Actively Engaging Middle School Readers: One Teacher's Story

On any given day, students experienced extensive and varied reading; had time to enjoy independence, self-reflection, and interactions with peers; learned about authors, genres, and story elements; expressed themselves in oral and written language; made choices; took ownership; and made connections.

PHOTO BY DOUG MARTIN

In reading aloud, the teacher models fluency and creates community by reading a book to the whole class.

By Amber Hammon & Carol Hess

*O*nce upon a time … a 22-year-old woman set out to fulfill her lifelong dream of teaching. She had just finished her undergraduate work and was eager to put all this newfound teaching knowledge to the test. Her first teaching job included a sixth grade reading class. She felt fortunate to be working with a core of experienced teachers. They shared with her the routines that had worked well in the past and gave her the curriculum and suggested methods for presentation. The curriculum consisted of six different genres, each assigned specific skills to be taught. In the 50-minute class, the students read silently for 25 minutes then worked on skill worksheets for the last 20. This had
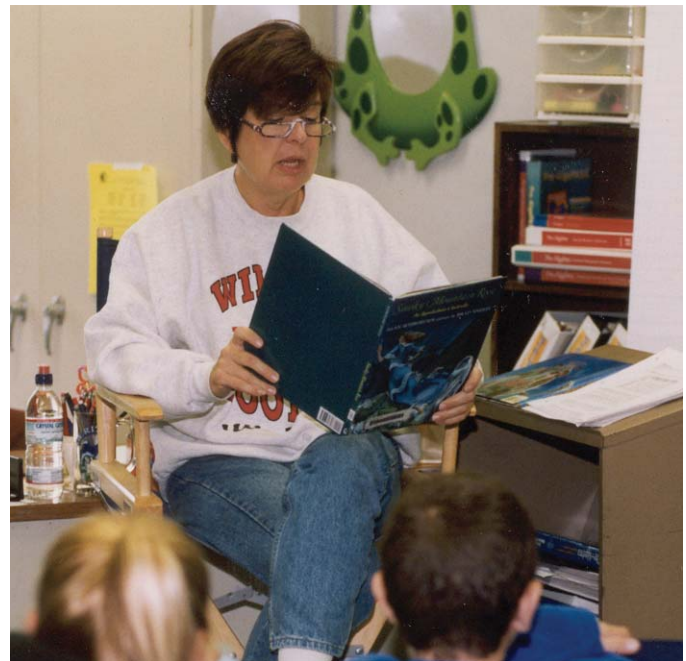
worked quite successfully for all members of the team in previous years.

The young teacher was excited for her first class to begin and had everything prepared. As the students entered the class, even before the tardy bell rang, one student had raised her hand. Excited by this show of enthusiasm, the new teacher quickly called on the student only to hear a dreaded question, "Please tell me, Mrs. Hammon, that we don't have to read books in this class! Do we?" Other students, agreeing and discussing how much they hated to read, quickly followed the question. That first class consisted of the teacher trying to convince the class that reading was fun while

the students eagerly waited for the bell to ring. Boom! The fairy tale was over and reality hit.

The 22-year-old woman was me and that is how my first reading class started. I was faced with the reality that my class of 23 students wanted nothing to do with reading. I thought to myself, "Perhaps tomorrow would be different."

Despite my enthusiasm and attempts to motivate the students, the days that followed were hardly different. Fresh in my mind was the research and studies often discussed in my undergraduate reading

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classes. Discussions had often emerged from research, which frequently pointed out that middle grade students' attitudes toward reading begin to decline along with their frequency of reading (Irvin, 1998). Also, an overwhelming number of students who drop out of school are reading considerably lower than grade level (Irvin, 1998). Diggins (1989) stated that, "sixth grade is a pivotal year, when students often are influenced to become either more or less interested in reading, attitudes then carry over into seventh and eighth grades and beyond" (p. 23). My experiences in those first few weeks certainly lent support to much of that research. Reflecting on this research reinforced the opportunities middle school educators have to influence student attitudes in a positive manner. I became determined to influence my students to become more, not less, interested in reading.

As students make the transition from learning to read to reading to learn, they begin the process of independence. However, literacy teachers at the middle school level must not let independence become synonymous with isolation. "In all curricular areas except reading, schools demonstrate continuous support for young people's learning. In reading, however, we often act as if students are competent by the sixth grade and place the burden on them to continue to improve their skills and to choose to read without encouragement" (Humphrey, 1998, p. 92). I quickly discovered the literacy program I was using did just that to my students: It isolated them. The program assumed the students were at an independent level so they needed very little encouragement to read. As a result, I spent the majority of my time in reading class dealing with disruptive students and students who refused to read or write. Because the students entered class with a bad attitude, their attitudes started to wear on me. I, too, came to dislike reading class.

As I passed out first quarter report cards, I was well aware that an overwhelming number of my students were below grade level or failing my class. I felt as though I had failed. While discussing my frustrations with my team members, I learned that they also had many failing students. They assured me that this was not unusual due to the lack of responsibility on the students' part. I, however, questioned whether the structure of the reading class promoted failure or met the needs of the students. A teacher must have some understanding of the needs of middle school students when making decisions about instructional practices. According to Irvin (1998), a teacher needs to accommodate the following needs of students:

1. the opportunity to work in groups (social needs)

2. a vehicle for connecting new information to what is already known, thus helping students to feel more confident about learning new material (cognitive and emotional needs)

3. experiences in abstract thinking that may help students move gradually from the concrete to the abstract levels of reasoning (cognitive and moral needs)

4. an opportunity to move and change activities (physical needs)

5. successful experiences, which help students feel better about themselves as learners (emotional needs)

6. motivation to learn because these strategies involve elements designed to heighten students'

curiosity about the subject (emotional and cognitive needs). (p. 32)

In my heart I knew the current program was not the way I had been taught in my preservice classes or the way I wanted to teach. I wanted my students actively engaged and making connections with their reading. I wanted to provide for their social and emotional needs as well as their cognitive needs. A change needed to be made.

Little did I know I was about to begin on a journey that would force me to challenge the way things had been done before. Being fresh out of college, I feared my ideas would be seen as unrealistic and unstructured. However, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) stated, "Getting students absorbed in meaningful, purposeful literacy activities requires a number of significant changes in the classroom—in the physi-

cal environment, in events and activities, and in the nature and quality of the interactions" (p. 43). The students and I were about to embark on a journey of many changes.

There were three very distinct things that changed in our classroom: the structure of the classroom environment, my role as the teacher, and the creation of a balanced approach to literacy development. My classroom became *our* classroom, and each day as we changed we grew together. The changes did not occur overnight but evolved over time.

Structuring the Classroom Environment

Previously, the students came to class to sit in assigned seats for the entire class period except for occasional small groups. I knew I needed to redesign the classroom environment to more fully meet the

Figure 1
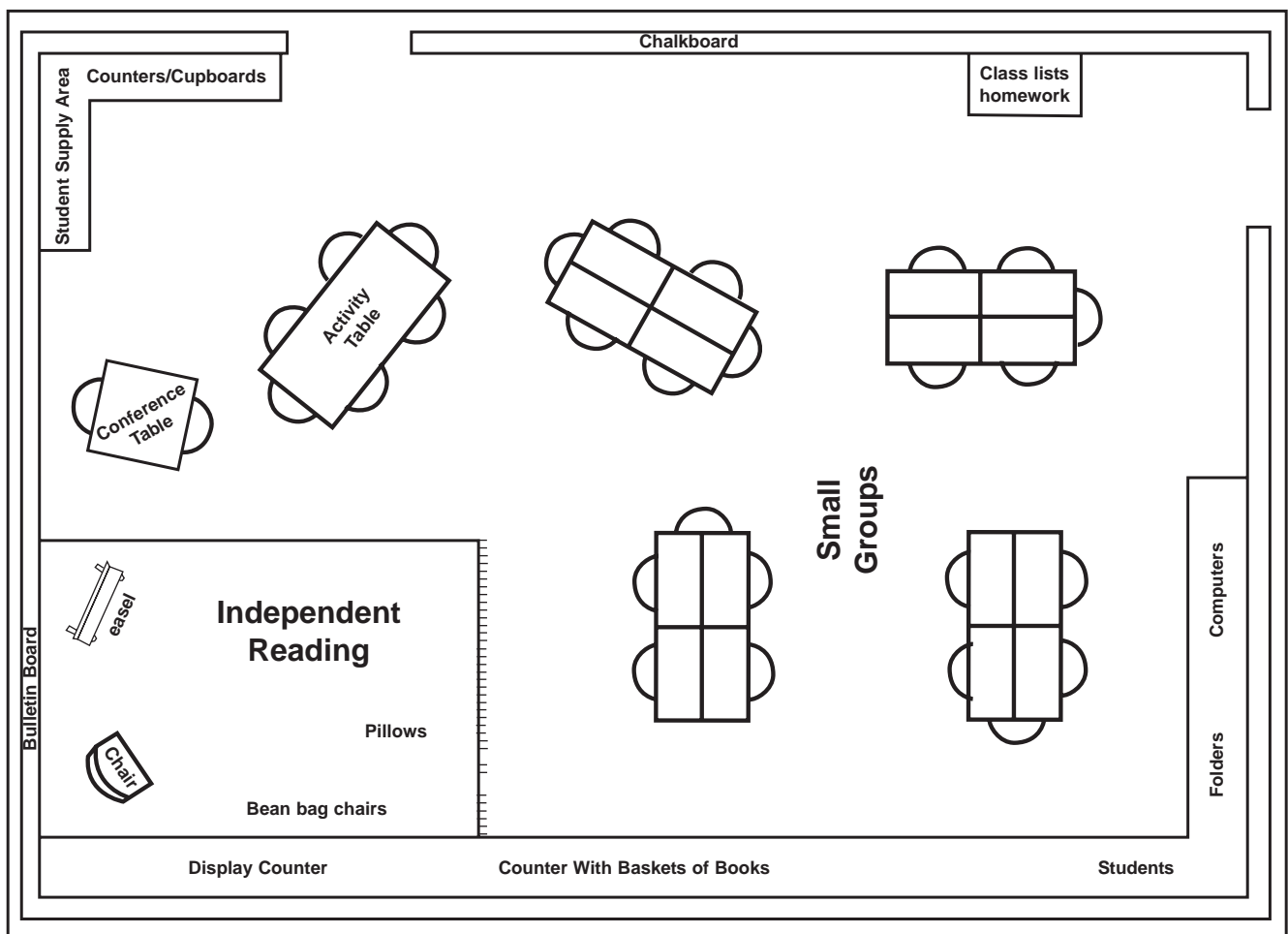
learning needs of each of my students. Fountas and Pinnell (1996) suggested that a classroom that is organized for literacy learning be built on the following theories about literacy:

1. All children can learn to read and write.

2. Children learn about written language in an environment that is print rich.

3. Learning is a social process.

4. Learning is a constructive process.

5. An organized environment supports the learning process.

6. Powerful demonstrations are an important part of the learning process.

7. Children learn best when they are responsible for their own learning. (pp. 43-44)

One important aspect of organizing the classroom environment is ownership. I had to be willing to let the students have some control in their literacy development. This began by transferring the responsibility from the teacher to the students. Transferring responsibility can be a slow process but is based on the desire to guide students in exploring their own ideas, accepting others, and reaching new understandings (Scott, 1994). I started by visiting with my students. I let my students talk while I took the role of a listener. I listened to what they liked, disliked, and what they wanted to do differently. During the visits, I kept hearing two important points: Students were bored with their reading and wanted to do something with partners or groups. I needed to create an environment that would provide my students with a chance to experience learning as a social process. By incorporating literacy strategies such as guided reading and literature circles into my program, I could turn my classroom from a traditional approach to a more student-centered approach. I knew with certainty that this time the tomorrows would be different.

I wanted the classroom atmosphere to be one that would encourage students to become risk takers, help them gain confidence, develop social skills, and learn how to effectively work independ-

ently. To accomplish this, I worked with the students on topics such as routines for taking turns, ways to have a good discussion, and ideas on ways to respond or react thoughtfully to each other. We developed a list of the suggestions and made posters to hang near the appropriate activity areas. It was my goal that these posters would assist in promoting student confidence. It was also my goal to encourage the students to take risks while sharing responses to their reading. I wanted the students to view mistakes as not a sign of failure, but a natural part of their learning process.

Integral to the success of any literacy program is how the classroom is physically arranged (Pike, Compain, & Mumper, 1997). When arranging the classroom, I kept in mind that students needed to know where to work for various purposes, and where to find and put away the materials they needed (See Figure 1). Supply areas were made accessible for several students to use at the same time. To better provide for accessibility, I purchased and labeled stacking drawers and containers for items students normally did not carry from class to class, such as scissors, glue, staplers, crayons, and various other items they needed for activities and projects.

Movement patterns within the room were established that allowed students to go from one area to another without waiting or crowding. I designated specific areas within the room for whole class activities, small group activities, and independent work. We actually practiced moving from area to area on specific cues.

The whole group area was a gathering place for the entire class. It could be on the floor, in chairs, or at desks. It was in the whole group areas that I presented lessons and gave book talks. If students had projects or writings to share, they did so while sitting in a special chair, uniquely painted or decorated. Small group areas were assigned specific spots and spread throughout the room to cut down on distractions. When working with a small group, I would sit so that I could easily view the rest of the classroom. Knee-to-knee, eye-to-eye sitting and appropriate voice levels were modeled and practiced in the beginning.

Establishing a reading corner in the room made reading come alive and created connections for the students. The more personalized the area, the more students took ownership. I wanted my students to associate reading with comfort and pleasure, so I set

up a corner of the room with a colorful rug and invited them to suggest ideas for making the area cozy and inviting. They quickly became involved by offering to bring beanbag chairs and cushions. Several parents volunteered to sew large, colorful pillows. I added a few plants, and one family contributed a lava lamp, which created a glow and coziness that invited even the most reluctant readers into the corner. When setting up the reading corner, I was careful to include the students' suggestions for books as well as magazines and newspapers. I found picture books to be a wonderful addition as well as a valuable and quick tool for modeling skills and teaching literary elements. When organizing the books for student use, I made sure they were accessible and easy to see. Arranging them by author, topic, genre, or theme encouraged the students to think about the books in different ways. Display space near the reading corner included guidelines for daily routines and most importantly examples of the students' projects, activities, and items relating to their reading. At one point, a large inflatable killer whale hung from the ceiling with shells and model ships scattered on the counter. A large fishing net, which had been used at sea by a student's grandfather, was draped over the tops of the cupboard doors. This was an example of a student connecting an experience to his reading.

One of the problems I faced with the previous reading program was off-task behavior and lack of motivation. "There are two ways to look at discipline. One definition is submission to authority; the other focuses on learning how to care for one's environment, oneself, and others. Self-discipline is learned; therefore, it can be taught" (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001, p. 103). Once the classroom was organized for space, movement, and materials, I went slowly to spend time teaching and modeling to students how they could manage their time and behavior in the classroom. Throughout the year I retaught as necessary because, "In a learner-centered classroom … we strive to help our students create an internal focus of control, to take the initiative, think for themselves, and assume responsibility for their own learning behavior" (Bridges 1995, p. 26). The changes I made in the classroom environment directly related to the positive improvements I observed in my students' behavior and motivation.

The Role of the Teacher

Middle school reading classes traditionally involved an isolated skills approach based around a reading basal and worksheets. Teachers were the decision makers and did most of the talking. Students seldom connected to their reading, nor were they engaged in discussions with their peers and teachers. (Irvin, 1998; Pike, Compain, & Mumper, 1997).

Despite pressures to pull back, many teachers are expanding their roles and becoming risk takers along with their students. Transferring the power of learning to the student while assuming the role of facilitator is a major goal of middle school reading classes. Teachers provide literacy-rich environments that are predictable and where expectations are known. Teachers show the class that they themselves value and enjoy reading. Teachers provide time to practice reading yet stretch and challenge students without defeating them. "By empowering students in the learning process, they develop a greater sense of connectedness, active involvement, and personal investment in learning" (Voltz, 1999, p. 29).
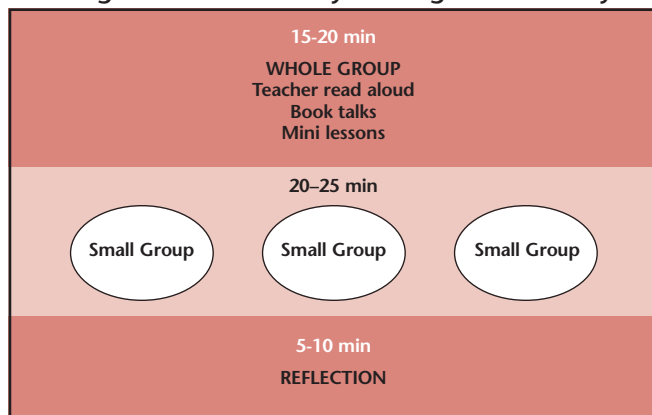
While changing the classroom environment, I was also changing my role as the teacher. I became more of a facilitator and supporter as the students became more and more involved in the learning process. I also began to incorporate strategies from

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such programs as guided reading, literature circles, shared reading, and journaling. As a result of these changes, a more balanced literacy program evolved.

Although the transition was slow, my involvement with the students was immediate. We became a team, growing together and supporting each other. The thrill of seeing reluctant readers engaged and connected with their reading gave proof that students can be part of the process. I no longer doubted my role as a reading teacher.

Figure 2
Reading Schedule Monday Through Wednesday

15-20 min

WHOLE GROUP
Teacher read aloud
Book talks
Mini lessons

20–25 min

Small Group   Small Group   Small Group

5-10 min

REFLECTION

Balanced Literacy Program

Keeping the needs of students in mind, I began to incorporate ideas and strategies from several kinds of reading: (a) independent reading, (b) reading aloud, (c) literature groups, and (d) guided reading.

In independent reading, students read silently from books of their own choosing. Once or twice a week they respond to their reading in a journal. Upon completion of the book, they share it with others through some form of evaluation or project. The teacher moves about the classroom observing and conferring with individual students during this time (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

In reading aloud, the teacher models fluency while reading a book to the whole class. A sense of community is established as well as the enjoyment and pleasure of reading. Reading aloud provides opportunities to discuss enriched vocabulary and story elements (Irvin, 1998).

Literature groups can be known by other names such as readers' choice and literature circles. In literature groups, students are brought together by their choice of the same books. They meet as a group to discuss their personal responses to the pages previously read and assigned to all members. Students are able to make connections between the literature they read and their own experiences and knowledge. They learn how to form opinions and share them with others. The teacher is an observer who guides the process, but the students construct their own meaning (Daniels, 1994).

In guided reading, the teacher selects challenging texts and groups students with similar reading strategies together. The groups are often smaller than literature groups. During guided reading, the teacher engages in discussion with the students,

teaches skills within the group, and often extends the meaning of the text after the reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001).

A 50-minute time frame made it impossible for me to incorporate all of the organization strategies of the various kinds of reading. However, the suggestions and ideas I applied from methods such as literature circles and guided reading brought positive and exciting changes to the climate of the room and the enthusiasm of the students and myself. One such example was the beginning of the class period. In the past, students were slow about entering the room. While I was taking attendance and checking on missing or incomplete assignments, off-task behavior and visiting took place. However, such behavior changed because, now, as soon as students stepped through the door, they were goal oriented and immediately engaged in instruction or read aloud with me. On a shelf by the door three class lists were labeled: "homework is completed and in the room;" "homework is completed but left at home;" or "homework is not finished but will be by _____ (date)." Upon entering, students circled their name on the appropriate list, set down their supplies at their small group area, and proceeded directly to the reading corner for whole group and the read aloud. Once whole group was finished, the students moved to their small groups. I could then quickly check the lists, enter attendance, and jot down dates which students committed to for unfinished work.

I organized my reading class around three basic groupings: whole group, small groups, and independent. Each day the reading period began with the whole group meeting together in the reading corner. On Monday through Wednesday, 15 to 20 minutes were used for teacher read aloud, book talks, and guided lessons (See Figure 2). Occasionally, throughout the year, I incorporated into the read aloud the concept of shared reading where each student had a copy of the text. I especially relished the whole group time with my students as we laughed and cried together while truly enjoying the voices of literature. I not only read chapter books aloud at this time, but also picture books, collections such as *Chicken Soup for the Teenagers Soul,* poetry, magazine articles, and feature stories from the newspaper.

Following the whole group gathering, students moved to their small groups for 20 to 25 minutes on Monday through Wednesday. An area for these groups had been assigned earlier and movement

from whole to small groups was actually practiced along with the expectations. Students were organized into small groups for approximately four- to five-week blocks to complete a book. I alternated using ideas from literature circles and guided reading each time I changed the blocks. If the students were grouped by choice one block, then I matched students to reading strategies the next. I divided the students into three groups, allowing me to spend at least 20 minutes with each group once a week. I also tried to spend a few minutes observing the other groups during this time.

To divide groups according to their choice of book, I presented book talks and posted a sheet containing the title of the book and a fixed number of lines. Students could then sign up for the book of their choice until the sheet was full. If for some reason I felt a group was too large for positive, constructive discussions, I split them into two smaller groups. The students continued to use the same book, and I would bring them back together when meeting with me.

The basic routine for small groups was to discuss and share individual responses and then continue to read the assigned pages. The small group brought students together to share their responses and discuss the assigned reading pages with each other. I generally assigned the pages; however, later in the year some groups were able to assume this responsibility.

Students wrote their responses in journals, which were easy to manage and gave me the opportunity to connect with my students. When reading their journals, I did not correct them, but wrote questions that would cause the students to respond. I also shared my own reactions and experiences with them. Journals provided a means of evaluation as I watched their writing and opinions develop.

Discussion within the group emerged from the students' personal responses to text or from an assigned task. I encouraged the use of sticky notes so the students could mark areas of text or jot down ideas or questions that arose while reading. As it was important that only one person at a time was talking while the others were listening, together the students and I established procedures for taking turns.

Students could read silently or aloud within small groups but often needed to finish the reading as homework. Families generally think of homework as worksheets or text assignments so, I found it impor-

tant to work with parents on the need for quiet, uninterrupted reading time at home. I enlisted their support in encouraging and creating time for their child to read each night.

Some of the ideas I found helpful for small group management when I was not meeting with the groups were the tape recorder, extra copies of books with discussion ideas for students to refer to, bookmarks with suggested lead sentences for journaling, and visual aids at each meeting area that showed guidelines for discussions and responses to each other.

The students returned to whole group the last five to 10 minutes of the period on Monday through Wednesday. It was at this time that students could reflect and share. For example, in connection with the story element of character, one group shared the character map they were adding to throughout their discussions. At another time, while reading the book *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen, a student shared a model airplane similar to the one in the story.

On Thursday and Friday we followed a different schedule (See Figure 3). First thing in the morning, the whole class met briefly for a "status check," a quick look at student expectations for the day (Atwell, 1998, p.140). At this time students or groups signed up for share time if they had projects or presentations to present to the whole class.

After a quick status check, the students spent the next 25 minutes on independent reading, journaling, and project work. Most of the time decisions about projects were left to the students and groups. I posted a list of suggestions they could refer to along with examples from previous students. Projects included such things as book jackets, poems, dioramas, posters, skits, character charts, plot graphs, pop-up books, and videos of mock talk shows relating to the characters or plot of the story. During this

Figure 3
Reading Schedule Thursday Through Friday

5–10 min WHOLE GROUP STATUS CHECK		
20–25 min		
Independent Reading	Journaling	Projects
20–25 min SHARING / EVALUATING		

time, I conducted individual conferences, retaught skills to those needing it, and did spot check evaluations. The ownership and pride students placed upon their projects and presentations amazed me. Certain students who would seldom turn in homework assignments in other subjects rarely failed to do so in reading. The period ended with 20 to 25 minutes for sharing and evaluations. It was during this time that I tested skills when needed.

A much stronger literacy balance was achieved by breaking the week into two blocks. On any given day, students experienced extensive and varied reading; had time to enjoy independence, self-reflection, and interactions with peers; learned about authors, genres, and story elements; expressed themselves in oral and written language; made choices; took ownership; and made connections. On such a day, I might have taught a lesson, given a book talk, conferred with students individually or in small groups, read aloud, responded to ideas, evaluated, and offered encouragement.

One very important element in making any change successful is to take time in the beginning to teach, model, and practice all expectations. Students do not assume responsibility for their own learning behavior overnight. I found it very helpful to take time to practice such things as how to enter the room, move between groups, take turns, respond both orally and in writing, and use tools such as webs and story maps.

This journey was as much about my learning as it was about my students and the influence I have on their attitude toward reading. As I sat with the other teachers in my core during a student-parent conference, I truly realized the importance of guiding students in making a personal investment in their learning. During the conference, one of the mothers shared that she did not know what had been done differently in reading but the difference it had made in Kara, her daughter, was remarkable. Her mother shared her surprise and delight at the increased time Kara now spent reading at home. Before, it had been difficult to get Kara to pick up a book, but now she seldom put one down.

My journey has no destination, as it will always be filled with changes that I, as a facilitator, must provide to meet and support student needs while they travel the road to become independent lifelong readers. Some changes on this journey were more successful than others. More than anything, this journey taught me that by providing support and encouragement while actively engaging the students, I could influence their attitudes toward reading in a positive manner.

Once upon a time … a 22-year-old woman set out to fulfill her lifelong dream of teaching.

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