

Units of Study for Teaching Reading  
A Workshop Curriculum, Middle School Grades

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**Question:** *What are the conditions needed for readers to thrive?*

**Mary Ehrenworth:**

Let's talk about the research that undergirds this work, and you can read a lot of this research yourself, or you could read about it. There's a summary of most of this research on the Reading and Writing Project website, Peter Johnston has done a bunch of articles which summarize the research around independent reading, and helping kids move up levels of text complexity, you can read, Scholastic has done a great summary on the benefit of trade books. So let's just go over some of the research that matters the most.

So, one of the things is we'll start with Richard Allington's research, and Richard Allington has done just dozens and dozens of articles, and over a dozen books on this, and he's been president of the International Reading Association. He's probably the leading researcher in what moves readers forward. So, Allington talks about three conditions which readers need in order to thrive. So, one of those is going to be protected time to read, a second one is going to be access to books they find fascinating, and a third is going to be expert instruction.

So, a big part of the work of creating units of study that will really help readers thrive is putting those conditions into play, and the first one is actually creating protected time to read, and frankly, in a lot of schools, especially middle and high schools, but you'd be surprised how, actually, in elementary schools too, around the country or around the world, sometimes kids are meant to just grow up as readers without getting any time to actually work on it. So the first thing that you actually need to look at when you're looking at research-based instruction is you have to look at your schedule, and you just have to say, what could we do to make more time for kids to actually work on their reading? Because otherwise, what happens is kids get good instruction, but they don't get any time to get any better. It's like having meetings and coaching about baseball but never getting to play it. Like, the kids need time to play it. They have to be in the scrimmage. So, that's the first, is Allington's research on protected time to read. And that actually means that they need protected time to read inside of school, and they need protected time to read outside of school, so some of the work that you'll see in the units of study is about helping kids find protected time in their life to read outside of the school day.

Then the second thing is going to be access to books that they find fascinating, and when you think about access to books that they find fascinating, emphasis is on the pronoun, "they." So, there's a lot of books that adults wish that kids would love to read. Do we wish that they would love to pick up *Death of a Salesman*? Sure. Do we

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wish that they would love to pick up *Antigone*? Sure. Do we think that those are the books that are going to turn them into lifelong readers? Sadly, they're not, right? They're not. So, one of the things is you have to figure out that, for kids to move forward as readers, and I think the best research on this has been Peter Johnston's research and Richard Allington's research. I really, really love Peter Johnston's book *Opening Minds*, which is where he did this incredible study of what happens when kids were given open choice over what they read, and what he found is it changed kids' lives. Like, kids who had never thought that they loved to read found out that they did like to read. Kids who had never talked to other kids about books learned that they had a lot to say when they had books that they were really fascinated by. So, listen, what's going to get in the way of this is your own comfort level, and your community's comfort level over which kind of books you think are appropriate for kids. In the end, it's a good book if it turns a kid into a reader. Like, if they become a reader, they will later read *Antigone*, they will later read Toni Morrison, they will later read Shakespeare. But if you don't turn them into a reader, all of those books are going to remain out of their reach.

So, part of it is access to books that kids find fascinating. You can definitely look at, we spent hundreds of thousands of hours working on this incredible not-for-profit endeavor, which is the TCRWP Classroom Libraries, where it's a carefully curated selection, so that the sixth grade books, and the seventh grade books, and the eighth grade books are not the same, so that there's below benchmark books that are below level but still interesting to teens, and I do think those are amazing. But in the end, you could be buying books used, you could be looking at the ALA website, you could look at Goodreads, you could look at Amazon. What you really want to do, though, is make sure that you get books that kids want to read.

So then there's Peter Johnston's research, which I love his research, and I think the best place to read it now is probably in his book *Opening Minds*, where he talks about how kids literally change when they get access to books they find fascinating. So, everything that actually, you know, old school teachers who are still teaching all class novels, which, by the way, I did for many years when I was a teacher, but everything that I wanted for kids to get out of when I wanted them to read, let's say, *Lord of the Flies*, they are actually going to get out of reading *The Hunger Games*, and reading *Maze Runner*, and then ultimately, they read those dystopian books, they're going to get to *Lord of the Flies*, and everything that you wanted for them, plus more, because if they read about books that are actually socially relevant to the lives they lead, it changes the decisions they make on an everyday basis. So, Peter Johnston really shows that, as well as showing how it will also raise their test scores, it will also make them stronger and faster readers, it will also mean that their reading rate goes up. Everything that you want for them will happen with really carefully orchestrated independent reading.

But there is one thing, and there's a couple great books in this. I like the whole series, the No More series, and one of the things that has come up is that untouched

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independent reading is not really what we're going for. It's actually, the kids feel like they're making independent choice, but it's really sort of carefully negotiated choice, where they have access to all this fabulous, like, the best young adult literature that the world has, and fortunately, kids are growing up now with incredible young adult literature. They feel like they're choosing on their own, but teachers are really deeply in those choice too, making sure that kids become really skilled at saying how will these books help me grow? How will the books that I'm going to read help me get smarter? And so, actually, we really get the kids onto what's called courses of study, where they're choosing books themselves, but it's not random, they're not just grazing at a level, because we want them to be able to move up levels of complexity faster, and we want to make sure that, you know, they are reading to get smarter, they are reading to become more complex, nuanced people, and so we don't want them staying with one kind of book for their whole career in middle school.

Within the research around the reading, there's another thread of this, which is helping kids move up levels of text complexity, and that is looking at levels of text complexity is really, really helpful. We think Fountas and Pinnell has done incredible research on this, and we really love their work, because it actually turns out that moving kids up levels of text complexity means you have to have teachers who understand text complexity, and you don't get that by reading five books a year, you get that by deeply studying books. So, you can rely on Fountas and Pinnell 's research, or you can dive into what they've done and begin to look at books with those lenses, so you're basically looking at, some of Fountas and Pinnell 's research has been that you're looking at vocabulary, you're looking at content, you're looking at length, and you're looking at a structure. And so, once you begin to look with those lenses, you begin to see why some books are harder than others, and what we're trying to do is help kids move up those levels of complexity.

Now, there's some research than Allington did that's actually pretty helpful in this, which is that one way to help kids move up levels of text complexity is to not just read a lot, but to read a lot in a topic or in a genre, so that, for instance, if you get kids who become really expert at fantasy, they're going to move up levels faster if they become expert and they keep going in fantasy. So, part of this is building libraries where it's easy for kids to keep going, keep going with a series, keep going with an author, keep going with a genre. And so, as you're building your libraries, you want to build the libraries in your classroom so it's a metaphor for the reading lives that kids will have, because sometimes what happens is they can't do it. Like, they begin a series, then the rest of the series isn't there, they can't go on with it, which, as long as your kids have a lot of academic and cultural capital, and they know how to get books, fine, then you can send them to the public library. But some of our kids are living and growing up as readers in places where they don't have access to great public libraries right away, and so that means we want to move Heaven and Earth to make sure that we get the books into the classroom so that kids can read.