The demands placed on teachers to prepare students to be critical literacy consumers in the 21st century have never been greater. Furthermore, the pressures educators feel from administrators, parents, politicians, and society at large to ensure all middle school students will perform proficiently on standardized literacy achievement tests continue to rise.

To meet these demands, school districts have purchased expensive, scripted reading intervention programs that are “research-based” and “scientifically proven” to improve students’ reading skills; students identified as needing reading intervention are placed in these classes for one or more years with the hope that their reading test scores will improve. Although some students have shown moderate growth from these interventions, many students continue to struggle with reading. Perhaps of even greater concern, I would argue, is that some students, after being placed in these reading intervention programs, dislike reading even more and choose to read even less than before someone intervened.

In their efforts to fix students’ reading problems and raise students’ reading test scores, some curriculum specialists have forgotten (or have chosen to ignore) some of the key conditions that decades of literacy research have suggested are essential to creating a learning environment where students experience literacy success. Cambourne (1988) identified eight conditions necessary for literacy development: immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectation, responsibility, approximation, use, and response. Although these conditions are considered most often by primary teachers when designing classroom environments for young children learning to read, Cambourne’s conditions should be considered by middle school teachers as well, especially reading intervention teachers. After all, who more than struggling and reluctant middle school readers should be provided with the most favorable conditions for advancing their literacy development?

According to Cambourne’s conditions, reading intervention classes should be filled with high-interest books that match a wide range of students’ reading interests. Students should be read aloud to every day by teachers who model how to read well and who discuss with students their own reading practices. Students should be encouraged to take risks with their reading and writing and be given realistic guidelines and expectations for progressing at a rate that is appropriate for them. Students should be encouraged to take responsibility for their reading and to make choices about their reading preferences and behaviors. Finally, students should be encouraged to read together and then talk together about their literacy experiences.

Does this sound like a typical middle school reading intervention classroom? Unfortunately, no. Too often, the opposite is true. Students are given little time in class to read, have fewer books available to choose from, have little or no access to books that interest them, are given little (if any) time to talk with peers about what they read, and are frequently taught by new teachers or teachers assigned to teach an intervention class.
against their will. These teachers are less likely to model reading, much less share the joy that reading brings them. Meanwhile, struggling readers are expected to progress rapidly through curriculum and improve their scores on each subsequent reading skills test, even though the conditions in their English classrooms are far from those Cambourne described as being optimal for literacy development.

Independent reading is another key condition for reading development that is being neglected in secondary schools. Although the research available on amount of time spent reading has been correlated with growth in reading (Allington, 2001), many language arts teachers are reluctant to forego instructional time for reading time. In some districts, teachers who believe students should be given time to read independently in school are told by administrators that free voluntary reading in school is not allowed. In spite of decades of research on the benefits of silent reading, including increased reading comprehension and improved reading attitudes, at-risk middle school readers are often given little or no time in school to read books of their choice (Ivey & Broaddus, 2000).

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Aware of the research on the benefits of independent reading and Cambourne’s conditions for literacy development, I designed a reading intervention for two teachers to implement during their language arts block. The intervention consisted of teacher book talks, interactive read-alouds (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004), independent reading, access to high-interest books, and partner talk. The primary purpose of the 6-week intervention was to motivate the most reluctant readers, many of whom were boys, to become more engaged readers and to read more often. In the remainder of this article, I describe the components of the intervention and what happened as a result of implementing each component—for the students and their teachers.

The Structure of the Intervention

On the first day of the week, teachers gave book talks about three different books or series of books. The total amount of time for the set of book talks was 10 minutes. During the book talks, teachers held up a copy of the book or used a document camera to project parts of the books being discussed so students could view the text. Following the book talks, students were given 15–20 minutes of independent reading with no restrictions on their choice of reading materials. Students had access in their classrooms to books of high interest. At the end of each independent reading period, students talked for 3–5 minutes with a partner about their reading. The same structure was repeated two additional days per week, though on these subsequent days, the book talks were replaced by an interactive read-aloud using one of the three book-talk books.

Teacher Book Talks

During the six-week intervention, teachers conducted book talks from six different genres or text formats: realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, graphica, information/sports information, and scary/horror/mystery. The book talks introduced the main characters and story problem and gave students additional information about the author or the book. For example, when doing a book talk about the Twilight series by Stephanie Meyer, students learned that between 2005, when the series debuted, and November 2009, it had sold over 85 million copies worldwide, had been translated into 38 different languages, and had been on the New York Times Bestsellers List for children’s series books for over 235 weeks.

During the book talks, students were engaged and wanted to know more about the books. Most important, students were eager to read many of the books their teachers introduced. The teachers believed the book talks were an effective way to expose students to a wide range of book titles and to share additional information about the lit-
One teacher told me that she had never thought to share the facts about book sales and awards the books had won until she realized this information is what grabbed the boys’ attention. She plans to include that information in future book talks for other genres and text formats.

Interactive Read-Alouds

Two days per week the teachers read aloud the beginning of a book that had been shared during the book talks. In their research, Fisher, Flood, Lapp, and Frey (2004) identified the following components of effective read-alouds: matching books to students’ reading interests, teacher preparedness, setting a clear purpose for reading, modeling fluent oral reading and reading with expression, engaging students during the read-aloud by stopping to allow students to talk, and making connections to students’ independent reading and writing. Each week, the teachers practiced delivering their book talks with fluency and expression; every two weeks, the teachers had a different instructional purpose for their read-alouds.

During weeks 1 and 2, the students’ read-aloud discussions were focused on making predictions and inferences. Every few paragraphs, the teachers stopped and prompted the students to turn and talk with a partner. For example, while reading aloud *Amulet: The Stonekeeper* (2008) by Kazu Kibuishi, students stopped to predict what would happen next in the scene where Emily is reaching for her father’s hand as the car he is stuck inside hangs at the edge of a cliff.

During weeks 3 and 4, the teachers focused on the text features of fiction and informational texts. While the teacher read aloud *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, the students learned about book jackets, dedication pages, and tables of contents in fiction. Text features in informational text, such as main headings and subheadings, sidebars, and captions were discussed when *Guinness World Records 2010 Gamer’s Edition* (Brady Games) was read aloud.

During the interactive read-alouds in weeks 5 and 6, the teachers stopped periodically for students to discuss their ideas about the characters’ traits and motivations. While reading aloud *New Moon*, book two from The Twilight Saga by Stephenie Meyer, students were given several opportunities to discuss the conclusions they drew about Bella’s character from her actions, thoughts, and feelings.

As I observed the weekly read-alouds, I witnessed firsthand the high level of student engagement. The teachers were pleased with how focused the students’ conversations were during turn-and-talk and noted that the students’ discussions reached higher levels as the weeks progressed. In the follow-up interviews with students, several noted that the interactive read-alouds piqued their interest in reading books they otherwise may not have chosen to read.

Independent Reading with Unrestricted Choice of Texts

Like teachers in many of today’s classrooms, before implementing the intervention, neither teacher had given their students time during the language arts block to read independently, and both had restricted students’ choice of texts for at-home reading. Both had believed they had too many standards to teach and could not give up instructional time for students to just read. After teachers saw the results of giving students 15–20 minutes of unrestricted reading time four days each week, they changed their perspective about independent reading in school.

Students who previously had not been engaged during language arts participated more during class discussions. During independent reading, students were so engrossed in their reading that often there was not one pair of eyes in the room not focused on reading a book. When students were told it was time to stop reading, there was an au-
dible response of disappointment. Many times the students begged to keep reading. Sometimes their pleas worked, and everyone, including the teacher, stole five more minutes to just read.

I talked with teachers after the formal intervention ended and asked if their beliefs about students being given time in school to read had changed. Both teachers told me that, from this point on, they would always give their students time to read in school.

What [the teachers] discovered was that the components of the intervention not only improved the reading attitudes and reading self-efficacy of their reluctant readers, it changed everyone’s attitudes and self-perceptions, including their own.

Access to High-Interest Books
Availability of books was a key factor in the success of the intervention. Each week, students’ enthusiasm grew as they were given new books to read that matched their reading interests. I recall the day when I arrived with a box in hand. Students were on break, and when one boy saw me coming down the hall he cried out, “Mrs. Wozniak is here with new books!” He and a half dozen other students came racing toward me.

Within seconds of seeing the new titles, students were calling out, “I am going to check out this book!” A minute later, their teacher arrived on the scene, and she and I reveled in the moment that every English teacher lives to see.

Partner Talk
At the end of independent reading, students were given time to talk with a partner. There were no guidelines, so their discussions took on different forms. Some talked about why they were reading their books, while others told why they liked their books and if they would recommend them to their partners. When both students had read the same book, they talked about particular scenes. In the past, neither teacher had given students time to talk about books, but both believed that partner talk was valuable. Students were given an opportunity to learn from each other what books might appeal to them for future reading.

The Results
After the intervention, the students were different readers. Overall, they had more positive attitudes toward reading, perceived themselves to have higher reading abilities, read more and for longer, and were more engaged during language arts instructional time. Students told me they liked reading now that they were given time to read in school and free choice of what they could read. For some, this was the first time they had been allowed to read graphic novels and comics in school, and they could not get enough of them.

The teachers also were different after this experience. They had more positive attitudes toward teaching reading and perceived themselves to be better reading teachers. Their beliefs and practices about conducting teacher book talks and interactive read-alouds, providing students with time for independent reading in school, allowing students unrestricted choice of books, and giving students time to partner talk had changed. They had agreed to try the intervention in an effort to reach some of their least engaged readers. What they discovered was that the components

Connections from ReadWriteThink
This article emphasizes the importance of having a wide range of high-interest texts for students to explore and read. The ReadWriteThink.org podcast series “Text Messages: Recommendations for Adolescent Readers” is a monthly podcast providing reading recommendations that families, educators, out-of-school practitioners, and tutors can pass along to teen readers. Each episode will feature in-depth recommendations of titles that will engage and excite teen readers.


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of the intervention not only improved the reading attitudes and reading self-efficacy of their reluctant readers, it changed everyone’s attitudes and self-perceptions, including their own.

In today’s educational climate, where the focus is on raising test scores, it is easy to see why elaborate reading programs that tout the solutions for reading failure appeal to the administrators responsible for buying reading intervention curricula. Each intervention program has its merits, and some students progress from this curriculum. However, I caution against the purchase of any intervention program that does not include time for teachers and students to read and talk about books. Perhaps it is a matter of integrity. I believe it is time we stop and ask ourselves: What is our goal? Do we care only about reading test scores, or do we want our students to have a positive attitude toward reading and choose to read on their own? I propose that an intervention built on a foundation where teachers and students read and talk about books is a way to achieve both.

References


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2012 David H. Russell Award Call for Nominations

The National Council of Teachers of English is now accepting nominations for the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. This award recognizes published research in language, literature, rhetoric, teaching procedures, or cognitive processes that may sharpen the teaching or the content of English at any level. Nominations of publications to be considered should be postmarked no later than March 1, 2012. Any work or works of scholarship or research in language, literature, rhetoric, or pedagogy and learning published during the past five years (i.e., between January 2007 and December 2011) are eligible. Works nominated for the David H. Russell Award should be exemplary instances of the genre, address broad research questions, contain material that is accessibly reported, and reflect a project that stands the test of time. Normally, anthologies are not considered. Reports of doctoral studies, while not precluded from consideration for the Russell Award, are typically considered as part of NCTE’s separate “Promising Researcher” program. Works nominated for the award must be available in the English language.

To nominate a study for consideration, please email the following information to fmann@ncte.org: your name, your phone number, your email, author, title, publisher, date of publication, and one paragraph indicating your reasons for nominating the work. Please include four copies of the publication for distribution to the Selection Committee, or give full bibliographic information so that the Selection Committee will encounter no difficulty in locating the publication you nominate. Send nominations and materials by March 1, 2012, to: David H. Russell Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010, Attn: Felisa Mann. Final selections will be announced in mid-August 2012.

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