



Reading Resistance in Middle School: What Can Be Done?

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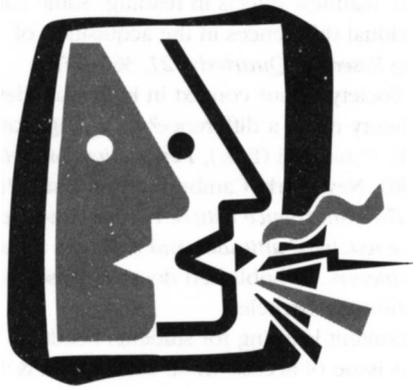
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STANDPOINTS & VOICES

Reading resistance in middle school: What can be done?

Marianne I. Baker

I interviewed a middle school student, a boy of Caucasian and African American descent. Jackson's candid thoughts on reading provoked me to wonder about the middle school reading experience, especially for those who resist it.

Marianne: Do you like to read?

Jackson: Kind of. Depends. Depends on what it's about.

Marianne: What do you like to read about?

Jackson: Basketball, Kobe Bryant, maybe some animal stuff.

Marianne: Do you read for fun?

Jackson: Yes, sometimes, but I mostly read for school.

Marianne: What kinds of things do you read for school?

Jackson: Short stories, poetry, novels from way back when.

Marianne: What do you think of people who read a lot?

Jackson: They're dorky. I'm kidding. They get a lot better at it. It usually makes them, it *can* make them, smarter in other subjects.

Marianne: What might help you enjoy it more?

Jackson: More books about Kobe Bryant or basketball. More assigned reading on basketball. More choice reading. People make me read dumb stuff.

Marianne: Do you ever get to choose what you read?

Jackson: Sometimes. But it has to fit the guidelines: third person, an autobiography. Now we are choosing between four novels. They're all second person or something.

Marianne: What are some of the best books you have ever read?

Jackson: *Watchdogs and Coyotes*, *A Dog Named Kitty*, *The Grand Escape*, *Slam*, *Kobe*

Bryant. (These books were all read at home.)

Marianne: Would you like to spend more time reading?

Jackson: Not really. I'd rather be playing basketball or doing something with my friends.

Marianne: Can you think of anything that would make reading more fun at school?

Jackson: A choice in reading and not having to read old stuff.

Marianne: When you have to make a forced selection, do you sometimes not like any of them?

Jackson: A lot of the time. I pick the one I hate the least.

Marianne: Are the selections culturally representative?

Jackson: Most of the books are about white kids. The only book this year about a black kid was really, really dumb.

Marianne: Would you like to read about current stuff (i.e., things that are really happening with teens now)?

Jackson: No, I just want to read about basketball, animals, things I'd like to do. I don't care about other kids and how they are growing up.

Marianne: Where do you get your ideas of what you want to read next?

Jackson: Most of my reading I don't get to choose so I'm not really choosing what I get to read next.

Marianne: Do you ever have conferences, discussions, book talks, book recommendations in school?

Jackson: We haven't been, but book talks are due on Monday for the books we are reading now.

Marianne: How do you find out about what other people are reading?

Jackson: I see it in class.

Marianne: Do you think your teacher likes to read?

Jackson: Probably. She's pretty much read all the books we have to read.

Marianne: What additional thoughts do you have on reading?

Jackson: I wish I didn't have to do it so much. I don't like having to read for school. When I get to choose it's all right. I would only choose the good stuff.

Marianne: Do you think your attitude will ever change?

Jackson: It could if I got to choose what I wanted to read, or if I could get assigned something I like—like an autobiography on someone you admire or choose a book on something you like to do.

I received a candid view, indeed, and the comments concern me. I do not question their accuracy as I know this boy well: as a reader, as a student, as my son.

His statements beg for more personalized selections of reading material, epitomizing an adolescent's yearning to make choices. In making a selection among a few titles offered, he picks the one he "hates the least." As well, his comments indicate that he knows reading is good for him, but he seems to need temptation, to want hooks to draw him. His responses are peppered with "have to" and thoughts about assigned reading. Having rarely encountered a choice, he doesn't seem to have given much thought to what he would do with it. Jackson dares teachers to make school reading appealing to him.

Certainly, my own child also knows me well. Jackson knows my platforms, my passions. Because adolescents have been known to make statements for no other reason than to provoke parental response one may question his replies, but his comments are supported through many years of my own knowledge of him as a student. It is interesting to note that during our conversation,

Jackson was so busy reading his *Sports Illustrated for Kids* magazine that he could hardly stop long enough to hear and respond to my questions.

Jackson was read to in utero and is still read to. His is a world of print and a home of books. As he entered middle school and I simultaneously entered a doctoral program in reading education a few years ago, he watched me pour myself into books daily, often into the wee hours. His comment in regard to my new role as student was "Why do you waste so much time reading?"

My main concern

With my background in reading, I find his statements doubly alarming. Personally, I know of his reading skills. At or above grade level in reading throughout the elementary school years, Jackson at some point became less engaged. His reading engagement has become my main goal. I am concerned with the notion of losing ground, especially with the increasing demands of successive grades.

Reading researcher Keith Stanovich would be among the ones who say Jackson may suffer. Coining the phrase *Matthew effects* (1986), Stanovich, whose research has focused on students experiencing reading difficulty, describes distinct cycles of those who do and those who do not read, noting the ever widening gap between the two groups. With this discrepancy in words read comes a lack of understanding of complex syntactical structures, conceptual development and knowledge, and vocabulary growth. Satisfying experiences may beget more experiences for active readers and whet an appetite for lifelong reading. Hence, as the biblical reference from the Gospel according to Matthew (25:29) infers: Those already rich in reading get richer.

What to do?

Teaching language arts in middle school presents varied challenges for teachers. Teachers are bound by mandated curriculum, budgets, schedules, and often by student resistance and apathy. As well, students arrive with a variety of reading skills. How can each student be reached?

This question may be addressed by examining today's middle school students. In Ivey and Broaddus (2000), we learn that reading habits may change for students in middle school. Students may begin reading less and may develop negative feelings about reading through the middle grades. Ivey and Broaddus underscore the observation that middle school students arrive with a wide range of habits and abilities and support the notion that reading instruction can respond to student needs and interests. Also, the role of attitude in reading should not be underestimated.

Engaged readers are thought to be intrinsically motivated and strategic. They enjoy learning and seek to understand. How can resistant middle schoolers become engaged with school reading and writing? A look at choice, time, and the classroom is in order.

Choice

If we listen to the readers, they might tell us about engagement. When asked what might help him enjoy reading more, Jackson replied, "more choice reading" and "I would only choose the good stuff." The role of choice is pivotal to his stance.

In his caustic remarks, Jackson makes a case for inquiry-based learning, declaring that his attitude might change if he "got assigned" (or chose) to read something he liked. Lindfors (1999) wrote about the role of inquiry for youth, informing us that pursuing personal inquiry is "how children learn" (p. 16). At the

very least, a choice in reading allows readers to pursue their passions.

As well, the authors of *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement* supported reading choice for literacy growth. First and foremost they stated, "Adolescents deserve access to a wide variety of reading material that they can and want to read" (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 4). To read more, readers of all levels must be engaged with the available materials. What array of materials exists in classroom libraries? Outside of textbooks and required reading, are there picture books, song lyrics, magazines, or comic books? A greater variety of classroom materials may increase engagement for today's diverse middle schoolers.

Time

Time spent reading is necessary for reading success. Class time for conferences, discussion, response, and recommendation facilitates the synchronous growth of reading and writing. Personal goal setting and cross-age tutoring may provide opportunities for bolstering skills and confidence. As well, with time provided for students to keep a list of intriguing books and authors to read next, the flow of engagement may continue between texts. The value of reading, writing, and responding is evident in the allocation of class time to do so.

Classroom

We also learn from *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement* that "adolescents deserve teachers who understand the complexities of individual adolescent readers, respect their differences, and respond to their characteristics" (Moore et al., 1999, p. 8). Perhaps we should examine the classroom atmosphere from an adolescent perspective. Is it a safe place for idea exchange? "Respectful classrooms are safe enough for students to take risks when expressing themselves publicly" (p. 8).

In addition, hearing Jackson's statement that "The only book this year about a black kid was really, really dumb" leaves me wondering. Is the classroom inviting? Are all of the cultures of the classroom welcomed and represented in available texts? Are students invited to make deep, personal connections with their conversations, their reading, and their writing?

Levels of conversation naturally vary with classrooms, yet a lack of validation of the cultural experiences of all classroom members may stifle students. A perception of arrogance, even a false perception, can sadly lead students to be silenced from reading, writing, and speaking.

Middle school students

Jackson thinks "probably" his language arts teacher likes to read because she's "pretty much read all the

books we have to read." Perhaps with choice, time, and an inviting classroom environment, students will be better equipped to delve into their passions. They might better gauge their teacher's passions as well.

Jackson is fortunate. At home, his dare to bait the hook has been accepted, and he receives continued support for reading engagement. Yet his response to school reading is "I pick the one I hate the least." I'm holding out for a different response, one as simple as "This looks interesting, I'll start here."

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