

## **Middle School Teachers Can Use Informal Reading Inventories To Identify Needs of Struggling Readers**

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*Reading problems that develop in elementary school and are not resolved could cause serious gaps in content learning during middle school years. Content area teachers may need assistance in diagnosing and prescribing effective remedies for addressing the needs of struggling readers. Teacher educators can incorporate into courses an evidence-based framework for helping middle level educators use an informal reading inventory to meet the literacy and subsequently content area achievement needs of their students. The most efficient comprehensive instrument for classroom teachers to use is the informal reading inventory. The results establish independent, instructional, and frustration levels of reading that help teachers match students to appropriate text. A number of inventories are available with varying levels of comprehensiveness giving teachers a wide berth from which to select instruments appropriate for individual students.*

Reading problems that develop in elementary school and are not resolved could cause serious gaps in content learning during middle school years. Content area teachers often are not fully trained by teacher preparation programs to diagnose and prescribe effective remedies for helping students who have difficulties with reading. Schools and districts have responded by providing teachers access to a wide array of remedial programs and instructional materials. Any successful intervention, however, should be informed by assessments that yield useful data about students' strengths and weaknesses.

Middle level educators need to be prepared to teach content to struggling readers, and professors at a southeastern regional university responded by creating a framework for practical applications of research-based diagnostic measures that will lead to meaningful supportive instruction. During coursework and field experiences in undergraduate and graduate courses, developing and veteran teachers learn how to administer an informal reading inventory, interpret the results, and develop effective instructional plans. Middle school teachers who know how to

use this valuable instrument will be better equipped to analyze the reading strengths and needs of their students so that they can adapt instruction appropriately. The purpose of this article is to provide teacher educators an evidence-based framework for helping middle level educators use an informal reading inventory to meet the literacy and subsequently content area achievement needs of their students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In spite of the emphasis placed on helping all students improve their academic achievement, many students reach middle school without the tools necessary to be successful in content area classrooms (Salinger, 2003). These students struggle to become independent learners but are frequently disengaged from the learning taking place in their classrooms. Students are expected to construct meaning from textbooks that may be written above the grade level for which they are intended or they may be required to respond to the text, not with personal connections, but in a more formal manner, drawing on evidence from the text itself (Guthrie & Davis,

2003). The content-driven nature of middle schools adds to the frustration of students who are struggling readers who have inadequate vocabulary development and comprehension skills (Rasinski & Padak, 2005).

Middle school teachers are faced with the challenge of providing instruction that is explicit, rigorous, and thorough so that students may construct meaning from texts (Salinger, 2003). Because textbooks are an integral part of the learning that typically takes place in middle school classroom, bringing students and texts together is crucial. Students must be able to be construct knowledge from text for them to develop insights and perspectives (Vacca & Vacca, 2005).

Teaching specific subject matter implies that students are guided into understanding how knowledge is structured and presented in content area material. It is far more than “assigning and telling” (Bruner, 1961; Vacca & Vacca, 2005). Teaching reading is a multifaceted process. It requires training, practice, and experience in selecting and using assessment instruments that promote sound research-based instructional practices (Jennings, Caldwell & Lerner, 2006).

Instruction that is based on five specific practices (oral or shared reading, guided reading, word study, self-selected reading and writing, and explicit comprehension strategy instruction) will result in bona fide learning for all students (Ash, 2002). These practices related to literacy acquisition and teaching content material promotes success for students across the learning spectrum, but especially for struggling readers. The informal reading inventory is a viable option for assessing students’ literacy strengths and needs.

### **What is an Informal Reading Inventory?**

An informal reading inventory is a diagnostic tool designed to measure reading growth, match students to

appropriate texts, verify a suspected problem and/or use as a guide for instructional intervention (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006). It is an informal non-standardized instrument that is administered in a one-on-one setting. Informal reading inventories are valuable in that they assess a student’s ability to decode and comprehend both narrative and expository text in a natural, meaningful, purposeful setting. The stress factor is low in that the administration is non-threatening and the results are used for diagnosis and placement purposes rather than high-stakes decision-making. It is truly a “working” assessment process where results are used primarily for instructional purposes.

Informal reading inventories can vary considerably in terms of the comprehensive scope of the diagnostic potential, but all are similar in that they are self-contained and match students with appropriate levels of instructional texts. Student profiles provide a snapshot of student performance and can be used to measure growth from pre-and post testing sessions. The class profile can be used to develop short term grouping configurations and to develop strategic lessons.

The timeframe for the entire administration of the IRI for one student is generally about 30 minutes. While this may seem time consuming, it is important to note that informal reading inventories are generally only administered to struggling students who appear to have a reading problem. Para-professionals or volunteers can be trained to administer the instrument and the teacher analyzes and interprets the results.

### **Specific Components and Purposes**

The results from the administration of an informal reading inventory provide an estimate of a students’ independent, instructional, and frustration levels for

both narrative and expository texts during oral reading, silent reading, and listening. Teachers may choose from a variety of available informal reading inventories (See Table 1). Some are more comprehensive than others, but most measure student ability in four major areas: sight word recognition, decoding, comprehension, and reading rate.

#### *Sight Words*

The administration of a leveled and graduated list of sight words developed from any of a variety of well-documented sources (e.g. Dolch or Fry words) in a specific sequence establish their independent, instructional level, and frustration levels of their ability to identify words in isolation quickly (automaticity). The process requires students to recognize and pronounce the target words within a specified time limit. The results are used to establish a starting point for administering the passages.

#### *Reading Passages*

Leveled reading passages, depending on the particular informal reading inventory, range from Pre-K to High School. Some inventories only assess reading levels through 8<sup>th</sup> grade while others may focus more on emergent literacy or may include passages for high school. Middle school teachers will need an inventory that covers at least through grade 8. The reading passages are controlled for difficulty and aligned with the sight words. Each passage is accompanied by a pre-reading set of questions designed to assess prior knowledge and familiarity with text and is followed by post-reading comprehension questions. Some inventories provide opportunities for “Look Backs” and “Think Aloud” activities (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006) and others simply assess comprehension based on the initial reading of the passage (Silvaroli & Wheelock, 2004). Comprehension is addressed through both implicit and explicit

questions. Reading passages can be administered to assess a student’s skills in oral reading, silent reading, and/or listening. Pre-reading and follow-up questioning generally remain the same for all three modes.

#### *Oral Reading, Silent Reading, and Listening Ability:*

Oral administration of reading passages focuses on the student’s ability to decode words in context by reading passages aloud and answering comprehension questions. Oral reading ability can provide valuable insights into students’ thinking strategies as they decode text. Reading passages silently allows teachers to determine the student’s ability to interact with text internally and without prompting. Students in today’s school environment are required to take a number of high stakes tests that require them to read silently, comprehend and respond to questions in strictly controlled settings. The major purpose of assessing listening skills is to determine the student’s ability to process text by listening to the teacher read to them. The focus is on students’ ability to listen strategically and answer comprehension questions about the content of the passage. Results are valuable in establishing student capacity to engage in the meaning of text. Students whose listening ranges are higher than either their oral or silent comprehension demonstrate Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1962). That is, within the instructional ranges of their listening ability, they have the capacity to learn from text they process aurally. Listening ability is particularly important for middle level learners who are often shifting to a more independent teacher-centered lecture instructional format.

#### *Reading Rate*

Fluency is one of the five dimensions of reading identified by the National Reading Panel as critical for developing reading skills and improving comprehension

(National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Students who are fluent readers demonstrate their ability to use mechanics of text such as punctuation and capitalization to read with expression at the optimum rate thereby enhancing their comprehension. Teachers can assess a students' fluency by measuring rate of reading in both narrative and expository text. To do so, they simply time the oral reading sections of the informal reading inventory administration. Timed readings can be valuable in determining if students are able to read and comprehend a sufficient amount of text during timed standardized testing situations.

### **Implications for Instruction**

Teachers who understand capacity for learning through a variety of modalities such as oral reading, silent reading, and listening can develop differentiated instructional plans that allow students to maintain an academic flow of learning. Based upon the results of informal reading inventories, teachers then develop and incorporate instructional strategies into their content teaching that will ameliorate the enabling reading behaviors that may preventing their students from gaining meaningful knowledge from text.

Instruction should build on students' strengths and focus on improving major areas of need. Students with low vocabularies and poor decoding skills are disadvantaged when reading content material and may require intensive direct instruction in word recognition. Error pattern analysis from miscues made during the administration of informal reading inventories will help teachers decide whether students need assistance with decoding strategies. Students who use context effectively may routinely correct their miscues during reading, but when they continually make miscues that detract from meaning they may not be mentally engaging in the text. Results from comprehension

analysis will help teachers gain a deeper understanding of how students response to literal and inferential questions, how they merge existing background knowledge with text or what gaps in background information may be preventing them from interpreting text.

Students who learn best from listening may benefit from learning activities where they are read to by a fluent reader or where they listen to tapes to help them comprehend their content materials and texts thus mitigating the often widening gap in their content achievement. Students who read slowly may need practice with timed readings to help them establish a pace for success in standardized testing situations. And finally, teachers who diagnose literacy needs and prescribe intervention are better informed to made referrals for additional assistance when needed. Those referrals can be accompanied by meaningful work samples from the assessment sessions that depict context embedded strengths and areas of need.

### **Summary**

Middle school teachers must accommodate a variety of reading abilities in their classrooms. Yet, they routinely face the daunting task of teaching content to students with moderate to severe reading problems who are drifting further and further into an achievement gap. The urgent nature of the situation and the demands of accountability and high-stakes testing have prompted many schools to respond by requiring all middle school teachers to teach reading. Toward that goal, the schools have expended considerable dollars in purchasing "intact" reading programs with highly scripted lessons. While this is a commendable gesture, it falls seriously short of providing teachers with the strategies they need to blend reading skills instruction with content instruction. These ancillary programs may be valuable

supplements to the middle school curriculum, however, they do not always address the need for assessing a student's level of literacy acquisition so that text and activities can be matched to ability. For teachers to effectively use these programs and curriculum materials to accommodate struggling students, they must first diagnose strengths and areas of needs. The informal reading inventory can be a valuable addition to middle level educators' repertoire of teaching and assessment strategies. Data gathered from information reading inventories can help to better inform instruction. Teachers who are able to analyze students' reading strengths and needs can provide instruction that is comprehensive, effective, and supportive of improved academic content area achievement. Teacher educators who recognize the needs of middle level classroom teachers can fortify teacher preparation by providing developing and veteran teachers with the necessary tools for helping struggling students. The informal reading inventory provides a framework for classroom teachers to meet the literacy and subsequently content area achievement needs of their students.

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**Table 1**

Sample Bibliography of Informal  
Reading Inventories

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