Teaching Middle-Grade Readers with Learning Disabilities

by Dr. David W. Moore

THE INCREASING EXPECTATIONS for advanced reading in the middle grades require increasingly sophisticated instructional responses. Getting readers off to a good start certainly is crucial in the early grades, but ongoing instruction in the later grades is necessary for maintaining and, in many cases, accelerating readers' growth. For students with a learning disability (LD) in reading, such instruction involves resources and practices that fit individuals' particular needs. Two general approaches for treating youth with specific reading disabilities include response to intervention and focused, research-based instruction.

Response to Intervention

Following the 2004 reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,* all 50 states now are offering some form of Response to Intervention (RTI) (Griffiths, Parson, Burns, VanDerHeyden, Tilly, 2007). Because the federal legislation set only general frameworks for RTI, state and local agencies determine specifications. The general education divisions in most states are taking or sharing the lead in helping school personnel apply RTI to all students while identifying those with special needs (Harr-Robins, Shambaugh, & Parrish, 2009).

RTI's instructional framework provides tiers of increasing intensity (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyde, 2007). Tier One, for initial core teaching, emphasizes high-quality instruction. It includes much differentiation to accommodate groups and individuals' distinctive learning needs. Tier Two is for students at risk of academic or behavioral problems or for those who have difficulty at Tier One learning and acting in accordance with school norms. Instruction at this level and the next often involves decreased class sizes to promote interactions among students and teachers. Tier Three is for students with intensive academic or behavioral needs. This third tier or another, Tier Four, typically is for students with LD or other special education needs.

To increase intensity at each tier, educators adjust instruction according to features such as frequency (e.g., three extra meetings per week), group size (e.g., one-to-five), and instructional areas and resources (e.g., reading fluency, comprehension). Students move flexibly among the tiers according to their response to targeted instruction.

RTI's diagnostic framework involves educators in monitoring individuals' progress to inform decisions about accommodating their instructional needs and positioning them on the instructional tiers (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyde, 2007). Educators periodically review data-based observations to see how students, especially those at risk of underperforming, are responding to instruction and achieving academic standards. Many middle-grade teachers work in concert with youth to determine their reading needs and goals.

RTI expressly supports basic reading skills, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. It also supports listening comprehension, written and oral expression, and social-emotional-behavioral matters. To align students with appropriate instruction in these areas, educators typically combine a problem solving approach, which matches individuals' distinct learning needs with corresponding teaching practices, and a standard treatment approach, which matches students' diagnostic profiles with instructional programs' emphases (Griffiths, Parson, Burns, VanDerHeyden, Tilly, 2007). Both approaches rely on trustworthy assessments for matching students with instruction appropriately.

Inside fits the RTI diagnostic framework well by offering assessments that regularly monitor students' progress. The assessments guide students' placements into the program, shed light on their ongoing grasp of key concepts and strategies, and check learning at the end of instructional units. These assessments inform instructional decisions.

There are also summative, end-of-level tests that indicate readiness to move into a more advanced level of the program or readiness to exit from the program.

Inside also aligns to the RTI instructional framework. Some middle-grade educators are using *Inside* for initial core teaching at Tier One for middle-grade students already identified as struggling readers or English learners. Some are using *Inside* as a Tier Two intervention, accelerating the reading and language growth of youth at risk of academic or behavioral setbacks. Finally, special education personnel are using *Inside* with Tier Three students, those who frequently are classified as having LD and necessitate special instructional services that fit their particular needs.

Focused Research-Based Instruction

Roughly 80 percent of students classified with a specific learning disability experience it with reading (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008). Research reviews on teaching reading to middle-grade students with LD present valuable guidance for high-quality instruction (Edmonds et al., 2009; Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008; Gajria et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2008 Torgesen et al., 2007). They show that when focused, research-based reading instruction is implemented, middle-grade youth with LD can succeed. This research emphasizes three areas: (a) basic reading skills, (b) comprehension, and (c) motivation and engagement.

Basic Reading Skills

Basic reading skills are the fundamentals of reading. They include word study, fluency, and vocabulary.

Word study. Research on middle-grade reading distinguishes beginning word study instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics from advanced word study instruction in multisyllabic and morphologically derived words (Roberts et al., 2008). Many older students with LD can decode single syllable words (e.g., *hot*, *camp*), but struggle to decode longer words (e.g., *international*, *thermometer*). Whether older readers struggle with basic or advanced word study, they can improve. Youth with underdeveloped word study can make small to moderate gains in reading comprehension when they receive instruction that builds word study along with comprehension (Edmonds et al., 2009).

Fluency. Many students with LD read haltingly, laboring over word and sentence patterns. Fluency instruction helps students process texts automatically, freeing cognitive resources for comprehending the texts (Roberts et al., 2008). Engaging youth with quantities of texts

they can and want to read, then helping them efficiently process the language structures of the texts are beneficial practices. Research with older readers who struggle with fluency suggests that targeted fluency instruction, like targeted word study instruction, is most effective when it is part of a complete intervention that includes comprehension (Edmonds et al., 2009).

Vocabulary. Knowing the meanings of many words is crucial for success in reading and academics. The research points to direct, opportunistic, and computer-assisted approaches as effective for improving vocabulary acquisition (Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008). It is important to note that students with LD may require more exposures to new words than other students in order to develop deep understandings of the words. Along with teaching the meanings of specific words, instruction is needed to develop youth's independent word learning strategies such as analyzing words' contexts and morphological composition.

Inside provides basic reading skill instruction that is targeted to middle-grade readers with LD. It provides rich and varied language experiences that embed multiple opportunities for word study and vocabulary development. *Inside* explicitly teaches critically important academic vocabulary along with strategies for learning such words. It regularly promotes word consciousness as well so students will be motivated to develop vocabulary on their own.

To help teachers bring best practices into their classrooms, *Inside* provides Daily Vocabulary Routines. These routines can be part of daily instruction. They expose students to targeted vocabulary multiple times, a practice that is very important for readers with LD. In addition, *Inside* presents numerous opportunities for students to read targeted vocabulary words in context and to reinforce their understandings through various experiences.

Along with the word study and vocabulary routines, *Inside* provides Daily Oral Reading Fluency Routines such as timed repeated readings. Various routines are presented so teachers can select different ones over time and keep their fluency instruction fresh.

Inside also features the *Inside Online Coach*®. The *Online Coach's*® structured supports give readers with LD a private, risk-free way to improve pronunciation and fluency, acquire academic vocabulary, and work through comprehension tasks. The *Inside Online Coach*® links to the reading selections in *Inside*, providing immediate corrective feedback and record keeping as students read orally and silently.

Comprehension

Comprehending texts is the reason for reading. Educational researchers have distinguished two essential factors that underlie reading comprehension, knowledge of the world and cognitive strategies (Israel & Duffy, 2008).

Knowledge of the world. Middle-grade students with LD are required to read a good deal of informational and expository text, and they often struggle because they fail to link their knowledge of the world to the texts' contents and academic language (Gajria et al., 2007). Activating students' knowledge of the world involves readers in calling up what they already know about a topic and using this knowledge as a scaffold to make sense of a text. And developing students' knowledge of the world involves richly informative texts and passages that encourage readers to access academic ideas and information. *Inside* contains reading passages deliberately selected to increase middle-grade readers' knowledge of the world. Informational and literary selections center around common topics and present important academic content.

Comprehension strategies. Middle-grade readers with LD who fail to apply comprehension strategies such as determining importance, visualizing text contents, and self-questioning benefit from explicit direct instruction in these strategies (Edmonds et al., 2009). These youth do especially well when they learn to apply strategies before, during, and after reading. The most effective instruction begins with a teacher explicitly modeling and explaining the use of strategies, then gradually releasing to students the responsibility for using the strategies independently (Torgesen et al., 2007).

The comprehension strategy instruction found in *Inside* is based on the principles of direct, explicit instruction and a show, don't just tell approach. Each *Inside* unit opens with an overview of one of its eight comprehension strategies, then each unit cluster follows with explicit step-by-step explanations of how to apply the strategy to different passages and genres.

The "Big Eight" comprehension strategies found in *Inside* are:

1. Plan

2. Monitor

3. Determine Importance

4. Ask Questions

5. Make Inferences

6. Make Connections

7. Synthesize

8. Visualize

These general strategies are known to promote reading comprehension (Israel & Duffy, 2008). In every instance of initial teaching, the explanatory steps contain model responses so students actually see an example of what is being emphasized; no step is merely mentioned. Additionally, one of the great challenges of teaching middle-grade students with LD is the difficulty they often have transferring what they have learned to new situations. This is why *Inside* provides students numerous opportunities to apply these strategies in a variety of reading contexts. Teachers gradually release responsibility to students to apply the comprehension strategies they have been taught directly and explicitly.

Motivation and Engagement

The will to read is at least as important as the skill (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Proficient middle-grade readers comprehend texts not only because they can, but because they want to. Interesting texts, social interactions, and self efficacy go far in promoting motivation and engagement.

Interesting texts. As students move up the grade levels, their texts become more difficult and their instructional environments tend to deemphasize their motivation to read (Roberts et al, 2008). Providing appealing, relevant materials that students inherently want to read is a widely known approach to improving reading motivation and engagement (Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008).

Students also become interested through inquiry opportunities. The Guiding Questions (GQs) that are at the center of every *Inside* unit provide opportunities for inquiry. The GQs and the meaningful reading selections in *Inside* which speak to young adolescents have been shown to engage youth in sustained reading. Because GQs have no single simple answers, they require students and teachers to take on new roles. Students become active agents in their learning, and teachers become part of the inquiry, too. *Inside* provides such reading materials.

Social interactions. Middle-grade readers with LD also can increase their motivation and engagement through collaborative learning opportunities (Roberts et al., 2008). Older students tend to become motivated and engaged when they interact with one another, responding to texts and ideas worth talking about. Collaborative learning tasks increase student ownership of their literacy learning, generate rich thinking, and can be expected to improve reading achievement (Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008). *Inside* provides these opportunities during each unit of instruction.

Self efficacy. A crucial aspect of motivation is believing that you can succeed, something that is especially important for students who have been told for years that they are not good at reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). *Inside* shows students how the strategies they already use outside of school apply to their reading comprehension strategies inside of school. This practice permits students to believe they can succeed; it encourages students to begin applying their everyday strategies to their academic reading. It builds self efficacy in reading.

Conclusion

Inside provides middle-grade students with LD rich and meaningful opportunities to take control of their reading. *Inside* aligns with the diagnostic and instructional frameworks established by RTI. It effectively supports students' basic reading skills, comprehension, and motivation and engagement. *Inside* provides the resources that youth with LD require in order to comprehend increasingly complex reading material and achieve academic success.

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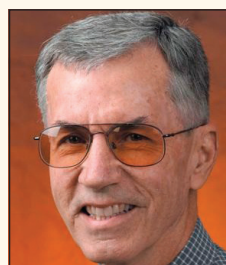
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