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Reading Intervention in Middle Schools:

Challenges and Suggested Approaches

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Abstract: Middle schools implementing a multi-tiered system of supports will provide adolescents with or at risk for reading difficulties supplemental, small-group reading intervention classes. Although numerous studies have established that peer collaboration, blended learning, differentiation, and sufficient time for instruction are effective practices for improving reading outcomes among middle school intervention students, educators still experience challenges to implementing these recommended approaches. This article offers research-based guidance intended to support the provision of literacy interventions that can meet middle school students' academic and developmental needs. After summarizing several challenges that were identified during a semester-long study of implementing a supplemental reading intervention class for Grade 7 students, guidance and tools or examples are provided for achieving a more successful implementation of each practice and promoting learning that is active, purposeful, relevant, and democratic.

Keywords*:* Literacy intervention, middle school, peer collaboration, blended learning, differentiation, instructional time

The Successful Middle School: This We Believe Characteristics

- **Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse.**
- **Instruction fosters learning that is active, purposeful, and democratic.**

Students identified as experiencing reading difficulties in Grades 6 through 8 typically require literacy intervention to support their development of reading skills (Vaughn et al., 2010). Proficient reading skills become increasingly important during the middle grades as students are expected to acquire social studies and science content knowledge through texts (Reed et al., 2017; Townsend et al., 2016). Accordingly, students identified as not reading proficiently on state assessments or district-administered benchmark assessments become eligible for supplemental, small-group reading instruction in specific skills. Although a growing body of literature has identified effective intervention practices for improving reading outcomes among middle school students in these designated classes (e.g., Vaughn et al., 2022), educators still experience challenges to implementing recommended approaches due to low educator preparedness for teaching reading (Merga et al., 2020), academic disengagement among adolescents experiencing difficulties (Buzzai et al., 2021), and restricted scheduling options for adding intervention classes into a students' day (O'Connor et al., 2017).

Furthermore, reading interventions in the middle grades must take into account not only the educational differences students are experiencing as they transition from elementary school, but also adolescents' developmental changes. For example, middle-level students often need to learn how to take charge of their academic achievement and productively direct their peer interactions (Rosen et al., 2022). The Association of Middle Level Education advocates for instruction that promotes learning that is active, purposeful, relevant, and democratic (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). This We Believe (TWB) tenets also suggest that reading interventionists need to be prepared for *what* they will teach (i.e., the curriculum and content) and *how* they should teach young adolescents (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

To that end, the sections that follow summarize several common components of

supplemental reading intervention that have demonstrated positive outcomes for middle school students at risk for reading difficulties and provide recommendations for overcoming challenges to implementing those recommendations. Specifically, the four components addressed are: (a) peer collaboration, (b) blended learning, (c) differentiation, and (d) sufficient time for instruction. These components have been established in prior research on reading instruction (e.g., Topping et al., 2021; Vaughn et al., 2022; Wexler et al., 2015) as well as research on supporting the developmental needs of middle school students (Koenka & Anderman, 2019; Rosen et al., 2022), and they were integral to a recent semester-long study of reading intervention classes for Grade 7 students (grant number R324A220269).

This study occurred with four teachers in four different school districts. The teachers included one who taught English language arts (ELA) with one intervention class during an advisory period, one who taught a combination of ELA and intervention classes, one who taught only reading intervention, and one who taught career and technology with a designated intervention class during an advisory period. Each school had a different intervention schedule, ranging from 30 minutes daily to 75 minutes on alternating days. Class sizes ranged from 6-24 students. To reduce the likelihood that findings were anomalous or relevant to a single set of contextual factors, the settings in which the intervention was implemented differed in terms of district policies, teacher background, class length, class frequency, and class size. The challenges associated with implementing the supplemental reading intervention were identified by recording each classroom weekly throughout the duration of the study and having two scorers use an observation checklist to document what occurred (reliability M = 90%). The patterns that emerged indicated the implementation challenges were consistent across teachers and settings. In each of the following sections, we first introduce the reading intervention component, provide

an overview of the research that supports its use in middle school, and explain how the component promotes active, purposeful, relevant, and democratic learning. Then, we present the challenges the teachers in our study experienced, followed by guidance for addressing those challenges. Consistent with the TWB tenets of collaborative and student-centered leadership in middle schools (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), teachers and administrators can use the template found in Figure 1 to identify starting points, collaboratively plan for the difficulties they may encounter, and return to the template iteratively to identify next steps.

Peer Collaboration

Peer collaboration occurs when students of the same age work together as partners or in small groups to complete tasks. Some examples of effective peer collaboration include reciprocal tutoring, partner reading, pairing more- and less- abled peers, the use of small groups, and the use of computers to facilitate collaborative learning (Wexler et al., 2015). Working with peers is motivating for middle school students and can foster more interest in the assignment by giving them a sense of autonomy (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). In addition, peer collaboration can provide an authentic opportunity for students to learn social skills and cognitive abilities (e.g., staying focused, critical thinking) that are important to middle-level development (Rosen et al., 2022). Wexler and Reed (2016) identified a number of benefits that peer collaboration may offer adolescents. First, as opposed to large-group activities, students have more opportunities to practice and respond when working with a partner or in a small group, keeping them active in the learning process. Second, students have more chances to give and receive feedback, which helps them better understand how they are performing a skill and what they can do to continue improving. Furthermore, feedback from peers often is more immediate than that from teachers. Third, working with partners allows students to build on the collective knowledge of their other

group members. Finally, relevant to reading intervention specific, students completing partner reading or fluency activities can experience different models of language use from their peers. Despite these benefits, teachers often experience difficulties when implementing supplemental reading interventions that include a peer collaboration component. Fortunately, there are ways that teachers can address these challenges.

Challenges to Implementing Peer Collaboration and Suggested Approaches

Addressing Challenge 1: Students May Be Off-Task or Disruptive While Working with Peers.

Teachers should devote time to preparing their students for being productive during peer collaboration. This involves explaining and practicing behavioral routines for the work, modeling and practicing the correct procedures for each activity or strategy, and setting clear expectations for what students should complete each session. Having students set daily or weekly goals that are authentic and personally meaningful may motivate students to stay focused (Kamil et al., 2008). Example routines, procedures, expectations, and goals for a middle-level reading intervention class are provided in Table 1.

In order to ensure that students remain on-task, circulating around the room and monitoring students is necessary. Offering praise to students for being focused can encourage students to continue positive behaviors (Royer, 2019). If a particular group of students is consistently off-task or disruptive, re-partnering students may be necessary.

Addressing Challenge 2: Student Absences Will Disrupt Partner Work.

Student absences require teachers to alter instructional plans, especially on days when teachers have planned for students to work in partners. This may deter teachers from implementing supplemental interventions with peer collaboration, but there are ways to mitigate the disruptions caused by absences. For absences of a single day, consider which activities the partner of the absent student can complete independently. If certain intervention components cannot be completed without a partner (e.g.,

peer feedback, partner reading), teachers could give an alternative assignment to the student whose partner is absent. It is important that this assignment keeps the student actively involved in learning and not waiting passively for the partner to return. Many online interventions include printable lessons to provide additional practice with specific reading skills. These would offer the student purposeful work while waiting to resume the partner activities.

If a partner's absence lasts several days or more, the remaining student should be re-partnered—even if only temporarily—to allow the student to continue progressing. When the student joins a new group, any changes to roles within the group should be explained and practiced. One example might be explaining how students accustomed to collaborating in dyads should modify their steps and responsibilities to collaborate as a triad. When the absent student returns to the intervention class, the students may resume working in their original partnerships. This kind of social problem solving and cognitive flexibility also are critical to the social-emotional development of middle school students (Rosen et al., 2022)

Blended Learning

Blended learning is the combination of in-person, teacher-led instruction with computer-based learning, commonly with web-based programs. The integration of both modalities can take different forms in a reading intervention class. Students may rotate among online and offline activities according to a fixed schedule within the class period or the week. Often, the data collected from the online learning component informs the kinds of lessons and assignments that students complete offline. Utilizing blended learning in reading instruction has demonstrated positive effects for students in all grade levels, including middle school (Cheung & Slavin, 2012). One potential benefit of blended learning is that the online component often allows for more student control over pacing and content. In other words, students are afforded some choices over which activities they complete, the order in which they complete them, or how much time

they spend on each activity. Allowing students to have some autonomy in their learning can have a positive impact on their motivation and interest (Kamil et al., 2008), and instruction that incorporates student voice and agency fosters a classroom environment that is democratic (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

Online interventions typically have scaffolding embedded within texts such as hints, hyperlinks, videos, and pronunciation guides, which can support students' reading of complex texts. Moreover, the feedback the students receive during online activities is often immediate and specific, which helps them understand how they are doing and what they can do to continue improving (Koenka & Anderman, 2019). Another benefit of computer-assisted learning is that teachers can easily track their student's progress. Student performance data can indicate whether a student needs more instruction or additional practice with a particular skill. Consistent with TWB tenets (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), ongoing assessment advances students' learning by helping teachers determine which online lessons to assign to which students and how to provide the appropriate level of difficulty.

Although online components have some advantages, teachers may experience challenges implementing blended learning in their supplemental intervention classes. The recommendations below provide guidance for addressing these difficulties.

Challenges to Implementing Blended Learning and Suggested Approaches

Addressing Challenge 1: Classroom Technology and Internet Connectivity Can Be Unreliable.

If the intervention has an online component, there inevitably will be some days when the platform runs slowly or the lessons for the day will not load. Many online interventions have printable lessons, so teachers should keep a few of these on hand in the event of technological issues. Although some online interventions automatically generate lesson recommendations

based on students' performance, it is important for teachers to continue to monitor online data so that they will be able to assign relevant printed lessons in the event that technology issues occur. Knowledge of the data also is needed to provide students feedback on their learning that is task-focused, specific to each student's performance, and connected to what students need to do next (Koenka & Anderman, 2019).

Addressing Challenge 2: Students May Not Be Able to Complete Intervention Steps Without Adult Assistance.

Greater autonomy is a benefit of online learning; however, some middle school students in reading intervention classes may lack the self-regulation skills necessary to complete online activities independently (Pilegard & Fiorella, 2016). For students to work independently, they must learn the procedures and expectations through teacher modeling and guided practice for each step or component they are to carry out.

Teacher modeling can include how to find and use online resources, what each group member's role will be, what product each group member will produce, and how much time there is for each activity (also see Table 1). In order to facilitate practice sessions, teachers must be comfortable with the intervention procedures themselves. If using an online platform, teachers should complete activities from a student's perspective prior to teaching students the intervention procedures. This way, teachers will be able to anticipate students' questions, help them use the platform, and troubleshoot any technology issues. Throughout the modeling and guided practice, students need opportunities to ask questions and try every step and component of the intervention with immediate feedback.

Although teachers may provide supports during the explicit instruction stage, it is important to fade prompts gradually so that students are able to complete the intervention

procedures without adult assistance (Cengher, 2018). If teachers offer unnecessary supports—such as telling a student what to say or what to click—students may become increasingly reliant upon the teacher. In this case, students never fully learn the procedures they are expected to follow for the online activities and, therefore, cannot receive the intended benefit derived from completing the steps themselves. To avoid student passivity and dependence upon the instructor, teachers should make sure students are able to perform all the steps and procedures before being assigned to do them independently. It is appropriate for teachers to redirect students or provide reminders at times when monitoring them during the intervention class, but corrective feedback should focus on empowering students to complete all steps of the intervention on their own.

Differentiation

When teachers differentiate instruction, they vary their instructional strategies or the content of their lessons in order to address each student's distinct learning needs. There is evidence that adolescents experience reading difficulties for different reasons (Clemens et al., 2017; Oslund et al., 2018). Students may struggle with one or more specific components of reading—such as word decoding, fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension—but not others. In addition, they may have difficulties to a greater or lesser extent, along the continuum of ability. One way to differentiate instruction within supplemental intervention classes is to offer targeted lessons that focus on students' most pressing needs. For example, a student whose primary difficulty is with comprehending complex texts might not benefit from a lesson on decoding strategies. Conversely, a student struggling to identify and pronounce unfamiliar words likely would need more practice with decoding strategies before moving to comprehension strategies. Differentiating instruction helps to ensure that the learning is purposeful, relevant, and targets the skill areas in which students have demonstrated a need for additional support.

Assigning lessons that target students' specific skill needs can help maximize instructional time in the designated intervention class because students do not spend the period completing lessons that are above or below their ability. In fact, receiving highly individualized reading instruction has been as important to the performance of middle school students as the overall amount of direct reading instruction they receive (Little et al., 2014).

Despite the benefits of differentiating instruction, intervention teachers may experience difficulties when adapting their instructional strategies, content, or the complexity of their lessons to address students' needs. The following recommendations may help teachers address these challenges.

Addressing the Challenge to Implementing Differentiation: Assigning Individualized Lessons to Each Student Seems Too Difficult or Time-Consuming

Differentiating instruction involves collecting data on students' performance from different sources and using it to make decisions about individualized lessons, so it is important for intervention teachers to have efficient processes in place for collecting relevant data. Many reading interventions have an online component that automatically collects data on each student's progress through built-in assessments and students' ongoing performance in the program. Some online platforms may generate automatic recommendations regarding which lessons or activities to assign each student. It can be tempting to let the computer program manage everything and be solely responsible for students' learning. However, teachers should understand how to access student performance data in the online system and use it to assign lessons and activities that are purposeful and target each students' individual needs.

In addition to computer program data, teachers can gather observational data while students are working on intervention components. Having students complete work in partners or

groups frees up time for the teacher to circulate around the room and take notes regarding each student's performance and progress. Establishing a note-taking system or using a checklist or key (see example in the supplemental file, Figure 2) can expedite the process. Finally, having students set daily or weekly goals can provide another source of data that can be used to assign targeted lessons. Many adolescents need help establishing reasonable goals for their improvement, so it is important to model and discuss goal setting (Reed & Lynn , 2016).

Sufficient Time for Supplemental Intervention Classes

Increasing the intensity of an effective intervention can improve student outcomes (Stevenson & Reed, 2017). The intensity of an intervention can be altered by adjusting group size or the amount of instructional time (e.g., smaller group sizes, longer sessions, greater frequency of sessions, or longer duration of the intervention). Unfortunately, middle schools can find it difficult to increase the amount of time students spend in a supplemental reading intervention without sacrificing other instructional time the students need. To carve out time for intervention, schools have taken steps such as replacing an elective class, pulling out students from other classes, or shortening all of the class periods in the day (National Center on Response to Intervention [NCRTI], 2011). Given the difficulty in scheduling time for intervention, it is important that the designated class time is purposeful and not lost due to absenteeism, lack of motivation, or other competing uses of time. This requires a shared vision and collaborative leadership (Bishop & Harrison, 2021)

Challenges to Implementing Sufficient Time for Intervention and Suggested Approaches

Addressing Challenge 1: Teachers May Be Expected to Use Class Time for Test Prep and/or Homework Help.

When first implementing an intervention class period, school leaders must establish the

purpose for that intervention time. Although test taking skills and homework help may be important for student success, this can take place as part of a student's typical classes or before- and after-school tutoring. The purpose of reading interventions is to provide students with targeted instruction and practice opportunities to develop the literacy skills and strategies that they need to become proficient readers and access on-grade-level content.

In order to achieve this purpose, school leaders can support the implementation of the intervention by building adequate intervention time into the school schedule and ensuring that this time is protected. It is recommended that the schedule be adjusted to accommodate intervention periods of 30-50 minutes each day (Reed et al. , 2012). If the designated class is scheduled for less than the recommended length, there will not be sufficient time for instruction, student practice opportunities, and transitions. School leaders can protect the time by minimizing disruptions, such as administrative tasks or assemblies, to the intervention class period.

Finally, through classroom observations, school leaders can ensure that intervention time is being used as intended. Routinely monitoring fidelity to the intervention can help administrators identify teachers who need further support as well as determine the areas of focus for future professional development.

Addressing Challenge 2: Class Time Can Be Lost Due to Absenteeism and Motivational Issues.

Reading intervention is not likely to be an adolescent's favorite class of the day. There are several ways teachers can help increase students' motivation to attend and participate in the class. Earlier sections addressed how peer collaboration supports middle school students' interest by allowing more opportunities for socialization (Wexler et al, 2015). In addition, allowing students choice in some aspects of their assignments, including in the selection of their own partners, can increase adolescents' feelings of autonomy, which is also believed to be a key factor in their motivation (Guthrie,

2014; Kamil et al., 2008). Nevertheless, these motivational strategies probably cannot overcome a lack of accountability for completing assignments (Tyner & Petrilli, 2018). Teachers need to monitor students while they work to ensure they are making good use of their time. Teachers also should take an active role in checking the work their students submit. If students believe no one will pay attention to what they do or how well they do it, there is little motivation for them to take assignments seriously.

Although teachers have some power to motivate students and encourage participation, ultimately school leaders are responsible for ensuring that students attend class. If attendance is inconsistent, students will not benefit from the opportunity that creating an intervention class in the school day was intended to provide (Locquiao et al., 2021). Middle school students may be absent the whole day or may just skip the intervention class, so leaders need to attend to patterns in attendance. In keeping with TWB (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), addressing attendance problems is not limited to punishment but should consider efforts to improve the school climate so that students experiencing difficulties feel a connection to the adults in the building, believe they are treated fairly academically and socially, and see purpose in their studies (Daily et al., 2020).

Addressing Challenge 3: Progress Monitoring Can Consume Class Time.

Regular progress monitoring is an important element of interventions (NCRTI, 2011) and aligned with the TWB tenet for ongoing assessment (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Often the assessments are individually administered during the intervention class time. Progress monitoring can be especially disruptive on days when students are completing partner work because both students are interrupted, not just the student being assessed. Teachers can limit the disruption by scheduling progress monitoring on days when the students will be working independently. This way, students who are not actively being tested can continue to work on intervention activities.

Conclusion

Peer collaboration, blended learning, differentiation, and sufficient time for instruction have been identified as effective practices for supplemental reading intervention. In addition, the practices support learning that is active, purposeful, relevant, and democratic (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). This article examined several challenges that teachers experienced while implementing a semester-long reading intervention class for Grade 7 students that included these components. It is probable the middle school students in reading intervention encounter similar components in their other classes during the day, so the issues and recommendations presented here might need to be considered by teachers beyond the reading interventionist.

Although it is not always easy for middle schools (NCRTI, 2011; O'Connor et al., 2017), teachers and school leaders can work collaboratively to prepare for and successfully implement reading intervention classes. To avoid feeling overwhelmed, educators might examine the questions listed in the first column of Figure 1 and determine which two or three are the most pressing issues to tackle first. A common way to begin reading intervention classes is to establish with students the routines, procedures, expectations, and goals (see Table 1). These can be tailored to any type of curriculum and instructional approach and promote the social-emotional development of middle school students. With those elements in place, teachers then can focus on incorporating the other components. Improved outcomes for middle school students are more likely when educators are prepared for *what* they will teach (i.e., the curriculum and content) and *how* they should teach young adolescents (Bishop & Harrison, 2021).

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Table 1

Example Routines, Procedures, Expectations, and Goals for Peer Collaboration

Instructional Element	Examples of What to Teach Students
Behavioral Routines	How loud to talk with a partner
	How to give and receive feedback respectfully
	What to do if a problem is encountered
	What it means to pay attention and stay on task
Procedures	How to log into the computer system containing the passages
	How to complete the steps of each activity
	What order to follow in completing different activities
	How to submit work on the computer system
Expectations	How many activities to complete in a class period
	What amount of time should be spent on each activity
	How long a written response needs to be
	What amount and type of feedback should be delivered to a partner
Goals	How much improvement is expected in what areas
	What literacy skills each activity is expected to improve

Figure 1

Planning Template for Implementing Successful Reading Intervention Classes in Middle Schools

How will I…	**Tips to Consider**	**Planning Notes**
Keep students on-task while working with peers?	Modeling and practicing procedures and behavioral routines Having students set goals Praising positive behaviors Re-partnering students as needed	
Respond to student absences?	Assigning alternative activities Re-partnering students as needed	
Prepare for technology issues?	Keeping printed lessons and activities on hand	
Empower students to work independently?	Modeling and practicing procedures Providing immediate feedback Fading prompts gradually	
Collect student performance data?	Using online assessments Gathering observational data Having students set goals	
Manage other competing uses of class time (e.g., homework help)	Establishing a purpose for the intervention time Minimizing disruptions Monitoring fidelity	
Motivate students?	Using peer collaboration Allowing student choice Regularly checking student work	
Conduct progress monitoring?	Scheduling progress monitoring for independent work days	

Other challenges I anticipate are…	How I will address these challenges:

Figure 2

Example Fluency Note-Taking Template

Class Period:	**Student:**		
Date	**Skill**	**Ability**	**Notes**
	Reading every word without skipping words and lines	Strength Weakness	
	Reading at a conversational pace	Strength Weakness	
	Using decoding strategies to pronounce unknown words	Strength Weakness	
	Correcting errors after making a mistake	Strength Weakness	
	Using appropriate pauses to reflect punctuation and phrasing	Strength Weakness	
	Using expression and volume to reflect the meaning of the text	Strength Weakness	