

## Professional Development for Literacy: Building a Community of Readers

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*There's an all-hands-on-deck urgency felt in many middle schools today about improving students' reading performance. Increasingly, teachers and principals are asking for help. The solutions they opt for will depend, in large part, on their concept of the reading problem. It will also depend on their beliefs about how teachers, as well as students, learn.*



*For example, some would argue that reading is a bottom-up or part-to-whole process. The reader moves from sounding out and identifying the meanings of individual words to understanding sentences, then paragraphs. In a similar way, word recognition and comprehension strategies are skills for getting at the meaning in the text. A different view of reading can be described as top-down or whole-to-part. The reader brings his or her knowledge of the world to the text and actually develops facility in decoding print as he or she reads for meaning. In this view, students learn to read and improve as readers primarily through the meaning they bring to the text. A third model can be described as interactive. In this approach, reading is the process of constructing meaning as the reader interacts with the various cueing systems—grapho-phonics, meaning, language structure, and purpose—available in a text. In this view, both the reader and the text contribute to the process of comprehension (Wilhelm, et al., 2001).*

It is important for principals and teachers to reflect on and discuss their own beliefs about literacy and learning as they plan for professional development that best matches those beliefs. Professional development models for middle school literacy improvement include the following:

### Additional Resources

**A Bottom-Up Approach.** It is a common assumption that students *learn to read* in elementary school, and after that they *read to learn*. In this view, reading is a purely technical skill that should be mastered by third grade. It follows, then, that middle school students who experience reading difficulties need to go back to the basics, typically to work on decoding and word recognition. Until this

knowledge is applied automatically, there is no point in attempting to build fluency or address comprehension. A problem with this approach is that, for many underperforming middle school readers, it is not their lack of basic skills but their lack of practice over time in reading a wide range of texts that causes them to struggle. Focusing on basic skills also deprives the weakest readers of the opportunity to learn appropriate content.

Another bottom-up approach focuses on comprehension strategies. This approach, emphasized in both inservice and pre-service work, uses strategies to help students read effectively. Teachers in all subjects learn how to use reQuest, Reciprocal Teaching, graphic organizers, and other instructional practices to help students read texts effectively. The assumption is that by adding the reading strategy to the content material, students will learn. The danger here is that the focus may be on the strategy rather than on helping students internalize a rich repertoire of comprehension-fostering and monitoring activities. Strategies that are not linked to teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning in their content areas are easily abandoned when the pressure is on to cover the content.

More important than knowledge of comprehension strategies is teachers' insights into what's involved in reading and what good readers do to make sense of various types of text. Teachers need to bring to the surface key reading processes in their content areas and learn how to make them available to students. When powerful ways to read in social studies, literature, science, and mathematics are embedded in instruction, students develop various strategies appropriate to the text and the task at hand.

**A Top-Down Approach.** This model focuses on motivation and engagement. It works from the assumption that young adolescent readers will grow to embrace a broader range of reading materials if they can connect to books that interest them and are easy enough to handle. In this way, they also build fluency. Classroom practices such as sustained silent reading (SSR) and commercial reading programs that match students with leveled texts operate on this premise. Developing confidence and engagement through extensive reading is important. However, for a schoolwide reading improvement focus, it is also essential to address the skills and knowledge students need to handle difficult, demanding, and sometimes boring academic texts.

**An Interactive Approach.** This approach is built on teachers' and students' abilities to recognize and share knowledge about reading. It is important to acknowledge that some middle school students need explicit instruction to bolster weak basic skills, and they need to develop both positive attitudes about reading and a repertoire of comprehension strategies. An effective interactive middle school reading program helps students become independent, effective readers of a variety of texts. Such a model assumes that teachers, as expert readers in their disciplines, can demystify the process and share their expertise with students.

One example of an interactive approach would be to think of the classroom as having four dimensions, each of which can be cultivated to support reading development (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). The accompanying [diagram](#) illustrates instructional goals and practices in each dimension as content area teachers work with students on reading and learning in their disciplines. Skills and motivation are addressed while a conversation goes on between teachers and students about the processes of reading. In classrooms where these dimensions are at work, students learn how to discover and share their own processes with each other. Reading is seen and modeled as the complex mental activity it is, with essential support from a community of co-learners.

Professional development for literacy must help middle grades teachers experience, talk about, and model reading as a complex process of constructing meaning with text. It should equip teachers with a deep understanding of reading in their content areas, help them rethink current practice, and act on new understandings. It should include ways to help students develop the necessary skills and attitudes, but most importantly, it should operate from a more powerful, interactive model of reading. Features of such professional development include:

**1. An environment that encourages teachers to see themselves as learners about their own reading processes.** In a network of colleagues that meets regularly, teachers are able to examine the challenges that different types of texts present for readers and to investigate their own and each other's reading processes—how they make connections, solve comprehension problems, raise questions, visualize, predict, and otherwise engage with text. They learn how to make these processes accessible to students and how to help them enter into a conversation about their own reading.

**2. Close observation of student reading performance in the classroom.** Using this window into students' reading, teachers see not only challenges and errors, but the resources students bring to comprehending text. Teachers can build on student strengths while addressing evidence-based needs.

**3. Support for teachers to learn from their own and each other's practices as part of a network of critical colleagues** (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Robb, 2000). Teachers who work together may find themselves questioning and replacing the theories that underlie their present reading practices. For them, as well as for their students, risk-taking is important and they need repeated opportunities to try new strategies while raising questions, sharing problems, and exploring the effectiveness of their teaching. Teachers learn about powerful pedagogical and conceptual tools in literacy and have multiple opportunities to generate appropriate uses or adaptations of them for their own classrooms. They raise questions, share problems, reflect, and explore the effectiveness of their teaching of reading.

Professional development in a community of readers allows teachers who understand what reading entails and demands to confidently assist students in gaining this knowledge for themselves.

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