Dropping Everything to Read?
How about Picking Some Things Up!

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When I was in school it was called DEAR time—Drop Everything And Read. Students chose whatever they wanted and teachers took the time to prep for the next class, grade papers, or (true story) grab a quick smoke break in the teacher’s lounge. Their intentions were good: in response to research that showed that students become better readers by reading, our teachers gave us time to read in class. It was a very important first step. Today, we know how to make this time even more powerful for students—instead of dropping everything, it involves some picking up: picking up on what engages students and supporting them with their engagement, picking up on goals that students can focus on, and picking up some conference notes and getting around the room to talk to readers as they read.

Supporting Engagement

As middle grade teachers, we send a message to students about what’s important by devoting precious time to it. When we set aside minutes for reading independently, we do so hoping and expecting that students will use this time wisely: they will quickly settle into reading, eyes glued to the pages, mind immersed in the book, thoughtfully engaged with the text.

Unfortunately, not all students will immediately respond to reading time with enthusiasm and engagement. Some will find ways to avoid the reading or end up being distracted from it. Some will fake it. Still others will read, but out of compliance, not true engagement. I see these students as opportunities, not burdens, and I am acutely aware of the responsibility (and privilege) I have to help them develop a reading life.

We can address student engagement and motivation in the classroom with whole-class lessons that offer students strategies for focusing their attention and building their stamina. These strategies could also be taught to small groups of students in strategy lessons, which are essentially conferences for two or three students at a time. In a strategy lesson, the teacher introduces a strategy and then supports each student with some individual coaching while the other students in the group work independently.

Providing booktalks to recommend and entice readers to try new authors, series, or genres can be something you weave into your classroom routine, as what readers choose to read can have a significant impact on their level of motivation (Guthrie, 2001). While many teachers deliver these talks to the whole class, you may also choose to give booktalks in small groups. That way, you can keep the interests of students in the small group in mind when you’re choosing which texts to introduce and what to say when introducing them. For example, for a group of students who spend their afternoons playing pickup games of soccer and basketball, you may decide to book-talk the latest Carli Lloyd biography, Kwame Alexander’s The Crossover, or one of Mike Lupica’s books. For students who haven’t really finished a book this year but have watched and enjoyed the movie versions of the Hunger Games series, maybe recommending Divergent, Ender’s Game, or The Maze Runner could get them hooked. Booktalking in small groups also allows you to consider the complexity of texts you’d recommend to a particular group, knowing that you’ll want to set students up to be able to read with high levels of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension to be fully immersed and engaged in the book. You can talk up the books, or students can recommend books to their peers.

Strategies for Supporting Engagement

- Longer texts and shorter texts take different kinds of reading attention and focus. It may help you to plan stopping places in your longer book and have some texts at the ready for briefer break reads. Articles, short stories, and poems are good texts for this kind of reading.

- When you get distracted, stop and notice where your attention first started to drift. Go back to the last thing you remember not just reading but really
understanding. Reread from there to get back into your book.

- Being engaged means keeping not just your eyes but also your mind on the book. As you read, be aware of your attention shifting. When it does, back up and reread. If you notice attention shifting very often, consider whether the book isn’t a good fit or something in your environment is causing you to become distracted.

- It’s crucial that you are always sure that you’re making sense of what you’re reading about. Check in with meaning by asking yourself, What’s happening, who is in this scene, and where are they? Can I see what’s happening? Am I thinking about, having feelings about, or reacting to what’s happening? If you feel like anything is fuzzy, back up and reread to make sure you’re understanding.

- Engage your mind by asking questions as you read. In fiction you might ask, What comes next? Why did the character do that? In nonfiction, you might ask questions about the topic. Read on to answer your questions.

Getting to Know Our Readers; Helping Them Know Themselves

It has been well-established that focusing on goals helps increase motivation and engagement as well as growth and progress (Hattie, 2009). When students have a goal to anchor their reading time, they can engage in meaningful thinking work while enjoying the books they’ve selected.

Possible Reading Goals for Middle Grade Readers

Engagement—working on stamina, book choice, and developing a reading life and love of reading

Plot and Setting—understanding cause and effect, identifying problems and solutions/resolutions, retelling the most important information within a chapter or across a book, and visualizing where the story takes place

Character—working to understand main and secondary characters’ traits, feelings, and motivations; relationships between characters; and character change

Themes and Ideas—interpreting lessons and messages in stories, being alert to symbolism and inferring the deeper meaning behind the symbolism, and considering how social issues are present in the text and relate the book’s themes

Main Idea—understanding what a nonfiction text is mostly about; uncovering an author’s angle on a topic

Key Details—collecting and synthesizing relevant facts and information related to the main idea from across the main text and text features

Text Features—reading text features carefully to learn information, and connecting that information to the main text on the page

Vocabulary and Figurative Language—being alert to precise and purposeful words an author uses, and examples of language used figuratively, and inferring the meaning of those words and phrases

Conversation—working on speaking and listening skills, and collaboration with peers in partnerships or small group book clubs

Writing about Reading—developing a repertoire of ways to respond to reading with purpose and intention, including short in-the-moment jots and longer responses to reading.

Ideally, goals are not doled out like scoops of mashed potatoes on a lunch room tray. Instead, they are decided upon in conversation with the reader, upon reflection of their reading, thinking, and writing about reading. The five-minute goal-setting conferences that take place between a teacher and a student often go like this:

1. Before meeting with a student, the teacher has done some pre-assessment and has some ideas about what might be the most beneficial to the student. This pre-assessment need not be a formal test, but instead it might mean looking at a student’s informal responses in a reading notebook, listening in on student conversations about texts, and/or talking about books with the student.

2. The teacher asks the student to bring the sample(s) of work that would help the student to see what the teacher saw.

3. Through guided inquiry and careful questioning and listening, the teacher helps the student to reflect and consider what goal would be the most beneficial.
4. The teacher offers the student some support, often in the way of a strategy, and a chance to briefly practice it before returning to independent reading.

In certain middle grade classrooms, where class periods are short and teachers have many classes of new students across each day, taking time for these one-on-one conversations can feel challenging—not because they can’t happen, but because they can’t happen with enough frequency. In these cases, I often recommend that the teacher provide an opportunity for each student to reflect on paper about strengths and possibilities for next steps. One support for this self-reflection could be a questionnaire with a collection of questions connected to each possible goal. For example, to determine if engagement might be an appropriate goal, a student might respond always/sometimes/never to statements such as “When it’s time to read, I get settled right away,” “I often have a hard time choosing a book that really speaks to me,” and “During independent reading time, I get lost in my book and feel like I’m waking up from a dream when time’s up.” For the possible goal of character, the questions might read, “I try to understand the characters in my books as if they are real people,” “I can see characters’ complexity: I think about traits that seem to help the character, and those that seem to be obstacles,” and “I often think about the relationships between characters” (for a complete example, see Serravallo, 2016). After completing the questionnaire, teachers could then have briefer, two- to three-minute meetings with each student to discuss chosen goals and strategies or even to meet with small groups of students who chose the same goal and could benefit from the same strategy.

Establishing a Regular Conferring Practice

Once students are engaged with reading and focused on their goals, then teachers need to support them with ongoing feedback. The most effective way I’ve found to provide ongoing feedback to readers is through regular conferring and small group strategy lessons during the independent reading time.

For teachers accustomed to anchoring the majority of their language arts instruction around a common text such as a whole-class novel, conferring with students in self-selected books can feel foreign at first. After all, when studying a common text with the class, the teacher is an expert on the text, thereby knowing what questions to ask and feeling comfortable at evaluating students’ responses to those questions. A teacher can listen in on conversation and know whether a student is “getting it” and how deeply that student might be thinking. What, then, could a conference with a child reading a 300-page novel that I haven’t read possibly look like? How could a student benefit from this, and how can I possibly learn about the student?

My first advice is to be sure to make the conferring time feel like a conversation. This is something I learned from Carl Anderson many years ago. Make sure there is a balance of teacher and student talk and that you take time to listen as much as you speak. Trust that as a reader yourself, you can have a conversation with a student who is reading a book you haven’t read because you know how books go. You know things about young adult literature. You know about genres. You know about certain authors. So, listen: one reader to another.

Trust, also, that you know about what it means to be a reader. You know the kinds of thinking that readers do—for example, in stories readers often think about the plot,
character, theme, and instances of striking or beautiful language—so you can listen for these elements of story in the students’ talks. Are they talking only about the plot/action? Are they using vague or specific language to describe the character? Are they sharing their thinking about the book or simply the facts of what happened? Can they show you places in the text where certain thoughts occurred to them? If students have already established goals for themselves as readers, you may even focus your conversation on just that one goal, listening for evidence of new work or thinking that connects to the goal.

Once you’ve had a conversation, you now have an opportunity to provide some support and feedback. In each conference with a reader, I like to offer a new strategy or choose to focus/revisit a strategy I’ve previously introduced. The strategy I choose will be connected to the student’s goal. When introducing the strategy, I offer students the “how to” but also the “why,” so they know how the strategy will benefit them as a reader and in which context(s) the strategy will work best. Finally, I set the student up to practice the strategy very briefly, with me right there, so I can provide some coaching and feedback as needed.

These conferences are important meetings to provide students with necessary support with and feedback on their goals, and they are also a valuable assessment opportunity to check in with how much students have read since our last meeting, what kinds of books they are choosing, and the sorts of thinking work they are doing while reading. I am sure to always take notes on these meetings so that I can keep a written record of what I’ve taught and what students have learned.

Conclusion

If you’ve already curated a classroom library and carved out some time for independent reading, my hope is that you now have some new ideas to make this time even richer. Supporting student engagement, offering students an opportunity to reflect on their work and set goals, and working toward a regular conferring practice helps to create an authentic and safe learning environment in which all students can thrive.

REFERENCES


YA LITERATURE


