

# Middle Schoolers With Reading Disabilities in Book Club?

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## Abstract

The writer describes a book project that successfully motivated middle school students with learning disabilities to independently practice comprehension strategies while reading material at their independent levels. Conception of the project, example homework and activities, development of a book club, and benefits for students are described.

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## Keywords

Learning difficulties , learning disabilities , corrective reading , individualized reading , adolescents.

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In my fourth year of public school teaching, I made the decision (which I considered very brave at the time) to move up to middle school. I was nervous to say the least. My new school was on a “block” schedule, so I would see my basic skills and reading students every other day. Ninety uninterrupted minutes with the same students! How different this would be from elementary school. Imagine my surprise as I conducted my reading pre-assessments, only to find that my students were reading at least three years below grade level- some as low as a pre-primer level- on the school’s informal reading inventory. Although I was saddened by this reality, as a former elementary school special education teacher, I felt well prepared to address the very critical reading needs of the special education students in my remedial reading classes. Or at least I thought so until I began mid-year assessments.

As I looked at the results of the assessments administered at the end of the semester, I had very mixed emotions. All of my students had made significant gains (multiple grade levels in many cases) in both decoding and fluency, and almost all students had made some progress in reading comprehension. But considering how far the reading comprehension abilities of these students were from the expectations for their grade level, it simply was not enough. I realized I had a big problem.

Reading comprehension skills were addressed each class, but the students simply needed more practice, especially independent practice, applying the strategies they were learning. The students certainly had an abundance of reading assigned to them in their English, history, science, and even math classes, but all of these texts were at or above grade level. Accommodations such as differentiated text and instruction, including use of

assistive technology, were frequently made within the classroom to help students successfully access the course content. However, when the students enrolled in my remedial reading classes were required to read their content material texts independently, this material was almost always at their frustrational reading level. I knew from best practice that my students needed to be practicing comprehension strategies with material at their independent reading level.

I went to our library. The lowest level books that the librarians and I could find were around a fifth or sixth grade level- still way too hard. So I went to the public library. I checked out and gave students books that were at their independent levels and assigned homework. They didn’t do it. Most were not self-regulated with any independent learning tasks, and others were reluctant to attempt tasks that they thought they would fail. More than that, what middle schooler wants to carry around a beginning chapter book? Not mine. Their friends would see. The high schoolers that rode their bus would see. Even their younger brothers and sisters would see. How could I build up their confidence by having success with independent reading if it was a punishment for them to be seen by their friends with the material I was giving them? I still had a big problem. How could I promote an increase in student reading of books at their independent level while allowing them to “save face” in front of their peers? My dilemma was not unique.

### **Reading Comprehension for Students with Learning Disabilities**

In the United States, approximately 11% of students attending public school qualify for special education services. According to federal data, 47.2% of those students were identified as having a specific learning dis-

ability during the 2003-2004 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). It is estimated that 80% of the three million students receiving special education services for specific learning disabilities have difficulty in the area of reading (Jennings, Caldwell, & Lerner, 2006). Further, 1.5 million children with learning disabilities from 12 to 17 years of age continue to receive special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

In addition, curriculum demands continue to increase as students progress through school. "Although the general education curriculum differs across classes, emphasis on reading to learn in content area classes requires that students possess reading strategies and skills, including basic early reading skills, to access and comprehend the general education curriculum" (Bryant, Linan-Thompson, Ugel, Hamff, & Hougen, 2001, p. 251). This is problematic for children with learning disabilities who have many additional obstacles to successfully reading text for meaning that is inherent to their disability. Students with disabilities are often not fluent readers by the time they reach middle school and so spend exorbitant amounts of energy decoding words and as a result they have few resources left to understand those words (Saenz & Fuchs, 2002). In addition to generally having less background and vocabulary knowledge as their typically developing peers (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001), students with disabilities do not consistently use comprehension strategies when reading (Bryant et al., 2001). Further, because of the technical nature of the vocabulary in expository texts, students may not even know the meaning of surrounding words that are intended to provide contextual clues for understanding key vocabulary words (Armbruster & Nagy, 1992; Bryant, Ugel, Thompson, & Hamff, 1999).

When this is compounded with students' lack of self-efficacy after years of viewing themselves as poor readers, students with learning disabilities are in serious danger of not even being able to access the text, let alone work toward comprehending what they are reading.

With all of these challenges, special education teachers of secondary school students with reading problems need to not only provide explicit reading instruction, but also to be especially creative in developing ways to motivate students to practice the strategies that they have been taught.

### **The Project**

At my school, each teacher was expected to require a final exam or cumulative final project. After the semester assessments, I decided that my student's final project would be to prepare and present a book talk to a class of elementary school students. In order to prepare for presentation day, students would participate in many activities. Most of all, they would need to read books. As the teacher, my motives remained unchanged: to get my students to practice reading comprehension strategies with material at their independent level. But now I had a way to change their perceptions. By attaching the elementary school component, I could say to them "you have to read books that elementary school students in your assigned classroom can read." Occasionally a student would bring a book to me that was above his or her reading level- like a book from the *Harry Potter* series (e.g., Rowling, 2001). In situations like this, I could say: "This book is great and I think it would be wonderful if you want to read it, but you are assigned to a second grade class. Do you think a second grader will be able to read this? Remember that when you present you will be trying to convince them to read your book, so let's try to find a book that

a second grader might like.” In addition, if asked by their friends why they were reading a beginning chapter book, they could say that they HAD to because it was the final project for my class to read with elementary school kids. In this way, my students were able to “save face.” In addition, as a rule my students tended to forget how little elementary school kids are, and so they were nervous about presenting in front of a class. The result? They began to do their homework!

### **The Homework**

Many students in my remedial reading classrooms rarely did homework for any of their classes. Usually I found that this was because they perceived it to be too difficult, and so by not attempting it, they avoided failure. While I could not implement changes to the homework assigned in other classes, I was able to carefully design the homework for my own classes to overcome this initial obstacle. Initially the goal was simply to get students to attempt the homework. Consistency was crucial. The homework was always the same: read for 20 minutes and write two sentences. (What the sentences were about changed throughout the year, but the structure of the assignment was always constant). This became “20 & 2” for short when I required them to write their homework in their planners. Every week, five (sets of sentences) on Friday were due. If a student was absent from school, not knowing what was assigned for homework was never an excuse- the homework was always the same. If they had soccer / dance / karate / church / family function / etc. after school and did not have time to do the assignment, there were two days built in with the weekend for them to “catch up.” Students that did not have their homework needed to turn in a written explanation for why; they were aware that this was what I

would show their parents during parent conferences if they continued not to be responsible for their assignments. In addition, when the homework was introduced the requirement was to read for 20 minutes and to write any two sentences they chose. The students were always skeptical of this; it seemed too easy!

To help illustrate that I was indeed serious, I made sure to model it in class. For the first week or two, I did a read aloud for the first 20 minutes of every class, and we wrote two sentences. At the end of the week, they turned in their five sets of sentences and I made sure to give lots of positive feedback. I did not edit their work or make comments for improvement because my goal was completion. Then they were set loose to keep going on their own for homework. Once I structured my homework assignments in this way, almost all of my students completed homework on a regular basis. These initial successes were critical to student’s later persistence with more challenging sentence requirements.

Once I had everyone, or most everyone, completing homework on a consistent basis, I began to embed comprehension strategies into the homework. For example the next step would be to tell them that their homework was still 20 & 2 and their first sentence could still be any old sentence they wanted, but the second sentence should be a “this reminds me of...” sentence (activating background knowledge). Any time I changed the sentence requirements, I modeled for the first week and made sure every one had mastered the skill before moving on. By the end of the year, students were reading for 20 minutes, writing a one sentence summary, and citing a direct quote from their text (with correct reference and proper punctuation). Examples of strategies embedded within the

homework follow. These examples are by no means exhaustive; please, see Table 1 for reviews of research on reading comprehension strategies.

*Activating Background Knowledge (Making Connections)* The goal of this strategy was to get students to begin to make connections to self, text, and others by activating background knowledge. Students began their sentence with one of the following phrases: (a) “This reminds me of...” (b) “I wonder...” or (c) “I think...”

*Summarization Strategy* This was perhaps the most challenging of the strategies for students, but perhaps the most important. Students were taught explicitly how to write a one sentence summary of their 20 minute reading. Initially students wanted to retell everything that they had read. It took quite a bit of practice to help them synthesize what

they had read. Because this strategy overlapped with goals in the English curriculum, student work was shared with the students’ English teacher to help demonstrate their competencies with this skill.

*Citing a Direct Quotation* Students were required to cite a direct quote from their reading using correct writing conventions. Although this is not a direct reading comprehension strategy, this assignment did expose students to text structures often overlooked by poor readers that contribute to the overall meaning of text. In addition, this skill was a part of both the English and history curriculums.

Beyond consistency with expectations for homework completion, matching books at the appropriate reading level and interest area to each student was an absolute necessity. Activities for assisting with this daunting task are described next.

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**Table 1: Reviews of Research on Reading Strategies for Students with Learning Disabilities**

- Berkeley, S. (in press). Reading comprehension instruction for students with learning disabilities. In T.E. Scruggs & M.A. Mastropieri (Eds.), *Advances in learning and behavioral disabilities: Vol. 20. International perspectives*. Oxford, UK: Elsevier.
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\*\* While the above list is specific to research in the area of reading comprehension, it should be noted that a body of research has been conducted with older students with disabilities in other important areas of reading such as: phonemic awareness (e.g., Torgeson, J. K., Shaywitz, S.), decoding (e.g., Engelmann, S. & Carnine, D.), fluency (e.g., Fuchs, L. & Fuchs, D.), and vocabulary instruction (e.g., Mastropieri, M. A. & Scruggs, T. E.).

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## The Activities

*Finding the Right Books* To determine student interests, students completed a survey about reading on the first day of class. In addition, during the assessment period of the first few weeks of school, students created their own alphabet books. These books contained all of the student's experience about reading prior to entering my class. If students did not have many prior experiences with books, they were directed to write about things that would help me to know about their likes and dislikes. These two activities helped me to learn not only about individual student interests, but also gave me an idea about the kind of successes and failures each student had previously encountered. I used this information throughout the year to make recommendations to students about books that I thought would be engaging for them.

Once I had a gauge about the interests of my students, I began to actively promote books on a regular basis. Janet Allen (2003)

calls this process the "blessing of the book." These activities were all designed to both expose students to new titles and also to entice them to give reading them a chance.

*Book Pass* The first activity is called a book pass. Each student chose one book from a limited selection that I provided. Every student (and myself) sat around a table and had one minute to preview the book (i.e., read the cover and the back jacket, look at any illustrations, read the first few paragraphs, etc.). When the timer went off, each person decided whether he would like to read the book, not like to read the book, or if he was uncertain. Then everyone passed their book to the person on their right and the process continued until each person ended up with their original book. At this point it was time to share opinions. See Table 2 for tips for conducting a book pass.

**Table 2: *Book Pass Tips***

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### Book Pass Tips

- (1) Number each book with a post-it note & have students right down their opinions on their own post-it notes (using arrow up, arrow down, or arrow to the side) this helps students to remember their own opinions instead of relying on the opinions of others in the class.
  - (2) Require students to share their opinions simultaneously so they are prevented from being swayed by others in the group. This can be done with index cards or even simpler by giving a Ropert & Ebert style "thumbs up" if they liked the book, a "thumbs down" if they did not like the book or a "thumbs sideways" if they were on the fence.
  - (3) Have the student who originally selected the book explain why they chose the book and what their opinion was after previewing. You can also allow that student to choose another student to share their rationale for how they rated the book.
  - (4) Another variation of this is to conduct the book pass in the library. Many libraries code their books using various stickers to represent difficulty level, and/or genres. This is an opportunity allow students choice while simultaneously helping to make the larger secondary school library less intimidating by modeling how to find books at appropriate levels.
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*Guest Book Talks* The ultimate goal of the book project was for students to give book talks, but long before students were explicitly taught how to create their own book talks, they were exposed to book talks given not only by me but by other adult models. I purposely invited presenters that I knew students liked and respected such as: their principals, counselors, the police liaison, the speech/language clinician, the special education department chair, and other content area teachers. This was a treat for both students and staff. Students liked hearing about books that their teachers had read when they were young, and the staff became better aware of and sympathetic to the severe challenges that my students faced in the area of reading.

*Rating the Book Talks* As a follow up to book talks by guest speakers, students rated the book talks (i.e., five stars meant they really enjoyed the book talk). This record sheet stayed in the student's folders and was referred to both by them and me when students were looking for a new book to read. This helped them to figure out the types of genres and/or authors that students might want to give a try. It also exposed them to different presentation styles that they could consider when preparing their own book talks.

*Project Preparation* Once students had been armed with numerous positive experiences, preparation for the book talk project presentations began. Please see Table 3 for sample presentation options. A description of activities designed to ensure student success on presentation day follows.

*Movie Talks* It goes without saying that almost all students love movies. And many films have now been made that are

based on award winning children's and young adult literature. These films are front and center for the first preparation activity. Students watched a movie during one class and then prepared and presented a "movie talk" during the next class. To assist students, the preparation began with a common word bank. For example, after watching *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1987), we created a class word bank with words like *Aleuts*, *Ghalas-at*, and *Rontu*. This assisted students in the writing process as they prepared what they would say. Then each student had the opportunity to present their "movie talk" to the class. They were reminded to (1) pretend that they were talking to people that had not yet seen the movie, (2) make their talk interesting so that those people might want to go see the movie, and (3) NOT give away the ending. After students had finished their talk, the audience wrote "American Idol" style evaluations. Everyone had two minutes to write one thing that the student did well and one thing that students needed to work on. In addition, the student who presented needed to critique himself. After students finished, they turned in their slips to me so that I could ensure the appropriateness of the comments and then they were given to the presenter.

*Video Practice* As a final practice activity prior to presenting at the elementary school, students presented their prepared book talk to the class and were evaluated "American Idol" style. This presentation was also video-taped. Later students would watch the video of their own presentation. Students really enjoyed this activity and were very motivated to continue to revise and improve their presentations, as well as to practice more once they saw video footage of their own presentation.

**Table 3**  
***Book Talk Presentation Options***

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What is a Book Talk?

A book talk is in essence an advisement of a book. It is different than a book report in that the purpose is not to retell the entire plot, but rather to pique someone's interest so that they might want to read the book.

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Example Presentation Options

*Traditional Book Talk*

In a traditional book talk, the reader tells enough about the plot to “hook” the audience without giving away too much of the book or the ending. If the audience wants to find out how the story ends, they need to read the book!

*Props*

Props are a fun way to enhance a book talk presentation while simultaneously taking a bit of the pressure off of the speaker. This is a great way for students to be creative. A simple prop such as an object that was central to the story or a copy of the book with speaking notes taped to the back can be very effective. Dressing like a character is another way to incorporate props. For example, a student who read a book about hockey might wear his hockey equipment on presentation day.

*Note:* Props should not be so elaborate that they are cumbersome for the presenter to manage or detract from the book talk itself.

*Read Your Favorite Part*

In this variation, a student will read their favorite part (or parts) of a story. This technique requires that students plan a brief introduction to set up the reading, as well as a brief conclusion that lets the audience know the kinds of things they might find out if they read the entire book. This book talk format is especially effective for book talking short story or poetry collections.

*Note:* The teacher needs to be very thoughtful when approving this presentation format. It should be made clear that a book talk is not synonymous with a read aloud; the introduction and conclusion are equally important. Further, to prepare students to do well when reading aloud in front of an unfamiliar audience, this option requires much more practice and rehearsals than the other presentation options. In addition, because the entire purpose of the project is for students to be set up for a success, this format may not be the best choice for students who are not proficient and fluent with decoding.

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*Author Talks*

In this variation, the presenter focuses on their favorite author instead of an individual book. This is a great format for students that choose to read several picture books by the same author or from the same series. Students might choose to tell the entire plot of one of the books, but then conclude by showing the audience other books by the same author that the audience might read. This is also an excellent format for creating a mock author interview. The student creates the interview questions and answers based on a book (or books) written by the author. With a partner (or the teacher) asking the questions on the day of the presentation, the student pretends to be the author of the book.

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air in the classroom buzzed with nervous excitement as students checked and rechecked that they had all the materials that they would need for their presentations. Once we arrived at the elementary school, the class broke up into three groups and headed down separate hallways: some of the students went with the school librarian to a fourth grade classroom, some went with the speech teacher to a third grade classroom, and some went with me to a second grade classroom. Book talks ranged from picture books and beginning readers to short novels. While all students took the presentations seriously and gave their best effort, the following are some examples of my favorite book talks.

One student chose to read books from the Beverly Cleary *Ramona* series. She chose to give a traditional book talk that included illustrative props. In her book talk she told her assigned fourth grade class about her favorite part of the book where Ramona's class makes owls for back to school night. In the book, the main character, Ramona, works very hard to make a unique owl, but realizes that one of her classmates is copying her creative ideas. Then to add insult, when the teacher walks around to inspect the students' work, she accuses Ramona of copying from the other student. Ramona is so angry that she smashes her owl, says a bad word, and flees the school. As my middle schooler conveyed this dramatic event to the fourth grade class, she pulled out from a box and carefully set up two identical owls that she had made from brown paper bags. When she arrived at the part of the retell where Ramona smashes her owl, my student very dramatically smashed one of her own prop owls. Of course the fourth graders were shocked! Then she proceeded to ask them: "What do you think would happen if *you* said a bad word and ran out of the classroom?" After listening to a few suggestions

from the class, she asked: "Do you want to know what happened to Ramona?" Naturally the students eagerly replied yes. She then dutifully replied: "Then you will need to read the book!"

Another student, who was a particularly reluctant reader, discovered Matt Christopher during the project. Matt Christopher writes sports books at varying difficulty levels. This student loved all sports and read several books about different sports throughout the year, but decided to give his book talk on a book about hockey. He was a goalie on an intramural team and gave his book talk in full gear. It was a joy to see my typically shy student open up in front of a room full of third graders who barraged him with questions both about his book and hockey in general.

One student really enjoyed reading poetry. He opted to do an author talk about his favorite poet, Shel Silverstein. He chose two of his favorite poems from different collections to book talk to his assigned third grade class. This was a huge accomplishment for this student as he had rather serious articulation difficulties. During the first part of the school year, this student often avoided going to his scheduled speech language sessions. However, once project preparation started, he regularly attended his sessions so that he could practice his presentation with his speech teacher. He also made some very clever props to accompany his poems (see Figure 1).

Yet another student was a fan of non-fiction; he was particularly fond of books about dinosaurs. He was a student that had a non-fiction book with him at all times. He spent every free moment of the school day studying the illustrations and maps and learning new facts. Although he initially attempted to switch to fiction because so many of his

classmates were reading fiction for their book talks, his heart was not in it. Ultimately the decision was made that he would give a “how to” book talk. He prepared diligently, marking with post-it notes and preparing comments about the most interesting facts in his book. On the day of the presentation, he showed the students in his assigned second grade class how to read his favorite non-fiction book about dinosaurs. He showed them how he used the table of contents so he could skip to the middle of the book to read about his favorite dinosaur first. His eyes lit up as he pointed out the illustrations, and maps, and graphs, and fun fact boxes throughout the book. He even showed them how he looked up words he didn’t know in the glossary. He was an absolute hit with the second graders—many of whom enthusiastically shared his love of all things dinosaur.

### **The Creation of Book Club**

Many times in schools, elective classes that occur during the school day become clubs (e.g., yearbook, band, etc.). Students in these clubs are recognized at the end of the school year for the extra effort, commitment, and achievement of these students in the club throughout the school year. I felt that my students had earned this type of recognition, so I applied for club status. At the end of the school year, my students were recognized in a school wide assembly and received certificates that read “in recognition for being an academic role model by encouraging young students to read.” For almost all of the students, this was the only time in their entire school careers that they had received an academic award. It was a highlight of the year for both my students and their parents. In future years, the club was extended to include after school activities.

### **The Benefits**

Benefits were seen on the end of the year informal reading assessments. After receiving intensive classroom instruction and completing the book project readings and assignments, all students displayed at least a year’s growth in reading comprehension. For example, one class began the school year with students reading an average of 3.33 years below grade level, and ended the year with students reading an average of one year below grade level. These positive results were also found with students reading far below grade level. One class read 5.33 years below grade level at the beginning of the school year and ended the year with students reading an average of 2.33 years below grade level. While students gained two to three years on average, some students’ instructional reading levels increased as much as four years, while other students’ independent levels increased as much as three years. Similar results were found in subsequent years during both “blocked” 90 minute classes and traditional daily 45 minute classes.

Further, after the creation of the book talk project many other observable outcomes occurred. Students more regularly carried books at their independent reading level with them throughout the school day, completion of homework assignments requiring students to read daily increased, and the number of students that successfully read one or more books increased. In addition, improvements in skills were observable in their club writing portfolios; there was evidence that students improved in making connection to self and to other text while reading, they improved in their ability to both summarize and identify the main idea of independent reading material, and the quantity and quality of their responses to material read increased. Student attitudes about reading also improved; many

students even requested to continue to participate as club members once they moved on to high school.

**Figure 1**  
**Example Student Book Talk Prop**

<p><b>COOKWITCH SANDWICH</b> (By Shel Silverstein; <i>Falling Up</i>, 1996)</p>	
<p><i>I heard that Katrina The Cook was a witch, But me, I'm such A stupid kid, I yelled, "Hey, Katrina, Make me a sandwich,"</i></p>	<p><i>And ZAP— She did!</i></p>
	
<p>(Middle School Student View)</p>	
	

Motivating middle schoolers to read independently is often a struggle, and the challenges increase significantly when students have disabilities in reading that have

caused them to fail throughout school. For this reason, teachers need to be especially creative in designing instructional activities that will entice these students to practice read-

ing. This project is one example of how research based strategies and creativity can be combined to create successful outcomes for even the most reluctant readers.

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