

# Chapter 5

## Closing the Gap: Improving Reading Fluency in the Struggling Middle School Reader



Agnieszka Medrecki

**Abstract** To succeed in the twenty-first century, students will need advanced levels of literacy to function responsibly as individuals, citizens and workers. They will need literacy to accurately evaluate the flood of information in today's digital age. They will need literacy to feed their imagination so that they can create the world of the future. Therefore, as a twenty-first-century teacher educating twenty-first-century learners, one must empower students with strategies that will enable them to participate in all aspects of their lives. Throughout my practicum observations to date, and supported by the literature, a disturbing number of serious reading problems exist among middle school students. This study will critically investigate and evaluate strategies to improve fluency in struggling readers to close the gap between the struggling middle school reader and their grade-level peers. This will take form using personal reflections and critical evaluation of my own practices, my peers and mentors and will be supported by literature on the topic to date. I dedicate this study to all the hard-working students who struggle with reading fluency. Without these students, this study would not have been possible. The students' hard work and determination to make significant improvements in their reading ability inspired me and made me not only a better person but a better teacher.

Journal entry, November 11, 2015, Cumberland Park, South Australia.

The room is so quiet. Students in the Year 8 English class are silently reading their class novel ... or are they? As my mentor teacher sits at her desk, I decide to walk around the room during this observation day. Something was not right, and I was determined to find out what. Some students begin to fidget, others quietly chat and laugh with their peers, while others who look like they are concentrating seem to have their finger stuck on the same paragraph for five minutes. Some students seem disengaged. Is it an inappropriate novel for the class cohort, or is there another factor I am not noticing something that could be easily addressed? As I took over the class the following week, I began with whole class oral reading of the novel hoping for fluent reading that would mirror spoken language, with adequate speed, use of appropriate phrasing and intonation (Mraz et al. 2013). Instead I was faced with slow, halting reading, poor phrasing and a lack of intonation patters. Where to from here?

---

A. Medrecki (✉)  
Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Australia  
e-mail: [agajourn@netspace.net.au](mailto:agajourn@netspace.net.au)

## Introduction

I am a wife, daughter, sister, and a mature age student who, standing at a cross-road of her career, wants to make a difference in the lives of young people. As a teacher, I want to teach, inspire and motivate. I want to nurture my students' imagination and thrill the intellect, so they are motivated to explore, learn and grow academically. With life experience, a career in psychology/journalism and a love for the English language I want English to be an avenue for my students' success in other content areas.

My teaching placements to date have been incredibly rewarding experiences where I could begin to apply what I have learned throughout this course and uncover the contradictions that lie between pedagogical theory and practice. This was complemented by ongoing reflective practice to evaluate not only the outcomes of my teaching practice to enhance student learning but also my own personal learning path. It is such a critical reflection and observation that have led me to look deeper into the struggling middle school reader.

## Who Was I in Relation to Fluency in the Struggling Middle School Learner?

During my school years, I was a strong reader, taking somewhat for granted the complex and interactive process of the various multiple interactions (Mraz et al. 2013) that reading entails. With a passion for teaching English, I was somewhat shell-shocked to see a disturbing number of serious reading problems among middle school students, who lacked the foundations and strategies necessary to read subject-specific content and textbooks. Oral reading fluency, defined as the ability to read connected text accurately, quickly and with proper expression (Torgesen and Hudson 2006), is a critical part of learning and a stepping stone to comprehension. As curriculum across subjects relies heavily on reading fluency, students who struggle in this area have their ability to gain knowledge through reading suppressed and their academic success compromised.

Although several students were provided with additional literacy support in an intensive reading class, this did not include instruction in fluency. I felt more needed to be done. I soon came to realise that, as a twenty-first-century teacher, simply teaching content was not enough; I needed to develop the "discipline of noticing" and changing what can be changed (Mason 2002). It was my responsibility to notice the struggling readers and to find appropriate strategies for integrating literacy instructional activities within my content area to strengthen their literacy skills and help them succeed. However, first I had to consider one key assumption: Fluency does not cause comprehension. Although this is true, fluency is seen as a bridge between word recognition and comprehension and a necessary component of successful read-

ing that can be further developed and enhanced through explicit fluency instruction and repeated reading.

My goal was to train students to read effortlessly, so they could focus on text comprehension; this required fluency instruction. With research lacking on effective instructional tools for meeting the reading needs of struggling students (Joseph and Schisler 2009), I began by explicitly modelling fluent reading, remembering to read with expression and prosody. To aid the students' understanding of fluent reading, I explained prosody to the students by saying things such as, "I paused here because there is a comma" and "The exclamation mark tells me to raise my voice a little at the end of the sentence". Further, I increased students' opportunities to read through the use of repeated oral reading with corrective feedback from a more proficient reader, ensuring no student felt uncomfortable in this process.

## **Where Am I Now?**

In the past, I thought that reading difficulties were predominately dealt with in the primary school level, but I have experienced first-hand struggles that middle school students' experience, falling further and further behind their peers. Observation, critical reflection of my own practice, and reviewing a vast amount of literature have enabled me to evaluate and see the effectiveness of various strategies upon fluency levels of struggling middle school readers. This gives me a resounding feeling of optimism.

I am now reaching the end of my teaching and learning journey, and feel inspired to help my students succeed. Through personal reflection, critical evaluation of my own practice, conversations with my peers and mentors, and the reading of academic literature, I realised that to ensure growth in student reading, I need to provide many opportunities for students to read. Although many struggling, readers may require additional support, and this will require carefully coordinated instruction between the reading specialist in the intensive reading classes and myself as the content teacher. Going into my last placement in 2018, I will need to critically evaluate my class schedule and routines to ensure I design lessons that increase time and opportunities for students to read and that teach vocabulary, comprehension strategies and increase fluency. Beyond the strategies mentioned above, I will also incorporate reader's theatre, which involves students in extensive practice and rehearsal of scripted material to be performed for a group (Mraz et al. 2013). Such material can be developed from poetry, song lyrics, plays, stories or novels with rich dialogue.

## **Of This Much I Am Sure**

A challenge facing both struggling readers and those who may have been considered fluent at one point are to continue frequent and regular reading; of this much I am

sure. Therefore, a systematic plan of action focusing on both decoding and vocabulary must take place to improve fluency in struggling middle school readers (Kamil 2003).

As a teacher, I need to frequently and regularly model fluent reading, which will give students a standard for which to strive. Oral reading in middle and high school classes continues to be necessary. Further, students should be engaged in repeated oral reading, as this helps students to develop fluency (Archer et al. 2003). By integrating repeated reading into my instruction, with sensitivity for the struggling reader, I will be able to provide students with the opportunity to frequently and regularly practice fluency skills, while providing feedback and guidance. Partner reading, as another instructional strategy to build fluency, may also be used with guidance by the teacher. Although more work needs to be done on the correlation between improved reading rate and fluency, all of the above strategies encourage students to read more often in the presence and with the guidance of a more fluent reader. Considering the struggling readers' needs during planning and teaching will enhance their learning and promote their motivation; of this much I am sure.

## Conclusion

I walk towards the classroom today and see Sarah and Rachel [names changed] sitting beside the closed classroom door, reading quietly the prescribed novel. These were girls who were known not to be motivated by reading. I was amazed. However, today was going to be a tough day. We were to read the last chapter of the prescribed novel, with the intensive reading class teacher as a relief. Jake [named changed], who at the beginning of our oral reading shied away, not wanting to read, put his hand up. "Miss, can I read first?" The students took turns, reading fluently, with accurate speed, phrasing and intonations, and smiles on their faces. "What have you done Miss Medrecki? These six intensive reading students read amazingly. What strategies did you use?" What a proud moment! All that hard work: I have made a difference, and helped my students succeed.

Reading fluency is the essence of reading: essential not only to academic learning success across curriculum subject areas but to lifelong learning as well. Improving students' fluency is arguably the most important challenge teachers, and students face in the middle years. As a pre-service teacher, with a high sense of efficiency and soon to enter the teaching profession, I want to engage my students in rich and meaningful activities by incorporating various strategies to enhance instruction and promote students' success in using reading as an avenue for learning in different learning areas.

The more I learn about middle school readers, the more I am convinced that all of them, even those who have struggled with reading since kindergarten, can become successful, engaged readers. This only requires appropriate strategies and a teacher who is attuned to the needs of the students.

## References

- Archer, A., Gleason, M., & Vachon, V. (2003). Decoding and fluency: Foundation skills for struggling older readers. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 26, 89–101. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1593592>.
- Joseph, L. M., & Schisler, R. (2009). Should adolescents go back to the basics? A review of teaching word reading skills to middle and high school students. *Remedial and Special Education*, 30, 131–147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932508315646>.
- Kamil, M. (2003). *Adolescents and literacy: Reading for the 21st century*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education.
- Mason, J. (2002). *Researching your own practice: The discipline of noticing*. London: Routledge.
- Mraz, M., Nichols, W., Caldwell, S., Beisley, R., Sargent, S., & Rupley, W. (2013). Improving oral reading fluency through readers theatre. *Reading Horizons*, 52(2), 163–180.
- Torgesen, J., & Hudson, R. (2006). Reading fluency: Critical issues for struggling readers. In S. J. Samuels & A. Farstrup (Eds.), *Oral reading fluency: The forgotten dimension of reading success* (pp. 130–158). Newark, DE: International Reading.