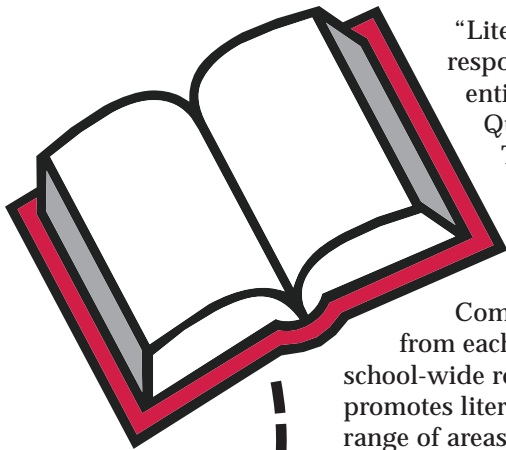


Teaching Literacy Across the Curriculum

By Jim Paterson

As they explore ways to improve literacy in middle schools, educators are finding that sometimes there are opportunities to make inroads outside the classrooms where such efforts are normally the focus.



“Literacy has to be a shared responsibility throughout the entire school,” says Terry Quinn, principal at Twelve Corners Middle School in Rochester, New York. The school’s Reading Comprehension

Committee, with a member from each discipline, plans school-wide reading activities and promotes literacy efforts in a broad range of areas.

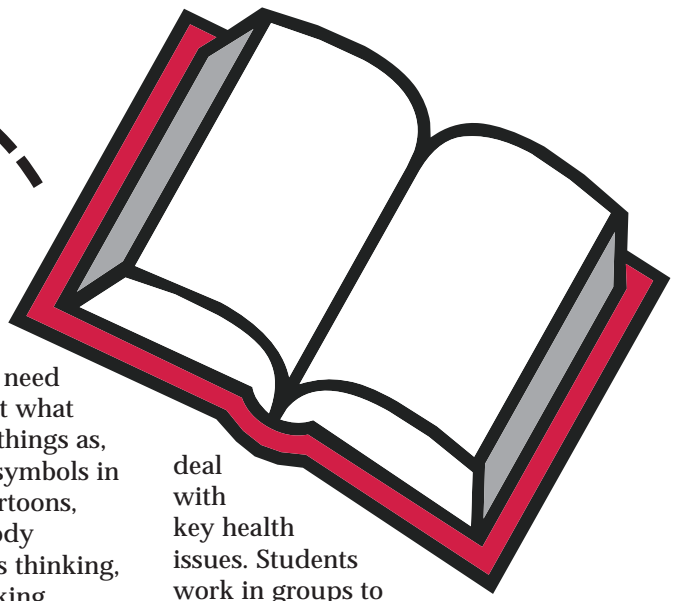
National Middle School Association spelled it out in a position paper on the importance of literacy education developed with the International Reading Association: “Integrate reading through the curriculum, recognize the multidisciplinary nature of reading instruction.” The associations recommend “modeling and coaching to introduce new instructional strategies for reading instruction across all subjects.” (See

the full text of the position paper at www.nmsa.org)

Patti Kinney, principal at Talent Middle School in Talent, Oregon, and immediate past president of NMSA, says that philosophy should include, but go beyond, other major content areas.

“We live in a world where all our learning is connected,” she says. “As adults we don’t think ‘Now I am doing reading,’ or ‘It’s time to use reading skills.’ We just do it. Students need to see that everything is connected and reading and writing are not just for English class; they must be practiced across the board. Then the skills become part of their daily life. I strongly believe that reading and writing have to be infused into everything we do and teach in schools,” she says.

Mark Fish, principal at Oliver W. Winch Middle School in South Glens Falls, New York, says, “Alternative approaches to literacy allow students



learning opportunities where they can see how reading and writing skills are applicable to all content areas and in real life. The stronger those connections are made, the stronger the literacy program will be.”

That connection can range from other content area subjects such as math and social studies to classes like art and physical education—or even in student activities, according to Tim Shanahan, a professor at the University of Illinois Center for Literacy and president of the International Reading Association. “Students should be expected to read and use their literacy skills throughout the day and school year.”

He says such efforts give a purpose to reading and help students develop a literacy-based approach to learning. “I have seen middle school art teachers who have kids read about the symbol system and then try to make symbols part of their art. Or there can be attention to the history of the subject or to a formal critique, which can include writing and reading,” Shanahan says. “In physical education, students can be encouraged to read about or learn about a sport or activity.”

He warns that time should not be taken away from the real purpose of these classes or activities—learning a skill or a sport or practicing it.

A Broader View

Victoria Ridgeway Gillis, a professor in reading education at Clemson University, an author, and director for the South Carolina Center of Excellence for Adolescent Reading, says too often teachers see literacy efforts as distracting from their other teaching goals.

“The difficulty is teachers in content areas generally view reading as something they will have to teach in addition to the topics they are responsible for instead of viewing reading as one way to help students learn their content—sort of like the difference between viewing your car

as an extra thing in your garage rather than as something that will take you somewhere.”

Gillis says educators also need to broaden their ideas about what literacy is. It includes such things as, mathematical expressions, symbols in science, Web sites, signs, cartoons, artwork, graphs, or even body language. “Reading involves thinking, making inferences, and making connections, and we read many things that are not traditional text.” She says a broader view of reading and an understanding by teachers of how it can enhance their efforts to teach any subject matter will allow other educators to explore and emphasize literacy.

Gillis says it is hard for teachers to focus on those opportunities because of the current climate that stresses test scores over critical thinking.

Teachers in other core areas are generally aware of the priority literacy has but must be reminded to infuse their classroom efforts with reading and writing, Shanahan says.

“It takes some work to help content area teachers see that reading is every teacher’s responsibility,” says Penny Axelrod, an associate professor at The College of Saint Rose in Albany, New York, and a literacy consultant. “It is nearly impossible to be a reading and writing teacher meeting individual students’ needs and teaching your subject matter when you have 75 to 125 students each day.”

She recommends that all teachers have students preview subject matter, be conscious of vocabulary words, and review main ideas. “It is not very innovative but it is truly designed to help students in all classes acquire missing skills.”

Books, Music, and More

In other courses, teachers can often find creative ways to improve student literacy.

Kinney says health teachers at her school have identified novels that

deal with key health issues. Students work in groups to discuss the novels and the health-related issues.

The library is obviously a place where literacy education is the focus, but some schools are taking new approaches to more thoroughly engage middle school students in reading.

At Marshall Middle School in Wexford, Pennsylvania, Librarian Linda Rosenbaum has tried several approaches: student book clubs twice a month, book talks by students, and author visits whenever possible. Visiting authors have included Avi, Gordon Korman, Ben Mikaelson, Paula Danziger, and Dorothy Hinshaw Patent.

She also has developed a collection of Japanese comic books and shows anime movies once a semester for the students interested in that genre.

Other librarians are also trying less traditional methods to involve students—looking for niche interest areas that might grab those students who typically aren’t good readers, such as car racing, sports, or contemporary music.

Music courses offer opportunities to read about the history of an instrument or piece of music or even read reviews about contemporary music that students may be interested in.

Theatre programs offer opportunities to promote literacy among the participants and, perhaps, the audience. Various clubs often can make literacy part of their activities, and student leadership organizations can take it on as a project or simply make it part of activities they promote.

As Shanahan suggests, in P.E. and

sports, some instruction can come by way of reading and diagrams, and students can be encouraged to read about sports they enjoy—or stars with whom they are enamored—especially if the reading supports the goals of the class or sport activity. Statistics are also a key part of sports watching and can be put to use in classrooms or sports activities.

Across the Board

Many educators say that literacy has to be seen as a school-wide activity.

At Quinn's Twelve Corners Middle School, several efforts are underway throughout the school, including a "weekly word" to build vocabulary. The word is introduced during morning announcements and discussed and used in each class. Pre-reading and post-reading strategies are also emphasized school-wide.

Kinney says at her school a bullying issue was dealt with by having homeroom teachers read aloud from the book *The Revealers*. Guided questions were provided to promote discussion, and the drama class kicked off the project by enacting the first chapter for the entire school on videotape.

"We noticed a carryover into the student services office, where students were referring to the book and the topics discussed when bullying issues came up. Homerooms also created

sometimes that means we acknowledge the untraditional: the foreign student, for instance, who translates often for family or friends, or the student who struggles with

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their own books on the topic."

She says similar issues can be taken on by middle schools using literature and writing as the foundation.

At Silver Sands Middle School in Port Orange, Florida, school-wide efforts have included allowing a 10-minute period for reading each day before first period (a bit of time was shaved off each period and locker time) and holding a literacy fair. A literacy council that meets monthly promotes other school-wide activities and established an in-service program to remind all teachers about the need to include literacy in their teaching.

Schools also can promote literacy outside of the school. Ridgeway says

reading but can work through complex manuals for video games.

She suggests that educators recognize and promote examples of untraditional literacy learning. For example, educators might help students who are expected to translate for their families and encourage and praise them for their efforts.

"We have to see the problem as less one of encouraging literacy and more one of motivating students to love learning—however that occurs," she says. ■

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