

Reading for Meaning in the Middle Years Classroom

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Abstract

Reading in the 21st century classroom looks quite different from what it looked like years ago. The days of assuming that the groundwork for reading has been laid by the primary teachers, and that all students entering middle years know how to read, have long passed. Reading takes place in every classroom and every subject. It is through a variety of strategies, collaboration, and time that lifelong meaningful reading takes shape in all classrooms.

Teachers everywhere strive to produce lifelong readers in their classrooms. The teacher's role is to create readers who not only read the words, but comprehend the texts. Teaching the formal reading process begins in the early years classrooms and moves into the middle years classrooms. The primary teachers lay the foundation and building blocks for reading, and it is therefore assumed that by middle years students have the necessary strategies to understand various texts and are truly reading for meaning. However, in 21st century classrooms, having all students read for meaning in the middle years classroom is far from the truth. These assumptions have led to students falling between the cracks in literacy. The role of literacy in middle years is changing, and it is now up to the middle years team to continue teaching strategies and finding ways to ensure that students are, in fact, comprehending what they are reading. Teaching for understanding, promoting dialogue, read alouds, guided reading, independent reading, book talks, reading notebooks, collaborating, and teaching reading cross-curricular are all crucial components in fostering an environment wherein middle years students read for meaning.

In order for students to demonstrate their understanding and provide evidence that they are reading for meaning, they must know what the verb *to understand* involves. The idea of students understanding what they are reading encompasses more than reciting what they hear, answering questions related to texts for a short period after their reading, and taking away a couple of new vocabulary words. When students are able to answer questions, restate, retell or summarize in their own words, as well as learn content-related vocabulary, then they truly are understanding and reading for meaning. Teachers in the middle years must move students beyond the understanding of basics, in order to ensure that each child is, in fact, reading for meaning. When opportunities in the classroom are created for teachers to analyse their students in their immediate learning, these experiences and language can enhance their understandings further (Keene, 2012). Teachers can then move their students beyond the point of only reading words, to a time in which each child is deeply immersed and involved in the literature.

Moving students beyond simply reading words begins with dialogue. Teachers who incorporate dialogue around the literature that their students are reading tend to create an atmosphere wherein students are comfortable sharing their voice. Fecho, Coombs, and McAuley (2012) described a classroom using dialogue as teachers and students being immersed in discussion as though they had found a bottle of sand, released to find a genie who had recharged not only the students but the teacher himself (p. 476). Open conversations with students lead to new understandings as they hear themselves and others talk about the literature. Open dialogue leads to an environment wherein students feel safe to talk, and safe to share their own interpretations of the texts. Deeper meaning is often found through connections between their worlds and the books that they are reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Students feel a sense of purpose when they speak about their reading, and therefore tend to immerse themselves in the texts, anticipating the dialogue that will be centred on their own literature.

Dialogue can also begin through a read-aloud. Read-alouds are typically a piece of literature, read by the teacher who captivates on opportunities to pause and discuss various components of the text with the students. This strategy is used for both fiction and non-fiction materials, giving time for students to synthesize and respond to the big ideas in texts. Read-alouds modelled effectively by teachers can lead students to synthesize on their own (Cummins & Stallmeyer-Grand, 2011). Synthesizing effectively means that the students fit all of the smaller pieces together to come up with the central big idea. As the teacher is reading aloud, students may be jotting key notes or ideas on their paper, or may be thinking of questions to ask. The teacher pauses and discusses the ideas that each student may be wondering about. This dialogue aids in the understanding of the texts by creating opportunities to discuss.

Effective dialogue assisting in overall reading comprehension can also be found throughout a successful guided reading program in the classroom. Typically, students' reading levels are assessed and then students are grouped according to their reading levels. The end goal is to foster lifelong readers. Initially, teachers choose the books with the students in mind, in hopes that with effective teaching, they will be able to handle more difficult texts in time and on their own (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Guided reading was typically taught in an early years classroom, however; it is becoming more popular in middle years as well. Teachers can move from picture books to chapter books in guided reading sessions. Students feel safe in their guided reading groups, as they are reading texts they are comfortable with, and in return feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. The dialogue within the group once again results in the overall understanding of the literature.

As part of the guided reading program, teachers introduce independent reading. Independent reading is a time when teachers are faced with excuses from students regarding why they choose not to read, and how difficult it is to locate books that they will be fully immersed in. Effective teaching and modelling of appropriate books for each student is crucial. Often, teachers assign books that they know their students will not enjoy, because they feel pressure from the curriculum to do so (Kittle, 2013). Middle years teachers must move away from this idea, and understand that whole-class novels, whereby each child reads the same piece of text, may no longer be effective. Students require guidance and recommendations for texts that will be suitable for their reading levels as well as their interests. Authors everywhere are devoting their time to writing novels for adolescents, however; it is up to the teacher to introduce them to the plethora of materials available. It is time to set aside the classics, and engage readers in new literature for their independent reading time.

Finding and introducing literature is difficult for middle school-aged children, particularly boys. This is especially true for boys. Boys tend to see reading geared toward females, and view little purpose for reading outside the confines of the school (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Understanding students, where they come from and their interests as well as their reading levels are all necessary components in making independent reading successful in the classroom. Aside from knowing each student, sharing literature through book talks is a key component. Book talks are used as a short introduction to books that are available for students to read. The teacher or students in the classroom take fifteen minutes to explain the books that they have read or are reading. Typically, the genre is discussed, and then a brief synopsis of the plot is given. Often, students take this opportunity to recommend the same book to their peers. Therefore, when students hear of other classmates enjoying a book, they are more likely themselves to pick that book up and read it. Book talks lead to valuable sharing between the two students once they have both read the book. Exposing students to as many books as possible is crucial in helping struggling readers find a book (Kittle, 2013). When teachers show interest in their students, and provide opportunities to become engaged in text, reading for meaning will happen naturally.

When students are fully engaged in their literature, teachers can assess their understanding by using reading notebooks. Reading notebooks act as written dialogue exchanged between the teacher and student. These notebooks act not as a play-by-play synopsis of what the child has

read, but as an opportunity to display deeper meaning. Students can respond to any genre of text, whereby the purpose is to write about what they are thinking while they are reading, not just recite a chapter or paragraph (Kittle, 2013). The thoughtful responses, or lack thereof, provide evidence to the teacher related to the students' comprehension. The written dialogue between teacher and student is something that each child in the classroom looks forward to reading. Having a letter addressed solely to them in their notebooks gives students a sense of purpose for reading. Many students in the classroom will read more in order to have something meaningful to share with their teacher. Teachers steer students toward different books if it is evident in their notebooks that the text is too difficult. Reading notebooks provide the needed one-on-one written conversation to display whether students are truly reading for meaning.

Understanding students in the classroom, where they come from, and their personal stories, allows teachers to guide students in the right direction when choosing their own literature. When students are given choice, they feel empowered. When that power is taken away from students, they are less likely to be engaged in forced literature (Miller, 2014, para 1). The end goal in allowing students to choose their own literature is that they will become lifelong readers, submersed into their books for the pure enjoyment of it. In order for lifelong reading to happen, a new approach must be taken, whereby offering choice leads to pleasure, involvement, and initiative (Atwell, 1998). Students are more likely to choose literature they will enjoy when they are given opportunities to choose.

Teaching students to read for meaning through their own choice is effective not only in the English classroom, but also cross-curricular. Teaching reading should not be the sole responsibility of the English teacher; it is the responsibility of every teacher teaching every subject. The Interactive Strategies Approach-Extended (ISA-X) responds to the need of struggling readers across the curriculum. A variety of texts are chosen for students, based on the curricular outcomes of science and social studies. Among these texts are a variety of genres, exposing students to literature that they may otherwise not have read. Lessons are centred on these books, giving students exposure to texts they may not have been exposed to before (Gelzheiser et al., 2014). Providing a variety of texts in all subject areas persuades each student to learn about all subject areas regardless of reading level.

Teaching reading in all subject areas is definitely becoming more prevalent in 21st century classrooms. Cross-curricular reading requires collaboration among all staff members, and restructuring of previous units taught, ensuring that the material they are using to teach is, in fact, reader friendly (Fang, 2014). The content area teachers rely heavily on the English teachers as well as the literacy specialists within the school. Classroom teachers in all subject areas are taught the necessary skills and strategies to assist the readers in their classrooms. Language specialists have the difficult task of ensuring that all teachers are conscious of the importance of literacy in their classrooms (Fang, 2014). The movement from literacy being primarily taught in the English classroom, to being taught in the content area courses as well, is beneficial to students. Often, teachers in the content areas assume that all students in their courses are, in fact, reading for meaning. However, with collaboration, teachers are seeing the value in choosing leveled texts to aid in their students' understanding.

Every child must be given the opportunity to read for meaning. Previously, it was assumed in the middle years classrooms that children entered grades five through eight and knew how to read. They came equipped with the necessary strategies to sort their way through difficult texts. Literacy in the 21st century classroom however, has taken a shift whereby reading for meaning happens through the programs set up in the classroom. Meaningful dialogue, guided reading, independent reading, book talks, reading notebooks, choice, and cross-curricular collaboration are all key in the success of adolescent readers' reading for meaning.

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About the Author

Alissa Cheung is in the guidance and counselling stream of the graduate studies program. She has taught for ten years and is passionate about reading for meaning in the middle years, with a focus on developing successful strategies for reading in her classroom. She is a wife and a mom to two amazing little boys.