



**Featured Links**

- [Middle School Journal](#)
- [Middle Ground](#)
- [RMLE Online](#)
- [Today's Middle Level Educator](#)
- [Middle E-Connections](#)
- [Middle Level Insider](#)
- [Classroom Connections](#)
- [The Family Connection](#)
- [On Target](#)
- [Web Exclusive](#)
- [Book Publishing](#)

**Get Connected**

- [Middle Level Insider](#)  
Articles, education news, free resources, book excerpts, videos, and more.  
Privacy by SafeSubscribe<sup>SM</sup>
- [AMLE on Facebook](#)  
Visit the AMLE page on Facebook.
- [Twitter@AMLEnews](#)  
You can follow AMLE News and Headlines @Twitter.
- [RSS Feeds](#)  
Keep up to date on middle grades news and headlines.
- [The Marketplace](#)  
Products and services designed for schools and classrooms.
- [Job Connection](#)  
Browse resumes or post employment opportunities.

# Middle School Journal

November 2011 • Volume 43 • Number 2 • Pages 8-17

## A "Ladder to Literacy" Engages Reluctant Readers

**Students help create a new approach to reading and enjoying literature assigned in school.**

**\* This We Believe Characteristics**

- Value Young Adolescents
- Meaningful Learning
- Multiple Learning Approaches

\*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from AMLE's position paper, *This We Believe*, for this article.

Wayne Brinda

*Students help create a new approach to reading and enjoying literature assigned in school. Reading is about spending time with characters and entering a fictional world and playing with words and living through a story page by page.* (Grossman & Sachs, 2007, p. 1)

*Without the sunlight of literature children cannot grow as they should.* (Morpurgo, 2009, para. 1)

Many students struggle with reading as they transition from the elementary to the middle grades and the literature becomes more complex. Many students may also have personal experiences that interfere with them seeing any importance, value, or enjoyment in reading literature, especially books assigned in school. As a result, "struggling readers seldom get to experience how great it feels to finish a book [and] how much fun it can be to escape day-to-day life by jumping into a good book" (Tovani, 2000, p. 9). Snow and Biancarosa's (2006) admonition is especially urgent at the middle level:

Educators must ... figure out how to ensure that every student gets beyond the basic literacy skills of the early-elementary grades to the more challenging and more rewarding literacy of the middle and secondary school years. (p. 1)

Rosenblatt (1978) contended that how we read depends on the stance we choose—an efferent stance from which we read to gain information, or an aesthetic stance from which we read to connect with and enjoy a text (Purves, 1988). Similarly, Sumara (2002) discussed ways to help teachers motivate and immerse reluctant readers in the language and images of a story, making books gateways "for both aesthetic enjoyment and creative and critical learning" (p. 93). Sumara (2002) proposed that reading is more than acquiring information, communicating ideas, or recording facts. It is an experience.

To discover ways in which reluctant readers can interact with books and engage in reading in this way, I investigated aliteracy from the perspective of sixteen reluctant readers in the sixth grade over a



[View Digital Issue](#)

[Download PDF](#)

[Preview/Purchase Digital Issue](#)

[Join/Renew AMLE to Receive this Member Benefit](#)

**Account Login**

User Name:

Password:

[Join/Renew Membership](#)

[AMLE Account FAQs](#)

[Create an Account](#)

[Forgot Password?](#)

[Member Access Center](#)

**About AMLE**

With more than 30,000 members in 48 countries, AMLE is the voice for those committed to the educational and developmental needs of young adolescents. [More.](#)



**Featured Events**

**2012 Institute for Middle Level Leadership**  
Orlando, FL  
July 15-18, 2012

**More info coming soon...**  
La Jolla, CA  
July 8-12, 2012

[Calendar of events](#)

**Featured Resources**



[The AMLE Catalog](#)

period of three months. The ideas of Rosenblatt (1978) and Sumara (2002) informed how I selected, designed, applied, and assessed the study's questions and interventions. My goal was to learn from the students themselves what would help them value the process of reading so that they could understand and enjoy unfamiliar books assigned in school. The students showed me, their teachers, and one another how we could engage them as they were developing the basic skills of reading and improving their attitudes to stay with the book longer than "a page or two." Their ideas became the "Ladder to Literacy" shown in Figure 1. In this article, I discuss the problem of reluctant, or aliterate, readers in the middle grades and describe the project I implemented with the sixth graders using the rungs of the Ladder to Literacy to organize my narrative.

### Reluctant readers and aliteracy

Juel related the story of a young reader who, when asked if he would rather read a book or clean his room, responded, "I would rather clean the mold around the bathtub than read" (as cited in Gunning, 2000, p. 35). The boy in this anecdote is a reluctant reader, someone who is capable of reading but chooses not to read. Tovani (2000) noted that for many reluctant readers, "reading has lost its purpose and pleasure" (p. 9). This problem is especially prevalent in classrooms in which motivation to read is minimal because complicated words—along with characters, situations, and settings—seem far removed from the students' lives (Baker, 2002; Guthrie, 2001; McEwan, 2002). Reluctant readers typically "have not learned how to establish a sustained connection with a text longer than a page or two" (Mackey & Johnson, 1996, p. 25); so, instead of being gateways to new ideas, books assigned in class become blockades against learning.

Straus (2007) provided a view of reluctant readers to which we may all relate, reminding us that anyone can be a reluctant reader:

In literacy education, there's a euphemism, RELUCTANT READERS. That term is meant to name adults and children who come to print after having failed at learning to read. ... It's hard to catch and keep their attention. ... I think, at times, we're all reluctant . ... Any time we have to read when we're out of steam, we become reluctant readers—even if it's our favorite topic. Then there are the times when we just aren't interested. We're definitely reluctant readers at those times too. (para. 1)

In a foundational book on the topic, Thimmesch (1984) called reluctant readers "aliterate," borrowing a term coined by Larry Mikulecky. Mikulecky recalled

I coined the term 'aliteracy' as being parallel to apolitical for people who were able to be political but chose not to. I've been somewhat amused over the years at the academic discussions; i.e., if students were choosing not to read or being driven away from it by inappropriate curriculum or teaching practices. (L. Mikulecky, personal communication, May 18, 2004).

Aliteracy seems to be on the rise, as teachers and researchers report that an increasing number of students say they are learning to hate reading (Dweck, 2004; Stover, 2005). As a former English teacher, current professor of preservice middle level and secondary teachers, and the artistic director of a theatre company that addresses adolescent literacy, I have seen this attitude far too frequently. Students are reluctant to read anything new, anything longer than a short story or article, and especially anything that does not immediately connect with their specific areas of interest.

When I asked a group of high school students and my preservice teachers to identify when their negative attitudes to reading began, a majority said it was around fourth, fifth, or sixth grade. Their comments substantiated what the literature says about when students

lose interest in reading (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2001; Reed, 1994) and resonated with my personal experiences with reading in fourth grade that shut me down as a reader until my sophomore year in college. Because the middle grades are such an important turning point in a young reader's life, all middle grades educators have a responsibility to go beyond mere reading comprehension and address engagement in literacy across the curriculum.

### Investigating aliteracy with students

Developing the skills of reading takes interest, time, and commitment (Sumara, 2002). However, the demands of meeting standards and preparing for accountability tests, which encompass "much of what passes for education these days" (Office of Catholic Education, 2010, para. 1), limit the time teachers have to transform students' negative attitudes toward reading and responding to literature. This puts teachers who wish to do more in a difficult position (Sullivan, 2002). How can concerned educators meet the needs of reluctant readers?

As Moje (2002) contended, before any academic programs are designed, students need to be heard and acknowledged, instead of just tested, surveyed, and cataloged. Using qualitative research methods (Hamel, 2003; LeCompte, 1999; Weiss, 1995), educators can listen to what students say about reading (Beers, 1996; Cook-Sather, 2003; Worthman, 2002) and carefully study their literary practices (Moje, 2002) to learn why they turn away from reading and how to turn them around. Guiding questions might include: How do they read? What do they read? What do they talk about after they read? Following these recommendations, I designed a three-month study with a diverse group of 16 sixth graders identified by their teachers as reluctant readers.

#### The students

Because aliteracy is prevalent among students from all backgrounds in all regions, I identified two contrasting schools to select a diverse sample of students. One was a suburban, western Pennsylvania Blue Ribbon middle school identified as excelling



academically. It had an enrollment of 767 students in sixth through eighth grades, of whom 93% were Caucasian, 4% were Asian, and 2% were African American. Only 2% of this school's families were designated as low income, and 2% of the students received free or reduced-price lunch. While the school's Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) reading score of 1,440 was above the state mean score of 1,310, there was a significant population of reluctant readers.

The second school was in an urban district and had an enrollment of 2,000 students in sixth through ninth grades, of whom 53% were African American, 46% were Caucasian, and 1% were from other backgrounds. Approximately 39% of the students were from low-income families, and more than 35% received free or reduced-price lunches. The school's PSSA reading score of 1,250 was below the state mean score of 1,310. Here, the majority of students were reluctant readers in an environment where, as the teachers noted, literacy was not valued by the community.

The teachers and I selected two teams of eight culturally, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse sixth grade reluctant readers, identified as those who were declining academically, who continually expressed disinterest in reading literature, and those the teachers felt could benefit from the experience.

#### The text

Both teachers selected *A Wrinkle in Time* as the novel we would use. The book was on their reading lists, and they believed it contained vocabulary and ideas that their students would see as complex yet

within their levels. As the groups read *A Wrinkle in Time* in their schools, I met with each group of eight students and their teacher in their classrooms once or twice a week as allowed by the teachers' academic schedules. While the students were initially reticent, they soon became enthusiastic about sharing their frustrations, challenges, discoveries, and suggestions while they read the novel.

### The questions

I explored four specific questions with the students:

1. When did you begin to dislike books that teachers assign to you?
2. What do you believe is causing your negative attitudes toward reading?
3. If and when you read things on your own, how do you choose a book, what do you do to understand it, and how do you respond to the story?
4. How can teachers help you see reading an unfamiliar book as rewarding, valuable, and fun?

In essence, I asked them to help me learn how aliterate adolescents can become engaged readers who comprehend, enjoy, and create personal connections with literature. My goals were to listen and to learn from their candid comments, experiences, thoughts, and suggestions.

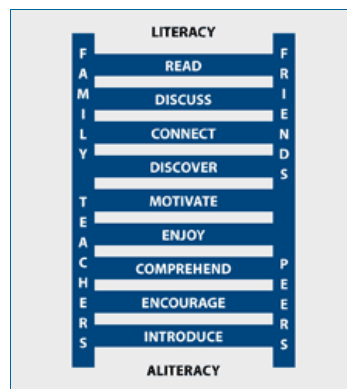
A fifth question came from the teachers, who felt they often lacked sufficient time to deeply engage students in reading. They asked: Can awareness of aesthetics be raised, efferent knowledge be acquired, and negative attitudes of reluctant readers be transformed within the allotted time frame for a given book?

### The "Ladder to Literacy"

Students selected the "Ladder to Literacy" (Figure 1) graphic because they saw how a ladder helps a person reach places that seem out of reach. The students stressed that a ladder needs support from others to hold it up. When climbing a ladder, people say, "Don't look down. Look up." The same ideas can be applied to reading in a supportive classroom: "Keep looking up—we are there with you." If support is sustained, the student reaches the top (finishes the book) and finds enjoyment in the process of reading. The teacher also becomes confident to use the ladder in other instructional situations.

Figure 1

Ladder to Literacy



### Introduce

The students (who selected their own pseudonyms), their teachers, and I discussed what they do when first seeing an unfamiliar book that they have to read in school.

Br: I ... uh ... probably would at least look at it if it was interesting.

Researcher: What would make something interesting?

Br: When it's, like, ... something I like to read about or want to read.

Researcher: How would you know that it is something you might like?

Bre: If I heard the name before.  
Kay-Kay: By the title. If I could picture the story with the title, then I might like it.  
SpongeBob: It has to be funny.  
Researcher: How much time do you give the book before you decide to read it?  
Supra: I, like, would give it the cover or usually the back.  
SpongeBob: Maybe a chapter.  
Jazz: Two pages. A book has to be fun and something I can relate to—if it's not boring.  
Researcher: What would make it "not boring"?  
Jazz: If it had action, things like that—things I like.  
Researcher: What if it didn't immediately have action? Would you still read it?  
JR: I'm not sure.

The teacher later confided in me that JR had had experiences which interfere with him wanting to read. He became a priority for me and his teacher to monitor during the study, along with Bre, Chris, Jazz, and Nitro, SpongeBob, and Supra. The teacher continued the discussion:

Teacher: So, what do I need to do to help you get motivated?  
Nitro: Don't talk so much about the test.  
Supra: If I get some help to understand it, I may read it.  
Bre: Yeah, me too. If we go slow and discuss it, like we are doing with this book. Give us a chance to look it over on our time.

The students' comments informed the creation of the first rung, "introduce," which occurs after the teacher has identified students as being reluctant to read the book. Teachers activate interest for the book rather than just presenting it as the next assignment or a test. Allow students sufficient time to look at the cover, read the back, and explore the book. Questions that can encourage them to begin are: What do you see? How could it connect to something you're interested in? and From what you see, what do you want to know about this text? By posing questions like these in a group setting where students hear one another's comments, questions, and confusions, along with those of the teacher, this level of the critical support system, educators and peers, is introduced.

### **Encourage**

The second rung, "encourage," is when relevant background information about the author, the plot, the setting, and other parts of a book are presented to encourage students to make connections with the book. This rung of the ladder evolved from discussions about what frustrated students when they read something that they did not choose.

SpongeBob: When the action goes real slow.  
JR: When I don't understand what's going on.  
Jazz: When I come to a word that I don't know.  
Bre: When I read, I don't want to be stressed.  
Nitro: I want to read for my enjoyment.  
SpongeBob: Help us read it by reading it aloud and making it fun.

One of the teachers posed a question that surprised the students.

Teacher: I have a question. What about the books I have to teach you?  
Supra: Well, can't we just choose whatever we want?  
Teacher: Not all the time.  
Bre: But you get to choose the books for us.  
Teacher: Sometimes I don't get a chance to make a choice. Sometimes I'm told what to do,

just like I tell you what to read.

Researcher: What could the teacher do to help you understand or like the book?

Jazz: I think it's real important that we meet like this.

Patrick: Yeah. In small groups rather than in a big classroom.

JR: This is the first time I've understood and wanted to read a book.

As one can imagine, JR's comment was quite encouraging for his teacher and for me. The team continued to read selected sections aloud and discuss ideas from the book so that the students could hear the language, ask questions, and share responses.

We also encouraged students to ask the following question of us and of themselves: How hard is this book going to be to understand? Will there be things in it that I like? This was a new approach and introduced questions the students could use with all literature. These strategies, which were reinforced by the support system that had become apparent to them, encouraged the students to explore the book.

### **Comprehend**

Reading comprehension is, of course, important, but its place on the ladder became significant for another reason. Instead of starting with comprehension, this skill followed a sequence that triggered and supported the students' motivation to learn and improve their comprehension skills. We all explored the students' suggestions for alternative ways of testing their comprehension that would also support their current desire to stay with the book.

Teacher: I have to give a test.

Bre: You could test us in this small group. Go around, ask questions, and see what we know.

Nitro: And ask questions that make us talk about the book. Then you can tell if we have really read it and understood it.

JR: And we could help each other out.

Bre: If you give that kind of a test, it will motivate us to read the book.

Teacher: There's the perfect reason!

When the teachers tried the suggestions, the students' comprehension skills showed marked improvement as students read and discussed the text. In addition to looking for facts, the students enthusiastically looked for smaller details and responded to the story's emotions and aesthetics, as recommended by Sumara (2002). In the suburban school, all eight students passed the Accelerated Reader (AR) test with at least a B for the first time that year. In the urban school, students asked me to celebrate their improved reading grades and interests. One student went from an F to a C on comprehension tests. Another student went from a D to a B. Out of eight students in the urban school, six completed the assigned readings ahead of schedule. Bre even reread chapters on her own.

Successful strategies included creating small groups to address enjoyable moments or moments that confused them. The teachers and I encouraged students to ask and answer: What was a *Wow!* moment for you, or What confused you? What does that mean? and Can you help me understand this? Support from their teachers and peers continued to strengthen as the students and we realized they could climb this "ladder."

The teachers and I also saw the importance of giving students sufficient time and space to practice reading, providing opportunities to make mistakes and learn from them in supportive ways, and having celebrations of their achievements. Students helped one another when one stumbled over a word, and celebrated with one another when something positive occurred. The "comprehend" rung showed the importance of establishing and displaying multiple support

systems.

### Enjoy

The reason for placing this rung just below the halfway point on the ladder emerged from a discussion we had about enjoying *A Wrinkle in Time*. As we implemented comprehension strategies, students were encouraged to reflect on their past reading experiences. I asked students when they believed they began to dislike the books assigned in school:

Supra: Back in elementary school. Around fourth or fifth grade. Before then the books were fun. Then became boring.

Researcher: What made them boring?

Supra: There was no good action. The books had no pictures and no action.

Chris: I don't like to read books.

Researcher: What do you like to read?

Chris: Magazines about video games. I love to play video games.

Researcher: I love to play them too. What kind of games do you like to play?

Chris: Action games, with blood. (The other students enjoyed this and laughed).

Researcher: Could you create a video game of a chapter from the book we're reading?

Chris: What?

Researcher: Sure. There are different levels in a video game, like there are different moments in a book. And once you get through one, you can go on to the next. What if you choose a scene and create a video game from it?

Chris smiled, giggled, and then agreed to try it. He found a way to fit reading into his turbulent life. He, like the other students, was dealing with personal situations at home and school that could be distracting, if not overwhelming. Helping students find and express personal connections with the text became vital to creating enjoyment. Enjoyment is more than liking a book. It is finding and affirming personal reasons to keep reading the book.

When this approach was applied in another school, an urban middle school student comprehended and found personal meaning and enjoyment in *Tuesdays with Morrie*. She wrote:

*Tuesdays with Morrie* helped me get through an enourmous [sic] hardship in my life. ... My grandmother was dying. This helped me get through it and find ways to express my feelings. Around the end of the book, I could always look back and I think that I at least had a chance to say goodbye a lot like Mitch.

Her enjoyment and the enjoyment of students in the study were reinforced by posing these questions: What do you think about the story so far? What is happening next? Who would like this story? What parts are meaningful to you?

Comprehension led to enjoyment. Students were motivated to share personal understandings and connections with the text, and an atmosphere of engagement and enjoyment was formed in each classroom. From what I found, if honest enjoyment is not present in the reading environment, students will jump off the ladder and stop reading. On the other hand, if enjoyment is found and nurtured, students will climb higher. Because of enjoyment, students gave this book a chance.

### Motivate

Halfway up the Ladder to Literacy is the rung "motivate." The students, teachers, and I found that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation emerges while readers are engaged in discovering or "uncovering" the literature. It cannot be forced upon the reluctant reader. As the students said, motivation must be "found" personally by each of

them. An example was expressed by JR, who enthusiastically shared a personal victory with me:

JR: Guess what? I have something to tell you.  
Researcher: What do you have?  
JR: I've started to read *Harry Potter*.  
Researcher: That's great! What do you think of it?  
JR: Well, I'm ... uh ... struggling a little bit.  
Trying to get through some boring parts.  
I've had this book ever since it came out,  
but I just started reading it on Monday. I  
haven't read a book ... for, like, ... ever,  
unless we have to.  
Researcher: Why do you feel this way?  
JR: I think the older I got after third grade  
they wanted me to read more, like, ... uh  
... complicated books. I just couldn't read  
the book, 'cause there's ... like ... all these  
words and stuff. So, I just stopped  
reading. It was always boring. My  
grandmother got this for me a year ago. I  
never wanted to read it. It's 875 pages  
long. Now I love it. I've read up to page  
342 and understand it!  
Researcher: What do you think happened this time?  
JR: This program got me into reading again. I  
found what I like. I can read it, and I like  
to do it!

His teacher noted that prior to the study, JR refused to read even a chapter assigned in class. Now, he found sincere, intrinsic motivation to read *Harry Potter* and the assigned novel. JR enjoyed the process and started doing well in class.

This level was a good time for us to encourage the use of personal reflections and group activities designed to support the literary experiences of students as they climbed the ladder. We encouraged students to use the new strategies that increased their comprehension, prediction, fluency, reading with expression, and responding to emotions and aesthetics in the text. The questions that were met with success included: What is going to happen? What will the character do? What would you do in that situation? Does this remind you of something else you read and enjoyed? We also wondered how to motivate middle school students to read. They provided the answers, simplistic and profound.

#### **Discover**

By the time they reached the "discover" rung, the students were at a higher level than they had ever been. Students climbed this and the next two rungs fairly quickly. As the ideas blended together, they created a momentum to reach the ultimate goal, which was apparent to them for the first time. Completing the book was in sight. It became even more important to make sure the support system in the classroom was very visible and strong. Discussion prompts came not only from the teacher and me but also from students. These included: "I just found something! I want to talk (or ask) about ..." and "I just found another Wow! moment." They made more discoveries about the book, each other, and themselves.

#### **Connect**

Linking rung "connect" directly to the dramatic curve of literature proved to be a very effective strategy. Students applied the skill of connecting emotionally with characters as we reached the book's climax and, in the process, previous connections were reinforced and new ones made. Students made predictions about the plot, discovered what happened in the story, and then responded to their predictions. As the connections became strong, students discovered what it meant to be readers. During a discussion, JR eagerly shared, "The story reminds me of a saying I heard the other day. 'Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.'" This led to a mature discussion, during which students made their points using examples from the text, other stories they had read, and their personal experience. It



became apparent that they inherently had this skill; it just needed to be triggered, enriched, and celebrated. This blended into the next rung, "discuss."

### **Discuss**

The students were encouraged now to look down and see how far they had come. They were also asked to show appreciation for the support system that helped them achieve this level. In addition to using other discussion prompts, I encouraged the students to say, "I think I can do it. What do you think? Let's finish it together."

### **Read**

By the time they reached the top rung of the ladder, the book had become comprehensible, enjoyable, and engaging. At this new point, the reluctant readers in my study had discovered what it meant to be engaged readers. Bre said, "I love this book. I need another book like the one you gave me." The students had acquired confidence, new skills, and a positive experience of reading literature that would remain with them. The teachers, students, and I celebrated their achievements and looked for ways to keep their new enthusiasm going.

The project culminated with both groups meeting each other at a celebration of reading. Here, we shared more experiences and moments from the novel, and we explored ways to use the ladder with other books. It was encouraging to hear students share authentic reasons to continue reading beyond their frustrations.

### **Outcomes and implications**

While the Ladder to Literacy was not a new, comprehensive literacy program, it did provide a sequence for teachers to address the roadblocks, complexities, and other areas in which reluctant readers would typically lose interest when reading an unfamiliar book. A majority of the students who participated in the study evolved from being disinterested in an unfamiliar book assigned in school to enjoying the process of reading it. The students' comments were quite encouraging:

- Jazz: This really helped me, and it will help sixth graders next year.
- JR: I now like to read when I don't have to read.
- Supra: Thank you for letting us know that it's OK to read!
- Bre: It was a good and well thought out book ... after all. I would pick this book again if I had the chance.

Together, we found ways that teachers can effectively engage their students in reading and sustain that engagement for a period of time. The teachers discovered that by following the ladder, they could really engage their students within the short time they had to read a book.

Did all the students transform into engaged, enthusiastic readers? While it would be wonderful to report a resounding yes, the truth was no, not all.

Yet, Bresso, the teacher in the urban school, commented:

"Although students did not [all] become proficient readers, I did

observe improvements in their willingness to read, participation, and grades" (J. Bresso, personal communication, March 2004). Of the 16 students, 14 passed a unit test with an excellent score. In the Blue Ribbon school, all participating students passed the AR test for the first time. A majority of students in both schools reported that they enjoyed reading this assigned book. Ten students significantly improved their reading grades, and more than half of the students continued to read other literature suggested during the study. The teacher in the suburban school noted that this was the first time she saw consistent enthusiasm and engagement with a book she



assigned.

An important discovery for me was that neither the students' cultures nor their ethnicities appeared to be factors in the degree of aliteracy or the progress made during the study. Attitudes toward reading came from identifying each student's academic and personal history, past experiences with reading, personal interests, and the degrees to which they wanted to formulate and resolve curiosities about the story. Hearing their stories, observing their behaviors, assessing their progress, and sharing their experiences gave me a deeper understanding of what it means to be a reluctant reader in the middle grades. Together, we explored what students want from literary experiences to help find enjoyment and meaning in books and what strategies we can use to revive as well as support their interest in reading.

### Conclusion

The Ladder to Literacy highlights what the reluctant readers in my study want teachers to address when they try to get them to read. It also defines a sequential approach teachers in any subject area can use with all genres of literature, including informational texts that, at first glance, seem dry and uninteresting. I found that reluctant readers want to contribute to their learning by making suggestions of literature and methods, sharing reading experiences with peers and teachers, and helping one another grow as readers. A key suggestion was for teachers to go beyond approaching literature study as a curriculum unit which culminates in a test and, instead, to help students learn how to comprehend literature so that they will enjoy reading. When the "ladder" was used, a majority of the students found motivation and success and became more engaged by supporting each other as they climbed each rung. Thus, the Ladder to Literacy is more than a graphic representation of sixteen students' evolution as readers; it is an approach teachers everywhere can use to activate their students' interest, sustain their enthusiasm, and develop their skills of reading while enjoying the process.

### Extensions

Who are the reluctant readers in your classroom? What strategies have you used to engage them in reading and help them enjoy literature?

The author describes how the Ladder to Literacy was implemented in sixth grade language arts classrooms. How can teachers adapt this approach for use at other grade levels and in all areas of the curriculum?.

### References

- Baker, L., & Wigfield, A. (1999). Dimension of children's motivation for reading and their relations to reading activity and reading achievement. *Reading Research Quarterly, 34*, 452–478.
- Baker, M. I. (2002). Reading resistance in middle school: What can be done?" *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 45*, 364–366.
- Beers, K. G. (1996). No time, no interest, no way! The 3 voices of aliteracy. *School Library Journal, 42*(2), 30–33.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2003). Listening to students about learning differences. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 35*(4), 22–27.
- Dweck, C. (2004, Aug. 10). How can teachers develop students' motivation—and success? *Education World*. Retrieved from [http://www.education-world.com/a\\_issues/chat/chat010.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_issues/chat/chat010.shtml)
- Grossman, L., & Sachs, A. (2007, June 28). Harry Potter and the Sinister Spoilers. *Time.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1637886\\_1637891\\_1637864,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1637886_1637891_1637864,00.html)
- Gunning, T. G. (2000). *Best books for building literacy for elementary school children*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

- Guthrie, J. T. (2001, March). Contexts for engagement and motivation in reading. *Reading Online*, 4(8). Retrieved from [http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art\\_index.asp?HREF=/articles/handbook/guthrie/index.html](http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=/articles/handbook/guthrie/index.html)
- Hamel, F. L. (2003). Teacher understanding of student understanding: Revising the gap between teacher conceptions and students' ways with literature. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 3(1), 49–71.
- LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *Designing & conducting ethnographic research*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira.
- McEwan, E. K. (2002). *Teach them all to read: Catching the kids who fall through the cracks*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Mackey, M., & Johnston, I. (1996). The book resisters: Ways of approaching reluctant teenage readers. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 2(1), 25–38.
- Mizelle, N. B. (1997). Enhancing young adolescents' motivation for literacy learning. *Middle School Journal*, 28(3), 16–25.
- Moje, E. B. (2002). Re-framing adolescent literacy research for new times: Studying youth as a resource. *Reading Research and Instruction*, 41, 211–229.
- Morpurgo, M. (2009, January 16). Books for schools: Michael Morpurgo says that reading for pleasure is a fundamental human right. *The Sunday Times*. London, UK. Retrieved from [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/books/article5529708.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article5529708.ece)
- National Middle School Association. (2001). Supporting young adolescents' literacy learning: A position paper jointly adopted by International Reading Association and National Middle School Association. Retrieved from <http://www.nmsa.org/AboutNMSA/PositionStatements/ReadingInstruction/tabid/284/Default.aspx>
- Office of Catholic Education. (2010). Teaching beyond the test. Retrieved from <http://www.catholicschools-phl.org/why-a-catholic-education/teaching-beyond-the-test>
- Purves, A. C. (1988). The aesthetic mind of Louise Rosenblatt. *Reader Online*, 20. Retrieved from <http://www.hu.mtu.edu/reader/online/20/purves20.html>: 68–77.
- Reed, A. J. (1994). *Reaching adolescents: The young adult book and the school*. New York, NY: Merrill.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *Literature as exploration*. New York, NY: Modern Language Association.
- Snow, C., & Biancarosa, G. (2006). *Reading next: A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy*. Alliance for Excellent Education, New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation. Retrieved from <http://www.kyreading.org/documents/ReadingNext.pdf>
- Stover, L. (2005, December/January). We teach kids to hate reading—Luckily, a solution exists. *River Gazette*. Retrieved from <http://www.smcm.edu/rivergazette/articles/04-4-6-9.pdf>
- Strauss, L. (2007, January 9). Reluctant readers: Content is king, but ... I'm too tired to read. Literacy blog. Retrieved from <http://www.successful-blog.com/1/reluctant-readers-content-is-king-but-im-too-tired-to-read/>
- Sullivan, E. T. (2002). *Reaching reluctant young adult readers: A handbook for librarians and teachers*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press.
- Sumara, D. J. (2002). *Why reading literature in school still matters: Imagination, interpretation, insight*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Thimmesch, N. (1984). *Alliteracy: People who can read but won't* (AEI symposia). Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public

Policy Research.

Tovani, C. (2000). *I read it, but I don't get it: Comprehension strategies for adolescent readers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Weiss, R. (1995). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. Free Press.

Worthman, C. (2002). The way I look at the world: Imaginal interaction and literacy use at TeenStreet. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45, 458–468.

---

**Wayne Brinda** is an assistant professor of secondary education at the University of Pittsburgh-Bradford, PA. E-mail: [wjb27@pitt.edu](mailto:wjb27@pitt.edu)

---

Copyright © 2011 Association for Middle Level Education

---

**Advertise**

[Media Kit](#)

[Exhibit](#)

**Membership**

[Join/Renew](#)

[Member Benefits](#)

**Newsroom**

[About AMLE](#)

[RSS Feeds](#)

**Legal**

[Privacy Statement](#)

[Copyright Policy](#)

**Contact**

[Contact AMLE](#)

[Website Feedback](#)

**Association for Middle Level Education**

*formerly National Middle School Association*

4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300 Westerville, OH 43081

614-895-4730 | 800-528-6672 | (fax) 614-895-4750

Copyright © 1999-2011 Association for Middle Level Education