

CHAPTER 1



Middle-Grades Readers

Introducing Three Case Studies and Debunking Common Myths

As former middle-grades teachers who have worked with students who experience literacy challenges for over 25 years, we (Kevin and Tisha) are all too aware that reading problems don't magically disappear when a student enters grade 4 or starts middle school. Some students' literacy difficulties persist even after robust instruction in the primary grades. Other students—adequate readers throughout the primary grades—suddenly find it difficult to tackle the very different literacy challenges posed by the middle-grades curriculum.

In this book, we define “the middle” as grades 4–8. Why 4–8? We believe this period of time represents a “critical window” in these young people's lives. First, *the general demands* of reading and learning change dramatically from the primary grades, with an increased focus on learning content, making sense of sophisticated academic language, and grasping more difficult conceptual knowledge. The *texts* also change, with more emphasis on informational texts that come with less familiar text structures. Finally, the *specific reading tasks* change, with students increasingly required to use more advanced ways of thinking, including summarizing, analyzing, and sourcing. To make matters even more difficult for students with literacy challenges, they are expected to do much of this reading and writing independently, often outside of class, and at a higher volume than ever before to keep up with the curriculum.

Our goal in this book is to provide you with research-based assessment guidance and instructional practices for teaching middle-grades students with these continued literacy challenges. We believe that if we can “catch them before they fall” in the middle grades, we have a good chance of setting them on firm footing as they enter high school, and beyond. While we acknowledge writing is an essential component of literacy instruction, the focus of this book is reading.

THREE MIDDLE-GRADES READERS WITH LITERACY CHALLENGES

Let's meet Aliyah, Zach, and Andres, the three middle-grades students we will be following throughout this book.

Aliyah: An Eighth Grader with Decoding and Fluency Challenges

Aliyah is an outgoing, high-energy eighth grader with a lot of friends at Great Neck Middle School. She is involved in a number of school clubs and activities, including student government and soccer. Until last year, she had consistently received A's and B's across her subjects. However, with the stepped-up academic demands in middle school, she is having trouble keeping up with the increased volume of reading she's expected to do each night and meeting expectations on assignments requiring a written response, particularly in English/language arts, social studies, and science.

Despite the literacy interventions Aliyah had been receiving since fifth grade, she did not meet grade-level benchmarks on the beginning of eighth-grade screeners, and, as a result, her educational team met to discuss ways to support her. As her team of content teachers meet with the school reading specialist, Mr. Jackson, they discuss Aliyah's literacy strengths and challenges:

Literacy Strengths

- When *orally* presented information—such as during class discussions, via video, and through audio-enhanced texts such as are available on Audible—Aliyah's comprehension is quite strong, and her ideas are insightful.
- Aliyah has a rich vocabulary, peppering her conversation with sophisticated words and phrases such as *evidence*, *rebel*, *on-point*, and *perishable foods*.
- Aliyah brings a wealth of background knowledge and a wide range of experiences to group discussions and collaborative activities.

Literacy Challenges

When Aliyah is required to *independently read* a text or novel, her comprehension is spotty. She often has trouble following class lessons and lectures based solely on assigned readings.

- She struggles to decode multisyllabic words (words such as *isotope*, *furthermore*, *spontaneous*) and reads very slowly, often word by word, with little phrasing or expression in grade-level texts.
- Aliyah's lack of automatic word recognition and fluency not only (1) prevents her from keeping up with her core class readings every night, but also (2) likely makes it more difficult for her to comprehend what she reads by herself.

Mr. Jackson explained how Aliyah’s word recognition and fluency issues are affecting her comprehension: “Aliyah’s reading brain is working overtime—much harder than the average eighth grader—to decode those bigger words. She’s working so hard to decode each word, that by the time she reaches the end of a sentence, she may forget what the beginning of the sentence was about.”

Zach: A Sixth Grader with Oral Language Comprehension, Vocabulary, and Reading Strategy Challenges

Zach is a quiet, thoughtful sixth grader who has two main passions: skateboarding and art. When not skateboarding at the local skate park with his friends, he can be found sketching scenes that wow his classmates at Great Neck Middle School. Zach told his teachers that he “loves anything to do with anime.” Back in elementary school, Zach was able to keep up with the content when he had only one classroom teacher all day. However, now that he’s entered middle school, with four different core content teachers—each with their own different set of expectations—he’s struggling to keep organized and stay on top of his work.

Like Aliyah, Zach did not meet grade-level benchmarks on the beginning-of-year sixth-grade screener. As Zach’s team of content teachers meet with the school reading specialist, Mr. Jackson, they discuss Zach’s literacy strengths and challenges:

Literacy Strengths

- Zach is an excellent decoder. In contrast to Aliyah, he can quickly and effortlessly recognize most multisyllabic words that he encounters while reading (words such as *remarkable* and *generation*, unless they are *not* in his oral vocabulary, such as *simultaneous*).
- Zach not only reads most individual words accurately and automatically, he also reads at a good reading rate and with generally solid fluency in context, including reading his textbooks and class novels smoothly, and with, for the most part, phrasal reading.
- Zach is highly motivated to improve. He is willing to work hard, he said, “As long as I see some results!”

Literacy Challenges

- Zach’s reading is often passive and disengaged. He thinks of reading as simply “calling out words,” rarely reading with a purpose or actively try to make sense of what he is reading.
- Zach has experienced difficulty comprehending a number of the key concepts introduced in the sixth-grade curriculum, such as comparing and contrasting: (1) *potential energy* vs. *kinetic energy* in science and (2) different

forms of government such as *democracy* vs. *dictatorship* vs. *monarchy* in social studies.

- While Zach can automatically decode many “big words,” such as *deforestation*, and *generation*, he often does not know a word’s meaning.
- As the texts become more complex and his comprehension breaks down, his generally solid fluency also starts to break down.
- In contrast to Aliyah, Zach’s comprehension struggles seem to occur both when the information is presented *orally* and when he has to *independently read* to learn new information.
- When asked to identify main ideas or summarize information in a text, Zach seems to simply repeat everything he can remember, which is often a series of disconnected details.

Mr. Jackson explained Zach’s literacy challenges to his team of content teachers this way: “Zach can read most texts accurately and at a good pace. Decoding and fluency aren’t his issues. What gets in the way of Zach’s comprehension is his lack of *vocabulary knowledge* and *reading strategies*. He often doesn’t know the meaning of key vocabulary words and concepts in the sixth-grade curriculum. And when Zach’s reading comprehension breaks down, he doesn’t appear to have any ‘go-to’ reading comprehension strategies—like inferring, questioning, or summarizing—to fix the problem.”

Andres: A Disengaged Fifth-Grade Reader

Andres is a fifth grader with an incredibly supportive extended family, which includes his parents, three younger siblings, grandparents, and many cousins. He spends most of his time outside of school with his extended family, helping to take care of his three younger siblings and constantly attending family gatherings, sporting events, and celebrations. While not talkative, he will open up and relate family stories with enthusiasm.

In terms of his academic work, Andres has struggled with a number of literacy issues since he first entered kindergarten at Roberto Clemente Elementary School. As his fifth-grade classroom teacher, Ms. Carter, meets with the school’s intervention team, including one of the school’s reading specialists, Ms. Hauser, they discuss Andres’s literacy strengths and challenges:

Literacy Strengths

- Andres has a wide range of rich and interesting family stories and anecdotes that he is willing to share, once he feels comfortable with his teacher and classmates.
- Andres is bilingual, speaking both English and Spanish fluently. He often translates for his parents and for classmates.

- When given the opportunity and scaffolding, Andres can make strong connections between the curriculum and his personal experiences.
- Andres is highly engaged in activities and subjects where his interests are piqued and that don't require much reading or writing. For example, he has always been a strong, talented math student and enjoys science, particularly hands-on experiments.

Literacy Challenges

- Andres struggles to read fluently in fifth-grade level materials, often reading difficult texts in a word-by-word fashion, with a monotone expression.
- Andres does not always have the background knowledge needed to make sense of new information presented in class, significantly impacting his comprehension of grade-level concepts.
- Most troubling for Ms. Carter, she sees Andres starting to “mentally drop out” of reading-related tasks. Andres has shared that he doesn't like school reading and doesn't see much use for reading in his own life.

Andres's intervention team has decided that while he has a number of literacy challenges, the most important and pressing one to tackle is his troubling loss of motivation to read and growing disengagement with literacy and school. It's only when Andres sees the worth of literacy in his own life that he will gain the essential motivation to work on improving his literacy skills.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

Aliyah, Zach, and Andres are composites of real cases that we have worked with across our combined 50-plus years teaching students who struggle with literacy skills in classrooms, reading centers, after-school tutoring programs, and various intervention settings. Importantly, Aliyah, Zach, and Andres all struggle to comprehend what they read.

However, they each struggle with reading comprehension for different reasons and represent three different—but common—profiles of reading difficulties that middle-grades teachers will encounter and must be prepared to teach. These different profiles of reading difficulty will necessitate different intervention approaches, different plans, and different instructional strategies.

After we introduce our instructional and assessment principles in Chapters 2 and 3, we then focus Chapters 4 through 9—our case study chapters—on different literacy interventions that directly target the different literacy components that middle-grades readers like Aliyah, Zach, and Andres find challenging (see Figure 1.1).

MIDDLE-GRADES LITERACY: DEBUNKING COMMON MYTHS

Before we dive into what *to do* with middle-grades readers like Aliyah, Zach, and Andres in the following chapters, it's important to debunk common myths that have arisen about older students, reading, and adolescent literacy in general. This “lay of the land” overview will give us a better general picture of what is, and isn't, true about middle-grades readers and writers today.

Myth #1: Students Don't Read as Well Today as They Did When I Was in School

Raise your hand if you've ever said, or heard, a variation of this myth. In fact, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—often called our “nation's report card” because it's regarded as the gold standard in national standardized tests—NAEP reading scores have remained relatively stable since 1970 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020; Deshler, Palinesar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007). If you dig deeper into the data, a more nuanced picture emerges. While some subgroups' achievement scores have improved over time, concerning achievement gaps among subgroups remain (Allington, 2012; NCES, 2020).

Reader	Literacy Challenges	Chapters
Aliyah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> word recognition skills below grade-level expectations with underlying needs in decoding and spelling listening comprehension and oral vocabulary are at least on grade level, if not exceeding reading comprehension isn't an issue in texts she can decode well limited reading comprehension and limited fluency are the result of word reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4: Word Recognition 5: Fluency
Zach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> word recognition skills meeting grade-level expectations reading comprehension below grade-level expectations despite good word reading reading comprehension difficulty due to vocabulary, background knowledge, inferencing, or other language-based difficulties fluency issues are based in difficulties with reading comprehension rather than word reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6: Vocabulary Challenges 7: Purpose, Text Structure, and Comprehension Strategy Challenges 8: Using Writing to Overcome Comprehension Challenges
Andres	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> both word recognition and fluency below grade-level expectations reading comprehension below grade-level expectations due to a multitude of factors, including limited practice and engagement variable engagement in school with notable drop during reading- and writing-related tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 9: Engagement Challenges

FIGURE 1.1. Case study chapters for three middle-grades readers.

So, if our nation's overall reading achievement has remained relatively stable over the last 50 years, should we be worried? Yes, we absolutely should. While the *reading achievement* of U.S. students may not have changed much, what has changed dramatically are the *literacy expectations* for today's 21st-century jobs (Deshler et al., 2007). No longer is it possible—as it might have been in 1970—for most people to find a good, stable job and earn a decent living with fourth-grade reading skills. In fact, most jobs today require much more advanced reading and writing skills to succeed. Put simply, while the overall reading achievement in the United States may have remained relatively steady over the last half century, the “reading expectations bar” has risen dramatically.

Myth #2: By the Time They Reach Middle School, Reading Isn't a Problem for Most Students

What percentage of students in fourth through eighth grade in the United States struggle to read proficiently? 20%? 40%? 50%? More? According to NAEP reading scores (NCES, 2019):

- 65% of fourth graders scored *below proficient*
- 66% of eighth graders scored *below proficient*

While we can argue over what *proficient* means, precisely, and where to draw the proficient/not proficient dividing line, the larger takeaway is that there are huge numbers of students who don't have the reading skills necessary to meet the challenging text and task demands they will encounter in the middle grades. Based on the NAEP statistics above and other information, it's not surprising that many experts believe we are in the midst of an adolescent literacy crisis in the United States (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Salinger, 2011). If you believe that reading is the “gateway skill” to learning in any content area, then this isn't just a literacy problem, it's a nationwide learning and achievement issue.

Myth #3: Struggling Middle-Grades Readers Are All the Same

As you can see from our discussion of Aliyah, Zach, and Andres above, middle-grades readers with literacy challenges are not a monolithic group. Some of your middle-grades students may struggle with word recognition, others with reading fluency, some with vocabulary and background knowledge, and still others with engagement. In fact, in one classic study of fifth graders who scored “below proficient” on a fourth-grade state reading assessment, the authors identified six different struggling reader profiles (Buly & Valencia, 2002; Valencia & Buly, 2004). Importantly, 58% of the fifth graders struggled with automatic word recognition and 82% of them struggled with word identification and/or fluency. This study, along with

others looking at older readers (e.g., Capin, Cho, Miciak, Roberts, & Vaughn, 2021; Catts, Hogan, & Adolf, 2005; Leach, Scarborough, & Rescorla, 2003), dispels the common myth that decoding and fluency issues are only problems for kindergarten through third grade (K–3) readers.

Because middle-grades readers with literacy challenges each have different reader profiles, including different literacy strengths and challenges, they will require different interventions. It follows, then, that a “one-size-fits-all” program or approach will not work with all of your students. For precisely this reason, we decided to take a “case study approach” in this book. We want to show how (1) to use diagnostic assessments (2) to plan research-based literacy interventions (3) that will target the individual needs of your students.

Myth #4: Middle-Grades Readers with Literacy Challenges Just Need a “Second Dose” of What They Received in the Primary Grades to Catch Up

There are distinct differences between middle-grades readers and K–3 readers. For example, with our middle-grades readers who struggle with decoding, we often work on decoding *multisyllabic words*. Specifically, we teach our middle-grades readers how to decode using larger word parts such as *morphemes* (e.g., the prefix *pre-* in *preindustrial*) and *syllables* (*gov-ern-ment*) as opposed to the letter-by-letter decoding approach (*r-e-s-t* in *rest*) emphasized in the primary grades. Throughout this book, we will emphasize the distinctive characteristics of middle-grades readers, like this, and how to capitalize on them during instruction.

Myth #5: If I Can Just Find the Right Program, I Can “Fix” the Problem

Once students enter the middle grades, there is an intense sense of urgency to help them “catch up.” This sometimes feels overwhelming, especially when some research has shown students who fall behind in the elementary grades rarely catch up even with intensive interventions (e.g., Juel, 1988, 1994). This situation can be discouraging, but some more recent research has shown older students can make significant gains given appropriate instruction (e.g., Archer, Gleason, & Vachon, 2003). But what is “appropriate instruction”? And how can I get my hands on some?

There are “research-based” programs seemingly everywhere. With that in mind, consider the following: If commercial literacy programs were the ultimate solution to our current adolescent literacy crisis, we wouldn’t have an adolescent literacy crisis. We believe that some programs are effective, and in fact we use some in our work with middle-grades students. However, we understand that programs are tools. Tools are essential to getting a job done, but tools are only as good as the carpenter who uses them.

We follow a thoughtful, common-sense, structured adaptive approach to implementation to improve the fit as we tailor a program to our context and the needs of our students. So, if you have a program, one possibility is a “scaffolded sequence” of adaptations where the program is first implemented with fidelity and then adapted for the best fit while maintaining the program’s core principles (McMaster et al., 2014; Quinn & Kim, 2017; Slavin, Madden, & Datnow, 2007). In the end, it is our teacher knowledge rather than programs that will move the needle of the adolescent literacy crisis.

That is why in this book we provide you with more than solely the tools (instructional strategies) to address your students’ literacy challenges. We also discuss, in some depth, how to use these tools skillfully, including how to decide (1) which tools to use (2) with which students (3) for which instructional purposes. To this end, in our next chapter, we introduce our “North Star” instructional principles that guide our intervention approaches, plans, and day-to-day decision making. We strongly believe that this type of principle-based thinking and expertise is what separates blindly following a scripted program from providing high-quality, expert teaching that makes a real difference with students like Aliyah, Zach, and Andres. As a reminder, we do sometimes use programs, but we realize that no one program will be a best fit for all students. It is our hope that this book will serve as a guide—a guide to inform you about effective practices for middle-grades students with literacy challenges to help you move the needle for your students.