

Summary

In their synthesis of research on literacy learning, Braunger and Lewis (1997) identify core understandings about literacy development. These core understandings are connected to views of reading as a primary language process and as a tool for learning. Other sources have identified similar elements connected to the development of proficient readers and writers. Crucial components include word-level influences on comprehension (Curtis & Longo, 1999b; Pressley, 2000); motivation (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000); metacognition (Flavell, 1985; Pressley, 2002); vocabulary (Pressley, 2000); and comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Pressley, 2000). The research trends pertinent to early adolescence indicate the importance of:

- Engagement in the reading event
- Active use of cognitive and affective processes to construct meaning
- Prior knowledge and experience
- Social interaction
- Reading and writing processes that develop simultaneously
- Literacy environments that provide rich, complex experiences to enhance reading development
- Opportunities to read extensively

- Strategic reading that develops best with authentic text and activities
- Readers and writers who have opportunities to learn a variety of strategies in a variety of ways
- Metacognitive knowledge and experience at the heart of student success

All these factors are important to consider when we are developing literacy contexts for students. However, engagement in the reading and writing process and access to interesting and relevant learning materials may be the most important areas on which to focus if students are to include the concept of reader and writer in their growing personal identities. Our classroom practice should excite adolescents' curiosity and "build on their desire to explore, strengthen their analytical and problem-solving abilities, and provide an understanding of how to make a place in the world" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995).

Kylene Beers (1998) worked with a group of middle school students to identify why they "just said no" to reading. I was struck by the response of one student when asked to advise teachers about increasing their students' desire to read: "*Tell them to ask students what they thought. No teacher*

ever asked me what I thought. And when I start to tell them what I thought, they say, 'We all have our opinions, but what does the story tell us?' And you know what that really means? That really means what I think isn't important. But maybe it is; maybe it was important to me." This student tells us that she does not feel respected, that she does not feel competent, that she does not include literacy into what William Glasser (1990) refers to as her "quality world." In other words, reading and writing will not be an important part of her identity as an adult.

In further discussion about the students in her study, Beers (1998) indicates that students who viewed themselves as readers had similar experiences in their early years. They remembered being read to often, both at home and in school. Their homes and their schools were filled with quality literacy materials and teachers helped them develop an appreciation of the literacy experience. On the other hand those students who had limited home and early school experiences in literacy never developed what Rosenblatt (1994) calls an aesthetic stance toward literature or other reading materials.

The reader's purpose or stance defines how the text will be read and how the ideas will be derived. If, for example, a student views reading as an information-gathering event then this individual is unlikely to read for ambience, flavor, tone, and feeling. Rosenblatt (1994) distinguishes between information seekers (efferent purpose) and readers who are ready to attend to "what is being lived through the reading event" (aesthetic purpose). The students in Beers' study who were not readers had only developed an efferent stance, that is, reading was for practicing comprehension or possibly getting answers to questions that would be on a later test. They could see no pleasure or joy associated with literature or discussions of literature.

Middle school classrooms obviously have a broad range and great diversity of reading and writing behavior. However, it is possible to create more avid readers and writers in our schools than is happening now. In a five-month naturalistic study of sixth-graders, Gay Ivey (2000) identified several themes that teachers might bear in mind.

- **Middle school students don't lose interest in reading and writing.** They lose interest in the reading and writing that is typically offered at school. Now we all recognize that lots of what kids like (teen magazines, horror stories, etc.) is not high-quality literature. That does not mean we cannot start with preferences and build. The teacher in the vignette *Marinating in Literature* (Page 31) let student preferences and ideas lead to establishing the curriculum and the selection of materials. However, once the kids saw that Barry respected their ideas and honored their choices they were willing to read and discuss books that Barry determined would engage them in more complex thinking and better-quality writing. The idea is to get the right books connected to the students. (Appendix II contains suggested novels and picture books that appeal to middle school students.)
- **Middle school students want to share their reading and writing with peers and teachers.** There is nothing that moves kids to read like a teacher's enthusiasm for a book. One of the best ways to share and get kids hooked into reading is for teachers to read aloud to students regularly. Not only is this high on students' lists of what they like about classrooms but it broadens vocabulary, expands student knowledge of the world, provides fluency modeling, and is truly enjoyable.

Literature circles or book clubs offer another means for sharing responses to literature. However, include expository works as well—articles

from *National Geographic*, *Scientific American*, *Nature*, and so forth. Students can discuss the ideas, examine the evidence presented, and critically evaluate the material.

- **Middle school students need real purposes for reading.** Practice is important to become a proficient reader. Strategy instruction helps increase students' ability to understand text. However, these are means to an end not ends in themselves. Kids need to read to gather data about an election issue, to find out how to make gourmet pizza, to feel the taste of slimy words on the tongue, to achieve empathy for other people. Reading and writing should help students accomplish personal and academic goals.
- **Middle school students want to succeed as readers and writers.** Some students become frustrated after years of reading failure. Even students who are "good" readers often find the demands of text beyond their abilities to handle without effective assistance. Teachers who foster optimism for achievement and improvement enable students to move ahead and to engage fully in the literacy process.

The following poem is an example of the way a student can use her growing sense of literacy to express deeply felt issues that relate to her future and the futures of her friends. This poem speaks from the heart. I am thrilled that many of our kids make our hearts sing and sob through language. How many Jessicas or Jamals or Youmes or Abduls are in our classes who speak with such authority, heart, and hope?

Land of Diminishing Dreams

*The year is two thousand fifty-four,
The world is full of curses.
People walk the streets no more,
No women carry purses.*

*The name of the game is survival now—
Safety is far in the past
Families are huge, with tons of kids
In hopes that one will last.*

*Drugs are no longer looked down upon
They are a way of life.
They help us escape the wrenching stress
Of our fast world's endless strife . . .*

*I wake up now—it was only a dream,
But the message was terribly clear.
We'd better think hard about the future
Before our goals and our dreams disappear.*

—Jessica, 16 (©Carnegie Council, 1995)

Students are rising to the challenge. They are engaging thoughtfully in challenging literacy activities and doing well on difficult standardized tests (Langer, 2001). In high-performing schools, teachers are inviting students to be members of learning communities (Langer, 2001). There is negotiation going on, choices being made, collaborative learning with teachers and students as learners together. People are being respected, cared for, and cared about. When we do what we know is good for kids, it works.