

## On Using Textbooks in Middle School

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### Background

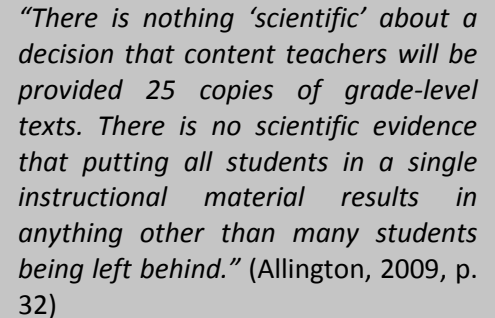
One of the most important steps I took to move toward a fully differentiated classroom and the accompanying rise in student performance was to abandon the practice of adopting and issuing a single textbook.

I had been aware of the problems many students have reading standard middle school texts since I began teaching Social Studies in 2004 after thirteen years teaching French. Early on, I addressed this with what I considered to be a strong content area reading instruction program. I applied extensive time to teaching kids how to read content texts, with the idea that this would help the struggling reader. It turns out this was not an effective, research-based method.

The main reason to abandon the practice of adopting a single, standard textbook in my teaching assignment is that a large percentage of students cannot read it independently.

Secondarily, the typical textbook has too much information for the ten months I have to address the course content. Often texts do not adequately address what the state core curriculum demands. The publisher-created exercises leave a lot to be desired.

The "Response to Intervention" process soon to be integrated into NYS schools mandates that the regular education classroom be the first stage of intervention when students are failing. The practices in the classroom must be "linked to scientifically-based interventions". This means that the regular educator's classroom practices will come under scrutiny when students fail. Before advancing to more intensive intervention, the regular educator will need to demonstrate that the instruction that the students received was scientifically research based. This represents a change in orientation regarding special education, a change I support because I know that this change is reasonable and in everyone's best interest. The change is this: the classroom can no longer be a static place with a single teaching strategy and the regular educator must accept responsibility for all students in the class. Not everyone will pass, certainly, but special education (including gifted-talented) can no longer be uniquely something done outside class by someone else. Using a single textbook is not a scientifically research-based practice unless all of the readers in the class can read the book.



*"There is nothing 'scientific' about a decision that content teachers will be provided 25 copies of grade-level texts. There is no scientific evidence that putting all students in a single instructional material results in anything other than many students being left behind." (Allington, 2009, p. 32)*

## Access Denied

I would like to see a research project done correlating low reading proficiency with failing Regents examinations<sup>1</sup>. I predict that there is a high correlation. Students who cannot read the class text are effectively excluded from much of the course content, especially the repetition of content necessary for learning outside class in high school. Since most regular classrooms offer little in the way of auditory alternatives (save for perhaps a lecture on the topic that parallels the text), it is obvious why students who cannot read the text and who cannot access the information repeatedly for long term retention do not learn content. Though this paper focuses on the middle school student, the conclusion is true for high school.

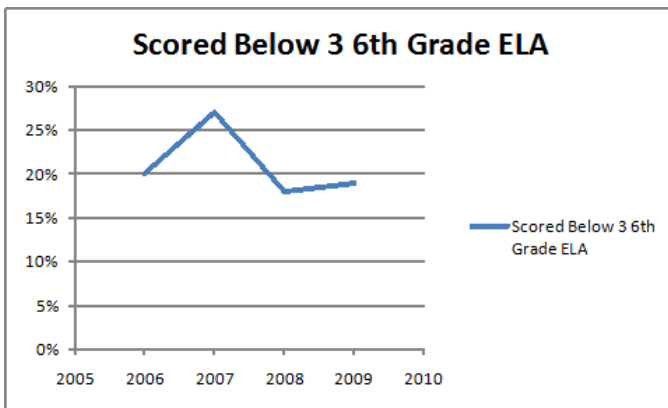


Figure 1

Why, at any level save university, would one demand students work out of a book they cannot read?

Reading instruction in the regular classroom stops after sixth grade in my district and I assume this to be true of many others. A large number of students continue to need reading instruction, especially reading content area material since elementary reading instruction tends to focus heavily on fiction reading.

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of students who scored below level three on the sixth grade English Language Arts State Test at Schroon Lake Central School (NYSED, 2010) over four years from 2006-2009<sup>2</sup>. The range is 18-27% with an average of 21%. Students scoring below level 3, the cutoff for "passing", are not reading on grade level and will not be able to read content area textbooks at a middle school reading level. In terms of real people, that's nineteen people of ninety-eight over those four years who were denied access in my classroom to the content in text form because I adopted a single textbook.

My own view is that students scoring a "low 3" on these four exams would also not be able to read content area middle school textbooks, which I think is supported by the fact that in 2010 the NYS Education Department adjusted the scoring on the tests to better reflect students' actual level of proficiency (Department, 2010).

<sup>1</sup> There is an interesting connection here: on average around 20% of students failed any given Regents Exam at SLCS over the period 2004-2008. Source: NYS School Report Cards.

<sup>2</sup> "Failed" NYS English Language Arts Grade 6, Schroon Lake Central School, 2006-2009

2006	20% of 32 tested
2007	27% of 22 tested
2008	18% of 28 tested
2009	19% of 16 tested

On average 21% of students in these classes cannot read the content area textbook independently. Though this sample is small and only reflects my particular district, it is certain a similar situation exists in any public school where students are heterogeneously grouped. Choosing to issue a single textbook to all students effectively denies access to content material in text form to a fifth of the students in this sample. How can one justify that?

Research on this is clear. Dr. Richard Allington, though addressing K-4 Response to Intervention strategies, makes important observations no less true in grades five through twelve:

"[...] on average, most teachers select one text. Most often this text is most appropriate for the average or higher-achieving students. The struggling readers get left behind." (Allington, 2009, p. 3)

"[...] using grade-level classroom texts with the truly struggling readers simply doesn't work. On the other hand, O'Connor and colleagues demonstrated that using *appropriately* difficult texts, books at the students' reading level, produced substantive reading growth." (Allington, 2009, p. 31)

"What should be surprising is finding so many schools that still provide struggling readers with texts that are too hard, day after day, in subject after subject." (Allington, 2009, p. 31)

"The goal is to ensure that struggling readers have texts in their hands, all day long, that they can read – texts they can learn science and social studies content from, texts they can learn to read from, texts that are at an appropriate level of complexity." (Allington, 2009, p. 32)

Dr. Allington is not alone. The same conclusion regarding the necessity of providing texts at students' reading level is attested in research from Carnegie Corporation of New York's Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy: "Instructors should [...] introduce different kinds of texts that are within students' instructional reading levels where they can use the prior knowledge already developed to tackle discipline related problems in the texts" (Lee, 2010, p. 16)

Furthermore, I would argue that the percentage of students who cannot read their content area textbooks does not change much over their high school career and that the people who could not read the standard textbook when I had them in seventh grade still cannot read their textbooks now that they are in tenth or eleventh. The hugely intensive intervention necessary to bring older struggling readers to grade-level is not in place. <sup>3</sup>

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Some may justify the practice of standard textbooks on the grounds that the number of struggling readers is small and that outside interventions such as resource room are responsible to address these concerns. I would argue further that twenty percent is too many people for outside service providers to possibly handle and that the most effective help for these people is in the regular classroom. Dr. Allington notes: "Another problem with most school interventions is that even when they are scheduled outside of the classroom reading block, they typically do not add enough instructional time to be expected to double or triple the student's rate of reading acquisition." (Allington, 2009, p. 15)

## Content Knowledge and Content Area Reading Strategies

Supporting readers in the content areas includes ensuring students build adequate background knowledge. This is absolutely vital. The inability to learn from content area text is often more a result of a lack of background knowledge than of mechanical reading skills. From the Carnegie Corporation: "Prior knowledge has been repeatedly shown as a strong predictor of comprehension [...]. Building and activating prior knowledge in relation to academic disciplines is one area that content area classrooms are uniquely positioned to accomplish." (Lee, 2010, p. 16) "The ability to comprehend written texts is not a static or fixed ability, but rather one involves a dynamic relationship between the demands of texts and the prior knowledge and goals of readers." (Lee, 2010, p. 3)

## Answering Challenges

### ***We already offer the option to access audio versions of the textbook. Isn't that enough?***

Clearly this can be very helpful. Studies "did show score gains from audio presentation for students with disabilities but no or only small increases for students without disabilities. This finding suggests that audio presentation removes barriers to reading comprehension for students with disabilities that were not present for students without disabilities." (Wise, 2010) However, I caution that if the reason the student cannot read the text is associated with lack of prior knowledge and vocabulary, then the audio version of the text will not be helpful. My

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. Allington notes that there is not a lot of research on interventions aimed at older learners and that the programs that have been studied have shown less success than those for younger learners. (Allington, 2009, p. 8) It would appear that there is a window of opportunity to address reading problems and that it is during the period of grades K-4.

experience is that when struggling readers are given a wide range of options for information, including video sources, they never choose the audio textbook. Oddly enough, I observe that struggling readers generally prefer textbooks and higher performing students generally prefer audio-video presentations.

***How can I teach using more than one textbook when no two textbooks are identical? I cannot possibly create two or three sets of activities. I do not have time for this.***

Knowingly disenfranchising 20%-30% of my students is a problem serious enough to merit dropping something else to make time to address this issue. In addition, building a class that is "literacy-rich" looks a lot different than classes dominated by publisher-created worksheets programmed to each textbook chapter. From the Carnegie report: "As opposed to asking students to read for homework or as a classroom assignment and then simply answer questions when they finish reading, literacy rich content area classrooms include a variety of instructional routines that provide guidance to students before, during and after reading." (Lee, 2010, p. 17)

The structure I have found useful to permit use of many information sources has been to translate the state core curriculum into sets of key questions whose answer may be found in any relevant source.

***Why does this have to be done in the regular classroom? Shouldn't easy books be in the Resource Room? Aren't resource room teachers responsible for teaching students with disabilities what they do not get in class?***

In law, this would seem an appropriate use of Resource Room. Resource Room is "[...] a special education program for a student with a disability registered in either a special class or regular class who is in need of specialized supplementary instruction in an individual or small group setting for a portion of the school day." (Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, 200.1(rr)) "Resource room programs shall be for the purpose of supplementing the regular or special classroom instruction of students with disabilities who are in need of such supplemental programs." (Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, 200.6(f)).

However, I support the idea that the main role of outside service providers (Special Educators, Reading Specialists, Speech Teachers, etc.) is to use almost all of the time with students to work on compensatory strategies to deal with the disability that caused the student to be referred. Given the time constraints Special Educators face, there may be little chance in many cases of effectively dealing with disabilities and additionally to address content. The number of hours needed to practice becoming a better reader, for example, arguably the more important long-term goal of remediating reading, would in most cases presumably exhaust all of the time allotted per week. The more the regular classroom is designed to meet the needs of all students, the more the outside-the-class service providers can devote time to addressing the disability.

## ***Why don't we just create reading classes for middle school students to help with their textbooks and get them ready for high school?***

The principle reason comes back to time. Dr. Allington explains: "By sixth or ninth grade, three- and four-year lags in reading achievement are all too common. In these cases it will *usually require several years* [italics mine] to catch up these struggling readers even if we can triple their reading comprehension rate." (Allington, 2009, p. 8) I would suggest that, since content-area classrooms can be modified to support developing readers and since the amount of outside time necessary to catch these readers up rests well beyond our scheduling limitations as it is, modification of the regular classroom is in order. One of Dr. Allington's remarks worth repeating: "Another problem with most school interventions is that even when they are scheduled outside of the classroom reading block, they typically do not add enough instructional time to be expected to double or triple the student's rate of reading acquisition." (Allington, 2009, p. 15)

The practice of just getting extra help for struggling readers with the standard grade-level texts is not supported by research. "The proposition that poor readers will make stronger comprehension gains by reading grade level texts is not borne out [...]." (Allington, 2009, p. 48)

### Selection Process and a Method for Using for Multiple Textbooks

Several publishers produce content specific textbooks at lower reading grade levels. My biggest concern initially was that these texts would not have all of the material in them students needed. I applied the following method to assess the appropriateness of lower-level texts for US History and World History: I looked up each answer to the multiple-choice section of two state tests in the texts and tallied the percentage of answers the text contained. The texts that contained over 85% of the content material, I requisitioned. The remaining information I can provide students in other ways, among which are simply sitting down and telling them.

During the spring semester last academic year, I practiced using multiple texts. Instead of being issued a standard text, students chose their text from the shelf in response to "essential questions" of the topic. Students at the age level I teach should have some say in their work and I mostly guided them to the appropriate text by encouragement rather than by assignment. A quick method to assess a text's difficulty is to have the student read one or more 100 word samples aloud to me. Students who can read a given text at an independent level have a 99-100% accuracy rate. If a student made more than 2 errors over a few samples, I usually do not need to tell them to seek an easier book. For sensitivity's sake, I do not reveal to students that the text I refer to as "basic" is at a 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. Many students use several texts in their lessons, a fact that is interesting and encouraging.

### Conclusion

A key component to the success of my students is how I handle reading in my classroom. Research confirms my own experiences: students must have access to textbooks they can read. I am responsible to see that this happens since it is I, and not outside service providers, who bear primary responsibility for the success of students in my class. Issuing a standard grade-level textbook is not a legitimate practice unless everyone in the class can read it. In addition to providing texts at levels students can read, I need to continue my work teaching content reading strategies and provide audio and video versions of lessons to reinforce the content.

Four responsibilities are obvious for me:

- provide materials students can read
- provide instruction in how to read in my content area
- ensure that students build content knowledge
- provide non-text information sources (audio & video)

*“The goal is to ensure that struggling readers have texts in their hands, all day long, that they can read – texts they can learn science and social studies content from, texts they can learn to read from, texts that are at an appropriate level of complexity.”*  
(Allington, 2009, p. 32)

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