

Close Reading as an Intervention for Struggling Middle School Readers

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An after-school reading intervention made a difference for struggling middle school students. But what made the difference? Close reading, peer collaboration, and wide reading of young adult literature.

Thousands of adolescents across the world are participating in a wide range of intervention efforts designed to improve their literacy achievement (Calhoon, Scarborough, & Miller, 2013). These efforts include additional classes during the regular school day, after school, and in summer programs, as well as computerized interventions (Hartry, Fitzgerald, Porter, 2008; Soper & Marquis-Cox, 2012). Given that millions of dollars are spent each year focused on students who have fallen behind their peers in literacy development, the effectiveness of these intervention efforts is an important consideration.

Thankfully, evidence suggests that reading interventions with adolescents can be effective. For example, Vaughn and colleagues (2012) focused on 28 students who had failed the state-mandated reading comprehension test in grades 6 and 7. During the students' eighth-grade year, the researchers provided daily 50-minute individual-



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ized intensive reading interventions in groups of two to four students. According to the researchers' findings, participants "demonstrated significantly higher scores than comparison students on standardized measures of comprehension (effect size = 1.20) and word identification (effect size = 0.49), although most continued to lack grade-level proficiency in reading despite three years of intervention" (p. 515). Cantrell and colleagues (2010) reported on a reading intervention effort focused on comprehension strategy instruction, the Learning Strategies Curriculum, which is part of the Strategies Intervention Model (Tralli, Colombo, Deshler, & Schumaker, 1996). This study focused on word identification, vocabulary, visualizing, paraphrasing, self-questioning, and sentence writing. On measures of achievement, the 365 students who received the intervention significantly outperformed the 290 students who did not. As the authors noted, "It may be that struggling readers in later stages of adolescence need instruction that focuses on constructing a situation model that enables them to effectively integrate their knowledge, experience, and strategies to achieve deep-level comprehension in a variety of contexts for a range of purposes" (p. 269).

Both interventions focused on learning during the school day, but several intervention efforts

occur after school. Many used educational technology to deliver part or all of the instruction. For example, Kim, Capotosto, Hartry, and Fitzgerald (2011) evaluated the impact of a computer-aided intervention program in an after-school program. Their analysis of 312 students who voluntarily enrolled suggested that it improved achievement in the areas of vocabulary and reading comprehension but not in spelling or oral reading fluency. Although the gains in vocabulary and reading comprehension were robust, the authors cautioned that the results “are suggestive that the program in fact may be better targeted toward moderate-risk students reading just below national norms on standardized assessments” (p. 198). More recently, Cheung and Slavin (2013) conducted a best-evidence synthesis (similar to a meta-analysis) of studies that examined supplemental and comprehensive computer-aided literacy interventions. Their analysis of the results of these interventions, which involved over 7,000 students, revealed that “educational technology applications had a small impact on reading achievement of struggling readers, with an overall weighted mean effect size of .14” (p. 295).

Given the limited studies available to inform intervention efforts for struggling adolescents, the question is whether there is an effective way to intervene with students in larger groups without spending significant sums. Given the recent attention to close reading (e.g., Hinchman & Moore, 2013), we wondered if this instructional approach, in which students are taught to think about increasingly complex texts rather than being taught with texts at their perceived ability level, could be effective. We were encouraged by the findings of Cantrell et al. (2010), which implied that a focus on deep comprehension might result in meaningful change for struggling adolescent readers. Based on these considerations, and our own experiences with a close reading approach during the instructional day, we designed an experimental after-school close reading intervention for students in grades 7 and 8 who scored in the lowest 40% on measures of achievement. The purpose of this study was to

Deep comprehension might result in meaningful change for struggling adolescent readers.

determine whether an after-school reading intervention program with a strong close reading component would result in improved academic achievement as measured by the state’s criterion-referenced test for English language arts.

Close Reading Defined

For the purpose of this study, we adopted the definition of *close reading* proposed by the Aspen Institute, an educational and policy studies group with significant influence on practice (Brown & Kappes, 2012):

Close Reading of text involves an investigation of a short piece of text, with multiple readings done over multiple instructional lessons. Through text-based questions and discussion, students are guided to deeply analyze and appreciate various aspects of the text, such as key vocabulary and how its meaning is shaped by context; attention to form, tone, imagery and/or rhetorical devices; the significance of word choice and syntax; and the discovery of different levels of meaning as passages are read multiple times. (p. 2)

In our implementation of close reading, we focused on the following salient features (e.g., Boyles, 2013; Fisher & Frey, 2012):

- *Short, complex passages:* The length of the selected texts ranged from three paragraphs to three pages. Passages were assessed to ensure they were appropriately complex, meaning that they fell in the quantitative range of text complexity recommended in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). For grades 6–8, the selected texts generally ranged between a Lexile level of 925 and 1185. As part of the analysis, we determined the qualitative factors of text complexity (for the rubric, see Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012), which would become the teaching points for the lessons.
- *Repeated reading:* The structure of the lesson allows for students to reread a text selection for different purposes and to answer questions. Research evidence over the years suggests that repeated reading of the same text can improve fluency and comprehension (e.g., Therrien, 2004). However, we were sensitive to the

comments of Nichols, Rupley, and Rasinski (2009), who suggested that “continual reliance on repeated readings without appropriate guidance and support can lead to diminished student engagement and may not help students recognize that increased fluency provides for more focus on meaning” (p. 5).

- *Annotation:* Students note directly on the texts as they read, identifying main ideas, circling confusing words or phrases, and writing margin notes such as questions, reactions, and examples. This approach can be used for narrative or informational texts, in both print and digital environments (Castek & Beach, 2013; Zywica & Gomez, 2008).
- *Text-dependent questions:* These require students to provide evidence from the text to support their responses. The questions are not limited to recall but rather focus on various aspects of the text. We used the Common Core reading standards as a source of inspiration for the questions, focusing on key details, general understandings, vocabulary and word choice, text structure, textual comparisons, and evidence-based arguments.
- *Discussion of the text, including argumentation:* As part of every close reading lesson, students interact with peers and teachers, using academic language and argumentation. If they can read a text without this type of interaction, it’s probably not complex enough for close reading. Text-based discussions improve comprehension and allow students to clarify their own thinking and consider the thinking of others (Kucan & Palincsar, 2013).

Students and Schools Participating in Intervention Efforts

We used a convenience sample method to identify three middle schools in three districts in which the principal was receptive to offering close reading as a significant part of the intervention. Each school had participated in ongoing professional development efforts, and school leaders were fairly well known to us. Site administrators identified all students who scored Far Below Basic or Below Basic on the annual state assessment, meaning that they scored in the bottom 40% on this criterion-referenced test. In other words,

at the middle school level, the students performed at least two grade levels below the criterion for their grade. In addition, the students selected for this study did not have an individualized educational program, because those interventions were coordinated by special education personnel, and we did not have permission to alter their interventions.

Participants

Across the three schools, 438 students in grades 7 or 8 met the inclusion criteria. From this pool, we randomly assigned 100 students to one of five intervention classrooms. At school 1, we selected 20 students for the experimental group and assigned the others to control classrooms. As schools 2 and 3, we selected 40 students for the experimental group, and the others served as the control group.

Over the course of the study, 23 of the experimental group participants transferred out of their schools, and 2 students stopped participating in the after-school program because of transportation problems, resulting in an attrition rate of 25%. In addition, 91 control group participants (27%) did not complete the study period. Although new students were enrolled in the classes, their data were not included in this analysis, given the lack of collection from the outset. A breakdown of the demographic profile of the 75 experimental group and 247 control group students who completed the study appears in Figure 1. The language and income demographics of the participants are similar to those of the schools they attended, although the gender ratio of boys (57.5%) to girls (42.5%) differed from the schools’ general population.

FIGURE 1 Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

	Number of Classes	English Learners	Students in Poverty	Boys	Girls
School 1 Control	4	29	21	36	27
School 1 Experimental	1	6	5	9	4
School 2 Control	6	24	74	54	34
School 2 Experimental	2	7	15	17	11
School 3 Control	7	64	61	50	46
School 3 Experimental	2	22	21	19	15

Instruments

All participants were assessed in the first weeks of school and again near the end of the study. Students took the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test (GMRT-4), a group-administered reading survey that allows for the use of alternate forms in fall and spring to monitor progress (MacGinitie, MacGinitie, Maria, & Dreyer, 2000). To determine instructional needs, participants were also assessed individually using the Analytic Reading Inventory (Woods & Moe, 2010), which provides graded narrative and expository passages to assess oral and silent reading, miscues, and comprehension. A quantitative measure of fluency was also generated using the norms established by Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006).

The results of these initial instructional assessments did not surprise us. Of the 438 students assessed at the beginning of the study, only one needed more instruction on phonics. Subsequently, we learned that the student in question was a long-term English learner from another state who qualified for special education services later that same school year. This is consistent with Ivey and Baker's (2004) findings that "in all our work with older struggling readers, we have not come across a single student who would benefit from phonemic awareness or phonics training" (p. 35). However, both the experimental group and control group participants were performing well below grade level in terms of comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. The experimental group averaged a 4.3 grade level as measured by the GMRT-4, and the control group performed at the 4.2 grade level (scale scores were used for the analysis, $t = 1.26$, $p < .20$). Oral fluency levels were equally depressed: 81 words correct per minute (WCPM) for the experimental group; 83 WCPM for the control group ($t = .874$, $p < .38$). These differences were insignificant.

Teachers' and researchers' roles

The experimental group classes focused on close reading of complex texts, whereas the control classes used the existing intervention curricula. The control classrooms implemented the standard supplemental intervention, which included a combination of computerized interventions, teacher-led small-group instruction, and independent reading. In each after-school class, some students completed activities on a computerized intervention system while small groups met with the teacher for guided instruction in leveled texts, and others read independently. The

groups rotated every half hour so that students experienced 30 minutes of each activity each day. The after-school programs had implemented this model the previous three years.

The teachers were assigned to close reading experimental or control classrooms based on school grade-level teaching responsibilities. The teachers in the after-school experimental group classes were purposefully limited to those who taught sixth grade during the day so that if they generalized their professional development experiences to the regular school day, the results would not be confounded. Teachers in the control classrooms had school-day teaching assignments in sixth, seventh or eighth grade.

The class sizes were limited to 20 students, as required by the funding source. The study period for both groups began the first week of October and lasted through May. The classes met three times per week for 90 minutes. Teachers in both the experimental group and the control group received ongoing professional development, albeit on different topics. Those teaching in the control group classrooms received training using the existing curriculum, which included the general operation of the computerized program, small-group guided instruction with leveled texts, and management of independent reading groups. Teachers in the close reading experimental classrooms received the same number of hours of professional development on close reading, as described below.

The Intervention Through Close Reading

On a typical day in the close reading classrooms, the teacher began the class by distributing a text to the students (all names are pseudonyms). The students were invited to read the text, or a selection of the text, marking it as they went along. The close reading typically lasted between 40 and 55 minutes. The remaining class time was used for independent reading, during which students read books of their choosing and met with the teacher for small-group intentional instruction focused on areas of instructional need, such as vocabulary, comprehension, or fluency.

For example, during a lesson in November, a teacher selected the Langston Hughes (1994) poem "I, Too, Sing America." The students were invited to annotate the text as they read it the first time. The teacher circulated around the room, making tally marks on her copy of the text as the students worked. She was collecting formative assessment data about

her students, specifically if they circled unknown words or phrases, underlined key ideas, or wrote in the margins. This allowed her to analyze students' responses as she planned her think-alouds or modeling.

When they finished the first reading, she asked students to select one member of their group to read the poem aloud to the other members. Students were seated in configurations of three or four. She reminded them to continue annotating the text as they read. When they had finished the second reading, she asked them about the main idea. "Talk with your team. What do you think is the message of this poem? What does Mr. Hughes want us to think about?" The students immediately got to work discussing the text. As an illustrative example, we will report on one of the groups in the class. The members were Jovan, a seventh-grade African American student who performed in the lowest quintile; Balaji, an immigrant from Malaysia who had not kept pace with other English learners; and Mykelia, a student who has missed a significant amount of school because of illnesses.

Jovan said that the main message was that Hughes was "an American, like other people." Balaji added, "I think he wants to get treated right. He's black, right? So maybe this [message] is to white people." Mykelia said, "I think so. He wants to be able to eat with the other people, like getting accepted." Following these initial conversations, the teacher invited them to listen to the poet reading his poem (www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=1552). After this third reading, she asked them to think about who the author was and what his role might be. Balaji said, "Maybe he was a slave and wanted his rights." Jovan agreed, saying that made sense. Mykelia added, "They didn't have rights, so it probably is."

The teacher asked the class to look at the date the poem was first published, 1945, saying, "Remember to use the timeline on the wall. Place this text in history. What would have been the experience this author had?" Mykelia said, "It's before the civil rights movement, so he really get the rights." Jovan added, "Look, Martin Luther King did his speech in 1963. So this is way before. So he must have been a slave." Balaji cautiously and slowly said, "Maybe. But look at what it says in 1865: 'Slavery officially ended when the 13th amendment to the Constitution was ratified by the states.' So that was a long time before." Before they could continue, the teacher asked another

member of each group to read the poem aloud to their peers.

When they finished reading, the teacher said, "Let's talk a minute about patriotism. It's about loving your country, right? And about wanting the best for your country. As many of you noticed, Mr. Hughes was not a slave and he was an American citizen. So, could this be a patriotic poem? Talk about that, and make sure you use evidence from the text to support your conclusions." Balaji said, "It's because he wants America to be better, because if not, they'll be ashamed. We should be proud, not ashamed. So it is patriotic." Jovan and Mykelia agreed, and Jovan added, "And also, he sings America, like that song 'My country this of be, sweet land...' That's patriotic because he is singing the same song as white people."

The lesson continued, with students looking for evidence for several text-dependent questions posed by the teacher. After about 45 minutes, the teacher asked students to respond in their journals to the prompt, "What is Hughes's vision for America?" She reminded them that they should continue their independent reading when they finished writing. She then called four students to a teacher center and worked with them on fluency. The students reread the poem, and she provided feedback about their prosody. For example, she told Marco that she appreciated that he sounded like natural talking, but she wasn't sure where the commas were when he read aloud. She invited him to read the text again, "with pauses for impact." She let Brandi know that her flow was "much better, and the timing really worked. Maybe you'd like to try to add some emphasis to certain words?" Brandi reread the text, adding emphasis to certain words, such as *darker*, *laugh*, and *strong*. When she finished, the teacher asked Brandi why she selected those words for emphasis.

After 15 minutes with this group, she reminded them to finish their writing and called another group to meet with her. The focus for this second group was on vocabulary development, and the teacher had a list of words on a chart paper. She started with the word *company*, asking the three students to tell her what it means. Sabrin said that "it can be like a business," and Aden said, "the author means 'people.'" They talked about various meanings of *company* and constructed several sentences in their journals based on the different meanings. They then turned their attention to *dare*.

In April, we observed a teacher in an experimental-group close reading classroom at a different middle

FIGURE 2 Petroski, H. (2003). The Evolution of the Grocery Bag. *American Scholar*, 72(4), 99

That much-reviled bottleneck known as the American supermarket checkout lane would be an even greater exercise in frustration were it not for several technological advances. The Universal Product Code and the decoding laser scanner, introduced in 1974, tally a shopper's groceries far more quickly and accurately than the old method of inputting each purchase manually into a cash register. But beeping a large order past the scanner would have led only to a faster pileup of cans and boxes down the line, where the bagger works, had it not been for the introduction, more than a century earlier, of an even greater technological masterpiece: the square-bottomed paper bag.

The geometry of paper bags continues to hold a magical appeal for those of us who are fascinated by how ordinary things are designed and made. Originally, grocery bags were created on demand by storekeepers, who cut, folded, and pasted sheets of paper, making versatile containers into which purchases could be loaded for carrying home. The first paper bags manufactured commercially are said to have been made in Bristol, England, in the 1840s. In 1852, a "Machine for Making Bags of Paper" was patented in America by Francis Wolle, of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. According to Wolle's own description of the machine's operation, "pieces of paper of suitable length are given out from a roll of the required width, cut off from the roll and otherwise suitably cut to the required shape, folded, their edges pasted and lapped, and formed into complete and perfect bags." The "perfect bags" produced at the rate of eighteen hundred per hour by Wolle's machine were, of course, not perfect, nor was his machine. The history of design has yet to see the development of a perfect object, though it has seen many satisfactory ones and many substantially improved ones. The concept of comparative improvement is embedded in the paradigm for invention, the better mousetrap. No one is ever likely to lay claim to a "best" mousetrap, for that would preclude the inventor himself from coming up with a still better mousetrap without suffering the embarrassment of having previously declared the search complete. As with the mousetrap, so with the bag.

school, noting her use of the informational text "The Evolution of the Grocery Bag" (see Figure 2) as part of her after-school intervention efforts. The students were given a copy of the text and invited to read the first paragraph while noting areas of confusion. Consistent with the professional development they received, the teacher had a larger copy of the text that she used to tally the notations of her students. For example, all the students circled *reviled*. When they finished reading the selection of text, she modeled word-solving saying,

I don't want to get stuck on the word *reviled*, so I need to think a bit more about it. I see that it has *-vile* inside of it, so I think it's something bad because I know the word *vile* is like "disgusting" or "gross." *Re-* is "again," but I'm not sure that makes a lot of sense to think that this is "gross again." I'll reread the sentence. The author says that it would be even more frustrating if there wasn't some technology advances in the grocery store line. So I am thinking about the lines I

have waited in, and I'm thinking that, yes, they were frustrating and that maybe that word means "bothersome." I also noticed that some of you circled *bottleneck* or *tally*. Can you talk with your peers to see if you can unpack the meaning of those words, even if you didn't circle them?

The students, seated in groups of three or four, began talking about the terms and hypothesizing their meanings. As they did so, the teacher listened in on their conversations, providing hints as they interacted.

As they finished talking about the vocabulary terms, the teacher asked, "What has kept the supermarket or grocery store lines from being even more frustrating, according to the author?" Gabriela, a long-term English learner, said to her group, "A scanner, so you could go faster." Fatima, a recent immigrant to the United States from Ethiopia, said, "Yeah, but he says it was the bag, too." Matthew, a student who performed below grade level and was referred for

special education several times but did not qualify, said, “But that’s not tech. A bag?”

The teacher brought the class back together and said, “There is one technology innovation that the author describes that was introduced in 1974. Find that in the text and talk about what it did to make the lines less frustrating.” The students focused on this part of the text during their conversations. After a few minutes, the teacher said, “There is another technology that the author describes from a century, or 100 years, earlier. I know it’s hard for you to imagine this, but the author is saying that there were not these types of bags. Let’s read the second paragraph, but stop when you come to the phrase ‘The history of design.’”

The students read and annotated the text for several minutes. They were invited to talk about words or phrases that were confusing and asked clarifying questions of one another and, eventually, the teacher. For example, Fatima asked, “What does the word *versatile* mean?” None of the other students offered the meaning, and the teacher noted that most of them had circled the word on their papers. She said, “The author doesn’t provide a lot of clues for this word. So, I’m thinking about my experiences. When I go shopping, I buy lots of different things, different sizes and shapes. And I need a bag that works for all of those different things. So, I’m thinking that this means that the bags could be different shapes, that they adapt or change easily.” The class continued, moving away from vocabulary to focus on the difference between how bags were previously made and what the technological advance was.

Gabriela said, “They used to make the bags one at a time. See, it says ‘on demand,’ like HBO. You get one when you need it.” Fatima added, “But that would make it slow for the line, right?” Matthew added, “Yeah, totally. So then they had a machine to make the bags. That’s why it’s technology.”

The exploration of this text continued with a lengthy conversation about products being perfect as well as the author’s attitude toward the paper bags and mousetrap. The teacher used several text-dependent questions to help her students’ understanding of the text. After about 55 minutes, the students were invited to write in response to the following prompts:

1. How did the “square-bottomed paper bag” make a difference in people’s lives?
2. Why does the author feel that creating the “best” of something would be a bad idea?

3. How were the new bags created, and how many were produced?

As they wrote in their response journals, the teacher met with small groups to focus on previously identified instructional needs. As they finished writing, students were reminded to read their independent texts.

Outcomes From the Intervention

At the outset of the study, we used an independent t-test to compare student success on the state achievement tests to determine if significant differences existed between the two groups; they did not ($t = 1.66$, $p < .10$). In addition, we compared students’ initial scores on the Reader Self-Perception Scale-2 (RSPS2; Melnick, Henk, & Marinak, 2009). The tool focuses on four factors—progress, observational comparisons, social feedback, and physiological states—with strong reliability, ranging from a low of .88 (social feedback) to a high of .95 (progress). There were no significant differences on any factor between students assigned to the experimental group and those in the control group. Not surprisingly, both groups had depressed scores in all four areas and were especially low on observational comparisons and physiological states.

One of the first differences we noted related to attendance. Given that after-school programs are optional, to a certain extent they rely on students getting themselves there and their parents not signing them out early. The students in the close reading classrooms attended more regularly than those in the control classrooms. When we compared attendance between the two groups, the results were significant. The students in the close reading experimental group averaged 94% attendance, whereas the students in the control group averaged 81% attendance ($X^2 = 46.76$, $p < .01$).

We were also interested in the differences between students’ self-perception. We readministered the RSPS2 at the end of the year, and the results suggested significant differences between the two groups, which had not been the case at the outset of the study. The students who participated in the close reading averaged 186 on the 47 Likert-type items, whereas the control group averaged 99. These results were also statistically significant ($t = 1043$, $p < .001$). The biggest difference between the two groups was the factor of progress (the student’s comparison of past performance with current performance), with the close

reading group averaging 4.02 (on a scale of 1–5) on those items, compared with 2.31 for the control group.

We also compared the results on the state-administered annual assessment (California Standards Test of English Language Arts). It is important to note that this assessment is criterion based and leveled by grade. Thus the seventh-grade assessment is more difficult than the sixth-grade version, given the higher standards. For the 75 students who completed the study, 48 (64%) made at least one level increase (e.g., from Far Below Basic to Below Basic or from Below Basic to Basic), 26 (35%) achieved the same score on the more difficult test, and 1 (1%) performed worse than the previous year. For the 247 students who participated in the traditional after-school program, 30 (12%) improved by one or more levels, 181 (73%) achieved the same score on the more difficult test, and 36 (15%) performed worse. We used a Fisher's Exact Test with the exact option because of the low sample sizes in some cells to determine whether these results were statistically significant, given that one of the cells contained no cases. The results were significant ($X^2 = 61.2$, $p < .001$). Interestingly, 18 of the 48 students in the close reading experiment made a gain of more than one level, including 6 students who performed at the proficient level. In the traditional after-school program, 9 students made a gain of more than one level.

Discussion

The participants in this study mirror the profile of far too many middle school students who are struggling readers. Many come from low-income households, more than a few are English learners, and the majority are male. They are also products of caring communities and schools that provide sound after-school program supports to address their instruction needs; the teachers who work in these programs are competent and well prepared. Yet even in these conditions, most fail to make a year's worth of progress for every year spent in school. Indeed, the participants in this study averaged only five or six months' worth of progress annually across their years of schooling.

Students benefited from intensive close reading instruction using complex, grade-level texts.

Nevertheless, the trajectory of their achievement improved noticeably. Why?

Access to complex texts with extensive supports

The students in the close reading experimental group benefited from intensive close reading instruction using complex, grade-level texts. It is important to note that they were not expected to comprehend these texts independently. Rather, they read the text multiple times, benefited from shared readings and teacher modeling, and, most important, discussed the work at the word, sentence, and paragraph levels. The text-dependent questions posed by the teacher were designed to focus attention on these elements to build a strong foundational knowledge about the text. The questions did not stop at the literal level but rather required that students use critical thinking skills to deepen comprehension.

These close reading sessions were designed to slow the reader in order to build knowledge. Students were encouraged to annotate and then use their notes in discussions. Each text was read multiple times, sometimes over two or more lessons, so that students could strengthen their understanding. Students found this practice motivating, as evidenced by the results on the RSPS2. We theorize that students appreciated the fact that they were not routinely confronted with "one and done" texts that required them to read once, discuss, and then move on, regardless of whether they fully understood it. In addition, the texts used were more closely aligned with their ability to think and discuss, rather than just read independently or with minimal scaffolding. Students were able to see their progress as they read and discussed a single text for an extended period. We believe this point is vital for supporting adolescent struggling readers. If always prevented from reading grade-level texts with complex structures and concepts because their reading levels are too low and the scaffolds not robust enough, when will they ever have an opportunity to catch up to peers?

Collaborative learning with peers to clarify and consolidate

Students in the close reading experimental group routinely discussed solutions to text-based questions with one another in small groups prior to engaging in larger class discussions. These small- and whole-class discussions during the close reading sessions required students to return to the text to support their answers.

The nature of the questions prevented these struggling adolescent readers from doing what they do best, that is, drawing on personal experiences in lieu of using text-based evidence. But a worksheet of text-dependent questions wouldn't be effective, either. The groups provided the collective resources to forward their thinking and deepen their comprehension. This is consistent with the findings of Slavin, Cheung, Groff, and Lake (2008), who reported that a common feature of effective intervention programs was opportunities for "students [to] work in small groups to help one another master reading skills and in which the success of the team depends on the individual learning of each team member" (p. 310).

Wide reading

We are mindful of the absolute necessity to ensure that adolescent students, especially those who struggle to read, are not denied the access and the time to find texts that are meaningful to them. We fully recognize that most students might not voluntarily pick up the poems of Langston Hughes, for example. Critical to their success is having time to read *Twilight* and *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things*—edgy, young adult literature that is devalued in some circles. The students in this study spent a significant portion of their after-school intervention time engaged in reading challenging texts that pushed their comprehension. They also had time each day to read what they chose, and to do so without having a lot of adult interference. In other words, they had the time to lose themselves in reading what they had chosen.

Ivey and Johnston (2013) remind us to view "engaged reading as an integral part of complex social practices...that promote a healthy development of personhood" (p. 272). Perception of oneself as a reader matters, as any English teacher can attest. The students in this study read throughout the period, sometimes engaging with the kinds of texts that don't appear on the list of Top Ten Books Recommended by Learned People. Some read about kids who are wimpy or wizards or wallflowers. And a few found their way to reading about dreams deferred as well.

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Take Action

STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

1. Review YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/FisherandFrey>) for examples of close reading instruction.
2. Identify a complex text that you could use for close reading intervention.
3. Identify teaching points of the text, based on an analysis of qualitative factors of complexity.
4. Plan the number of readings students must do to gain a deep understanding.
5. Develop text-dependent questions and ideas for annotation that will spark discussion among students.
6. Model close reading and annotation a few times before asking students to try.
7. Talk with students about their perspectives on close reading and modify the experience accordingly.
8. Provide access to and allow students time to engage with a wide range of appealing texts so that they can apply their growing skills to books that hook.

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More to Explore

CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

- 1 *The Common Core: Teaching Students in Grades 6–12 to Meet the Reading Standards* by Maureen McLaughlin and Brenda J. Overturf (IRA, 2013)
 - Maureen McLaughlin and Brenda Overturf explain the key points of the CCSS and describe how to use the standards effectively in grades 6–12 instruction.
- 2 Modeling Reading and Analysis Processes With the Works of Edgar Allan Poe.
 - Explore reading strategies using the think-aloud process as students investigate connections between the life and writings of Edgar Allan Poe. The unit, which begins with an in-depth exploration of “The Raven,” moves students from a full-class reading of the poem to small-group readings of Poe’s short stories (“The Black Cat,” “Hop-Frog,” “Masque of the Red Death,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher”). (www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/modeling-reading-analysis-processes-411.html)
- 3 Common Core State Standards Webinar Series Bundle
 - Featuring webinars by Timothy Shanahan, Nell K. Duke, Timothy Rasinski, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Diane Lapp
 - IRA’s Common Core Webinar Series gives you access to field leaders and fellow educators in a convenient, affordable format. These hour-long webinars will help you strengthen your understanding of how CCSS affects you and your students, providing classroom-tested strategies you can implement right away.

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