

Background Knowledge and the Magazine Reading Students Choose

Teachers and researchers have long been aware of the role of background knowledge in facilitating the meaning-making processes of comprehension. In our study of middle school students' magazine reading habits we were surprised to find that students, at least implicitly, know it, too.

The importance of background knowledge is reflected in the texts students choose to read on their own, their decisions about initiating leisure reading, and the ways in which they use what they've read in conversations and their social lives. In this article, we describe the findings of our longitudinal study of middle school students' magazine-reading habits (Gabriel & Allington, 2009, 2010) as they relate to a question we often asked ourselves as teachers: Can students read difficult but self-selected texts—and if so, how? We begin by describing what we learned about background knowledge and specific vocabulary from our interviews and observations of students reading magazines, and then discuss implications for instruction that facilitates connections between students' in- and out-of-school literacies.

The Reading They Choose

Great consensus exists in the fields of reading and magazine marketing about the primacy of magazine reading as a leisure activity among young adolescents. Magazines are among the top ten items young adolescents will purchase with their own money (Magazine Publishers of America, 2004), they are the source of text that

young adolescents are most likely to read in their leisure time (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007), and even middle school students who claim not to read in their free time do report reading magazines (Gabriel & Allington, 2009, 2010; Carnell, 2005; Hall & Coles, 1999, 2001). Further, research converges on the theme that students make rather predictable magazine choices, with topic preferences falling neatly along gender lines and special interests. That is, girls tend to choose fashion and lifestyle magazines, with the occasional hobby or sport-related title; boys tend to choose sports and electronics magazines, with the occasional hobby-related title (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007). This pattern held true in our study and suggests that the choice of what to read has some embedded social implications and is centered around topics students already know and talk about.

To begin our study, we invited 200 sixth-grade students across two rural districts in the Southeastern part of the US to participate in a study of magazine reading habits over a two-year period. The districts serve a student body of approximately 7,300 students. In the first, the student population is 93% white and 53% economically disadvantaged; in the second, it is 94% white with 61% economically disadvantaged. We asked all students to fill out surveys about their magazine reading habits and motivation to read, and we administered a brief reading comprehension measure (the Test of Silent Contextual Reading Fluency), which we compared with their state test scores in reading.

We then randomly selected 100 students (half of the participants) to receive two magazines of their choice for free over the next two

years. Though students had over 30 magazines to choose from, eight choices emerged as clear favorites, with more than half of the students choosing at least one of the top eight (see Table 1). We used a variety of readability and leveling systems to estimate the average difficulty of individual passages within each magazine and were surprised to find that students consistently chose magazines that, according to multiple measures of text difficulty, were above their reading level.

In order to investigate whether and how students read and understood the difficult texts they chose, we carried out in-depth interviews with 30 of the students at the six-month, one-year, and two-year anniversaries of their free subscriptions. Fifteen boys and 15 girls made up a convenience sample from the group of students who chose at least one of the eight most popular magazines. We asked students to tell us which sections they tended to read as well as when, where, and why they read their magazines. We then asked them to turn to a page of a recent issue they had not yet seen but would normally read, and then read us a section of about 100 words. While we listened, we took a modified version of a Running Record assessment by calculating fluency, recording miscues, and asking students to retell what they read at the end of the passage.

The first thing we noticed when we asked students to choose the passage they read to us was that students chose what to read by looking for passages that have to do with something they already know. On our previous paper-and-pencil surveys, students overwhelmingly responded that they had a favorite section of each magazine (e.g., advice, reviews, letters, back cover) that they routinely flipped to and read. When interviewed in person, however, most students reported and demonstrated simply browsing for whatever was “interesting,” “caught my interest,” or “looked good.”

When we probed a bit further, we found a strong pattern in students’ rationale for which passages looked good or seemed interesting: they picked something that built on or related to something they already knew. For example, out of a page of reviews for different video games, students will read the review of the game they own or have experience with—explaining that

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Table 1. Eight most popular magazines with estimated levels

Magazine title	Number of times selected	Topic	Estimated range of grade-level equivalents*	Students who chose this title but read below its range of levels
<i>Twist</i>	19	Lifestyle	2nd–7th grade	0/19
<i>Tiger Beat</i>	12	Lifestyle	2nd–7th grade	0/12
<i>North American Whitetail</i>	11	Hunting	5th–12th grade	8/11
<i>GamePro</i>	14	Video games	6th–12th grade	10/14
<i>PC Gamer</i>	10	Computer games	6th–12th grade	5/10
<i>Dirt Rider</i>	8	Outdoor sports	5th–12th grade	4/8
<i>J-14</i>	15	Lifestyle	2nd–11th grade	0/15
<i>Seventeen</i>	8	Lifestyle	3rd–11th grade	0/8

*Given that no readability or leveling system is specifically designed for use with magazine texts, levels were calculated using the lowest and highest levels generated by either of two readability formulas and one qualitative leveling rubric in order to present the widest possible range.

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things that are familiar “catch my eye.” Given a choice among several interviews with celebrities within a few pages of each other, students read the interview with the celebrity they are most familiar with. Though it may be that familiarity brings a level of comfort when reading aloud in front of adults, it also seems to be grounds for initiating reading (especially when flipping pages) and a highly reliable strategy for identifying texts students can read independently.

Specific Vocabulary and Student Success

Out of the 30 students, only 2 selected passages that our running record indicated were on their frustration levels. Other students were able to find a passage on their independent or instructional level on their first attempt. Each of the 28 students who could read their magazines with accuracy provided retells that were sufficient to convince us of their ability to recall and understand the text, despite its relative difficulty. This was surprising to us given the difficulty of many of the magazines they chose. For example, we estimated that the average level of passages in *GamePro* would be accessible to 6th–12th-grade readers with lexiles ranging from 960–1480, Fry Readability scores from 7th–12th grade, and qualitative leveling rubric estimates of 7th–10th grade (Chall, Bissex, Conrad, & Harris-Sharples, 1999). Though 14 students selected *GamePro*, only 4 read at or above a 6th-grade level when they made their selection as 6th graders. Still, during our interviews, students easily conquered words representing the technical vocabulary of computer games as well as brand and character names.

Lifestyle magazines that were popular with female students presented a wider range of text difficulty, with passages ranging from elementary

to high school levels. Still, students consistently chose texts of at least 100 words that they could read quickly and with accuracy during our Running Record protocol. They similarly provided thorough retells, often adding their opinions and making connections to other things they knew about the celebrities and the fashion trends they read about. Young hunters (mostly boys) who had selected *North American Whitetail* as one of their magazine choices also explained the terms and tools of their interest area as we engaged them in discussions about the difficult passages they read and retold. Words unfamiliar to us and difficult in terms of length, spelling, multiple meanings, and levels of abstraction were easy for these students, who regularly found themselves steeped in conversations using such words.

Using the Texts They Choose

It was clear to us that students were successful with these challenging texts precisely because they had the relevant background knowledge, specific vocabulary, and motivation to engage with texts that described things they know and care about. This finding—that students will choose to conquer and enjoy texts that are challenging by any measure (sentence length, complexity, frequency of unfamiliar words, assumed background knowledge, etc.) when they have the background knowledge, vocabulary, and interest—has several implications for teachers working to address reading and writing standards, especially those included in the Common Core. Here, we give examples using Common Core anchor standards for Reading and Language in grades 6–12.

First, given that magazines provide a bank of texts in a variety of formats (advertisements, interviews, features, profiles, reviews) and on a variety of levels, magazine excerpts may effectively be used either to introduce or practice standards related to informational or literary texts. For example, a teacher may demonstrate Reading Anchor strand one (“Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it”) using an interview from *Twist* to

introduce new material in a familiar, high-success text. Students may then be asked to extend what they have learned about making inferences to a set of authentic texts, including grade-level academic texts. Or, if students struggle with Reading Anchor strand four (“Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone”) after an initial lesson, it could be reintroduced in the context of a nonacademic text (magazine) in order to provide support for students who had struggled with text difficulty or engagement in the first lesson.

Alternatively, a teacher may demonstrate a new standard using a grade-level academic text, and then provide a variety of magazines with which to practice independently or in groups. Providing a variety of texts for practice allows students the opportunity to choose what they read—a practice that is consistently associated with higher comprehension and motivation (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004). Rather than assigning boys to a certain text and girls to another, thereby reinforcing a gender binary and assuming the interests of individuals, teachers could provide several text options and allow students to group themselves around them. Since magazines offer a bank of texts on a variety of levels, students are more likely to find something they can and want to read in a magazine they choose than in a book or basal reader.

Text options can be drawn from a combination of magazines, high-interest books, local news sources, and online magazines or related sites that represent students’ out-of-school interests. Though magazines are not often found in classroom libraries, a year-long magazine subscription costs about as much as two paperbacks for a classroom library and provides monthly installments with timely coverage. As we found in our surveys, students are most likely to read their magazine “as soon as it comes,” due to the excitement of what we have termed *the novelty factor*. This finding holds true in summer reading programs as well, where studies have shown that stu-

dents read more text more frequently when the texts are delivered to students at regular intervals rather than provided all at once (Lindsay, 2010).

Drawing from traditional out-of-school texts, such as magazines, as part of regular instruction not only acknowledges students’ out-of-school literacy but makes explicit connections to the skills and strategies students use to read, understand, and apply the texts they choose. This also expands the set of texts students have access to for practice beyond grade-level, academic materials—an advantage that provides differentiated material for both struggling and advanced readers. The same techniques could be used with online texts in classrooms and communities where the Internet is easily accessible. Magazines and other media outlets regularly make their content available online for free, which allows students, teachers, and librarians to avoid the cost of subscriptions in areas where schools and most homes have reliable Internet access.

Using the Words They Know

Another classroom strategy that builds on our observations of middle school magazine reading habits involves highlighting and increasing students’ specific vocabulary knowledge. Though knowledge of academic vocabulary is often a challenge for students in middle and high school (Fisher & Frey, 2011), it is important to remember that students may have rich and varied vocabularies related to their out-of-school experiences and leisure reading. One of the strategies that can be used to build on this sometimes-untapped fund of knowledge is to ask students to discuss the relationships between words they know well. This increases awareness of word knowledge

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and builds explicit knowledge about the ways in which authors make words work together.

For example, students who are hockey players outside of school often know a variety of terms and metaphors related to the quality of the ice they skate on. Given the chance to generate some of these terms, students could “demonstrate understanding of word relationships and nuances in word meanings” (Common Core Standards: Knowledge of Language, L.11.12.5) by organizing the words along a spectrum from least to most intense or desirable (adapted from Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002). This activity would allow teachers to establish a discussion about the multidimensional, contingent nature of word meanings that could be carried into discussions of words that come up in class texts or vocabulary study.

As Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) have pointed out, words that are considered low-frequency, highly specialized, or technical in a school context (“tier 3” words), may in fact be high-frequency and high-utility (“tier 2” words) to individual students when engaged in particular out-of-school pursuits. Providing a forum for using and making connections between these words allows students to build explicit knowledge about how words work. Similarly, using these words to enrich connections to academic and new vocabulary by generating associations and modeling the conceptual relationships between them allows students to use their out-of-school funds of knowledge to support and build their academic vocabularies. Indeed, the complex task of finding a relationship between words that are not automatically related (a hunter’s instinct and an

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Magazines in the Classroom

ReadWriteThink.org has several resources on using magazines in the classroom.

Magazine Redux: An Exercise in Critical Literacy

Paper and pixels get compared in this lesson in which students compare both printed and online versions of a magazine.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/magazine-redux-exercise-critical-214.html>

I’ve Got It Covered! Creating Magazine Covers to Summarize Texts

Start the presses! Catchy titles, eye-popping graphics, and attractive fonts are all on students’ agendas in this lesson as they create magazine covers to summarize a topic.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/covered-creating-magazine-covers-1092.html>

Zines for Kids: Multigenre Texts about Media Icons

Students use ReadWriteThink tools to create magazines about prominent figures using a variety of writing genres and styles.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/zines-kids-multigenre-texts-1013.html>

Profile Publisher

Students use the Profile Publisher to draft online social networking profiles, yearbook profiles, and newspaper or magazine profiles for themselves, or other real or fictional characters.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/profile-publisher-30067.html>

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author's virtuosity; an athlete's agility and a character's animosity) is not only robust vocabulary instruction (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan 2002), it is also a way to bridge students' in- and out-of-school literacies.

Our study of middle school students' magazine reading habits not only underscored the importance of background and specific vocabulary knowledge, but also highlighted students' potential to build and use such knowledge in and outside of school. We were encouraged to observe students reading challenging texts in their leisure time for enjoyment, information, and even, at times, to fit in with their peers. We are even more encouraged when we imagine the ways in which teachers might use magazines as instructional supports for engagement, differentiation, and practice, as well as the ways in which teachers might tap into students' out-of-school word knowledge in order to help students use known words to learn new words.

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