I confess, I am a fan of makeover shows. Let me clarify—I am not a fan of the part where they secretly film or photograph the unsuspecting unfashionable victim in their most vulnerable moments. I cringe when the host or stylist suggests that everyone—friends, family, and work colleagues—considers the victim’s appearance so hopeless that the only thing left to do is shame them into improvement on national television. I derive no joy from watching even the most unsightly coiffed and attired target relent to the process and tearfully voice, “Yes, I am hideous.”

What I do love is the transformation—the big reveal—not to the audience necessarily, but to the participant, as he or she looks in the mirror and sees what was possible all along, what friends and family knew was just beneath the surface. Outerward appearance now matches and projects the person on the inside. But it’s not really about a new hairstyle and wardrobe. In theory, the made-over individual feels more capable at work, in love, in life, and sets off to accomplish things he or she never previously imagined. I hope that’s how it works, anyway.

Indeed, that is what happened, metaphorically, with the middle school classrooms I have been privileged to study and participate in recently. Outward appearance now matches and projects the person on the inside. But it’s not really about a new hairstyle and wardrobe. In theory, the made-over individual feels more capable at work, in love, in life, and sets off to accomplish things he or she never previously imagined. I hope that’s how it works, anyway.

What I do love is the transformation—the big reveal—not to the audience necessarily, but to the participant, as he or she looks in the mirror and sees what was possible all along, what friends and family knew was just beneath the surface. Outward appearance now matches and projects the person on the inside. But it’s not really about a new hairstyle and wardrobe. In theory, the made-over individual feels more capable at work, in love, in life, and sets off to accomplish things he or she never previously imagined. I hope that’s how it works, anyway.

Indeed, that is what happened, metaphorically, with the middle school classrooms I have been privileged to study and participate in recently. Outward appearance now matches and projects the person on the inside. But it’s not really about a new hairstyle and wardrobe. In theory, the made-over individual feels more capable at work, in love, in life, and sets off to accomplish things he or she never previously imagined. I hope that’s how it works, anyway.

Several years ago, I invited four eighth-grade English teachers at one school to help me explore the possibilities for student engagement under three key conditions (Ivey, 2009). First, all whole-class assigned reading, particularly in class novels, would be abandoned. Second, students would be given the latitude to select texts from a vast collection of contemporary, high-interest trade books and pace their own reading. Third, every effort would be made to identify and respond to the barriers to engagement for inexperienced and reluctant readers so that 100% of students would come to read for their own purposes. Intervention, for us, was not about fluency practice, reading strategies instruction, or word-level drills. It was about actual reading.

This was a modest shift for my teacher friends, as they had already begun to read and share diverse young adult literature in their classrooms and were already setting aside daily periods for independent reading. Still, though, what happened when we decided to make high-interest, self-regulated reading the centerpiece of the curriculum was nothing short of an all-out transformation of students as readers.

In short, students read more (and I mean a lot!), read more strategically, liked reading, initiated conversations about their reading, and made notable gains on mandated achievement tests.
But when it came to the least experienced readers in the group, the change was especially palpable. The most substantial evidence that students had crossed over came from confessions stating that they were actually reading for the first time:

- Before 8th grade, our teachers gave us a book to read and I would never read it. I’d just look at it. I never used to read, but now I do.
- I see people reading that I used to wouldn’t see reading. There’s a couple of people I’ve never seen with a book and this year I have. I’ve known these people since kindergarten and I’ve never seen them reading until this year.
- I have never read a whole book in my life until 8th grade. This year I have read over 50 books!
- You don’t imagine how much I read now because of the books. I don’t remember even finishing a book before this year.

What not to read—in the spirit of my favorite program, What Not to Wear—is the same old, same old. The persistence of the limited selections of whole-class novels and literature anthologies that pervade most middle school classrooms guarantees that inexperienced readers will stay that way. I would like to say that the transformations we observed were the result of simply gathering lots of books and letting students choose, but, like the stylists of my favorite makeover shows, the teachers and I had actually become experts in the subtleties of revamping how we “market” books to students.

In the remainder of this article, I offer a book makeover guide, borrowing some useful rules for the style-challenged. While we typically think of interventions as attempts to get kids to behave differently, these principles are meant for us, their teachers.

Rule 1: Step into This Decade

The books of yesterday do not fit most students in contemporary classrooms; what is more, they were likely ill-fitting for the classrooms of yesterday. Even books penned in the 1990s have little appeal for today’s young adolescents. If we are still gushing over the books we read in our first years of teaching, or worse, when we were in middle school ourselves, it might be a good time to take stock.

Our eighth graders are drawn to edgy fiction that helps them consider a myriad of tough issues, such as drug addiction (e.g., In Ecstasy, McCaffrey, 2009), loss and grief (e.g., If I Stay, Forman, 2009), the consequences of bullying (e.g., Hate List, Brown, 2009), and the psychological complexities related to dysfunctional families (e.g., Break, Moskowitz, 2009), just to name a few. While the messages intended by some of the old favorites are timeless, the contexts in which they are set are not. Keep in mind that the books that captivate eighth graders might be too mature for some seventh graders and most sixth graders. The principle, though, is the same: find what plays well in the lives of today’s middle schoolers.

Rule 2: Try on Something You Normally Would Not Have Selected

In the midst of our book makeover, I had to admit I had a problem: I had not tried hard enough to understand what boys like to read. I had read some wonderful studies of boys and literacy (e.g., Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), and I had certainly helped match individual boys with books, yet my knowledge of high-interest fiction for a range of boys was limited. The complete truth, I am ready to confess, is worse: although I knew lots of young adult books, I had really only read what I liked. Sadly, that left out more than just boys. Opening myself up, though, I quickly learned not only what works for some hard-to-engage boys (e.g., Stormbreaker, Horowitz, 2001; Hell’s Heroes, Shan, 2010), but also for fans of science fiction
Voices from the Middle, Volume 19 Number 2, December 2011

(e.g., Unwind, Shusterman, 2007), another genre not on my radar. Some other underrepresented texts in most middle classrooms are urban fiction (e.g., Kendra, Booth, 2008), books with Latino/a characters (e.g., We Were Here, de la Pena, 2009), and books with characters from less-than-privileged socioeconomic worlds (e.g., Why I Fight, Oaks, 2009).

Rule 3: You Might Have to Try on Lots of Things before Finding a Good Fit

I suspect that most of us trying to motivate inexperienced readers to identify which texts might work for them have asked something like, “What kinds of things interest you outside of school?” Unfortunately, typical responses—like hunting, soccer, or listening to music—offer little direction for finding books. At best, we might locate one novel, or a dry and dated nonfiction selection, or a magazine that includes the topics students say they like. None of these options leads to the transformations we witnessed in our eighth-grade classrooms. Plus, having a hobby or skill does not guarantee a student wants to read about it. Even less fruitful is, “What kinds of things do you like to read?” Students who have not yet read have no idea what they like to read. We must begin with understanding that kids are more than the sum of their likes and dislikes, and we must give them the opportunity to know the wide range of things others have written.

For instance, Rusty loved monster trucks, but the stack of monster truck books his teacher had gathered for him collected dust after he perused them once for the pictures. After days of trying out the beginnings of a variety of books with his teacher, he devoured Walking on Glass (Fullerton, 2007), a verse novel defined by a boy’s complex emotions surrounding his mother’s depression and suicide attempt. Recent events in his life made this choice relevant in ways we could not have imagined or understood by asking simplistic questions about reading preferences.

Rule 4: When Something Good Doesn’t Quite Fit, Try Tailoring

Brittany desperately wanted to read Shock Point (Henry, 2006), but gave up after several days, unable to get any momentum with it. “It’s too confusing,” she explained. As I flipped through it, I understood her frustration. This suspenseful story begins with a series of flashbacks, a literary style Brittany had not yet encountered in her reading. A quick explanation of how this format works and a conversation about why an author might write this way was enough to solve Brittany’s dilemma. She completed the book, which she proclaimed her favorite of the year, and learned something about a literary device she would use again.

When our eighth-grade readers are engaged, they can and will reach for texts that are a bit difficult. They reread, ask questions, and sometimes even devise their own guides and notes to help make sense of books that are important to them.

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRIETHINK

The author shared several strategies to help students choose the right book for them. Sometimes more than one type of book “fits.” The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “An Exploration of Text Sets: Supporting All Readers” invites students to create text sets on a high-interest topic and use the texts to practice three strategies for reading for information. Text sets are groups of books that are connected somehow by subject matter, genre, or theme. When read together, they offer teens a sustained reading experience over time.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/exploration-text-sets-supporting-305.html

The ReadWriteThink.org podcast “Reading Text Sets” is organized around themes such as revolution and espionage, relationships with brothers and fathers, and buying and selling in America.

http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-after-school-resources/podcast-episodes/reading-text-sets-30672.html

Ivey  |  What Not to Read: A Book Intervention
But when strategic reading is not enough, particularly when students are reading books with unconventional formats, quick individual mini-lessons also double as an opportunity to teach students about text structures and other tools of writing. Contrary to popular belief, students will not, when given choices, pick the easiest texts to read. We can capitalize on that.

Rule 5: It Doesn’t Have to Match, It Only Has to Go With

When our first-time engaged readers come out of a great reading experience, they want a new text just like the one they completed. Can you blame them? Series and sequels are great and keep them reading for awhile, but to sustain engagement over the long term, we guide students toward thematically linked selections. For instance, Jarrod loved Black and White (Volponi, 2005), a stand-alone book, but followed his own personal line of inquiry about the consequences of gun-related violence by moving on to Homeboyz (Sitomer, 2007), then If I Grow Up (Strasser, 2009), Casbay (McMullen, 2009), and Life in Prison (Williams, 2001). He ended up with something similar to the student-constructed text sets Nichols (2009) describes—a collection of texts that facilitate thinking beyond a single story toward the development of critical questions inspired by thinking across texts.

Rule 6: Quality Matters

Conversations about quality typically center on whether the books selected for English classrooms meet conventional criteria for “good literature.” In the eighth-grade classrooms, we consider a text to be of high quality if it gets students to think, talk, and keep reading. Those are the books worth the investment in tight times. We have needed a lot of books, but to stock the classroom shelves indiscriminately would be a mistake. Although the idea of flooding classrooms with books where few exist sounds like a good idea, choose carefully. Not all books are equal. Certain kinds of books will be read to death and others will not be touched.

A good beginning reference point is the Young Adult Library Services Association’s (YALSA) annual list of Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/yalsa/booklistsawards/quickpicks/qphome.cfm). For struggling readers, verse novels, graphic novels, and other texts that read in a single sitting (or so) are must-haves. Figure 1 includes a sample of these essential texts.

Need a Makeover?

When I share at schools and conferences the evolution of the eighth-grade reading collections, I consistently find that the books that engage inexperienced middle school readers are still, as Worthy, Moorman, and Turner (1999) suggested more than a decade ago, “hard to find in school.” Our first order of business is to become more expert on the texts that resonate with the students we teach. Our classroom book collections and our repertoire of knowledge about what students need are due for a major overhaul. The first step is admitting there might be a problem.

Contrary to popular belief, students will not, when given choices, pick the easiest texts to read. We can capitalize on that.


Figure 1. Sample of engaging quick-reads.
References

Young Adult Literature Cited

Gay Ivey is a professor at James Madison University in Virginia. She can be reached at iveymg@jmu.edu.

Call for 2012 Hoey Award Nominations
The NCTE Edwin A. Hoey Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator in the English Language Arts recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers in grades 5–8 who instill their own love of learning in their students. Sponsored by *Weekly Reader*, this award honors Edwin A. Hoey, who brought limitless imagination and creativity to the pages of *Read* during his nearly 40-year career as writer, editor, and managing editor of the renowned educational magazine.

Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at www.ncte.org/awards/hoey and must be submitted by **February 1, 2012**. Results will be announced in Spring 2012, and the award will be presented at the 2012 Annual Convention in Las Vegas, Nevada, at the Middle Level Luncheon.

*Voices from the Middle*, Volume 19 Number 2, December 2011