Despite the increased emphasis on higher education standards, too many students encounter almost overwhelming obstacles to literacy. Educators are often frustrated by students’ poor reading ability and lack of motivation. Students, conversely, complain about difficult and uninteresting literature and boring curricula. This can easily lead to a “yes, but” curriculum where all agree that literacy is important but there seem to be insurmountable barriers to helping secondary school students become more literate. This sense of futility can permeate a school to the degree that neither students nor educators believe anything could really be different. In schools with large numbers of learners who struggle with life and literacy problems, an unchallenging reading curriculum can easily become part of the school culture. Changing this culture requires examining the barriers to teaching reading effectively then changing our practices to overcome these barriers.

To better understand and combat this problem in three inner-city middle level and high schools in California, my colleagues and I generated lists of things getting in the way of literacy for the more than 4,000 students in these schools. The list was extensive and included many areas in which the school could exert little direct influence. It was noteworthy, however, that the list did not include any significant aspects of curriculum and instruction—the very areas that teachers and principals have the most influence over. The educators’ overwhelming sense that students could not or would not become more literate had led them to a “yes, but” curriculum that supported students who were actively not learning. When educators find a way to interest and motivate their students, they can implement strategies to improve skills and increase challenges.

**Reading Success for All**

By the time students get to secondary school, many are suffering from the cumulative effect of years of struggle and failure in school. Some have developed extremely negative attitudes toward reading and writing, and teachers find themselves overwhelmed with students’ negative attitudes...
and lack of reading ability. Fortunately, not all students come to us with negative attitudes toward reading. Many struggling readers come to class each day willing and eager to learn. Despite their attendance and good nature (on some days) and supportive environments, instructional systems can impede these students’ progress. There are also significant numbers of literate secondary school students who once liked to read but who chose not to as they got older.

From interviews and surveys with thousands of students in middle level and high schools, I have discovered patterns in curriculum and instruction that consistently get in the way of reading pleasure and competence for students:

• Lack of interest and motivation
• Insufficient and inappropriate resources
• Insufficient reading experience
• Insufficient background knowledge
• Inability to break text codes
• Inadequate support and inappropriate interventions
• Lack of independent reading strategies.

In schools where educators have listened to students’ voices and developed instructional practices that helped overcome barriers to literacy success, great improvements in students’ literacy have been made. I would like to highlight those student voices as a way to look at instructional practices that make a difference.

Lack of Interest and Motivation

Students who were surveyed and interviewed were passionate in their dislike for and disinterest in the reading curriculum that exists in most middle level and secondary classrooms. Many interview comments echoed Chanelle’s words: “We spend all this time studying stuff and you just have to wonder, like, what difference does it make. There’s all this important stuff going on and we sit in school talking about iambic crap and I want to yell at the teacher, ‘Who cares? So what?’” Students repeatedly pointed to the lack of relevance and the tedious delivery of information in all content classes.

For other students, the cumulative impact of years of academic failure had reduced their motivation. One student commented, “I just do enough to get by—you know, so I don’t have to take the class again.” This sense of futility can be deep-rooted and cause students to feel helpless to improve their success in school. I discussed the importance of taking...
steps to become a better reader with a grade 10 student. He finally erupted, “Hey, nobody in my family is a good reader. I figure if God wanted me to be a good reader, He would have made me one.” I smiled at him and said, “God sent me. Let’s get started” (Allen, 2000). This hopelessness, combined with a curriculum that students don’t like, is a foundation of disinterest and lack of motivation. How can educators move students from apathy and discouragement to competence and confidence? We must look closely at two areas: resources and support.

**Inappropriate Resources and Absence of Support**

There is a statement by Nathaniel Hawthorne that I love: “It is odd enough that my own individual taste is for quite another class of works than those which I myself am able to write. If I were to meet with such books as mine by another writer, I don’t believe I should be able to get through them.”

I choose to interpret this as an indication that even Hawthorne didn’t want to read his writing, yet we insist that all high school students need the experience. Many students have never learned to love books, and we spend our days attempting to layer the study of literature on a nonexistent foundation. In a summer literacy institute, Rodman Philbrick (author of *Freak the Mighty, Max the Mighty*, and *The Last Book in the Universe*) said, “Books have to be fun before they can be work.” It isn’t that classic works of literature shouldn’t be the source of significant study by some students, but many of the students who struggle with literacy have not had enough reading experience to overcome the challenges of such texts.

In each of the three schools, our first task was to purchase class sets and independent reading libraries of interesting young adult literature. These books were not without their challenges, but they were at least relevant and interesting to the students. In our middle level classrooms, we began with such books as Gantos’s *Joey Pigza Swallowed a Key* and *Joey Pigza Loses Control*, Philbrick’s *Freak the Mighty*, Sachar’s *Holes*, Spinelli’s *Who Put That Hair in My Toothbrush*, and Sparks’s *It Happened to Nancy*. In our high school classrooms, we chose such books as Cheripko’s *Imitate the Tiger*, Crutcher’s *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, Rodriguez’s *Always Running*, Ewing’s *Party Girl*, Soto’s play *Novio Boy*, and McDonald’s *Swallowing Stones*.

Each of these works has significant literary merit and is interesting to most readers. Teachers read these novels aloud to students as they followed along (shared reading), which helped students experience reading with the support of a fluent reader’s voice. Shared reading provided students with opportunities to break language and text codes, increase vocabulary, sustain reading for longer periods of time, and experience the pleasure and success that accompany reading entire books. In an end-of-year survey, 1,200 of these students cited shared reading of interesting books as the most important aspect of their literacy experience during the year. One student commented, “I went from being a big, fat loser who thought reading was boring to someone who finally figured out what everyone else knew all along: reading can be the best thing in the world.”

At times, the most difficult thing teachers do is abandon a curriculum they believe is significant and embodies the content they love. I struggled with these issues with my high school students. After experiencing great success with two young adult novels, I decided it was time for real literature. We began reading Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. As we moved
through each scene and act of the play, I became convinced that the students were really enjoying the play. They could answer all the questions and complete the study guide. As we moved closer to Willy Loman's suicide, I began to worry that my class of 18- to 20-year-old young men would cry at Loman's death and blame me for embarrassing them in front of their friends. When Loman crashed into the concrete abutment, I expected to see the guys dissolved in a sea of sympathetic tears. Just as I looked up, I made eye contact with Warren. He slammed his book shut and said, “Thank God he’s finally dead.”

I was devastated and replied, “What are you talking about? This is a great work of American literature; Willy Loman is a classic figure in literature.”

“This is the worst thing we have ever read!” and “I thought this thing would never end” are typical of the comments I heard. I wanted to remind them that the only other things they had ever read were *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* and *Bless the Beasts and the Children*, but I didn’t.

I left the experience convinced that these students just weren’t ready for “Literature”; they left the experience mistrusting my judgment about the next book we read together. For these students who were living with the results of poor care giving, poor choices, inadequate resources, and a lack of reading experience, I was trying to start in the wrong place. It wasn’t that *Death of a Salesman* was bad literature; it was only that it was a bad choice for these students at this time in their lives. As with everything, timing is vital in the literary experiences we share with students, and sometimes we have to meet students where they are, not where we think they should be, to help them develop literacy.

**Insufficient Reading Experience and Background Knowledge**

Two years ago, I visited a middle school classroom in San Diego where a teacher read aloud Scieszka and Smith’s *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*. When the wolf reminds readers that no one would leave a perfectly good ham dinner lying in the straw, one girl looked up at the teacher with an incredulous look and asked, “Pigs have ham in them?” Her words were a wonderful reminder to me of reading’s value and its ability to expand world knowledge and increase vocabulary. Baker, Simmons, and Kameenui (1995) cite Anderson and Nagy’s (1991) and Baumann and Kameenui’s (1991) research in support of the importance of reading: “Reading is probably the most important mechanism for vocabulary growth throughout a student’s school-age years and beyond.” Sarah, a grade 10 student in my reading class, would agree. She came to class one day after reading Miller’s *The Crucible* and handed me a note telling me about a boy she liked. In language more typical of John Proctor than of students in northern Maine, she said, “I think on him softly from time to time.”

Reading changed the language Sarah used when talking and writing. Many middle level and high school students have lacked the time, the opportunity, the resources, and the environment to clock the kind of reading mileage that makes a difference in one’s ability to read. Providing a wide range of interesting and challenging books and audio books that students can read along with provides the kind of supportive reading opportunity many students have missed. If students had access to such materials during all advisory periods, in-school suspensions, independent reading, and extended-day programs, most students would probably read about 40 books a year. With that kind of increased back-
ground knowledge about the way words work, students’ attitude toward and aptitude for reading would significantly improve.

Increased time spent reading also has the advantage of significantly improving word knowledge. In a *Time* magazine article titled “How to Make Your Kid a Better Student,” Wallis (1998) writes that Tom Parker, director of admissions at Williams College, “has never met a kid with high scores on the verbal section of the SAT who wasn’t a passionate reader.”

**Text Challenges and Strategic Reading**

Effective educators model strategic reading. Informational texts are becoming increasingly complex, and sophisticated narrative texts always present challenges. Students need to see how educators use wider contexts to make sense out of the diverse language. They need to see us using graphs, charts, pictures, glossaries, footnotes, and parenthetical comments to help us understand words. They need to hear us stop and think aloud about the voice and tone used in a text as a way of inferring word meaning. They need to see us going back to certain words or phrases after we have gathered more information from the surrounding text and the larger text.

Strategic reading is a way for teachers to demonstrate how content reading works; reinforce the predictable text supports to assist readers; and help students develop and use a repertoire of reading strategies to make sense of diverse, difficult, confusing and (sometimes) uninteresting texts.

In content classes where teachers are using textbooks, one supportive strategy we have used is creating a template of a blank text page and offering students the opportunity to make guesses about the purpose of the text supports: title, headings, subheadings, graphs, charts, vocabulary, bold type, italics, and the like. In addition, teachers can read certain portions of the text and think aloud about how they would read the text and remember significant aspects. They also can demonstrate reading strategies in action by stopping and saying, “At this point, I think I need to connect these three significant events,” or, “I know it would help me pay attention to this section if I ask myself a question at the end of each column and see if that question is answered in the next few paragraphs.” After finishing a reading, the teacher might say, “Well, now I need to figure out how to put all this together in a way that will help me remember it. Maybe I’d better create a graph that helps me keep it all straight.” This type of reading and thinking aloud helps students learn to be strategy-conscious readers. Although many students don’t need such conscious strategies for reading fiction, most students need support when reading complex content passages. Skilled readers increase their word knowledge through their independent reading, but many students are not skilled readers. Strategic reading experiences help bridge that gap as students see and hear words and concepts used in meaningful contexts; these words and concepts then become resources that readers can use in independent reading. Those words and concepts may then become the focus of extended study and discussion as students read more diverse texts with similar patterns and supports.

**Supporting and Celebrating Success**

I care that my students become confident, competent, and joyful readers. I want them to be able to turn to a variety of texts as sources of information and pleasure. I want them to have a range of language choices so they know multiple ways to make their lives richer and more rewarding. If educators develop effective instructional practices for helping all students overcome the barriers that get in the way of reading success, students will leave our classrooms with strategies for overcoming challenging texts, choosing texts that will interest them, and using books for enjoyment and information.

I began my teaching career hoping to find a program or a set of teaching practices that would help me remove all the barriers to success my students were experiencing. It never happened. In my own classroom and in the classrooms where I work today, I have yet to discover a program that will meet all the reading and writing challenges our students face. But while we spend our days searching for those programs, students are loudly telling us what gets in the way of reading for them. When we listen to them and address curriculum and instruction issues accordingly, we begin to see success.

I believe that Richard Allington (2001) offers us the best advice:
Imagine that we could design schools where 100% of the students were involved in instruction appropriate to their needs and development 100% of the day. Imagine how different the achievement patterns of struggling readers might be. I will suggest that the 100/100 goal is, perhaps, the real solution for developing schools that better serve struggling readers. (p. 23)

School leaders who promote and support this goal in content classes will find their teachers and students moving from a “yes, but” curriculum to one that challenges and supports them. PL

References

Janet Allen (jallen3219@aol.com), a former high school teacher and recipient of the Milken Foundation National Educator Award, was an associate professor at Central Florida University, has directed the Central Florida Writing Project, and is an international literacy consultant.