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Becoming an Insider: Reaching All Students

by Dr. Alfred W. Tatum

A major challenge for educators in the United States is to find ways to advance the literacy development of middle school students. National assessment data indicate that only about 30 percent of U.S. eighth graders are proficient readers. Almost 40 percent of high school students lack the reading and writing skills that employers expect of employees. Roughly 5 out of 10 high school graduates who enroll in college must take a remedial reading course (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Literacy-related difficulties are often exacerbated for students who lack the English proficiency needed to handle the academic language and cognitively challenging content found in the texts that they must read from middle school on.

- readers who have difficulty decoding the words on a page—the smallest of the groups.

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Across groups, these young marginalized readers are most at-risk of quitting school before graduation. Dropping out of school, of course, limits their opportunities to lead productive lives. Educators know that marginalized students need a great deal of help, and that this help must begin long before students reach high school.

Literacy instruction provides one of the best opportunities to better prepare marginalized students to take charge of their lives. Literacy classrooms are a natural environment for nurturing the resilience that striving students “in the middle” need in order to face and overcome obstacles.

Students on the Margin

The inability of adolescents to read with understanding affects their self-perception and self-understanding and leaves them vulnerable to failure (Alvermann et al., 2006). Think of the “dead eyes” present on the faces of many middle school students during reading instruction. These students live on the outside of literacy instruction; and many will remain there unless instructional practices are planned and educational contexts are shaped to meet their specific language and literacy needs and so bring them in from the margins.

This universe of marginalized adolescent readers is made up of three distinct groups (National Governors Association, 2005):

- readers who experience some problems with fluency and comprehension, but are able to read everyday texts such as newspapers
- readers who have more difficulty with fluency and comprehension, and who may fail to complete high school or who graduate with limited literacy skills

Literacy Instruction to Promote Resilience

Resilience is a product of multiple personal attributes, such as temperament, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and the ability to set meaningful purposes and goals for one’s life. In developing literacy instruction for striving middle school students, educators need to acknowledge, honor, and advocate for each of these attributes and to combine them with research-based literacy instructional practices to shape positive literacy outcomes and personal-growth paths for students.

Adolescent students are more likely to become resilient if they feel secure in the presence of adults who clearly communicate high expectations along with realistic goals, and who support the students’ active participation in authentic tasks and “real-world” dialogue (Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). During reading instruction, educators can help nurture student resilience by modeling specific reading strategies that students can use to read independently, while simultaneously *engaging* students with texts or text-based questions and activities

that are meaningful to them. These actions are particularly effective for economically disadvantaged students and students who are English language learners; that is, students who often feel disconnected from literacy instruction (Ivey, 1999; Miller, 2006). Building these contexts and relationships helps to construct students' literacy identities (Triplett, 2004).

Literacy classrooms and instructional practices that invite students in from the margins and nurture their resilience are characteristically non-threatening. Students engage in conversations with teachers and classmates about the multiple literacies in their lives and feel supported and valued. Educators who structure such classroom environments and instructional practices have the potential to promote more active student participation in literacy-related tasks and to increase student motivation, leading to improved academic outcomes.

In developing instruction to address the literacy needs and to nurture the resilience of students who are vulnerable to failure, educators should keep in mind the following:

1. Structure supportive environments.
2. Provide direct and explicit strategy instruction.
3. Work to bridge the gap between students' in-school and out-of-school lives.
4. Recognize that young adolescents are developing a sense of self, and that they draw on cultural, linguistic, gender, and personal identities to define that self.
5. Honor cultural and linguistic diversity during instruction while holding all students to standards of excellence.
6. Provide adequate language supports before, during, and after instruction.
7. Select and discuss texts in ways that engage students.
8. Use appropriate pacing during instruction.
9. Involve students in the assessment process and develop an assessment plan that pays attention to students' cognitive and affective needs.

As this list indicates, there are multiple ways to *enable* and *engage* striving middle school students. It is important for teachers to be flexible in finding the ways that work best with their students, and to avoid approaching literacy instruction with a single technique or method.



Engaging literature selections bridge the gap between students' in-school and out-of-school lives.

Applying the Research: *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content*

Inside Language, Literacy, and Content is designed to nurture the resiliency of striving middle school students and to support them in achieving academic success. Engaging literature selections bridge the gap between students' in-school and out-of-school lives, honor the diversity of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and encourage them in the development of positive personal identities.

Teacher's Editions support teachers in providing a nurturing classroom environment and in delivering direct and explicit instruction, with appropriate pacing and systematic guidance to keep students on track in learning skills,

strategies, and content. The program features highly structured and guided practice, using repetitive routines that move striving readers toward reading independence. By involving students in the assessment process, *Inside Language, Literacy, and Content* helps students visualize their own progress and embrace the goal of becoming proficient readers.

These approaches to instruction and assessment offer the best potential to shape positive literacy and life outcomes for students who struggle to read. With such help, students become insiders during their school years and carry multiple efficiencies with them when they graduate and move into a promising future in the outside world.

Reading Strategy: Make Connections

Use your experiences and your feelings to make connections to the text. Making connections can make the text more meaningful or interesting.

Reading Strategy Make Connections

HOW TO MAKE TEXT-TO-SELF CONNECTIONS

- 1. Identify the Topic** Figure out what the writing is about. Ask yourself: *What do I already know about this topic? How do I feel about this topic?*
- 2. Look for Familiar Details** As you read, think about what the information reminds you of. Ask questions like: *Have I experienced something like this before?*
- 3. Make a Connection** Think about how your experiences affect your understanding of the text.

Explicit, systematic instruction moves striving readers toward reading independence.