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Suzanne L. Whitford

READ 180: Policy Gone Wrong

A few years ago, in response to pressure under the No Child Left Behind policies that required continuous rises in MEAP test scores, my district adopted READ 180 published by Scholastic. READ 180 promises high interest reading materials and increased literacy achievement for students who do not perform well on the MEAP.

Before we adopted READ 180, my district encouraged me to use Michigan's definition of reading as the foundation for my middle school classroom. In 2001, the Michigan State Board of Education defined reading as "the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation." I embraced this definition and created a reading workshop that allowed my students choices. But, though Michigan's definition of reading has not changed, because we've adopted the READ 180 program, my teaching has.

READ 180 promises to meet the needs of students who read below grade level [and who have not passed the MEAP English Language Arts test]. It claims to be:

An intensive reading intervention program that helps educators confront the problem of adolescent illiteracy and special needs reading on multiple fronts, using technology, print, and professional development. READ180 is proven to meet the needs of struggling readers whose reading achievement is below proficient level. The program directly addresses individual needs through differentiated instruction, adaptive and instructional software, high-interest literature, and direct instruction in reading, writing, and vocabulary skills. (A summary of efficacy studies using READ 180, 2002, p. 1)

The word "proven" convinced us that READ180 would help us serve our struggling students. Key terms like "differentiated instruction" and "high-interest literature" lured administrators and teachers into believing that the program supports "best practice."

But after years of following the program and watching my students struggle, I am convinced that, like so many other commercial programs, READ 180 cannot deliver on its promise. I have attempted over the last several years to maintain a meaningful and literature-rich environment that allows for individual choice within the confines of teaching READ 180.

It hasn't been easy.

Too late I realized that READ 180's instructional model is very prescriptive and rigid. Each class period I am required to spend the first twenty minutes in whole group instruction of a lesson created by READ 180. After this lesson, students break into three smaller groups. Each smaller group rotates through three twenty-minute stations: independent reading, READ 180 software, and small group instruction. Students then come back together again for a 10-minute whole-group debriefing or wrap-

up lesson. READ 180 stresses that this instructional model should be followed precisely. Scholastic's, READ 180 website states:

The research is clear: We must invest sufficient time for instruction for students who are at risk of failure. Studies have conclusively shown that when schools implement and follow the 90-Minute Instructional Model, significant gains can be expected after one to two years of program participation. (<http://read180.scholastic.com/about/instructional-model>, para 1)

READ 180 trainers encourage teachers to use a buzzer or bell to notify students when it is time to change stations.

And while the software for READ 180 may produce colorful charts and graphs, call up multiple-choice questions about text, and chart student progress on quizzes, the reality is the program is repetitive, tedious, and mind-numbing for students. The program dictates that students follow this model during every instructional period throughout the school year.

My students hate it.

Never mind that a student might be curled up in a comfortable chair, interacting with a specific text, or that a small group might be debating issues surrounding racism in their community, it's switch time...

You heard the cow bell. Stop the engagement now and go log on to the computer. It's time for the software rotation, and the instructional model only allows for a two-minute transitional time. Hurry! Hurry!

Donald Fry (1985) says reading instruction needs to be "...responsive to what [the student] does in order to maintain that interest and allow that process to bring about change and not stagnate" (p. 29). It is my belief that effective reading instruction must be student-focused rather than program-focused. This is supported by Frank Smith (2004) who says:

Children don't learn to read from programs...Programs can't anticipate what a child will want to do or know at a particular time. They can't provide opportunities for engagement...although some methods of teaching reading are worse than others...the belief that one perfect method might exist to teach all children is contrary to all the evidence about the multiplicity of individual differences that every child brings to reading. (p. 220)

The READ 180 program begins with diagnostic testing. Each student in my district is given the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) test twice a year to determine her or his Lexile score. Students are placed in READ 180 if their Lexile is below grade level. Parent approval is required in my school, but few parents resist the placement. Scholastic began its collaboration with MetaMetrics in 1998, the research and development firm that developed the Lexile framework. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) funded

MetaMetrics' works with a grant intended to support research on reading and psychometric theory. According to the READ 180 program claims, this instructional tool is "...recognized as the most accurate way to match readers with text" (Read 180: A Heritage of Research, 2006, p. 13). The READ 180 report goes on to claim that many well-known reading achievement tests such as the Terra Nova (CAT, CTBS), Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), and Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) have been linked to the Lexile framework (Read 180: A Heritage of Research, 2006).

Once a Lexile is determined, the student in the program is "free to choose" books in the range of 100 Lexile points below the student's Lexile score to 50 points above. The books, however, must come from the Scholastic READ 180 library of about 60 titles. Additional titles are available for additional cost. The paperbacks for the Independent Reading rotation in the READ 180 model were selected based on the understanding

Overall, READ 180 is an electronic basal reading program with emphasis placed on skills and reflects part-to-whole conceptualization reading instruction.

that struggling readers need high-interest and age-appropriate books, with a special focus on content-area non-fiction and relevant topics such as careers, health, and life skills. Scholastic claims its "long-established collection of well-known books and authors allows READ

180 to offer a wide range of genres and levels" (Read 180: A Heritage of Research, 2006, p. 14).

This is simply false.

While some of the titles are engaging for many of the students—S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* or Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising*—other titles don't resonate at all. Gordon Korman's *Dive* or Kristiana Gregory's *Jimmy Spoon and the Pony Express* have remained untouched for the past several years despite my encouragement to try these books. The students' choices are limited to those within the purchased READ 180 program. Students are further limited by having to read text within their Lexile range.

Frank Smith (2004) would disapprove. He argues that the students themselves must judge whether materials and activities are too difficult or dull. "A child's preference is a far better yardstick than any readability formula, and grade levels have no reality in a child's mind. Teachers need not be afraid that children will engage in reading so easy [or difficult] that there is nothing to learn" (p. 223).

Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmermann, co-authors of *Mosaic of Thought* (2007), agree. Keene tells of a second grade student named Anne who received the book *The Secret Garden* for Christmas and wanted to tackle reading it in her classroom. Although the readability of the book exceeded Anne's reading level, Keene encouraged her to try it, and provided several comprehension strategies to help Anne connect to the novel. Through conferencing with her teacher, dialogue with an older student, and the use of metacognitive strategies, Anne was able to complete the book and feel successful. Keene writes:

Did she recognize the subtleties of meaning an older reader might have? Perhaps not. Will she reread the book in

fifth or eighth grade or as a parent? Probably, and if she does, the layers of meaning she uncovers will no doubt surprise her. The monumental effort she expended as a second grader to make her way through this book will have an equally lasting impact. She learned that she can set her mind to something and do it. She can move through and beyond the hurdles. (p. 60)

Keene's assessment of Anne's experience is reflective of Rosenblatt's (1938) Reader Response theory: we never read the same text twice. Anne's experience with *The Secret Garden* encouraged the building of her literacy. In the READ 180 program, Anne would have been denied this opportunity because the book is neither in her Lexile range nor is it a Scholastic title.

Students in READ 180 complete two worksheets with every chosen text they read. The worksheets, titled Comprehension Check and QuickWrites do not necessarily represent poor instructional strategies. But the procedure the students must use is so repetitive that getting students to care about what they've written or engage in a text-to-self activity is a struggle. This is largely because the activities are artificial.

After a student has completed the text, she or he must take an electronic comprehension test. Scholastic refers to this as Reading Counts! These quizzes are assessed automatically and scored by the same management system that produces Scholastic Reading Inventory and READ 180 reports. The program literature states "Such assessments serve to hold students accountable for their independent reading, but also motivate students to read more through interactive technology that features a reward system" (READ 180: Heritage of Research, 2006, p. 14).

This claim, as well, is false.

Each quiz is a series of comprehension questions, some of which are completely irrelevant to the big ideas or themes of the book and all of which are detail-oriented. The quiz questions are neither inferential nor analytical. In fact, the question types are very similar to those in *Accelerated Reader* and don't really require the student to truly comprehend at all. The reward system tracks the number of words students have read in the book. It also keeps track of quiz scores. If a student doesn't pass the quiz after three attempts, she or he loses credit for having read the book. This means that the number of words the student has read is not tallied, and the student doesn't receive a reward certificate as quickly. This is what Scholastic must mean when claiming that the quizzes are "motivating." What is worse is that this methodology, according to Nancie Atwell (1998), reinforces what these students have already come to believe:

- Reading is a performance for an audience of one: the teacher/program.
- Reading requires memorization and mastery of information.
- Reading is followed by a test.
- Readers break whole, coherent, literary text into pieces, to be read and dissected one fragment at a time.
- Reading is a solitary activity you perform as a member of a group.

- There is another kind of reading, an enjoyable, secret, satisfying kind you can do on your free time or outside school.
- You can fail English [a READ 180 quiz] yet still succeed at and love the other kind of reading. (p. 28)

Of the three rotations, however, the one I least care for is the Small Group rotation, which prescribes the use of the rBook. The rBook is a glorified basal. Scholastic promotes these worktexts as providing daily instruction in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing and grammar skills. Students write in their books (at great cost to the district), so new books must be ordered each year. The rBook is advertized as follows:

Since students struggle more with nonfiction than fiction, and assessments for older struggling students are majority nonfiction, the rBook is 80 percent nonfiction. This nonfiction focus supports transference of comprehension development to student content-area work throughout the school day. Based on Dr. Kinsella's research on Narrow Reading, the READ 180 rBook includes 9 specially designed Workshops, or instructional units, with progressively more difficult readings on a related topic. Comprehension instruction in the rBook follows a gradual-release model that moves students from teacher-led instruction and modeling, to guided and scaffolded practice, and then independent practice. The use of graphic organizers, text marking, note-taking, and frequent written and oral response helps engage students and scaffolds their application of strategies to improve comprehension. Students also participate in a variety of instructional routines that are built on Dr. Kevin Feldman's research in the area of structured engagement. The use of structured engagement routines has been shown to increase the attention and on-task behavior of struggling readers and promotes active and accountable participation (Feldman, 2002). In these routines students read, revisit, and react to passages in the Workshop. Routines, such as Shared and Strategic Reading, Oral Cloze, Think (Write)-Pair-Share, and Idea Waves, address vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, writing, or grammar. (READ 180: A Heritage of Research, 2006, p. 15-16)

The truth is that while some of the worksheets are mildly engaging, the rBook overall is repetitive and dull and doesn't resonate with the students. The fill-in-the-blank approach to text and vocabulary lessons is tedious. Some of the current event nonfiction articles are dated 1999 and fail to engage students; my students were born in 1997! Worse, it reinforces to students that reading is something that lacks authenticity and is something you do for school. The goal, as stated in READ 180's literature is to improve standardized test performance on non-fiction items. This is not literacy!

The rBook Teacher's Edition, also very costly, provides the classroom teacher with a direct-instruction model. The Teacher's Edition includes coaching notes that "...guide teachers to consistently model and explain metacognitive strategies, demonstrating for students the habits and strategies good readers use to monitor comprehension" (READ 180: A Heritage of Research, 2006, p. 15). The translation here is that the classroom

teacher has no autonomy and must follow the scripted model if success is to be achieved.

The READ 180 rotation I find most ineffective is the Topic Software portion of the program. Incidentally, it is also the part of the program the kids most dislike. One would not believe this could be true based on READ 180's research. Stated in the READ 180: Heritage of Research (2006) report, the software...

...provides instruction that is individualized based on individual responses and adjusts instruction to meet each student's needs in the areas of decoding, word recognition, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and spelling. Topic software videos help students develop the background knowledge they need to form accurate mental models before reading leveled passages. (p. 14)

It should be noted that READ 180 seeks to develop [student] background knowledge rather than asking the student to rely on her or his own schema to construct meaning. Scholastic seeks to create the illusion that READ 180 is based on schema-theory. It isn't. Nonetheless, READ 180 claims that:

Instructional activities in the four Learning Zones—Reading, Word, Spelling, and Success Zones—focus on target words to develop abilities in decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Scaffolded instruction begins in the Reading Zone: viewing videos and reading leveled passages. In the Word Zone, students receive systematic instruction in decoding and word recognition as they master words from the reading passage and build fluency. In the Spelling Zone, students complete an initial assessment and receive a customized spelling-word list that they practice in several types of activities. In these activities, they receive immediate corrective feedback based on their specific errors. Finally, students reach the Success Zone after they successfully achieve all requirements and demonstrate mastery of all words in a passage. Students demonstrate success through a final oral recording of the passage, then move to a new segment. (READ 180: Heritage of Research, 2006, p. 14)

There are several reasons this portion of the program is ineffective. The biggest reason is that kids don't want to sit, day-after-day, in front of a computer screen wearing headphones that are passed among several different students, speaking into a microphone repeating words they hear Ty, the computer guy, speak into their ears. They also hate recording passages of text. The headphones mess up the girls' hair; they cramp the boys' style. I'm just waiting for a lice outbreak. I've had more colds and other communicable viruses passed among my READ 180 students than students in any other class! However, if I were convinced that this approach worked, I'd say, "Toughen up. Spray the headphones down with Lysol and keep reading." But the approach doesn't work.

The students find the software rotation very isolating, again because they're cut off from their peers via the headphones. This further instills in them the idea that reading is a solitary activity you perform as a group. They quickly discovered ways to manipulate the software to get through each "zone" without really having to read the passage. And, I can't say that I blame them when they're asked to repeat the same pas-

sage several times for consecutive days before arriving at the Success Zone, which allows them to finally move ahead.

Students must be engaged in reading every day, and it must be authentic and meaningful. Too often students are engaged in activities about reading rather than being engaged in actual reading.

Students resist the Reading Zone of the topic software (NOT to be confused with Nancie Atwell's book!) the most because the passages are of little interest to them. Students need meaningful contexts for learning, even if they are struggling with basic literacy skills. These con-

texts imply that there is "some kind of negotiation of the curriculum for learning. What is a meaningful context for teachers cannot be assumed automatically to be a meaningful context for learners" (Wray, 1998, p. 4).

Students resist the Spelling Zone of the software the least because it requires the least from them. This is usually where they score the highest; however, there is little transference. My students spell the words correctly within the context of the program software, but will still spell those same words incorrectly in their writing. This is because learning to spell words in an isolated context does not transfer outside that context (Wray, 1998).

So if the program is clearly flawed and students are resistant and it does not truly promote literacy, then why is it, and others like it, so popular among school districts nationwide?

The answer is because programs like these generate flashy data reports which administrators, shackled by No Child Left Behind legislation, love. At any time my administrators can access reports that tell them how many minutes each of my students is spending on the software. It even flags students in yellow or red if they are not meeting the required time and then generates an administrative report. It's very "Big Brother." The program also generates over 20 additional reports. Reports, though, don't a literacy program make. But, reports sell programs.

Overall, READ 180 is an electronic basal reading program with emphasis placed on skills and reflects part-to-whole conceptualization reading instruction. The worksheets and the software provide practice with comprehension skills like finding the main idea, drawing inferences, recognizing cause and effect, summarization, and sequencing, but in the process, it kills the love of reading for students.

Is There a Better Way?

Yes. Frank Smith (2004) argues that reading is making sense of the world. Reading is natural. It is "...the most natural thing in the world... We have been reading—interpreting experience—constantly since birth and we all continue to do so" (p. 2).

I want my students to develop a love of books, a passion for reading, and a desire to become life-long learners through literacy. My students don't need glitzy, costly programs. They need to be surrounded by books. When they walk into my classroom on the first day of school, they need to enter a literature-rich environment. They need to see desks, shelves, crates, cupboards and widow sills piled with novels, short-stories, plays, poetry,

informational books, picture books, comics, graphic novels, and biographies. They need to see student anthologies filled with memoirs, essays, and poetry of past students. They need to see dog-eared books and newsprint and magazines. They need to smell new books and mildewed books and maybe a little coffee brewing in the corner. (I provide the coffee; they provide the cups). And, they need to see their teacher reading. Reading every day. Nancie Atwell (1998) confirms this in her book, *In the Middle*: "Every September, I [Nancie] build a new dining room table, one where there's room for all students of every ability to pull up their chairs and join me. In reading workshop, I expect everyone will read and discover books they love. Together we'll enter the world of literature, become captivated, make connections to our lives, the world, and the worlds of other books, and find satisfaction" (p. 34-35).

It is also important for students to see me, their teacher, as a reader rather than a teacher of reading. Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (2007) model reading for their students by bringing in all sorts of adult-world text to share with students and to model their own reading process. Using book club books, newspaper articles, essays, poetry, etc., they show students what readers do: they question, infer, refocus, write, reread, predict, and evaluate. Students need to realize that comprehension strategies are not activities for school but rather natural processes we all use as readers to construct meaning.

Another critical factor for teaching literacy in a program-less classroom is the need for student choice. Students must be free to choose what they want to read, again, as readers do in real life. These choices must come from a variety of genres and sources. Students cannot be stifled by a few titles available within a purchased program or basal series if authentic reading is to occur in the classroom. Jim Burke (1999) notes that we as teachers must accept that not all our students will love the literature we require them to read. In fact, some students will dismiss a book simply because we've required them to read it. There is a place for a whole-class novel study, and certainly place for literature circles and in-class book clubs, but students must be given time and freedom to choose texts if they are to become life-long readers.

Students must be engaged in reading every day, and it must be authentic and meaningful. Too often students are engaged in activities about reading rather than being engaged in actual reading. We must be certain that "students are actually doing the one thing that makes the biggest difference in their reading performance—spending extensive periods of time every day actually reading" (Keene and Zimmermann, 2007, p. 29).

Students should also be grouped heterogeneously within the classroom. A program-less approach to reading moves away from ability-level grouping. Kids who are tracked into advanced ELA classes see their peers as competitors; they panic about grades. Students who are tracked into remedial programs such as READ 180 see themselves as dumb and are embarrassed by the class label. They develop immediate defense mechanisms. Atwell (1998) reminds us that students:

...most need interesting, challenging instruction. They most need school to enlighten and make sense. They most need individual conversations with the teacher. And they most get remedial work, low-level texts and low-level ideas, and

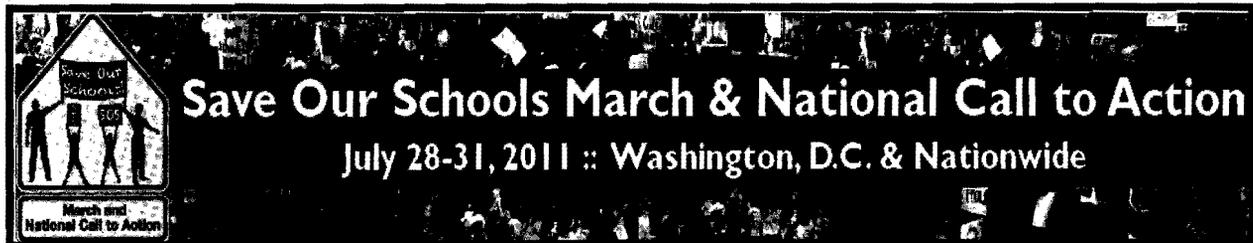
teachers faced with a crazy situation: a whole class of kids who could benefit from one-on-one help, but mostly need to be disciplined and managed. (p. 69)

I want to return to a meaningful reading workshop that promotes true literacy. I want to use my own good brain and the skills I have acquired through experience and education to create a program-less classroom that truly meets the needs of my students.

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