



Bringing Students Inside: Shaping Equitable Pathways

by Dr. Alfred W. Tatum

The adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is shifting the instructional focus for middle school students in the United States. Literacy demands have increased for all students, including those who struggle with reading and writing. According to national assessment data, a mere 34 percent of U.S. eighth graders are proficient readers. Sorely, only thirty-eight percent of twelfth-graders performed at or above a proficient level in reading in 2009 (NCES, 2010). This indicates a clear performance trajectory between the proficiency levels of middle school readers and later reading achievement. Therefore, it is imperative that educators shape equitable pathways to protect the literacy rights of middle school students to prepare them for a wide range of post-secondary options.

Broaden the Lens of Reading, Writing, and Language Instruction

Instruction for middle school students must be conceptualized to align to the broader contexts that inform their lives. Often, middle school 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 to bring them in from the margins. Literacy-related difficulties are often exacerbated for students who lack the English proficiency needed to handle the academic language, vocabulary and content found in the texts that they must read from middle school on. Narrow approaches to literacy instruction that have simply focused on skill and strategy development without regard to students' intellectual development have only yielded small upticks in reading achievement over the past four decades (NCES, 2010). A broader frame of literacy instruction as outlined by the CCSS brings attention to the intersection of reading, writing, language and knowledge development that should benefit middle school struggling readers who have been traditionally underserved by schools. Educators must safeguard this intersection to counter inequitable literacy pathways to ensure that a significant proportion of middle school students receive the instruction they need and deserve. Educators must balance a focus on complex texts as called for by the CCSS while honoring the complexity of middle school students' lives and their need for academic, cultural, emotional, and personal development.

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Shaping Equitable Pathways

Advancing the literacy needs and shaping equitable pathways for middle school students will involve, at minimum, nurturing students' resilience and increasing their experiences with more cognitively demanding texts, including disciplinary texts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Middle school 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 and writing strategies that students can use independently, while simultaneously engaging students with a wide range of fiction and nonfiction texts. These actions are particularly effective for 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 shape equitable pathways 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 (Guthrie & McRae, 2011). For too long, policies and practices have inadvertently authorized failure in middle school (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012).

Education should keep in mind the following as they move to authorize a different set of instructional practices to shape equitable pathways for middle school students:

1. Conceptualize reading, writing, and language as tools of protection for middle school students. Instruction in middle school can shape the trajectory for post-secondary options.

2. Focus on the intersection of reading, writing, and intellectual development. Require students to demonstrate their comprehension through reading, writing, and discussion.

Develop a writing routine that requires students to demonstrate their new understandings that emerge from the texts.

3. Increase students' exposure to academic words and language in the middle school. Use rich language while speaking. Share examples of your own writing that models how you use rich language.
4. Move beyond texts during instruction that are "cultural and linguistic feel goods" in favor of texts that advance students' cognitive and social development.
5. Become better arbiters of the texts you use with students or change how you plan to use the texts. Establish a litmus test for your text selections that moves beyond mandated materials.
6. Provide direct and explicit strategy instruction.
7. 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.
8. Honor cultural and linguistic diversity during instruction while holding all students to standards of excellence.
9. Provide adequate language supports before, during, and after instruction.
10. Select and discuss texts in ways that engage students.
11. Use appropriate pacing during instruction.
12. Involve students in the assessment process and develop an assessment plan that pays attention to students' cognitive and affective needs.
13. Do not reject complex texts for struggling readers and writers based on perceived notions of ability or capacity to handle complex text across a wide range of subjects. Be patient and steadfast.

As this list indicates, there are multiple ways to shape equitable pathways for 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 literacy experiences.



Applying the Research

Inside Language, Literacy, and Content is designed to shape equitable pathways 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.

CLOSE READING

The Power of Mysteries

by Alan Lightman

1 I believe in the power of the unknown. I believe that a sense of the unknown **propels us** in all of our creative activities, from science to art.

2 When I was a child, after bedtime I would often get out of my bed in my pajamas, go to the window and stare at the stars. I had so many questions. How far away were those tiny points of light? Did space go on forever and ever, or was there some end to space, some giant edge? And if so, what lay beyond the edge?

3 Another of my childhood questions: Did time go on forever? I looked at pictures of my parents and grandparents and tried to imagine their parents, and so on, back through the generations, back and back through time. Looking out of my bedroom window into the vastness of space, time seemed to stretch forward and backward without end, **engulfing** me, engulfing my parents and great-grandparents, the entire history of earth. Does time go on forever? Or is there some beginning of time? And if so, what came before?

4 When I grew up, I became a professional **astrophysicist**. Although I never answered any of these questions, they continued to challenge me, to haunt me, to drive me in my scientific research, to cause me to live on tuna fish and no sleep for days at a time while I was obsessed with a science problem. These same questions, and questions like them, challenge and haunt the leading scientists of today.

5 Einstein once wrote that "the most **beautiful** experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which **stands at the cradle of** true art and true science." What did Einstein mean by "the mysterious?" I don't think he meant that science is full of unpredictable or unknowable or supernatural forces. I think that he meant a sense of awe, a sense that there are things larger than us, that we do not have all the answers at this moment. A sense that we can stand right at the boundary between known and unknown and gaze into that cavern and be exhilarated rather than frightened.

Key Vocabulary

- **beautiful** *adj.*, very pretty; amazing

In Other Words

propels us pushes us forward

engulfing surrounding

astrophysicist person who studies the way objects move in space

stands at the cradle of is the starting point for learning about

Historical Background

Albert Einstein was a famous and award-winning physicist.

6 Scientists are happy, of course, when they find answers to questions. But scientists are also happy when they become stuck, when they **discover** interesting questions that they cannot answer. Because that is when their imaginations and creativity are **set on fire**. That is when the greatest progress occurs.

7 One of the **Holy Grails** in physics is to find the so-called "theory of everything,"

the final theory that will **encompass all the fundamental laws of nature**. I, for one, hope that we never find that final theory. I hope that there are always things that we don't know—about the physical world as well as about ourselves. I believe in the creative power of the unknown. I believe in the exhilaration of standing at the boundary between the known and the unknown. I believe in the unanswered questions of children.

Key Vocabulary

- **discoverer** *n.*, to find something that is lost or hidden

In Other Words

set on fire truly inspired

Holy Grail greatest question to answer

encompass all the fundamental laws of nature answer all of our questions about the universe

The Horsehead Nebula is a dark nebula, or interstellar cloud. Its swirling gases are in the form of a horse head. It is about 1500 light years from Earth.

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Complex texts incorporate rich language and advance students' cognitive and social development. Instructional routines integrate reading, writing, and intellectual development and require students to demonstrate their comprehension through reading, writing, listening and speaking.