

The effects of implementing a reading workshop in middle school language arts classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Two language arts teachers in a small, rural middle school set a goal of improving their reading instruction and ultimately their students' learning. The two teachers implemented Reading Workshop as their new methodology for teaching reading to all six of their 7th and 8th grade classes. Interviews and classroom observations, over the course of eight months, showed that implementing Reading Workshop has some positive effects. According to the data, the change in teaching led to improvements with the students including increased motivation, comprehension and learning experiences.

Keywords: Reading Workshop, Middle School, Language Arts, Teaching



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INTRODUCTION

Teaching reading and writing to middle school students can be challenging and rewarding. Students in the middle grades have a wide variety of reading levels and interests. In the method familiar to many, the entire language arts class reads the same novel. Finding the right books to place in all students' hands can be an overwhelming task for teachers. Supporters of the Reading Workshop methodology believe assigning books to students leaves many uninterested or unable to comprehend the texts. Letting students make their own book selections, they say, can help to build a lifetime love of reading. The Reading Workshop format instructs students in skills they need to select and comprehend texts. Reading Workshop students read many books, exploring different genres, authors and texts with the emphasis on the interaction between the students and their texts.

Two language arts teachers at a small, rural middle school discontinued their whole class approach to reading instruction and instead embraced Reading Workshop. Their goal was to improve their students' learning of language arts. In this study, the 7th and 8th grade students were provided with time to read self-selected books. They responded to their texts in a variety of ways while their teachers served as facilitators. Reading Workshop's aim is to create a society of readers with teachers focusing on the individual needs of students during conferences (Towell, 2000). In Reading Workshop, students still receive skill instruction; however, the skills, techniques, and procedures are taught within the context of real literature (Atwell, 1998).

Current research on reading and learning supports the Reading Workshop philosophy. Students of all abilities and backgrounds can benefit from the individualized instruction and an approach to reading which focuses on understanding and enjoyment. The teachers in this study believe their change in teaching methods led to improvements with their students' learning of language arts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The workshop approach to language arts represents a way of organizing meaningful instruction with balanced literacy that can meet a variety of student needs (Frey & Fisher, 2006). Reading Workshop provides time to read and respond to texts. It traditionally includes mini-lessons, independent reading and reader response tasks. The Reading Workshop process scaffolds students to deeper levels of thinking and engagement while providing students with greater input into and ownership of their learning (Meyer, 2010). Activities and strategies presented in Reading Workshop classrooms are based on the assumption that students have varying abilities and teachers design instruction suited to individual learners. Teachers invite, nurture and support students which helps move them toward independence (Atwell, 2009). A classroom community is created as students work and learn together with the teacher serving as a guide on the side. Creating lifelong, reflective and responsive readers is a goal of Reading Workshop.

Meeting the Needs of Individual Students

One key component of implementing Reading Workshop into the classroom is recognizing that each student has his or her own individual needs (Towie, 2000). As stated by

Cathy Roller (1996), “Rather than view children as capable or disabled, workshop classrooms assume that children are different, that each child is unique and has special interests and abilities, and that differences are normal” (p. 7). Basing instruction on the needs of individual students allows the teacher to create an environment that encourages students to develop a love for learning. As discussed by Lucy Calkins (1991), “Teachers of writing and reading throughout the world have come to care passionately about workshop teaching, in part because reading and writing are ways in which human beings find significance and direction, beauty and intimacy, in their lives” (p. 23). The workshop approach to reading instruction helps to make reading meaningful for students by allowing them to explore their own interests. According to Nancie Atwell:

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 a 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)

When educators allow students to select their own reading material, they not only establish a trusting relationship with their students, but they are also helping their students to build background knowledge, expand vocabulary, apply comprehension strategies, and take meaning from the text.

Sharing and Mini-Lessons

Another important component of an effective Reading Workshop includes teacher sharing and teacher led mini-lessons. During sharing time, the teacher shares a text that he/she find interesting (Graves, Juel, Graves, Dewitz, 2011). Mini-lessons are used to meet curriculum requirements, while still focusing instruction on individual student needs (Oszakiewski and Spelman, 2011). When discussing where her mini-lessons come from, Atwell (1998) says, “... from my analysis of what students need to know next, based on what’s happening in their writing and reading, and from my experience of the kinds of information needed by the age group” (p. 151). Furthermore, as discussed by Reutzel and Cooter (1991), “Mini-lessons are... instructional sessions for demonstrating reading strategies and preparing students to read new books successfully and independently” (p. 550). The modeling of comprehension strategies that good readers use is a very important aspect of a successful Reading Workshop (Meyer, 2010). As stated by Towle, “Strategies and skills that students could focus on include choosing a book, making predictions, summarizing a story, and distinguishing fact from opinion” (p. 39). Once students internalize the comprehension strategies, they are then able to apply them to their own reading.

Reader Response Tasks

When using Reading Workshop, it is also essential that students engage in independent reading and reader response tasks. As stated by Towle, “In Reading Workshop, students spend

their time reading and writing to construct meaning” (p. 38). Students should establish a routine in which they are responding to the text verbally or in writing (Towle). Atwell (1998) suggests that students respond to reading through journaling and letter writing. Atwell says, “In their letters students also reflect on themselves as readers. They describe how they learned to read; their reading rituals, strategies, and habits; and their needs and desires in encounters with literature“ (p. 273). Another activity that can be used for reader response is teacher conferencing. The teacher should meet periodically with students to discuss accomplishments, difficulties, and future plans for reading (Graves, et al., 2011). Conferencing is beneficial for both the student and the teacher. The students are demonstrating efficacy through honest discussion with their teacher, while the teacher is able to informally assess students’ understanding and progress. Reader response tasks provide students with various ways to show their comprehension of their independent reading.

Reading Workshop is an approach to literacy that promotes student engagement and student choice. Through the use of Reading Workshop a classroom environment is created in which students can learn and develop together. As the teacher guides and facilitates learning, students work their way toward developing into independent readers. The Reading Workshop approach provides students with the skills and strategies necessary to develop into lifelong readers.

METHODOLOGY

Setting and Participants

The study participants were two female, Caucasian middle school language arts teachers at a small, rural middle school, located in the Midwest. One teacher had four years of teaching experience and the other had seventeen years of experience. Both teachers were full time teachers and were teaching in 80-minute block periods each day. The teachers’ class size of students ranged from 15 to 25 students per class. One teacher taught three block classes of 7th grade students while the other teacher taught three block classes of 8th grade students.

Both teachers said they were frustrated with their students’ understanding of language arts and lack of interest in reading. They discuss how they could improve their students’ learning and decided to change their instructional technique from a whole class strategy to an individualized approach, following the Reader’s Workshop framework.

This case study was conducted over a period of eight months to investigate the two teachers’ perceptions of their newly implemented reading program and to learn how they taught with this methodology. Qualitative research methods were utilized in order to gain a more holistic picture of the Reading Workshop experience of the teachers and their students. Because the researcher desired to describe, explore and explain this situation a descriptive case study was selected for the methodology.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this endeavor to investigate the two teachers’ experiences.

- 1.) Why did the teachers switch to Reading Workshop to teach language arts?
- 2.) How effective do the teachers believe their new instruction is for their students?
- 3.) How do the teachers teach their students with Reading Workshop?

DATA COLLECTION AND PROCEDURES

Classroom Observations

Over the course of eight months, 48 total classroom observations, each lasting 80 minutes, were conducted in the 7th and 8th grade language arts classrooms. There were 12 observations of each teacher’s classroom in the spring of one school year and also 12 observations of each teacher’s classroom in the fall of the following school year. The researcher observed the classrooms for evidence of conferencing, instruction and student engagement in reading and writing, all components of Reading Workshop. (See figure #1.)

Figure 1: Researcher’s Classroom Observation Data Collection Form

Researcher’s Reading Workshop Observation Checklist & Note Taking Sheet # _____ 7 TH or 8 TH Grade Classroom (Circle one.)		
Date of Observation: _____	Observed?	Notes:
Teacher conferencing with small groups		
Teacher conferencing with individuals		
Students reading self-selected books		
Students doing reader response activities		
Teacher using mini-lessons		
<u>Other:</u>		

Interviews

Twenty-four, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher over the course of eight months. Each interview lasted between 10 and 30 minutes and was held privately during each teacher’s planning period, lunch break, or before or after school. Twelve interviews were held with each teacher in the spring of one year and 12 interviews were again with each teacher in the fall of the following school year. The questions were slightly modified for each interview, depending upon where in the transition process the teacher was with her students. Initial questions were more heavily focused upon why the teacher felt that change was needed and later questions focused more on how the new methodology was working for the students’ learning. (See figure #2.)

Figure 2: Sample Researcher’s Teacher Interview Data Collection Form

Reading Workshop Teacher Interview Questions, Sheet # _____ 7 TH or 8 TH Grade Teacher (Circle one.)	
Date of Interview: _____	
Question:	Notes:
How effective do you believe your new instruction, Reading Workshop, is for your students’ learning?	
How did you implement Reading Workshop in your classroom?	
How do you teach your students with Reading Workshop?	
How is the Reading Workshop method working now?	
What is troubling you the most?	
<u>Other:</u>	

DATA ANALYSIS

Inductive Coding Process

Data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, and recombining the evidence (Yin, 1994). According to Lincoln & Guba (1985), the essential task of categorizing is to bring together, into categories, data that relate to the same content. To analyze this study's data, the researcher used an inductive coding process.

The inductive approach is a data reduction procedure of analysis taking the raw data and moving it into meaningful themes. The primary mode of analysis is the development of categories from the raw data into a framework that captures key ideas judged to be important by the researcher. The outcome from an inductive analysis is the development of categories that summarizes the data and conveys key themes.

Following an indicative coding process, described by Creswell (2002), (See Figure 3.) the data from the observations and interviews were read and reread as the researcher sought to identify segments of information in the data based on similarities, but also noting data not supporting emerging patterns.

Figure 3: Chart of the Coding Process Adapted from Creswell (2002) Figure 9.4, p. 266

Initial read through data	Identify specific segments of information	Label the segments to create categories	Reduce overlap & redundancy among the categories	Create a model to incorporate most vital categories
Many pages of text	Many segments of text	30-40 categories	15-20 categories	3-8 categories
Codes emerging from the data in this study:		Engaged readers, Selecting own books, Book Clubs, Responsibility, Asking questions, Answering questions, Conferencing, Discussions, Skills taught and practiced, Responding to Texts in many ways, Comprehension, Writing, Partner work, Ownership, Lists of books read, Book Talks, Like real world, Choices, Options, Book Projects, Inform, Post It Note System,	Differentiation, Engagement, Discussions, Asking Questions, Independence, Understanding, Making Connections, Applications, Self-Selections, Choices, Motivation, Real World, Conferencing, Reading & Writing, Learning Skills, Collaborative	Motivation, Comprehension and Authentic Experiences

	Requirements, Understanding, Genres Selected, Teacher Facilitating, Mini-Lessons, Making connections with prior knowledge, Independence, Connecting with other texts, Application of readings	Work, Teacher as a Facilitator, and Reader Response Tasks	
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The researcher initially labeled these segments to create categories. The researcher then removed redundancy, which reduced the categories and recorded the number of times the detail appears in the categories. Next, the most important categories, based on similarities, were identified to determine the themes with details listed to support each theme. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4: Themes Identified in the Data

Themes	Motivation	Comprehension	Authentic Experiences
Detail 1	Individualized learning, Differentiated Instruction	Reader Response tasks and Conferencing	Independence & Responsibility
Detail 2	Reading books at own reading and interest levels	Able to understand books (at own level)	Real World, Life-like scenarios
Detail 3	Opportunities to discuss books with teacher and peers	Book talks between and among students	Making own Choices & Decisions

Member Checks

Member checks of the researcher’s data analysis were then conducted to ensure accuracy, credibility and validity. Each teacher was asked to read the findings of that data analysis and to affirm that the findings reflected their views, feelings and experiences, or to disaffirm that the findings reflect these experiences. Both teachers agreed with the researcher’s findings.

Triangulation

The need for triangulation arises from the ethical need to confirm the validity of the processes. Case study is a triangulated research strategy. In case studies, multiple sources of data improve validity (Yin, 1984). Data triangulation occurred because two methods of data collection were utilized. With data to analyze from the observations and interviews, the researcher was able to have the data checked, or cross-examined, from two sources. For example, data collected from the interviews was checked against the classroom observations data for verification.

FINDINGS

The observations and interviews showed that implementing Reading Workshop in a small, rural Midwestern middle school's language arts classrooms has some positive effects. According to the data, the participating language arts teachers believe their change in teaching methods led to improvements with their students including increased: motivation, comprehension and opportunities for authentic learning experiences. Classroom observations confirmed motivation, comprehension and authentic experiences occurring with the students in their classrooms.

Increased Motivation

Students seemed motivated to read many self-selected texts and partake in reader response tasks during their language arts classes. Students held both formal and informal discussions about the books they were reading, often making recommendations to their peers and teachers. One teacher stated, "When students were reading the same book, I would pull them together and let them talk about it amongst themselves." While teacher recommendations of new books were shared, it was typically the peer recommendations that the students opted to read. Another teacher shared:

I have students begging for reading time, racing to the board to sign up for a conference with me, bragging about how many books they have read and giving suggestions to each other. A week doesn't go by when a student doesn't ask me to research a new book and see if I can find it cheap enough to buy. My classroom became such a pleasant place to be.

One teacher remarked, "Early on I began to notice exactly how much more enthusiastic my students were about reading while they were in my classroom. Students are excited to tell me about their stories." All students had a required reading goal of 40 books each school year. The teachers shared that ninety five percent of the students met that goal the first year and approximately 75% of the students read more than the required 40 books. The same trend was occurring the second year. The teachers stated that in prior years most students were only reading six books per school year. One of the teachers said:

I have some students reading a book every other day, but I also have a couple of students who only read two books a month. That is the beauty of this concept though; the students have the freedom to be honest about their progress and take ownership of it. No one forces them to read a story they don't understand and they are able to make more choices to find something they like.

Students appeared to have a sense of ownership and showed responsibility. A teacher stated in an interview, "They know it's their responsibility to do their own work because they can't rely on their friends' answers now because everyone is reading something different." They had choices regarding the books they read as well as the reading response activities they completed. Care was observed in the book corner of the room with students straightening up

baskets of books and tidying up pillows and beanbag chairs. Students showed responsibility and independence as they self-selected the books they read and completed the tasks.

As the teachers facilitated individual and small group conferences, a sense of excitement existed. Students appeared to enjoy reading and talking about their books. They also talked with other faculty members about what they were reading. One teacher interviewed stated:

After seventeen years in the classroom, I realized there was a better way to teach reading. I had this vision when I started teaching of every student coming into my room wanting to learn and being excited to read, then reality set in. Many students do not like to read and have a million reasons why books are not cool or interesting. I decided I would save the world, or at least every student that came through my classroom door, and I would show them reading was awesome. I tried for years to turn kids onto reading and had some success, but nothing compared to what I see now using Reading Workshop. Students choose their reading material, which promotes a greater connection of what they read to their own lives. The personal connection to literature fuels the drive to read more. My students are reading more now than at any other time in my teaching career. Finally, I am seeing my dream of passionate readers come true.

The other teacher interviewed remarked:

When I look back at what I did in the past I assigned just one novel for my students to read in 6 weeks. Sadly, that was the only book some of my students would read in that entire time frame and that boiled down to about 6 books per year – that's it for their entire year! Now that I'm teaching with Reading Workshop, it has really opened my eyes to exactly how much time my students were reading before; which from my perspective now, was not very much at all. That should embarrass me as a reading teacher! We would read a novel, do the vocab words, have the discussion, write the journals and then do some sort of final assessment. We had dissected the book to death and made it tons of work. No wonder the students weren't benefitting from this! They weren't reading much and they weren't enjoying it! Now my students are required to read 40 books a year and most all will be successful in achieving that goal and most will read more than that! What's going on her now is incredibly exciting and that's because of how I now teach.

Increased Comprehension

Reader response tasks and conference questions required the students to use higher level thinking skills including: (a) application; (b) analysis; (c) synthesis; and (d) evaluation. The completed reader response tasks confirmed most students understood what they were reading as they correctly referenced parts of the texts, made accurate applications and connections to their books and to their own lives. Other reader response tasks that were completed were aligned with the skills taught by the teachers in mini-lessons. Most of these reader response tasks were also fulfilled with accuracy.

Students were observed periodically asking questions of teachers or peers, indicating they understood that they needed more information or something explained to them to better comprehend their book. From the observations, it was clear to see students informed others about the books they were reading, answered peers' questions regarding their books, and knew what was being asked of them in their requirements and tasks. Students kept records of the books they read. Some students created posters of their favorite books; these were displayed on the classrooms walls.

Observations also indicated students made book selections by talking with others and by reading the backs of the books and small sections within the books. During independent reading time, students were occasionally observed going back and revisiting earlier parts of their texts, which is a self-monitoring comprehension strategy taught by the teachers in mini-lessons. They would also use their computers to research items, typically related to their nonfiction books. This helped students build background knowledge, a strategy taught in mini-lessons to increase students' comprehension.

Conferences conducted by the teachers, typically included questions requiring reflection. Teachers also asked probing and follow up questions and encouraged students to give their own opinions at times. Observing students as they conferenced with their teachers, the students appeared to appropriately answer the questions posed about the books they were reading. Students were observed revisiting their texts and using them to demonstrate their understanding to their teachers. Teachers asked students to recall some of the text through retellings or summarizations. Personal responses to the texts were often included as well analysis questions which required the students to compare and contrasts texts. Interviews with the teachers confirmed students were demonstrating comprehension of the reading skills and of the content of their books during their small group and private conferences. One teacher interviewed said:

Conferencing with my students is an excellent way to see how well they understand not only the book, but also if they are improving their skills as readers. When I meet with them they know they are being held accountable for the readings and for applying the skills I've taught in the mini-lessons. Before using Reading Workshop, I would give a paper and pencil quiz over the assigned chapters. Now I can go so much deeper because I take the students' answers and take them to the next level; it really gets them thinking deeply and meaningfully.

The other teacher interviewed said:

When I conference with students, I ask questions to see how well they can make connections, predictions and draw inferences from the text. They must show me they understand the important information. I also informally assess their attitudes toward reading and it's great to say since I switched to teaching this way, the attitudes are almost 100% positive. That's really something for middle school!

Increased Authentic Learning Experiences

During the classes, the conferencing and reader response tasks provided students opportunities to practice real-life skills as they analyzed, integrated, and critically thought upon

their self-selected texts. One teacher commented, “This was a new style of teaching and learning for all of us. It generated enthusiasm and curiosity among all our students. They were welcoming a new challenge and embracing the big change we made to our teaching program. They felt it was more like the real world, like they were being treated with respect and like adults.”

The other teacher shared:

I teach with mini-lessons based upon what my students need. The students apply the concepts to their own books so they engage themselves in their own stories. They are interested in what they are reading and that assists with their comprehension. They wouldn't go to a bookstore and buy a book they didn't want to read, why should it be any different here? When the students are silent reading I meet with groups or individuals. When they are working on their reader response tasks, I still call students back to conference with them. It makes my classroom a big, productive tutoring session. I spend most of my time with the students who seriously needed my help while letting those who didn't need my help as much, work at a faster pace and take their work to a brand new level. To me, it this is the ultimate use of a teacher's time. Those who need help, get it while those who don't, aren't wasting their time listening to me answer tons of questions or going over a lesson again. I can do something new with them, something that they actually need.

From a list of options, students selected the books they wanted to read in the classrooms. Books were organized in baskets according to genres with over 200 books available for selection. Book topics focusing on other subject areas (social studies in particular) were included so that students could practice thinking in interdisciplinary ways.

Students were overheard commenting that the book center was like a bookstore and that the libraries in the classrooms were better than the school library. Students were also permitted to read electronically, if they had their own electronic reader. A teacher shared:

Students now follow the schedule and complete all the work on their own without having to be prompted five times to get to work. The expectation is established and the mini-lessons are taught so students know exactly what to do.

The teachers stressed in their interviews that their reader response choices were not ‘arts and crafts’ activities, but required deep reading, writing and thinking, based on the literature. Students could collaborate on tasks, if they were similar in manner or if the students read the same book. The use of real world problem solving was confirmed in the observations. The reader response tasks typically focused upon the skills taught during the mini-lessons and included choices.

Students could create a brief commercial about their book or create a graphic organizer to illustrate the main points. Students could perform a role-play or skit depicting an important idea or scene from their text. Some students selected drawing and drew illustrations about their books, while others wrote music lyrics to accompany their selection. Students wrote journal entries reflecting upon their thoughts and feelings, while others created newspaper articles,

wrote new story beginnings or endings, or posted book reviews on-line. Some students drew multi-paneled cartoons depicting important ideas, while others were engaged writing poetry about their books or crafting letters, which were mailed to the authors. While most tasks selected were completed within the block period, others were more complex and required many sessions to finish. In addition to the choices of tasks, if there were student generated questions, they often led to the students asking permission to substitute in a different reading response task which would help them answer their questions or wonderings.

One teacher interviewed said:

I give the students the option to choose from a plethora of creative assignments to do for a reading response, including book talks. I have students who have created websites, wanted posters, a pizza, flip books, post cards and even some traditional written reports. I find that giving the students choice is probably the most successful thing I've done as a middle school teacher. To me, this is brilliant! Why hadn't I thought of this before?

DISCUSSION

The Reading Workshop approach has been found to improve students' reading comprehension and attitudes (Atwell, 1998; Graves, Juel, Graves & Dewits, 2011; Meyer, 2010). Qualitative analysis of the data in this study suggest that teaching through a Reading Workshop methodology can have a positive impact on middle grades students' learning. According to the data from this study, improvements with the students included increased motivation, comprehension and learning experiences as a result of participating in Reading Workshop in the middle school language arts classrooms. After years of teaching, the two middle school teachers in this study claim that they realize a better way to teach reading than their previous whole class method. They say their students now connect with texts and read more books than ever before.

Initiative

The two teachers in this study were willing to try something new. Teaching with a new methodology was their idea, not one mandated by the administration. They were motivated to change their way of teaching and excited to try something new to better help their students. Teachers attempting to switch to teaching with a Reading Workshop methodology may want to ease into the format and not go cold turkey when attempting this program for the first time.

Establishing Reading Workshop

Launching Reading Workshop presents many challenges including building a classroom library with grade level and interest appropriate texts, creating mini-lessons that are timely and integrated, and assessing the reading comprehension of each student as they read independently. Assessment can take the form of dialogue in conferencing, written responses such as journals, or book talks, formal and informal evaluations and activities and tasks surrounding the mini-lessons. The teacher becomes a reference or facilitator for the students to aid and guide them on

their independent reading journeys. In Reading Workshop, teachers recommend book titles suitable for students based on reading levels and interests. The teachers also work with each student to set goals such as fluency rate, number of books to read, a genre to try, and strategies to use to improve all aspects of reading. Each student, from gifted to those needing a modified curriculum, can be served within the framework of a Reading Workshop.

Having already established a block schedule was an ideal way for these teachers to switch their teaching to Reading Workshop. In their 80 block schedules, students first received a mini lesson then they were provided time to read. The mini-lessons focused on reading strategies to teach students how to read like experts. Their goal was to get students to read with a purpose. Students gain ownership over texts by selecting what they read. Finally, students respond to the texts they read in a variety of ways.

Student Choice

In Reading Workshop, students are given the power of choice and have opportunities to select a learning mode that works best for them. This high level of independence transcends all modes of assignments: writing, projects, vocabulary and reading. According to the data, Reading Workshop provides students with greater input into and ownership of their learning.

Having books in the classrooms and teachers who understand the importance of reading may help encourage students to read more. Providing students with choices of reading materials increases their interest and engagement in the topic of study. Independent choice of texts in the classroom should be a norm in the middle grades because students are transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn (Stairs & Burgos, 2010). When students become engaged in reading, they will read more books, more often, and they will remember what they have read. Extra reading time, provided in classrooms, gives students knowledge that they might not otherwise gain.

While students in this study were told to self-select their books, those who continually tried to read from the same genre or read books that were too easy received limited choices determined by their teachers. This was to expose students to reading more types of literature and to give them skills in many styles of writing without overwhelming or boring the students.

Books Required

In order to successfully establish Reading Workshop, books need to be available for students to read. In this study, the teachers had the support of their administration. The administration provided the funds to purchase books and to establish comfortable reading areas (bean bags, large pillows) for each classroom. Teachers also added books they obtained from garage sales and used bookstores. Faculty and community members were asked to donate new or used books of interest and they did. At the end of the school year, students were asked to donate books they no longer wanted in their homes that other students may enjoy reading. Most wrote messages to future students inside the book covers. When students suggested new titles to their teachers, they were almost always purchased and added to the classroom libraries. Students were permitted to read on electronic readers, but they had to purchase the electronic books on their own, or download them from a library.

Teachers need to create an inviting atmosphere with immediate access to books (Tompkins, 2010). An essential part of increasing reading experiences for students is building a balanced and organized classroom library (Galda & Graves, 2007; Graves, Juel, Graves, & Dewitz, 2011; Sanacore & Palumbo, 2010; Tompkins, 2010; Vacca, Vacca, Marc, 2010). Because of the new Reading Workshop program, the teachers' classroom libraries were increased. It is imperative to assist students in creating meaning from a text and building and connecting background knowledge in all subject areas. Students need high quality books to help them do this.

Independent Reading

The data suggests that these teachers believe students need opportunities to read self-selected books. Independent reading is central in reading instruction for middle grade students. Students who are involved in independent reading activities display increases in literacy and reading endurance (Tompkins, 2010; Vacca, Vacca & Marc, 2010). Allocated time for independent reading in classrooms is vital, because not doing so ignores the reality of the home lives of many middle grades students. Students need to read widely, and the teachers believe that many of their students are not reading at home; the students do not have the books or the time. If reading is important, and if educators desire wide reading outside of school, it should start with teachers setting aside time for reading in school – on school time.

CONCLUSION

After years of teaching, the two middle school teachers in this study shared that they have now realized a better way to teach reading than their previous whole class method. Their students now connect with texts and read more books than ever before. Establishing Reading Workshop presents many challenges including building a classroom library with grade and interest appropriate texts, creating mini-lessons that are timely and integrated, and assessing the reading comprehension of each student as they read independently. Assessment can take many forms including conferencing, written responses and tasks surrounding the mini-lessons and books. The teacher becomes “guide on the side” to assist students on their independent reading journey. In Reading Workshop, teachers recommend book titles suitable for students based on reading levels and interests. The teacher also works with each student to set goals such as fluency rate, number of books to read, a genre to try, and strategies to use to improve all aspects of reading. Each student, from gifted to those needing a modified curriculum, can be served within the framework of a Reading Workshop.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The list below identifies recommendations for future research. Future research could

1. Examine the standardized reading test scores of these students.
2. Examine Reading Workshops established in urban and suburban schools.
3. Conduct interviews of students participating in Reading Workshop classrooms.
4. Examine Reading Workshop in classrooms without block scheduling.
5. Address the impact of Reading Workshop students in content area classrooms.

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