

Paradigm Shifts that Nurture Improved Middle School Reading Instruction

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Abstract

In order to achieve middle school literacy success over time in an urban school district with a high poverty rate and a growing population of English language learners (ELLs), the Chicago Public School (CPS) System has adopted a pedagogical strategy that relies on instruction that is data-driven (formative and summative), standards-based (utilizing state board of education standards and performance descriptors), and classics-rich. This presentation elaborates on these three components as they have evolved over the past five years resulting in system-wide literacy improvement.

Major elements of this literacy reform include: innovative systems of instruction, professional development modules, systems of accountability, and the implementation of a comprehensive coaching network. The implications of this major literacy reform movement have impacted teachers and their individual classrooms, principals and their learning communities, and regional instruction officers and their comprehensive network of schools. In this way, the entire middle school network of teaching and learning in Chicago Public Schools has experienced steady growth over time. Consequently, as this literacy movement enters its sixth year, a paradigm shift is taking place in which *instructional* leadership is becoming the priority. In this way, the commitment to sustain middle school reading improvement and innovation is growing within a meaningful structure rooted in research, accountability, and high standards.

Introduction

Improving middle school reading instruction requires the integration of three critical components: the effectiveness of the classroom teacher, the accountability of the local school administrator, and the long-term commitment of city-wide administrators. When these components are integrated, the result is a leadership structure that enables and nurtures the kind of meaningful and engaging instruction needed to propel the teaching and learning of middle school reading instruction forward.

Teachers, reading specialists, local and citywide administrators need to assume an equal stake in improving the effectiveness of daily teaching; in accepting professional accountability for results over time; and in committing themselves to this on-going collaborative process. This structure empowers these three groups of stakeholders to engage in effective instructional leadership. Unless this occurs, leadership remains segregated into various categories including financial, managerial, administrative, and clerical ones. When leadership is divided in this way, instructional focus is reduced.

Instead, instructional leadership needs to be maintained as the overarching umbrella under which these other components operate. In short, if middle school reading instruction is to improve, a paradigm shift needs to take place. Local school administrators need to have an expertise in literacy; teachers need to have a working understanding of research and evaluation; and citywide administrators and reading specialists need to have input in daily instructional decision-making. Likewise, local school administrators need to be competent in modeling and coaching innovative instruction; teachers need to analyze formative and summative data in order to devise meaningful action plans; and citywide administrators need to engage in local professional development and grade level meetings. These examples demonstrate that the traditional separateness of these entities needs to be shattered and replaced with a cohesive co-dependent collaboration.

The Chicago Reading Initiative (CRI), which was launched five years ago, has endeavored to nurture such a shift in roles and responsibilities. This presentation will detail how these gradual paradigm shifts have transpired, how they have directly impacted middle school reading, and how they can be duplicated by other school systems. Although the perspective of this presentation will include relevant research and data, it is rooted in the personal testimony of an educator who has served as middle school reading teacher, citywide reading specialist, and local school assistant principal.

It is the very interdependence of these three roles which establishes meaningful instructional leadership. The integration of classroom teacher, reading specialist, and local administrator is the critical mechanism which will propel middle school reading instruction into a Renaissance of revitalization. To this end, in addition to theoretical research and data, this presentation relies heavily on specific classroom practices as well as specific text excerpts that have proven successful in my middle school classroom. In this way, the focus of this paper remains rooted in the classroom where the teaching and learning takes place.

Chicago Reading Initiative

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Like so many other effective classroom teachers, as an eighth grade reading teacher for fifteen years, I embedded my instructional content with topics about which I am knowledgeable and passionate. Just as Athena, goddess of knowledge, mentions in Homer's *Odyssey* Book XIII:

Always you are the same, and such is the mind within you,
And so I cannot abandon you when you are unhappy,
Because you are fluent, and reason closely, and keep your head always...
And I never did have any doubt, but in my heart always
Knew how you would come home (lines 330-2, 339-40),

likewise, I have always found tremendous success returning “home” to the “fluency” and “reason” of classical texts. When my students and I embarked on a rich unit of instruction that was rooted in the ideas, archetypes, language, universal characters, and underlying themes of Homer's *Odyssey*, Bulfinch's *Anthology*, and D'aulaire's *Mythology*, the reading instruction became more meaningful and engaging.

The instruction was standards-based; the assessments were daily and formative. More importantly, however, the texts and their connections and implications were intrinsically relevant to me and to my students. In *Strategies for Teen Readers* (2005), Carolyn Coutant and Natalia Perchemlides advocate for intensive scaffolding to help students infer personal, global, and literary connections: Compelling storytellers often seek to convey universal truths to their readers. Students should use the inferences that they made about a story's themes to search for those themes in the characters' actions and words (p.46).

Although this sort of rigorous teaching and learning impacted my middle school literacy classroom, it was not significantly impacting school-wide reading progress. It was not impacting system-wide middle school literacy trends. The teaching and learning with its underlying theory and practice that I utilized in my daily literacy instruction needed to be integrated into the coaching and modeling guided by the local school administration. It needed to become an integral component of citywide initiatives. Effective middle school reading instruction needed a systematic venue through which progress could be efficiently nurtured and propelled forward on a system-wide level.

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The Chicago Reading Initiative (CRI), which began in 2001, provided such an opportunity. Innovative middle school classroom language arts teachers were offered positions as school-wide and area-wide literacy leaders. In this capacity, they used their real-world expertise to coach, model, motivate and support middle school reading teachers within and among schools citywide. After two to three years in the field, many of these literacy leaders became assistant principals and principals. This cycle, from classroom teacher to reading specialist to instructional leader, establishes a remarkable network of expertise that is rooted in teaching and learning. In this way, the often-segregated roles of teachers, literacy leaders, and administrators are more closely aligned with day-to-day pedagogical concerns.

The top-down paradigm of educational infrastructure is replaced with a lateral model. Literacy leaders are now able to reach out to teachers and administrators and bring their instructional expertise to a large number of schools in order to affect systems of literacy improvement. Administrators are now able to move teaching and learning forward based on their own experiences as teachers, coaches, mentors, and instructional strategists.

Professor James Spillane (2006) describes this phenomenon as distributed leadership:

The distributed perspective shifts the focus from leaders to leadership practice. In this way, efforts to understand school leadership are firmly anchored in the practice of leadership. Leadership roles, structures, and functions are still important. But from a distributed perspective, leadership practice is the vital concern. The distributed perspective offers a particular way of thinking about leadership practice, arguing that practice gets defined in the interactions of leaders, followers, and their situation (p. 89).

Meaningful texts

As a city-wide middle school reading specialist, I brought my passion for Greek and Roman mythology out of the individual classroom and into a larger arena that impacted over nineteen schools and literally hundreds of teachers and administrators. Through professional development sessions, I have been able to model middle school instruction from the perspective of someone

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who had actually taught middle schoolers successfully for many years. This included the following highlights:

- Demonstrations of instructional scaffolding to bring Homer's *Odyssey* to middle schoolers
- Modeling of how classical and contemporary music and art can be used to further engage students in the mythological themes
- Workshops for teachers and administrators on how to align lessons from classical texts with state instructional standards; how to use formative and alternative assessments to monitor and strengthen daily instruction; and how to map the instructional pacing to address differentiated/individualized needs
- Providing financial resources and grant opportunities that allowed teachers to purchase appropriately suited materials
- Arranging school and area-wide study groups that met weekly to collaborate

Although standards, student data, pacing, and assessment tools were all integral pieces of the training and modeling, the true driving force of these sessions was providing meaningful texts that would truly engage the middle school student. Similarly, Teale and Gambrell (2007) published findings that support the use of authentic, challenging work as being critical to raising student literacy achievement:

In addition, the analysis confirmed what other studies have shown—there is a close connection between high quality literacy instruction and sustained, cumulative professional development for teachers. Looking more deeply, we also concluded that something in addition to classroom practices or providing professional development was at work. Consideration of the principles behind the practices revealed that the authentic, challenging work, the actualization of a learning community, and engagement were all central to the impact... (p. 737).

As an assistant principal, I am using my passion for classical literature to improve middle school reading instruction. This includes the following highlights:

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- Instructional modeling and coaching within and among classrooms that utilized engaging classical texts
- Budgetary supports that align with innovative instructional practices
- Professional community conversations focusing on content-driven decision-making supported by state standards and formative assessments (and reflected in weekly lesson plans)
- Formal and informal classroom observations that focus on the art of teaching middle schoolers

Although some teachers and grade level teams have enhanced their use of mythology as a tool for more engaging middle school instruction, many other teachers have used this model of coaching and mentoring as a means to bring topics and themes that they are passionate about into their teaching. This paradigm shift from a segregated managerial accountability to a shared *instructional* accountability has empowered all members of the school community to plan, deliver, and support middle school instruction that is more engaging, more meaningful, and ultimately more transformative for the students.

I have experienced this shift from rote instruction to transformative instruction because I did not leave being a teacher to become a coach. I did not leave teaching and coaching to become an administrator. Instead, it is my evolving role as teacher which is fortified and transfigured in my roles as coach and administrator. Clinical and organizational psychologist Robert Evans (1996) further qualifies the strategic-systemic approaches that underscore this transformation:

Strategic-systemic approaches to leadership emphasize substance rather than technique. They see leadership not as a science but as a craft, a unique blend of practical experience, personal skill, judgment, and intuition, all informed by training and research (p. 167).

Because of the Chicago Reading Initiative, which has systematically facilitated this professional growth, the true beneficiaries are the students who now are being supported and lead by teams of teachers whose hearts and passions lie in teaching and learning.

Compassionate Texts

Like many middle school teachers, I believe that carefully selected texts need to be engaging, meaningful, and rich. For example, as a Shakespeare aficionado I would frequently incorporate the bard's work into a variety of lessons. Many teachers, however, need supportive coaching mentoring, and modeling in order to effectively use such texts. Furthermore, a deluge of administrative mandates including stringent standards-based lesson planning, data-driven curriculum maps, and formative differentiated assessments can deter teachers from focusing on deeper utilization of rich texts.

But imagine having mentors and coaches modeling and supporting instruction of rich texts within the school. As Shakespeare himself observed:

When I consider everything that grows
Holds in perfection but a little moment;
That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment. (Sonnet 15).

Imagine having administrators who prioritize the teaching and learning components and allow the more administrative tasks to assume a lesser emphasis. The research of Booth and Rowsell (2002) underscores this critical mindset. They report the following:

Principals who believe in and even feel passionately about a project or initiative, infuse momentum and purpose into its goals. Clear communication about project goals, literacy plans, and policies, and professional development events help keep everyone on track. Communicating goals to the group compels individual teachers and teaching teams to maintain a commitment to literacy initiatives and to improve literacy standards in a school (p. 16).

Although such paradigm shifts may seem unrealistic, they are, in fact, imperative if literacy instruction is to move forward.

Over the past five years, the Chicago Reading Initiative has been building such a structure. Throughout the city, building and area coaches and specialists have become more commonplace and indispensable. Many of these coaches and specialists are now becoming the building

assistant principals and principals. This means that a trend is taking place wherein the school administrators, coaches, and teachers are sharing a more common mission and purpose. This indicates that the time is right for nurturing the kind of meaningful, engaging, and rich instruction so crucial to middle school literacy.

Although many authors and genres certainly qualify as rich, meaningful texts for this caliber of instruction, in order to exemplify this integrated instructional leadership, I will use works of William Shakespeare. As a classroom teacher, students and I would regularly analyze passages that especially addressed the kinds of social and peer pressures that middle school students face. One such Shakespeare quote, *He jests at scars that never felt a wound* (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, Scene 1, Line 43), demonstrates the kinds of social commentaries of this nature that are deeply relevant to middle school students. Because of the universality of its message and its concise use of words, all students regardless of academic ability, special needs, or level of language acquisition can be engaged.

Using text in this way as a vehicle for middle school students to exercise empathy and compassion is crucial to meaningful literacy instruction. Furthermore, English teacher and staff developer Cris Tovani (2000) maintains that this type of instruction is critical to extended student understanding from the literal to the more sophisticated:

Initially students' connections will be superficial, but with teacher modeling and practice they will become more sophisticated and will be able to go beyond the literal meaning on the page. Making connections helps readers relate to characters. They understand how characters are feeling and the motivation behind their actions. Readers also learn about themselves and can ponder how they might react in a similar situation (p. 73).

As a reading specialist, I often modeled drama activities for the reading classroom that opened up an entire new way for teachers to connect students to text, to engage students in a meaningful interaction with text, and to nurture stronger levels of empathy and compassion. Teachers who may have been uncomfortable or uncertain about such techniques have appreciated the support and guidance. English language learners and special education students have also benefited from the kinesthetic, drama-oriented activities.

As an assistant principal, teachers are supported (and coached) in trying new teaching strategies such as drama-oriented ones. Local school funds are provided to offer further assistance, including training sessions from the Reading in Motion professional troupe specializing in drama in the classroom. Opportunities are also arranged so that teachers can observe other teachers who are using particular strategies.

Metaphorical texts

Metaphors and the critical thinking needed to analyze them are a critical piece of middle school instruction. If such analysis is going to be engaging and meaningful, however, teachers need a variety of ways to facilitate the discovery and explanation of meaning without losing the interest of the middle school student. Often I would concentrate on specific lines that were symbolically rich such as: *My lips two blushing pilgrims, ready stand/ To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss. (Romero and Juliet, Act 1, Scene 5, Lines 94-5).*

Consider the many ways of teaching and re-teaching metaphor with this one line: dramatic reading, pantomime/acting, artistic visualizations, video clips, paraphrasing. These are just a few of the strategies that enable this rich text to be used as a lure for the deeper study of metaphorical thinking. Donna Ogle's research (2004) reveals that students in such dynamic literacy classrooms achieve larger gains in overall reading achievement:

In addition, general intellectual and language stimulation were important pluses in the richer meaning-oriented classrooms. Students from urban neighborhoods need intellectually stimulating classrooms that compensate for the lack of some of the experiences that more affluent families provide their children. They need to hear elaborated academic language and to learn daily about an expanding world. They need to be engaged in inquiry and encouraged to explore their own questions and interests (p. 329).

As a reading specialist I established a calendar of monthly museum presentations for all area-wide lead literacy teachers. Each month, the museum presenters would demonstrate direct connections between text and their museum exhibits by sharing a variety of related classroom literacy activities. For example, the art museum would share paintings related to texts; the

symphony center would demonstrate music samples related to various literary genres; and the planetarium would illustrate constellations that reflect diverse stories and themes. With this ongoing training, teachers were exposed to new strategies as well as to diverse museum resources. In this way, the middle school reading experience could be further enhanced and student-centered.

Furthermore, my perspectives as classroom teacher and citywide reading specialist have empowered me as an instructional leader. For example, as assistant principal I have worked with the local learning community to plan and implement a school-wide fine arts calendar that enables the entire student body to focus on a particular artist, writer, and composer each month. In this way, effective classroom literacy strategies for all students are supported by a school-wide vision and mission that nurtures the kinds of meaningful texts, thought-provoking ideas, and rich curriculum that will best motivate, inspire, and challenge middle school students.

Contemplative texts

Another rich text I have found to be especially successful with middle school students is Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. The transformative themes and the complex characterizations in the novel transcend time and place in a style that connects the students to the ideas of the text in authentic, personal ways. As Hugo himself observed: "Be it true or false, what is said about men often has as much influence upon their lives, and especially upon their destinies, as what they do" (*Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo, Book I). The integrity of such texts becomes the impetus for drawing conclusions, analyzing characters, inferring internal conflicts, and synthesizing ideas. Although state reading standards are addressed, the heart of the instruction is text-based. As a middle school reading teacher, I came to understand that learning standards and skills were only the means to an end. The end is the gift of savoring a text rich with relevant ideas.

As a classroom teacher, I nurtured my pedagogical skills in terms of differentiated instruction, literacy centers that addressed multiple learning modalities, instructional strategies for English language learners, and intervention activities for special needs students. As a reading specialist, I broke through the too-often isolating perimeters of the individual classroom. In over twenty

schools, I generated research-based dialogue and reflection and modeled middle school strategies for innovative instruction. As an assistant principal, I facilitated a school-wide system of internal walk-throughs that allowed teachers to observe other teachers implementing innovative instructional strategies. In this way, my classroom teacher focus on teaching and learning is now systematized into the school's culture.

The links connecting *teacher* to *reading specialist* to *instructional leader* have formed a cohesive whole that nurtures and supports the kind of innovative middle school reading instruction that effectively addresses the needs of all learners. This is a working model of the kind of literacy prototype Walpole and McKenna (2004) advocate:

We urge they [educators] consider three nested goals for professional development: serving individual teachers within their school, serving the school community through study of the effects of the initiative on student achievement, and serving the district community by connecting and embedding all initiatives to serve students. A true system of professional support will provide powerful results (p. 220).

As an instructor, I found that middle school reading instruction which centered on universal archetypes provided the most engaging framework for critical thinking and analytical discussion/writing. Passages such as this one from *Les Miserables*, describing Marius' state of being, can be metaphorically relevant to all middle school students:

Remember the condition of his mind. As we have just mentioned, all was now to him A dream. His understanding was troubled. Marius, we must insist, was under the shadow of the great black wings which open above the dying. He felt that he had entered the tomb, it seemed to him that he was already on the other side of the wall, and he no longer saw the faces of the living save with the eyes of one dead.
(*Les Miserables*, Book I).

Once reading instruction is used as a means to understand ourselves, each other, and our world, then it becomes meaningful and respectful to the learner. Once this instructional epiphany is realized and supported, reading instruction will no longer be about calling out words, memorizing definitions, or filling in worksheet pages. Such tasks for the middle school student are meaningless and disrespectful. Researcher Regie Routman in her treatise *Reading Essentials* (2003) emphatically emphasizes this point:

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Students will happily engage in work that is connected to their lives and in projects in which they can see value. As much as possible, ensure that the work students do is literacy centered- that is, that students are reading and writing worthwhile texts that provide opportunities to expand their skills, knowledge, and thinking. The literacy tasks we ask our students to do impacts their motivation for learning and their views of literacy. Authentic reading and writing in which students have some challenge, choice, control and opportunity to collaborate motivate students most (203-4).

Herein lies the ideological impetus for authentic middle school reading progress. It involves reconnecting with the passion for reading. Let's face it: neither teachers nor students are passionate about finding root words or drawing conclusions about meaningless texts. But we can be passionate about the themes explored in *Les Miserables*. When root words and conclusions help us understand Marius' tortured soul and our own souls by extension, then we can all passionately pursue the art of reading. Talk about paradigm shifts!

Whenever I work with teachers as a reading specialist, presenting literacy incentives, mandates, and targeted standardized test outcomes is always secondary to being passionate about the text and about the implications of reading. The Chicago Reading Initiative gathered teams of reading specialists whose minds were focused on reading scores but whose hearts were focused on reading itself. Citywide reading scores have incrementally improved over the past five years that reading specialists have been utilized in this way.

Drawing from my classroom experiences, I coached teachers in the art of scaffolding students to see beyond static characters and texts. Together we explored the super hero archetype portrayed in Superman comics, the sardonic archetypes offered in selected *Seinfeld* scripts, the paternal archetype of Jim Conklin in *Red Badge of Courage*, and the self-sacrificing archetype of Jean Val Jean in *Les Miserables*. The text was used as metaphorical mirror to ourselves; the state reading standards were used as a means to bring the mirror's image into focus. Reading specialists across Chicago have been able to offer this type of middle school reading coaching because they were empowered to speak passionately about the craft of reading and the art of teaching that they themselves have nurtured during years of classroom teaching.

Taylor and Collins in *Literacy Leadership* envision school communities led by professionals whose experiences and expertise blend leadership processes with a keen knowledge of literacy development (p. 2). The Chicago Reading Initiative is bringing this vision to life. Reading specialists such as myself are now shifting into administrative leadership positions throughout the Chicago Public Schools. Our passion for reading and expertise in teaching and learning are enabling us to be much more than building managers and paper pushers. As school administrators, we are equipped as never before in providing meaningful professional development, in articulating a relevant literacy vision and mission, in strengthening teaching and learning by coaching teachers, and in providing the necessary financial and emotional supports for teachers and students. These are the very elements necessary for middle school reading instruction to become meaningful, relevant, and respectful to students.

Conclusion

If reading instruction is to improve, what happens within classrooms can no longer be separated from what happens across classrooms and throughout school districts. *The practice of task segregation must shift toward a paradigm of collaboration and shared accountability.* T.S. Eliot captured the essence of this challenging endeavor with his insight that: *It is in fact a part of the function of education to help us escape – not from our own time, for we are bound by that – but from the intellectual and emotional limitations of our own time.*

The teacher, the reading specialist, and the administrator must be:

- equally concerned with instructional frameworks
- mutually committed to student-centered teaching and learning
- collaboratively involved in meaningful professional development
- collectively engaged in data driven analysis and action-planning
- philosophically dedicated to treating reading standards as means to an end. The end being meaningful literacy experiences.

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This paradigm shift is beginning to happen in the Chicago Public Schools thanks to the city-wide reading initiative that is respectful to the craft of teaching; that acknowledges and empowers experts in the field; and that is metaphorically tearing down the walls that separate instructional practice from educational management. Shared accountability and mutual passion for teaching and learning are critical to moving middle school reading instruction forward. Rote implementation of reading standards and projected data outcomes do not address the unique developmental, physiological, and psychological needs of the middle school learner. A collaborative union whereby teachers are nurtured by reading specialists and supported by literacy-savvy administrators empowers the curriculum and the instructional strategies to move beyond isolated skills and static text. This paradigm shift toward a shared commitment among stakeholders is necessary if we are to restore the passion to middle school reading. It is this passion and the structure to nurture and maintain it that will continue to propel middle school literacy improvement forward.

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