



# The Power of Independent, Self-Selected Reading in the Middle Grades

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*If we want our students to grow to appreciate literature, we need to give them a say in decisions about the literature they will read. (Atwell, 1998, p. 36)*

Now, more than ever, teachers are challenged to negotiate multiple and contradictory demands on their time. Across the nation, schools have been required to raise their standards for student achievement and make “adequate yearly progress.” This is just a sample of the abundant evidence that the complex work of teaching described two decades ago by Apple (1986) has intensified. Teachers have had to adopt curricula, instructional strategies, and assessment techniques that undermine their ability to conduct authentic, engaging activities and contradict their professional beliefs about effective teaching, learning, and schooling. Pressured to comply with state and district mandates, teachers may follow scripted, back-to-basics lessons and, as a result, feel frustrated about the assaults on their professionalism and the prevalence of “test-prep pedagogy” (McNeil, 2000).

As they experience relentless pressure to improve test scores, teachers face a constant challenge to maintain their commitment to student-centered pedagogy—though we do not suggest the two are

mutually exclusive and lack correlation (e.g., Tatum, 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Our main argument in this paper is that, despite the aforementioned challenges, literacy educators should keep independent, self-selected reading at the center of the middle grades language arts curriculum. We believe that a literacy-rich classroom environment grounded in student-centered pedagogy offers possibilities for engaging all learners and encouraging them to be lifelong readers. After outlining a rationale for independent reading in a reading workshop classroom environment, we describe how these practices were enacted in an eighth-grade classroom in Maine. We share students’ reactions to these practices, which remind us how influential books can be when students are given the opportunity to choose what they read in a classroom environment that values reading.

## A rationale for independent, self-selected reading

Independent, self-selected reading is widely supported in the empirical and practitioner-oriented literature, as summarized in the annotated bibliography in Figure 1. In a recent review of the literature, Morrow (2003)

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**This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics:** Meaningful Learning — Multiple Learning Approaches — Varied Assessments

**Figure 1** Annotated bibliography of independent, self-selected reading resources

**Allen, J. (2000). *Yellow brick roads: Shared and guided paths to independent reading 4–12*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.**

The author describes numerous strategies for implementing independent reading.

**Atwell, N. (2007). *The reading zone: How to help kids become skilled, passionate, habitual, critical readers*. New York: Scholastic.**

This book contains an entire chapter devoted to students' choosing independent reading texts.

**Atwell, N. (1998). *In the middle: New understandings about writing, reading, and learning*, 2nd ed. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.**

This is the seminal text for reading and writing workshop curriculum in the middle grades.

**Kaster, W. C., & Wilfong, L. G. (2005). Encouraging independent reading with ambience: The Book Bistro in middle and secondary school classes. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48(8), 856–864.**

This article explains how to create a café atmosphere in school to promote independent reading.

**Scieszka, J. (2003). *Guys and reading*. *Teacher Librarian*, 30(3), 17–18.**

The author explains how to help boys choose books through website he created: guysread.com.

**Wedwick, L., & Wutz, J. (2006). Thinking outside the book box: Using BOOKMATCH to develop independent book selection. *Voices from the Middle*, 14(1), 20–29.**

The authors describe a strategy for helping all students find the “just right” book.

**Power, B. M., Wilhelm, J. D., & Chandler, K. (Eds.). (1997). *Reading Stephen King: Issues of censorship, student choice, and popular culture*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.**

This edited volume includes several essays on student choice.

concluded that the amount of time children spend leisure reading is correlated with reading achievement, that teachers play a critical role in influencing students' attitudes toward reading, and that immediate access to books and an inviting atmosphere are important in promoting reading. Similarly, Flood, Lapp, and Fisher (2003) reported that “the effectiveness of voluntary reading programs, in which classrooms were filled with high-quality trade books, reported success in overall reading comprehension as well as improved attitudes toward reading” (p. 938). Studies that have focused specifically on middle school students further support independent, self-selected reading (Broaddus & Ivey, 2002; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Pflaum & Bishop, 2004), and studies that have focused on increasing boys' motivation to read and improving attitudes about reading also support choice and in-school time for reading (Horton, 2005; Weih, 2008). Even a study of graduate students who were allowed to choose their reading revealed 93% felt selecting their reading was more meaningful than being assigned reading by the instructor (Ho & Choie, 2005). It is clear that independent, self-selected reading is a research-based practice beneficial for all students.

## Independent reading in a reading workshop classroom

At Saco Middle School (SMS), a public middle school near Portland, Maine, more than 700 predominantly White, working- to middle-class students who speak English as a first language attend separate, heterogeneously grouped reading and English classes every day for 50 minutes each. The second author, an eighth-grade reading teacher at this school, conducts a reading workshop classroom inspired by Atwell's (1998) revised theory of the purposes and procedures of a workshop curriculum. If you were to walk by her classroom on most days, you would see the students choosing books for independent reading and actually reading during class time; the teacher leading lessons as needed, using whole-class texts; and the teacher and students dialoguing with each other about books in reading journals and in one-on-one conferences. On other days, you would see her teaching the required curriculum, albeit in student-centered, authentic ways that support the literacy skills taught in reading workshop. For example, the literary elements mandated in the standards are reinforced through book club meetings in which students have selected novels to

be discussed in small groups. Recently, students were allowed to choose between two required whole-class novels and completed double-entry reading logs as they read. She even prepared students for the state's standardized tests by having students complete a few practice questions once a week and by facilitating discussions in which students must provide evidence for their answer choices. In this way, literacy activities on non-workshop days were in line with the school's required curriculum and taught in meaningful ways valuing student choice.

Allowing student choice of reading material does not mean that teachers cannot “cover” the standards addressed on the state's standardized assessment. The fact that students are actually reading only enhances the teacher's ability to teach the standards, as students are engaged with practicing the tested skills. This approach to curriculum and instruction ensures the Maine English Language Arts standards related to reading are met in direct ways.<sup>2</sup> For example, Standard A, Process of Reading, states: “Students will use the skills and strategies of the reading process to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate what they have read.” This standard holds teachers accountable for helping students meet numerous objectives, such as questioning while reading, reflecting on what has been discovered while reading, identifying the author's purpose and point of view, and summarizing whole texts and passages from texts. These are exactly the kinds of skills that are taught during lessons in this teacher's classroom and reinforced when students read and respond to texts of their choosing. One notable objective listed under Standard A is that students will be able to “read for a variety of purposes” including “to enjoy,” one of the intended outcomes of independent, self-selected reading.

responses to quality literature with peers. The teacher ensures that these objectives are met in much the same way as Standard A—through lessons and reading and responding to texts. Students also meet this standard by reading a variety of materials in the classroom library, sharing their reading experiences through book talks to the whole class, and analyzing culture and the human condition through dialogue journals and conferences with the teacher. Independent, self-selected reading creates a classroom culture where reading and student choice are valued and the standards are met by employing meaningful pedagogy.

Atwell shared what her students taught her about independent reading in a workshop classroom:

My students taught me that they loved to read. They showed me that in-school reading, like in-school writing, could actually do something for them; that the ability to read for pleasure and personal meaning, like writing ability, is not a gift or talent. It comes with the ability to choose, books to choose among, time to read, and a teacher who is a reader. Finally, I learned that selecting one's own books and reading them in school is not a luxury. It is the wellspring of student literacy and literary appreciation. (p. 34)

We agree with Atwell that independent choice of texts in school should not be a luxury but a norm, particularly in middle grades classrooms where students are transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn. In earlier grades, when students are learning to read, they often choose their texts, but in later grades when the purpose of reading shifts to content literacy, the texts are mostly teacher (or district) selected, leaving students with less voice in the direction of their school reading. The middle grades time frame is critical to fostering ability and interest in reading, which reading workshop affords.

**It is clear that independent, self-selected reading is a research-based practice beneficial for all students.**

Standard B, Literature and Culture, states: “Students will use reading, listening, and viewing strategies to experience, understand, and appreciate literature and culture.” The objectives of this standard focus on making and justifying conclusions, demonstrating awareness of culture pertinent to texts they read, understanding and appreciating the actions of others, and sharing

## **Gathering evidence about students' favorite texts**

During the 2006–2007 school year, we became interested in learning more about the eighth-grade students' perceptions of and practices related to independent, self-selected reading in reading workshop. As a starting point



*Many students develop deep personal connections with texts they choose to read.*

for directing further investigation into this topic, we asked the students to write a regular reading workshop journal entry about a favorite book. The students' reflections about a book that changed or influenced their lives are at the center of this article, as they revealed a great deal about students' reading perceptions and practices. Above all, their writing shows how important self-selected books are for encouraging deep personal connections to texts. And, the simple process of having students journal about favorite books could easily be replicated in other language arts classrooms and provides rich data for teachers to consider when making curricular and instructional decisions, especially in support of independent reading.

With student and parent permission, we told students that we would like to share their thoughts about books with the larger educational community so that others might learn from them. In the middle of the year, the teacher asked all 53 of her students to respond in their reading journals to the following questions:

1. What is the best book that you have read in class or own your own?
2. How did it change your life or influence your thinking?
3. Who else would like this book and why?

All students in all three classes wrote for a full 20 minutes, reinforcing the motivating factor of an authentic writing task. The teacher had made clear the audience—other reading and English teachers and researchers—and the students never asked how long their entries should be or if they were going to be graded. They cared about having a larger community of readers hear their voices, reminding all of us to incorporate authentic writing tasks into the language arts curriculum.

We both read through the journal entries several times, first simply charting the book titles and number of times each was recommended by a student, but then we were drawn to re-reading because of *how* the students talked about their choices. Though a few book choices were not surprising to either of us, the way students articulated their deep personal connections with texts lead us to reflect further upon the notion of independent reading. In the next section, we will provide the results of the tally. Then, we will look more closely at what we learned about adolescents' reading through their writing about their favorite books.

## **Students' responses and the importance of self-selection**

The 26 boys and 27 girls who wrote journal entries about their favorite books revealed varied reading interests. They recommended 37 books or book series, and they only mentioned seven books more than once (see Figure 2). We recognize that not all of their recommendations would be considered young adult literature in the traditional sense—books specifically written for or about young adults—but we believe this in no way diminishes their choices. In fact, Donelson and Nilsen (1989) argued that young adult literature is any text a teenager freely chooses to read. The variety of students' recommendations reminds us that we need to provide access to young adult literature as well as other texts that may appeal to young adult readers depending on individual interests (e.g., *Band of Brothers*, *Curse of the Bambino*, *Great Expectations*).

As we read and re-read students' journal entries, three distinct categories emerged in the way that students talked about their most influential books. First, we noticed that some students thought reading their favorite book led to altered views of themselves and their personal decision making. These students suggested

**Figure 2** Favorite books and book series of SMS eighth graders 2006–2007

| TITLE  | AUTHOR                   | # VOTES |
|--|--------------------------|---------|
| Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl, The  | Barry Lyga               | 1       |
| Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle Nest | Stephen E. Ambrose       | 1       |
| Bartimaeus Trilogy, The  | Jonathan Stroud          | 1       |
| Car, The   | Gary Paulsen             | 1       |
| Child Called It, A   | Dave Pelzer              | 3       |
| Cirque du Freak series   | Darren Shan              | 6       |
| Clique series  | Lisi Harrison            | 1       |
| Crash  | Jerry Spinelli           | 1       |
| Crispin: The Cross of Lead   | Avi                      | 1       |
| Curse of the Bambino, The  | Dan Shaughnessy          | 1       |
| Demonata series  | Darren Shan              | 1       |
| Divide, The  | Elizabeth Kay            | 1       |
| Eleven Seconds: A Story of Tragedy, Courage, & Triumph   | Travis Roy w/E. M. Swift | 1       |
| Eragon: Inheritance Trilogy #1   | Christopher Paolini      | 1       |
| First Part Last, The   | Angela Johnson           | 1       |
| Giver, The   | Lois Lowry               | 4       |
| Go Ask Alice   | Anonymous                | 4       |
| Gossip Girl  | Cecily von Ziegesar      | 1       |
| Great Expectations   | Charles Dickens          | 1       |
| Harry Potter series  | J. K. Rowling            | 1       |
| Hatchet  | Gary Paulsen             | 1       |
| Invisible  | Pete Hautman             | 1       |
| Misfits, The   | James Howe               | 1       |
| Monster  | Walter Dean Myers        | 2       |
| National Velvet  | Enid Bagnold             | 1       |
| Rules of Survival, The   | Nancy Werlin             | 1       |
| Silent to the Bone   | E. L. Konigsburg         | 1       |
| Soul Surfer  | Bethany Hamilton         | 1       |
| Speak  | Laurie Halse Anderson    | 2       |
| Stormbreaker (Alex Rider series)   | Anthony Horowitz         | 1       |
| Sweep series   | Cate Teirnan             | 1       |
| Time Capsule, The  | Lurlene McDaniel         | 2       |
| TTFN (Ta-Ta for Now)   | Lauren Myracle           | 1       |
| TTYL (Talk to You Later)   | Lauren Myracle           | 1       |
| Uglies Trilogy   | Scott Westerfield        | 1       |
| Without You: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and the Musical <i>Rent</i>                                 | Anthony Rapp             | 1       |
| Wounded Spirit, The  | Frank E. Peretti         | 1       |

that books can foster a sense of personal agency about future choices and direction in life. Books that fell into this category included *Monster*, *Go Ask Alice*, *The First Part Last*, *The Wounded Spirit*, and *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl*. For example, one of the two boys who cited *Monster* as his most influential book stated:

This book influenced the way I make decisions, like the decisions they made in the book about stealing cigarettes from the drug store and murdering the owner. This makes me think about the decisions I make and think about the consequences before I make them. I think that kids my age that get into trouble should read this book, because it would be interesting to them and it might change how they live and what they do.

Through examining the consequences of fictionalized characters' actions—not those of real people—this student has learned important lessons about his agency and ownership in the choices that he makes in his own life, a positive outcome of connecting with a book.

A second category we noticed in journal entries related to developing and sustaining healthy interpersonal relationships. The books noted in this category led students to appreciate family, friends, and/or society in general, books like *A Child Called It*, *Speak*, *The Giver*, *The Time Capsule*, *Gossip Girl*, *Crash*, and *Crispin*. One girl said of Pelzer's *A Child Called It*:

**When students were provided time in school to choose books, read them, and reflect on them, they became more interested in reading and connected characters and themes in their favorite texts to their own lives in meaningful ways.**

It changed my life because it showed me how grateful I am to have a loving family. I mean, this kid had no one that loved him. He had no family, no friends. He had no one. He got picked on at school and at home. I will never make fun of anyone again because of that book.

Books that function to encourage students' reflection upon their relationships were clearly important to some students.

A third category we noticed in students' writing about influential books was a shift in views about reading. Some students noted their extreme dislike for reading changing to greater interest in, and frequency and

enjoyment of, reading. Shan's *Cirque du Freak* book series was written about most frequently—by six students, all boys—and served as the strongest example of books altering views of reading. One boy wrote, "I have never liked to read. I just thought it was a waste of time, but with the *Cirque du Freak* books I like to read and enjoy it." Similarly, another boy stated, "This book made me have a different view on reading. I've never liked reading for as long as I can remember. Because of these books I enjoy it now." The boys who wrote about *Cirque du Freak* noted reading up to 50 pages every night and even an entire book in one day. Other books that inspired interest in reading included *The Demonata* book series (also authored by Shan), *The Harry Potter* book series, *Sweep*, and *Silent to the Bone*.

What is common among the 37 books and book series recommended is the element of choice. Only one—*The Giver*—was taught as a whole-class novel by the teacher that year, and it was recommended by four students. This means that 49 of 53 students, or 92% of the class, cited a self-selected text as their most influential book. The context and climate of a reading workshop classroom cannot be underestimated. When students were provided time in school to choose books, read them, and reflect on them, they became more interested in reading and connected characters and themes in their favorite texts to their own lives in meaningful ways.

Student outcomes in this reading workshop classroom where student choice was valued went beyond self-reported perceptions and practices. Year-end standardized test data for this teacher's classroom revealed that nearly three-fourths of these students met (49%) or exceeded (24%) the state standards for English language arts. Only 19% partially met the standards, and 8% did not meet the standards. These results were typical for this teacher's classroom and the school as a whole, where all reading teachers were implementing reading workshop strategies, including independent, self-selected reading. Though there was

room for improvement to have all students meet or exceed standards, the evidence from these scores, and the students themselves lent credence to the benefits of independent, self-selected reading.

## Creating a literacy-rich classroom

We urge English language arts teachers to keep independent, self-selected reading at the center of the middle grades English language arts curriculum. We believe that students must be allowed choice in what they read and time in school to read to learn what real reading is, the kind of reading that encourages students to become lifelong readers. When teachers know their students' interests, they can put the "just right" books in their hands. One way to do this is to administer a simple reading inventory at the beginning of the year; teachers will further learn students' interests through classroom interactions, particularly one-on-one conferences and reading journal dialogues. In addition, it is important for teachers to stay current with young adult literature published each year and continually build their classroom libraries. We argue that students are better served by district money being spent on trade books rather than on textbooks. Anthologies just do not invite students to curl up in a quiet, comfortable corner of the classroom to read, and research supports the use of trade books in classrooms (Galda & Cullinan, 2003). Teachers can remain informed about the newest young adult literature by attending professional conferences, checking resources through the International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English websites, and reading book reviews published online or in journals like *Language Arts*, *Voices from the Middle*, and *SIGNAL*. Teachers can then build classroom libraries and showcase popular books in teacher- or student-led book talks that need last only a minute or two but allow students to see and hear about easily accessible texts in the classroom library. Creating literacy-rich environments in middle grades classrooms, which students are accustomed to from their elementary school experiences, further signifies the importance of reading.

## Conclusion

We conclude by sharing some real occurrences witnessed at Saco Middle School that serve as evidence that implementing reading workshop and independent,



*Teachers are better able to address standards when their students are engaged in independent, self-selected reading.*

self-selected reading with eighth graders is successful in promoting literacy and creating lifelong readers.

- They are reading their self-selected books in the hall at 7:00 a.m. while waiting for homeroom.
- They are reading their self-selected books in other core classes.
- They sign additional books out of the classroom library on Fridays because they know they will finish their books over the weekend and will want to begin reading others.
- They are recommending books to each other and asking questions such as, "Is that a good book? Do you think I'd like it?"
- They recommend their independent reading books to adults, and they sound so good that we read them.

Atwell contended, "This is the kind of evidence that begins to convince doubting administrators and parents: Students read more, comprehend better, and value books and reading to a greater degree when we make time in school for them to read" (p. 96). If teachers are given the

professional authority to combat prescriptive curricula and test preparation materials that are currently invading their classrooms and implement independent, self-selected reading in the context of reading workshop, the result may be students who are lifelong readers and highly literate human beings.

<sup>1</sup> **Editor's Note:** To read more about the relationship between test preparation and appropriate pedagogy, see the article "Ethical and Appropriate High-Stakes Test Preparation in Middle School: Five Methods That Matter," by Steven L. Turner, in the September 2009 issue of *Middle School Journal*.

<sup>2</sup> **Author's Note:** We cite the Maine English Language Arts Standards in effect at the time of our study.

#### Extensions

The authors discuss numerous benefits of independent, self-selected reading in the middle grades.

1. How can you incorporate elements of choice and independence in your reading instruction?
2. How can you make your classroom more "literacy rich," as described in this article?

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