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## *Introduction*

This book introduces instruction in strategic, differentiated reading groups for middle school classrooms. Small group reading instruction has a long history in elementary and middle schools. Until fifteen years ago, small group instruction was most often a place where students sat with their teachers to work on reading skills. These groups allowed the teacher to give different instruction to different groups of students as the teacher saw fit. Most teachers remember, from their own experience as students or from teaching long ago, that these groups were stable in their membership. Students were placed in groups in September and they stayed in those same groups for the year. More recently, *guided reading* groups (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Opitz & Ford, 2001) have focused upon reading strategies and are, notably, flexible in membership, with students moving in and out as their literacy skills and strategies develop at different rates. The field owes a tremendous debt to the scholars who helped us see the value of flexibility in these groups for all grades and reading levels.

Strategic, differentiated reading groups come out of our work in K–5 reading instruction. In working with K–5 teachers on guided reading we discovered that despite their best intentions, they were often unable to do guided reading as often or as well as they would have liked. Part of the struggle, our further inquiry suggested, was that the groups went on too long to be productive for the rest of the students. Part of the struggle was that planning lessons for multiple groups was unrealistic given a teacher’s other responsibilities and limited time; another part of the struggle had to do with the difficulty in implementing effective practices inside the group. We offered elementary teachers a simpler model for guided reading that we call *responsive guided reading groups* (see Berne & Degener, 2010, for more

detail on the way these groups function in elementary classrooms). As we began working in K–8 buildings (which are the norm in the large urban area in which we work), the middle school teachers asked about adapting these groups for the needs of adolescent readers. We had always believed these groups would be effective with readers of all ages, though middle school teachers often shy away from small group instruction. Some avoid small group instruction because they believe the groups feel so elementary. Some avoid it because they have no experience seeing it with students in these grades. Still others avoid it because the groups can be cumbersome, time intensive, and inelegant. We see the promise of these groups, and also the difficulty, and offer middle school teachers a model that, we believe, maximizes the value while minimizing the struggles.

Before we present a detailed discussion of the small group work we recommend for middle school teachers and students, we discuss the ways that middle school language arts teachers differentiate throughout their literacy block. It is important that differentiation not be relegated only to small group instruction, but a vital component of everything we do with students. We feel it important to embed our discussion of small group instruction in our bigger ideas about the entire literacy block. Thus, we begin with an overview discussion of the conceptual ideas underpinning excellence in middle school literacy instruction. Chapter 2 presents a more detailed discussion of where and when various instructional practices fit into a middle school day.

## **DIFFERENTIATED LITERATURE INSTRUCTION**

Middle school language arts teachers are most often asked to teach two subjects at once. They are, of course, responsible for the demands of literature as a content area. In this course of study, they teach students about the characteristics of various literary genres; story and fictional text structure; figurative language; literary periods and authors; and archetypal plots, themes, and character traits. Middle school teachers are often anxious to share the stories, poetry, and drama that they loved when they were students with the students they find in front of them. Our observations of dozens of middle school language arts teachers suggests that in large measure, teachers are comfortable and skilled at selecting and sharing rich classic and contemporary young adult literature.

In the last dozen or so years, there has been much attention focused upon the ways in which teachers deliver this content. Book clubs, literature circles, and other small group interactions have helped teachers involve more students in their own learning. These structures have also allowed opportunities for teachers to provide different texts for different level students. We are always thrilled to see students discussing literature on their own and almost never fail to get excited along with them as they talk together about wonderful books, poems, and other kinds of texts.

There are times, however, when a teacher determines that the entire class will read the same novel. In this case, differentiation of support is essential. The following example highlights the work of an exemplary sixth-grade teacher as she organizes her literature instruction to differentiate for student levels:

Ms. Simon's sixth-grade students are reading Lois Lowry's dystopian novel *The Giver*. As in many middle school classes, Ms. Simon's students have a wide range of reading abilities. Some students read at a second- or third-grade level, while others have no problem with high school-level reading. Even so, Ms. Simon has determined that all students should have access to this novel, which is rich in thematic importance and always evokes strong opinions and lively discussion from students. When assigning reading to be done independently in class or as homework, Ms. Simon knows that her strongest readers will need little support and will easily comprehend the basic story. She knows the thematic complexity will come out in class discussion and in their writing, so she leaves them alone on their initial read. Her largest population of students, those reading right around grade level, will be able to make meaning of the plot with some support. For this group, she designs a readers' guide that previews vocabulary, offers chapter summaries before each chapter, and suggests guiding questions. She instructs this group to use this guide to assist their reading and to ask for more support if necessary. For her lowest level readers, she provides an audio version, downloaded from a school supported online source, in which the author herself reads the slightly abridged text. The students read along on their versions, and Ms. Simon alerts them to the fact that some passages may be shortened or skipped. These students will be able to participate in class discussion of the text as the themes, plot, and figurative language are available to them through their listening skills.

This is an example of differentiated literature instruction. Clearly, the priority is access to the ideas in the text and this is accomplished for different students in different ways. If all students can comprehend, talk, and write about *The Giver*, Ms. Simon's instruction has been successful. We greatly admire this classroom example because even though the three groups of students access the text in different ways, their varied reading levels do not keep them from sharing the experience of an age-appropriate text. A decade earlier, all the students might have received the same instruction on this text. It would have been simple for some, a challenge for others, and nearly impossible for those who struggled, and we didn't do much about that. Though we have learned much about differentiation in the past decades, these practices persist in some classrooms today. Ms. Simon is able to differentiate, allowing students to learn different things in

different ways, but still to share the experience of a text she believes is worthy of study. Certainly, there are times when Ms. Simon has groups reading different novels, but not all times. Struggling readers deserve access to texts at their social level, even if they cannot read them independently. They are most often given texts that are below grade level—which makes sense—but these texts are also frequently below their social level. Simple, elementary texts are demotivating for middle school readers who may be quite mature in their thinking and understanding even if their reading level is low. We want to expose all middle school students to texts that are at their social level even if the texts are well above their reading level. The preceding example depicts this possibility.

## STRATEGIC READING INSTRUCTION

In addition to this kind of literature discussion, and often in the same class period, middle school teachers are responsible for teaching what we call *strategic reading*. Strategic reading instruction calls for different teaching practices, different kinds of texts, and different assessments than does literature instruction. This does not mean that students don't read literature strategically, only that strategic reading instruction has different primary aims and purposes than does literature instruction.

With strategic reading instruction, the focus is not on the text at hand but on the way that one *reads a text*. Strategic reading instruction aims for students to gain experience using reading strategies that transfer across time and texts. Because of this, understanding the content of the text is less important than the lessons learned about reading.

Compare the following example of strategic reading instruction with the example of literature instruction found earlier:

The eighth graders in Ms. Thomas's class watch and listen as she cognitively models her own reading of an article from the *New York Times*, "Orchestras on Big Screens: Chase Scenes Needed?" (2010) about the new movement in the arts, wherein technicians beam orchestral concerts to theaters around the country so that these performances might be watched in real time. She reads and thinks aloud to model for her students her own reading process. The actual text appears in bold; her thinking aloud is in italics:

**The performing arts have long been holdouts for unfiltered, direct connection between audiences and performers in a digitized, electronic and screen-laden world** (p. A1). *Okay, I am thinking that they are saying that fancy things like opera and symphony usually are snobby about television but now maybe they are changing their mind. I think that is what they are saying, but I am going to read it again just to be*

*sure. [reads aloud] Okay, yep, that is what they are saying. I am going to go on.*

**Opera houses, ballet companies, even the National Theater in London, are competing to lure audiences to live high-definition broadcasts in movie theaters, many of which are then shown again. It is the HD-ification of the arts, and it is already affecting programming decisions along with costume and set design, lighting choices and even ticket prices (p. A1).** *Hmm, there is definitely a word I do not know in all that and it seems like an important one. HD-ification. So I think I am going to look at the word and see if I can understand any of the parts. I know that HD usually stands for high definition because I have an HD television at home, and I think "ification" means something like doing something like certification means to certify, so from that I am going to make an inference that HD-ification means becoming high definition. That seems to work in that sentence so I am going to go with it.*

Ms. Thomas then asks her students to summarize what they saw her do. One student points out that she reread a part that she wasn't sure of and another student noted that she used things she knows about words to infer the meaning of an unknown word. Ms. Thomas repeats these strategies, copies them on chart paper, and tells students that they will now practice using the same strategies they watched her use. Ms. Thomas pulls three small stacks of texts out of her file cabinet. For her highest readers, she distributes an article on the president's recent visit to China. For her middle readers, she hands out a piece of a long article on organic farming. For those who struggle, she offers a section of their social studies textbook on immigration. Each student begins to read their text as Ms. Thomas reminds them of the two strategies they witnessed her using and she hopes they will focus upon as they read texts that she assures them are "quite a challenge."

Ms. Thomas knows that students need to learn how to read strategically on texts that are in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) or just beyond what they can do on their own. She also knows that there are varied levels in her class. If she were to distribute the same text to all students, some would read it with ease, for others it would be a modest struggle, and still others would be frustrated no matter how much support was offered. Her wise solution is to teach a common lesson to all and then ask students to practice the modeled strategy on a text that is at an appropriate level for their learning. Ms. Thomas worries little about the content of the text; instead, her focus in text selection is on finding something that will be a modest challenge for each group. Ms. Thomas thought it was very reasonable to categorize student

readers in three groups for this purpose, though some teachers might divide the class into more than three groups. She did not pick the texts in order for students to learn content or share an experience of reading, so she picked three different topics that coincided with the reading level for which she was looking. In this, she was able to modestly challenge each group. Ms. Thomas is well aware that students will note that there are different levels of reading. She makes great efforts to group students in all sorts of ways, for all sorts of purposes, throughout her language arts instruction so that all levels of students interact around books and writing. For this activity, however, she lets the students know that she has selected texts that she believes are appropriate for their learning.

### THE NEED FOR BOTH LITERATURE AND STRATEGIC READING INSTRUCTION

The examples of Ms. Simon and Ms. Thomas exemplify two crucial, yet distinct, teaching practices and are summarized in Table 1.1. The first shows differentiation in the teaching of the same literary text. All students in Ms. Simon's class read the same text, yet the support for their reading was different. The second shows instruction in strategic reading with multiple texts, customized to student level. In this example, students in Ms. Thomas's class received the same lesson, but practiced the strategy on different texts. In Chapter 2, we discuss in detail the placement of both of these kinds of instruction in a middle school language arts classroom or literacy block. These two emphases (along with an emphasis on writing and self-selected pleasure reading) will provide students with the necessary tools for accelerating their skill in reading all kinds of texts.

**Table 1.1** Literature Instruction and Strategic Reading Instruction

	<i>Texts</i>	<i>Genre</i>	<i>Support</i>	<i>Emphasis</i>
<b>Literature instruction</b>	Same for all	Novel Poetry Drama Creative nonfiction	Varied	Text content Theme Character Plot Figurative language Literature enjoyment
<b>Strategic reading instruction</b>	Differentiated by instructional level	Nonfiction/ informational texts Content-area textbooks	Same for all	Reading strategies



## STRATEGIC READING GROUPS

The work that Ms. Thomas did with her whole class is critical in introducing them to new strategies for managing difficult texts. In addition to this instruction, students need to work in close proximity to their teachers, in small groups. The small group instruction we will describe provides the opportunity for teachers to listen to students read aloud individually—a rare and extremely valuable opportunity for middle grade teachers. When students read aloud, teachers can hear their strengths and can identify areas of concern. They also can provide ad hoc strategy instruction that arises directly from a student miscue or comprehension breakdown. There is compelling research (e.g., Durkin, 1993; Wilkinson & Anderson, 1995) to suggest that students gain little from round-robin reading (i.e., reading aloud while other students follow along), but they do need to read aloud to skilled adults who can use what they hear as a valuable formative assessment. Strategic, differentiated reading groups focus on individual student reading, which results in a customized teacher cue that the student can take away from the group and practice independently. Chapters 4 and 5 focus upon helping middle grade teachers learn how to listen to readers and provide appropriate cues.

Teachers want to do the kind of intense, effective instruction that small group instruction allows. They believe that students benefit from one-on-one attention focused upon their individual reading; however, the organization and management involved in setting up and enacting the groups completely overwhelms them. In response to this, we have put together a simplified model of small group strategic reading instruction that is manageable for new teachers and teachers new to small group instruction of this kind. In particular, we have listened carefully to teachers' concerns about text selection, planning, time management, and engaging the other students in productive independent work. We begin this discussion with the principles we relied upon to create the model. Then we offer an outline of the activities and timing to use as a template for getting started. Each of these principles is elaborated upon and instantiated in classroom practices in the chapters that follow. For now, we offer a practical and conceptual overview.

### **Strategic reading groups have a predictable, transparent structure.**

Adolescents and teachers benefit from routine, particularly when they engage in the kind of challenging work that takes place in strategic, differentiated reading groups. For this reason, these groups run the same way each time. Later in this chapter, we provide a very specific "schedule" complete with timing, yet we offer this only as a model. We hope that teachers think about the spirit in which all the elements are included and make decisions about how their time should be allotted in these groups.

**In strategic reading groups, the teacher waits for the student to miscue or have a comprehension breakdown before deciding what to teach. Thus, the preplanning is limited.**

In a strategic reading group, student errors dictate instruction. It is the student's reading that tells the teacher what the student might learn in that moment. Consider the following example:

Ari is a seventh-grader working with his teacher, Mr. Sanchez, in a strategic reading group. He reads a passage from an April 30, 2010, *New York Times* article on the Gulf oil spill that his teacher believed would be a challenge for him and his like-leveled classmates.

**Ari:** Officials in the Obama administration began for the first time Friday to publicly chast . . . chast . . . chasten?

**Mr. Sanchez:** Okay, I hear you are struggling with that word so I am going to stop you there. Why not go back and read the same sentence again, seeing if thinking about the beginning of the sentence might help you with that word.

**Ari:** Officials in the Obama administration began for the first time Friday to publicly . . . [stops reading]

**Mr. Sanchez:** Okay, that didn't seem to solve it. I think we might want to try to guess at the meaning of the word, which I will tell you is pronounced "chastise"—is that a word you know?

**Ari:** No.

**Mr. Sanchez:** Okay, well, one thing I do when I come to a word I don't know is I see if I can guess at it by thinking about the meaning of the sentence. What is it that we know about the sentence before that word? What is it about?

**Ari:** About the president doing something for the first time.

**Mr. Sanchez:** Good, but that probably doesn't give us enough to go on, so let's skip that word and keep reading and see if the end of this part helps us to better understand that word and that sentence.

**Ari:** BP America for its handling of the spreading oil gusher in the Gulf of Mexico, calling the oil company's current