

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

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**Question:** *Why teach reading in middle school?*

**Mary Ehrenworth:**

Colleagues, let's talk for a minute about why you might want to teach reading units of study, why you might want to teach Reading Workshop. I think the best way to start is to actually talk to you for a minute about some of the things I might actually tell parents, and that is the big question of, why is it worth it in middle school, to work on kids reading? Because frankly, a lot of you, like me, when we went to high school and we were in middle school, no one taught you reading. Basically, reading instruction stopped around third grade. So here's the thing, one of the things we know about kid's reading work is that all of school is easier if they become powerful readers. Their science classes, their math classes, their history classes—there's a hidden curriculum of literacy within all of those disciplines, and that's going to be true in the middle school, it's going to be true in high school, and it's going to be true in college. So one thing we want is for kids to be able to make all the choices they want in the world for their careers, for their academic goals, for the books that they can read, based not on can they read the text, but if it is this the right choice for them in terms of what they want to study. So one of our goals is that we want that kids become more powerful readers through Reading Workshop. And we know from a lot of research that actually, kids need time to work on their reading, and that's what Reading Workshop is going to do for them.

If one of our goals is that kids become powerful at reading any text, another one of the things that we want is for kids also to become more nuanced readers, more complicated readers. So that means both that kids can read harder, more complicated, denser, longer texts. It also means that they begin to read weighing and evaluating multiple perspectives, thinking to themselves, well, if I read this book, what would I read next that might give me a different perspective? We're looking for kids that realize that the world is complicated, and that we don't all think and feel the same way.

And then, there's another thing that we want for our middle school readers that we care very deeply about and have woven throughout our units of study, and that is questions of representation and kids being able to see themselves in the books that they find in your classrooms. Sometime if you want, you might go back and read a really stunning book called *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales*, by Bronwyn Davies, and in there, Davies talks about how kids learn about possibility and impossibility through the stories that they encounter in school. So issues of representation are really important for us, and I think they're going to be important for you as well.

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And then there's one more thing, and that is, there are different ways to teach reading, but there aren't that many ways to teach reading that inspire kids to want to read for the rest of their lives, and that's what we're looking for. And so, you'll see that throughout the units of study there's an emphasis on the work that you do in school, and the work that you do out of school, and that actually, the work that they're going to do in school is really a starter set for what they're going to do outside of school, because we know that so much of the achievement gap happens outside of the school hours. So, you'll see that part of the work of Reading Workshop in these units of study is inspiring kids to want to read outside of school, to read over vacation, to read over the summer. We follow Richard Allington's work, which says that for every five weeks the kids don't read, they drop a reading level, and we don't want that for our kids. We want that our kids actually come back from summer having read more, because they've had time to read in the midst of their really busy and complicated lives as adolescents.

So those are our goals: firstly, we're hoping that kids will become more powerful readers, and we're going to work to make sure that's possible for all kids. Secondly, we want them to become more nuanced and complicated readers, and thirdly is that they learn to become independent readers who can read outside of school as much as inside of school, including how to find books, where to get them, and how to fit reading into their lives.