 29). According to the authors of the study, it is argued that the decline in reading may be a result of rigorous coursework and extracurricular activities.

The National Endowment for the Arts, “Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America” (2004), found similar results; however, this study only considered traditional literacies such as poetry, novels, short story and poetry). While it can be assumed that the results would be

marginally different if magazines, online blogs and other literacy rich media were considered, they should still be noted. The PEW Internet and American Life Project considered these additional media sources and found that teens do not think of their digital communication and activities as reading and writing (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith, & MacGill, 2008). Teens spend a considerable amount of their time in digital formats (texting, blogging, IMing, working on their MySpace and Facebook pages), yet this format was not considered “real” writing. Lenhart et al. (2008) found that “85% of teens ages 12-17 engage at least occasionally in some form of electronic personal communication, which includes text messaging, sending email or instant messages, or posting comments on social networking sites and 60% of teens do not think of these electronic texts as ‘writing’” (p. ii). While the PEW report had a primary focus on writing, emphasis was placed on digital communications and thus included reading in relationship to textual written responses.

A key factor which impacts the success rate of students is the transitions experienced in schooling. The transition from elementary school to middle school has always been a difficult one. In recent years though, the transition occurs symbolically at a much younger grade level (Lesesne, 2006, p. 10). Students still enter middle school at the same grade, but years earlier they entered the mindset of middle school as *serious* due to testing requirements and increased rigor (Gallagher, 2009, p. 23). The transition from elementary school to middle school is marked by “a startling change: the zeal and enthusiasm noted during earlier days get tempered, and the drive for literacy appears to wither” (Feirsen, 1997, p. 25). Causes of this decline have been attributed to decreased levels of motivation of students, emphasis on action, focus on individual work and lack of appropriate material (Feirsen, 1997; Lesesne, 2006; Follos, 2007). While all these factors do play a role in the decline of middle grades students’ reading habits, it may be argued that the issue runs deeper and is exacerbated by the very educators who hope to advance students. As Feirsen (1997) points out, “superficial change efforts will not reach down into murky layers of organizational culture” (p.25), especially when those changes are at the state and national level through mandates.

With such a recent emphasis on testing and not on the creative or personal connections to literature, it is no wonder that there is a decline in reading and marked illiteracy. Reading is no longer about pleasure; it is about work. The aspect of literature as creative has been removed from the curriculum due to state driven tests such as in New York, where there is “the absence of any chance for students to write creatively, but also fewer opportunities for students to read and respond to imaginative writing in general” (Butti, 2008, p.3). What new teachers and many older teachers fail to see is that although the testing may be required and may not even value creative works, the classroom can still highlight the worth of these materials. Lesesne (2006) also notes the loss of the inclusion of arts at the higher grade levels and points out that visual representations (media literacy) skills will help students combine, “the concrete with the abstract, making students think on a higher level while providing the scaffolding they need” (p. 45); a premise also supported by English education guru, Jim Burke (2007).

Hypertesting has also led to a marked decline in the joy of reading at earlier grade levels. Lesesne (2006), who writes about tweens (between the grade levels of four through eight) points out that, “before the emphasis on testing in primary grades began, interest and attitude toward reading didn’t begin to flag until seventh or eighth grade. Now with all the pressures placed on

educators and students to achieve incredibly high levels on *one* measurement, I am being asked to deal with reluctant and recalcitrant readers as early as fourth grade” (p. 50).

While the lack of creative writing is of concern, any deviance from traditional teaching and test preparation is also a risk. Educators recognize the importance of the inclusion of multimodal literacies beyond the textbook in order to prepare students for the sociotechnical literate workplace, yet it is often pushed to the side. Many of the students in my teacher education courses say that they believe including multimodal literacies are a great tool for learning, but that they just will not have time because of the looming test. As a result, lecture, worksheets and the textbook take center stage in the classroom and students continue to harbor dislike for the material and the teaching methods.

Teachers should also consider that the “need for reading instruction during the middle grades is not the result of any failure on the part of elementary teachers” (Rycik & Irvin, 2005, p. 4). Reading instruction should not stop at the elementary grades, but should be continued on into middle school and even high school to support students in their development of literacy understandings. This is important for all students and “not just for students who struggle” (Rycik & Irvin, p. 4). The type of material that students encounter at the middle and high school grades becomes more advanced and complex yet the support offered to guide students through this material is cursory if attended to at all. In addition, students will encounter many different types of text including, but not limited to web pages, novels, articles, film and political cartoons. Students need instruction on how to read each new form of material as different comprehension skill sets are required in order for meaning making to occur.

Rycik and Irvin (2005) point out that middle level students also achieve and work best in social environments (p. 14), yet our classrooms do not often support this environment. In most cases, students sit at individual desks in rows. In one school, a peer teacher reported that the desks were even bolted to the floor preventing the grouping of desks. Social interaction is important and is a skill which students need to learn in order to be successful in collaborative work environments as adults. The instruction of reading can also be social and collaborative.

Another common component that appears in the published literature is a call for motivating reading programs. These are popular at the elementary grade levels and include a range from DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) to more extrinsic motivators such as the Pizza Hut Book It program. Other programs which are supported by a commercial standpoint are also put into place as a means of reading development such as computer software bundles or Accelerated Reader. As Lesesne (2006) points out, “the programs have some flaws from a pedagogical perspective” in that they, “assert that the external motivation of points and incentives earned for reading become intrinsic motivation after a period of time” (p. 16). In addition, there is a novelty factor which will dissipate after a period of time. Another factor is that in SSR (Sustained Silent Reading) programs such as DEAR, teachers often do not model appropriate behavior and instead of reading with his or her students, the teacher uses the time to catch up on e-mail or grading (Gallagher, 2009, p. 45).

One additional factor is that what one teacher may find to be motivating may not be the case for another teacher or for students. This discrepancy also occurs when teachers and students have

different perceptions of teacher relationships with students and material. The research supports the finding that the quality of teacher student relationships impacts the student behavior and perceptions of school. The discrepancy is often that a teacher may perceive the relationship with students to be good, their teaching methods to be effective and materials to be motivating and engaging, yet students feel the opposite (Thompson, 2008). According to a study documented by Thompson, of teachers, “(91 percent) said that they made the curriculum relevant to their students’ lives. Students disagreed; most black students and Latino students said their classes were boring” (p. 52) and not relevant to their lives. This may lead to situational resistance in which students disengage and display alliterate behaviors.

Some classification attempts have been made to further describe alliterate students. Kylene Beers (1996) notes three categories of alliterate students, which include the dormant, the uncommitted and the unmotivated readers. Dormant readers like to read, but find that they do not have the time or make the time to do so. Uncommitted readers do not enjoy reading and do not identify themselves as a reader now, but might in the future. Unmotivated readers do not read and do not see themselves as a reader now or in the future. Worthy (1998) further defined some students as “renegade readers” those who do not read school materials or traditional materials, but readers who read outside the classroom materials such as comic books, internet pages and popular fiction. My study does not draw a distinction between the types of alliterate students, but does label the adult experience as either a recovered reader, partially recovered or non-recovered.

As Beers (1996) points out, one major issue with alliteracy research is that each case is unique. “I came to realize there is no simple template for the aliterate student. The term aliterates should not call to mind a mass of students who dislike reading, but instead individuals with differing views about themselves, about others and about the reading” (Beers, p. 33). Each student who becomes alliterate will experience a unique pathway to this stage and must be examined as individual. At the same time, some generalities can be drawn from these students which will help educators better refine techniques for engaging the alliterate student.

Elementary Reflections: When Reading Was Still Enjoyable

Every student who participated in the study noted that they enjoyed reading as a child. Many of the students shared that they had participated in motivating school programs, but that they liked to read outside of the programs as well. For each student, reading was viewed as a positive experience. Personal literacy histories included a nighttime story, trips to the public library, books read by parents and older siblings as modeling literate behaviors, and freedom of choice in reading selections. While the motivators of childhood such as a nighttime story may not be developmentally appropriate for adolescents, motivators are still needed. Rather than a story book reading, family supported activities such as completing the crossword puzzle together may provide motivation and family encouragement for literate activity.

Free time to read and choice in reading material were two aspects that were noted by the interview participants. Bailey remembered that, “at the library we would take a book and she [the librarian] would read it to us and we would have free time to look through all sorts of books.” She also remembered getting books that older cousins had outgrown and having books

with a read along record. Another participant, Jan, recalled that in, “elementary school I loved reading. I used to read all the time and the teachers were actually pretty good ‘cause I remember they used to take us to the library and let us take out what we wanted to read...so we could pick whatever level we were at.” Jan pointed out that while the class also had books they would read together; the independent reads were valued because they were for each individual’s reading level and interest.

One other participant, Nick, recalled that in fourth or fifth grade,

“We did a lot of reading and we did a lot of cool books, we did the *Narnia* book and we read this one book like *Hatchet* and I loved it...My teacher realized there was a sequel to the book so she had a little book review. Whoever wanted to do it and go home and read it and after a month instead of going out for lunch, we stayed in and talked about the book.”

For Nick, the free time and choice of participating were encouraged by an invested teacher who also recognized the importance of fostering the social. He later noted that everything was voluntary, an important factor.

For Bailey and other students, reading at the elementary grades was often perceived as social. Bailey recounted that, “I actually went [to the library] with my friends and then I just kept going and I started going by myself and as I got older I would ride my bike down there before I had a job.” All the students remembered being read to by parents or older siblings. This social story time often occurred at bed time and was remembered fondly. Isabelle remembered story times as a bedtime routine with her father and as she grew, she later took on the role of reading as she became a big sister she would, “impersonate the voices.” The family often played with the stories as her father would sometimes “make up a crazy end and I would say, ‘that’s not how it goes’ and he’d be like ‘Yeah, that’s it’ and I could tell it wasn’t the right ending, but I loved when he did that.” Story time for Isabelle was enjoyable, game like and full of social play.

School sponsored events recalled by student participants included the reading book order flyers that students could purchase books from, reading book fairs and other consumerist motivations such as the Book It program sponsored by Pizza Hut. Other school programs attempted to capture a more intrinsic and social love coupled with extrinsic motivation such as the one Tiffany remembered called PARP. She stated that, “with the book clubs you are excited they’re offered; you’re excited to go home and show your mom, you’re like oh like I want some new books and they have book fairs. That’s always exciting...so everyone gets into it and then you have PARP like reading with parents, so I feel it’s more pushed towards you.” She continued later by explaining PARP, “Parents as Reading Partners...um, basically you would pick out books, read them with your parents, write down your hours and sometimes they would reward a class with like a pizza party”. Nick recalled the Read Across America program his school participated in. “Every book you read, you write a book report out and handed it in and there was a huge viewing of the whole U. S. map and they had everyone in the school’s name on it and they take your little person and moved it across each state as you got a book report.” In most cases, the reading programs sponsored by the school were implemented on a large scale including either the whole school or a whole grade level.

Middle School and Alliteracy: “If You’re Gonna Be Like That”

For the purposes of this study and based on the school structure of the participants, middle school is defined as from grades six through eight. Students in my study cited a number of causes for their alliteracy during the middle school years. Among the reasons provided in self-reflection by participants, are things such as a dislike of the teacher, other activities such as sports which are time consuming, lack of choice and dislike of the reading material selected for class, a change in how the material was perceived and academic level of the work (pleasure to work). There did not appear to be a difference in alliteracy habits based on gender.

A dislike of the teacher was often coupled with other factors such as a dislike of the material or the difficulty with transitioning from elementary school to middle school. Students who cited a dislike of the teacher, often revealed that refusing to read also allowed for a sense of control. As Bailey recalled

She’s [English teacher] been there since the 1900’s, she was ready to retire and she just wasn’t understanding that me and the other kids weren’t getting it [Shakespeare]. She just made it so hard, she would give us tests and we would do horrible and she was just like, how come you’re not getting it. ...I was like well, I don’t understand Shakespeare, so I don’t like reading. It’s like, if you’re gonna be like that, then, you know...if I have to struggle with any other books, that just completely turned me off.

Later, Bailey continued her comments on the teacher by saying that, “oh, Mrs. Hatch was horrible and I [told my parents] I don’t understand this and I went to her for help and she didn’t help...I could hear her in the back of my head saying you know, you should know what this means.”

Jack combined a dislike for materials with a commitment to extracurricular activities as his rationale for why he became alliterate in middle school. He stated that,

I hated the book and I would not read it and we used to have discussions in class about it and I would just look out the window...I didn’t want to read from that point on and then in middle school that’s like when we all started to play sports so I would rather play soccer or basketball than sit down and read a book...there’s too much other stuff you could be doing.

He continued his story by also explaining that students had no free read time in middle school and no choice in book selection; all material was provided by the teacher and all students had the same texts. Another interesting comparison between both Bailey and Jack is that they both had twins. Each pair of twins grew up in the same household and went to school together. In middle school, the twins were separated and although they read the same materials, they had different teachers. Bailey’s twin went on to become an English major in college and Jack’s twin (a sister) loves to read.

Jesse, a wrestler and English education student, remembered that sixth grade was a turning point in his reading habits. Prior to sixth grade he enjoyed reading but then,

...in middle school I started not reading as much because I didn't like my sixth grade teacher. I don't even remember my seventh grade teacher, but I remember in sixth grade my brother had her the year before me and she didn't like him, so I knew going in she wasn't very good and we just didn't read any good books.

Later in eighth grade, Jesse transferred to a private school for one year and his reading habits only worsened, "we had to read one book every two weeks and they were dumb books...every two weeks is a lot especially in eighth grade because every two weeks there was a test and an essay." He continued by saying that he never read for pleasure during this time and only read the bare minimum to get by in class.

Isabelle, similar to Jack, also cited outside activities as a block to her reading time. Isabelle was over programmed and participated in multiple sports along with ballet, gymnastics and flute lessons. Later in seventh grade, she developed stomach pains and had to have multiple medical tests done to see if she had developed ulcers. This stress load continued with her into high school as she enrolled in multiple AP courses. She noted that beginning in middle school, "reading wasn't fun anymore, I hated it. I would always try to. I would pick up a book that someone would recommend as a good book. I would read the first page and then put it down. This isn't interesting. I don't wanna read it." She continued trying to rationalize her position by saying, "I think it has something to do with it like being the first child ... but yeah, I'm a perfectionist."

Nick was the only student who made a direct comparison between elementary school and middle school reading programs and cited that as a potential reason. He coupled this with a difficulty with the transition. He states that,

In middle school, I didn't read at all, only what I had to do for class. It was a crazy time, middle school is always crazy. I had a lot of different classes and I don't think I read at all on my own. I wasn't really encouraged, I mean not that they didn't encourage it, but it wasn't really anything set up or like read on your own, it was like flopping around class to class and most kids didn't read much.

Nick also noted that he was involved with football and lacrosse and that these activities took away from his free time to read. Chris had a similar experience stating that he was so overloaded with sports (playing one every season) he did not have time to read and so he stopped reading altogether. For Chris, his changing priorities dictated his reading habits. He also experienced some social pressure to direct his focus toward sports rather than academics and reading outside of school for pleasure. For class, Chris would skim the readings rather than take the time to read through because he found that was enough to get by in class. Chris was the only student who also noted that this affected his writing and pointed out that had he read more as a middle school student, he might have been a better writer.

Another concern was what one student called, “the academic tunnel”. Transitioning to middle school changed the perspective of the work. Jesse noted that this came with an increased weight on testing and noted that “in 8th grade every two weeks there was a test and an essay on it [the book]. It was just too much. I probably read two or three out of the assigned reading books. I didn’t read for pleasure at all. I read the bare minimum – less than the minimum.

Recovered Readers and Conclusions

One point of concern is that the study participants were all undergraduate education students. The data collected is unable to speak for those students who either dropped out of the education system or chose another career option. As a result, the reading habits of the students are changed in part due to the choice to pursue a career as a teacher. Another consideration that should be made when discussing the participant population is that each individual was a college student, which implies that the students are afforded the privilege of a four year college education (either through student loans or other payment). A wider study inclusive of individuals outside this population may result in different findings.

Although several of the students did not identify as adult readers, they all needed to complete readings in order to be successful in college. Of the interview participants, all but one was recovered or a partially recovered reader (students who appreciate and engage in literate activities such as reading a novel). Several of the students were able to identify a turning point which allowed reading to be viewed as enjoyable and return to the love they discovered in elementary school. For Bailey, it was joining the student newspaper as an editor. Eventually, she began writing articles and started to read again for pleasure preferring the works of Stephen King and V. C. Andrews. Now, as a recovered reader in college (a junior), she reads on college breaks. And, she usually reads selections recommended by friends. She also has subscriptions to *Time* and *Entertainment Weekly*.

Jack and Jesse are also recovered readers. Jack began a position as a substitute teacher and between boredom then and during the summers off from college began to read again. Jesse recovered in high school having discovered a box with Charles Burkowski’s *Ham on Rye* in the attic of his home. Jesse commented that over winter break and summer break, he always reads the books he puts to the side during the school semesters when he is busy with reading for class.

Tiffany and Isabelle are partially recovered readers. They often have good intentions to read a book and will buy the books, but getting through them takes some time and dedication. While now they do enjoy reading, often the books still sit on the shelf. Tiffany reads magazines for pleasure and will read other books because they are being talked about by her peer group, such as *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold. Isabelle is similar in that she will also pick up books that are in conversation with her peers. She recently read the *Harry Potter* series of books just for that reason. Other books she has not been successful with and she notes that she will often pick one up, read a few pages and then not return to finish it.

Nick in his junior year of high school was similar to Tiffany and Isabelle in that he picked up *The DaVinci Code* by Dave Brown because everyone was talking about it. He noted that, “I thought it was amazing...it was this whole information, this whole thought process that I never

thought about before... It opened up this gateway like there is all this information that we can find and have access to at any time and all you have to do is read the book, so after that I just fell in love with reading.

Implications and Conclusions

Regardless of the grade level, it appears that several key factors need to remain in play in order to foster a lifetime habit of reading. Suggestions for improvement include validating the literacy choices made by students, not placing excessive pressure on students for testing or teaching to the test (Gallagher, 2009, p. 7), allowing students some control over their education and showing students how to balance their time to include reading. Choice, free time to read that is structured within the school day and support from school teachers are essential and have often been cited as key ingredients to successful readers. In addition, the teacher should be considered. Middle school is a pivotal time in forming a reader's habits. Teachers who are unwilling to or unable to support the needs of middle school students should not remain in the position, as pointed out by student interviews. Middle school teachers also need to recognize and identify when a student may be purposely refusing to read as a means of exerting control over one's life. The failure to intervene when such behavior is evident may cost a student years of enjoyment reading. By noting the direct refusal, teachers can address the larger issues (such as problems at home, bullying in school, dislike of the material), which may be present for the student.

While this study provided preliminary analysis of the role of teacher and student exerted control, it also considered other understandings of the causes including time, choice and transitions. Sports and other extracurricular activities are important for tweens and teens, yet a balance must be established. Those who lead the extracurricular activities should also help continue to foster a successful student and reader rather than leave that work to the teachers and parents. Students often admire and look up to sporting coaches and extracurricular advisors, perhaps it is those individuals who should take leadership roles in creating and maintaining school sponsored reading initiatives. Those initiatives should not be abandoned in middle school, but should be continued at the high school level in a more mature manner fitting the students.

This study left the understanding of "reading" up to the interpretation of the participant. Because all of the participants were college age, perhaps they did not include digital or multimodal literacies because they identified the teacher acceptable answer as the traditional definition of literacy (reading and writing text). A follow up study looking deeper into the multimodal understandings of alliteracy may be considered. Perhaps, students do continue to be just as literate within a different context. If teachers validated and utilized these multimodal literacies more often within the classroom, students may not be so quick to give up traditional reading formats for digital forms and would better be able to find balance.

Larger issues that impact how students perceive the classroom include the push for standardized testing. Nearly all the students identified the level of seriousness of the school work and the drive for curriculum completion as elements which impacted literacy development. They did not specifically identify testing, but instead focused on other classroom factors that result from testing pressures. The student participants in this study had already left the elementary classrooms before the pressure to test became such a focus in schools. They did participate in

middle school testing. This issue will not easily be resolved in an NCLB, Race to the Top era, yet teachers can reclaim control over their classrooms and not allow test preparations to drive curriculum. Another more systemic concern is that alliteracy awareness and literacy development need to be moved beyond the English/Language Arts classroom and into other content area classes. With whole school support, literacy and reading for pleasure may begin to be more valued.

Each student is unique, but following recommendations of researchers and those teachers experiencing success may help prevent some students from pushing reading aside. Not every generalized suggestion may work for each student, but a combination and a balanced approach will.

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