[Image description: Four middle school aged children of various races and genders sitting outside reading multicolored books.]

Equity by Design:

The Equity and Engagement Challenges of Teaching Reading in Middle School

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The American public has long worried that American schools do not adequately teach reading to all students. Shrill titles like "Why Johnny Can't Read" go back to the 1950s. But the diagnoses behind many of these calls to action were often simplistic and even led to programs that exacerbated patterns of unequal measured achievement by race, ethnic origin, economic class, and language background (Adams, et al., 1991). In other words, public attention to reading education has not necessarily meant reading education has become more successful for those learners who are often less well served by schools.

The words stated previously are carefully selected. 'Measured' is there as a reminder that all tests carry with them cultural assumptions that are easier for some types of students to recognize and attend to than others (Berliner & Glass, 2014). Or, phrased bluntly, tests are biased (that doesn't mean testing has no utility, just that we need to recognize their hazards if/when we are going to use them).

Apart from naming assessment as an area of possible hazard, however, this brief focuses in a different direction. Similarly, the goal here is not to reinitiate the debate about the nature of desirable early reading instruction (which is often reduced to phonics versus whole language, as if one cannot do both, even though the National Reading Panel [1998] recommended just that). Rather the point is to look at mid-level and high school students—those often encapsulated by the term 'adolescent literacy'—and to ask what it is that makes those students less likely to engage in productive reading practice.

> A student can 'learn' that they count less, that reading class is stigmatized, that they are expected to be disruptive, or that its welcome if they are docilely detached.

That may at first look like a psychological question about motivation, which makes the challenge seem like it is something inside the student that needs attention or 'fixing'. But the orientation here is instead more sociological for at least three reasons. First, if we talk about instruction, in this case reading instruction, it is intrinsically interactive, between teacher and student most obviously, but also interactive between students and their peers (e.g. how 'cool' is reading viewed in their classroom), and even between student and author (e.g. prospective readers can ask: Why should I care about what this author could tell me?).

Second, as educational sociologist Jeannie Oakes (1985) long ago established (in a pattern that continues to be documented in more recent studies), students in lower track classes have less access to quality instruction. Yet those classes are more likely to enroll higher proportions of low-income students, English learners, and students of Color. In those classrooms, more of class time is spent on rote tasks or interruptive disciplining (Oakes, 1985). And the teachers are likely to be newer and less

expert, as veteran teachers often use seniority to opt to teach higher-level classes (Lewin, 2012). Struggling readers are usually put into lower track classes where limitations in the quality of available instruction can exacerbate existing challenges rather than reduce them.

Finally, we are informed by anthropologist Frederick Erickson's (1987) still pertinent considerations about what makes a school learning environment credible, or not, to a given learner. As he noted:

> Students in school, like other humans, learn constantly. When we say they are 'not learning' what we mean is that they are not learning what school authorities, teachers and administrators intend for them to learn as the result of intentional instruction...Learning what is deliberately taught can be seen as a form of political assent. Not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance. Assent to the exercise of authority involves trust that its exercise will be benign. This involves a leap of faith—trust in the legitimacy of the authority and in the good intentions of those exercising it, trust that one's own identity will be maintained positively in relation to the authority, and trust that one's interests will be advanced by compliance with the exercise of authority. (pp. 343-344)

A student can 'learn' that they count less,

that reading class is stigmatized, that they are expected to be disruptive, or that its welcome if they are docilely detached. A teacher's challenge then might include proving that at least in their own classroom such students' learned skepticisms do not hold. Inequity is vast and daunting, but teachers can resist it.

Using a critical literacy lens (Shor 1999; Street, 2003) we can see students' skepticism, disinterest, and/or anger as forms of resistance, however inchoate that resistance may sometimes be. Yet critical literacy pertains not just diagnostically, but also in terms of our ostensible goals for schooling, including reading instruction. In Shor's words, "critical literacy is language use that questions the social construction of the self. When we are critically literate, we examine our ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make

[Image description: Word cloud including text that describes literacy]

sense of the world and act in it." If school is supposed to develop the agency youngsters will need as they become adults—including the skills to discern larger dynamics,

participate civically, and problem solve or their own behalf—then we can ask whether our reading classes (and other classes) move toward that goal or away from it. Taking into account all of these dynamics may seem both complicated and abstract.

[Image description: A female teacher of Color leaning over two female students of Color as they read off of tablets and notebooks.]

But not taking them on would leave intact the unfair practice of putting any failure to read on the students' backs (as their fault) rather than as a predictable product of the environment that teachers are supposed to shape. We accept that much of what we name here (e.g., why a middle schooler would find a reading classroom credible or not) is subject to many more influences than just that of that student's teacher. A goal of this brief is to speak to educators, to give them both specific tactics and goals regarding the conditions necessary for currently struggling readers to thrive.

To that end, I interviewed long-time middle school reading teacher, Dr. Stephanie Malone, who just left her Nebraska 8th grade classroom to become a teacher educator at Shenandoah University. Her task was, teacher to teacher, to highlight ways reading instruction can become more equitable, that is more successful with a broader range of learners.

An Interview with Dr. Stephanie Malone

Ted: *Dr. Malone, Stephanie, I know you're a long-time middle school reading teacher who has worked extensively with struggling, bored, skeptical readers. How did you first start problematizing how we teach reading at that level? What made you worry about the ways we conceptualize the struggling students?*

Stephanie: My first teaching experience with struggling readers began at an urban high school in 2008. I taught five sections of Reading Intervention to sixty students using a novel-based curriculum. Reading Intervention was a remedial reading class in my school district that supported students who were reading below grade level. The class met five days a week for a fifty-minute class period. I felt frustrated when my struggling readers, slouched in their chairs, did not participate in class discussions of novels or hand in satisfactory written responses to comprehension questions.

"Feed the seals" (offering candy as a reward) was the advice Mary, my mentor, shared with me during my first year of teaching high school reading. That was her strategy to win her students' attention and her suggestion to me to help my adolescent, struggling readers become more engaged and motivated in their reading intervention class. So, desperate for student engagement, I initially followed this advice. I asked a question and when a

student responded, I tossed that particular student a Starburst. Their stubbornness towards reading could temporarily give way to their passion to get candy. Unfortunately, the success of such a strategy to engage and motivate my readers did not last long. I tired of buying huge bags of Starburst (which like all candy are not particularly healthy), and it quickly proved to be ineffective.

With such lessons, I was simply reading a novel with students and having them answer low-level comprehension questions. I was not teaching reading skills or strategies to help my students acquire or improve their literacy. Essentially, I had no access to their reading process, just their product. I was not improving their literacy skills and was barely motivating them. My students needed to grow a real passion for reading. Giving them candy was not going to accomplish that.

Ted: *Okay, so if 'feeding the seals' is wrong. And it's easy to see your point that it is and that it's a pretty degrading way to think of one's students, the task remains: 'How do you reach a middle school student who is struggling with reading'?*

Stephanie: Although school districts implement various reading programs, such as Systems 44 and Read 180, as well as a plethora of reading intervention classes for students who need literacy support, student voice remains absent from most curricula. Typically, students placed in reading intervention are taught with some one-size fits all curriculum (that perhaps has a 'skill' gradient) that rehearses and drills students on basic reading skills. Those lessons are saturated with the teaching of reading strategies and skills they have been

exposed to since kindergarten. They have likely already learned the process, for example, of 'how to state a prediction using support from the text' by the time they reach the secondary grades. That's not what they are missing. Instead, they experience the reading material provided as outdated and disengaging. These methods do not meet most individual students' needs and as a result, we rely on "feeding the seals" to encourage and engage students with a curriculum that does little to improve missing literacy skills and even less to attend to why we teach reading in schools anyway (i.e., so that students use that capacity to gather ideas, consider information, and negotiate the world across their lifespans).

[Image description: Picture of an open book with a globe resting on top in front of shelves of books.]

Ted: *That still sounds like more of a critique, albeit an apt one, than ideas or strategies for how to move forward.*

Stephanie: During the first week of school, I interview my students. This interview allows me to gain insight into them as a reader, both in terms of skills and identity. I want to

know their conceptions (and misconceptions) about reading and their literacy history.

Ted: *Can you offer a concrete example? Or two or three?*

Stephanie: When I met with Cadence [pseudonym] I learned that she had been enrolled in a reading intervention course since elementary school and since then had developed a low sense of self-efficacy, often referring to herself as a "failure." An intervention should be a short-term, strategic plan to get the student where he or she needs. However, for many of my middle-school students, they have been enrolled in some type of reading intervention since first grade. This is problematic. By the time the student has reached upper middle school, they have become disengaged and unmotivated to work on reading.

Pajares and Graham (1999) explain that when a student uses avoidance behavior, they are unmotivated and feel vulnerable about their literacy identities. They experience a decrease in their engagement, attitude, and self-efficacy (i.e., their belief in their ability to learn). This was how Cadence was when she came to me. Thus, avoidance is an exacerbating factor, a symptom that needs to be addressed to uncover older and deeper problems.

Gottfried and his colleagues (2001) speak to the importance of motivation to middle-school struggling readers. They show that a drop in academic intrinsic motivation occurs when students experience a decline in enjoyment, curiosity, and persistence

towards learning. This also described Cadence when she came to me.

Cadence needed to see herself as a 'reader' verses the label 'struggling' that she associated herself with when enrolled in my reading intervention class. She needed to have more confidence in herself and understand what type of reader she was in order to progress in her literacy skills. When I paused and listened to Cadence's needs as a reader, I uncovered her misconceptions about reading and what she needed from me to improve her literacy. I continued to work with her on using active reading strategies when reading during our Guided Reading lessons. I also continued to monitor the moments when she was critical of herself. I offered her support and encouragement by pointing out the positive things she was doing and highlighted the progress she was making. Mostly, Cadence needed to see that I cared about her learning.

Ted: *To make explicit how this all connects to equity, you're reminding us that the ways schools can label kids can become this self-fulfilling prophecy of low expectations and weak outcomes. Low motivation on the student's part then is a symptom, as Erickson (1987) might put it, is a symptom of a student having learned not to trust the system. Our task then isn't just to attend to low motivation, but to interrupt the processes that create distrustful students and that also create patterns of which students are most likely to be expected to struggle.*

Stephanie: In Celeste Ng's, *Little Fires Everywhere*, Mia Warren tells Izzy

[Image description: Three students who appear to have brown skin and dark hair. Two in front listening, one in back with chin on palm looking bored or frustrated.]

Richardson, "Sometimes you need to scorch everything to the ground and start over. After the burning the soil is richer, and new things can grow." My advice here is not to start a fire, but to think about your students enrolled in remedial reading intervention courses in middle school. Do they feel burnt or scorched? Do they trust you or themselves to think that their skills as readers (and more broadly as students) can grow? What challenges do you face teaching reading at the middle level? What do you enjoy the most? How you can provide more equitable and engaging schooling experiences for students?

Ted: *Part of why I approached you to offer expert advice is that you're a practitioner. You don't get to just diagnose where/how education systems can be unfair. Instead, you have to be diagnostic, but you also have kids in front of you so you're in a position to address colleagues, teacher to teacher. You*

get to explain what, according to your experience and preparation, is needed to interrupt the dynamics that trap long-term strugglers like Cadence navigate. I know we share your five-steps for the classroom teacher in a separate section after this transcription, but what else do you want us to think about?

Stephanie: Disengaged. Low performer. Reluctant. Struggling. Lazy Learner. Alliterate[1]. Illiterate. Slow reader. Affective Reader. These labels, some formal, some not, are attached to students who read below grade level and are often unmotivated to perform middle-school literacy tasks. While labels can be intended as diagnostic, they are often problematic.

Donna Alvermann (2001) agrees that a label can harm a student's identity. Labels support underlying assumptions that may not be accurate but are nonetheless consequential for self-esteem and self-efficacy. Students who have been labeled "reluctant" get placed in classes like mine. Their placement may not be due to ability per se but rather to low motivation towards school (in what can become a self-fulfilling prophecy).

How do we separate skill from learned habits? A student label offers little insight about the reading habits of a student. What does it mean to be a "struggling" or "reluctant" reader? Does the student have difficulties decoding words? Reading automatically and fluently? Or are they simply not interested in reading what we've given them?

[1]Alvermann (2001) and others have referred to alliteracy to describe those who supposedly can read but don't (which has the same effect inhibiting their learning through reading as occurs those who cannot read).

Ted: *In my experience the equity issue really emerges with that last question. It asks us as educators to consider what we do and don't do that leaves kids unexcited about reading. What's an example of a structural barrier, particularly an arbitrary structural barrier, that if we eliminated we could reach more students?*

Stephanie: Every school year, students enter my classroom and the first thing they ask is why they can't be in PE. Their inquiry is almost always intertwined with discouragement. A placement in a reading intervention course, for most students means not being able to participate in exploratory classes or the "fun" classes, such as art, PE, Computer, Industrial Tech, Family and Consumer Science, etc., as the intervention uses up the elective spot in their schedule. So, the students who most need to feel some agency related to school and learning find themselves with even less of it than most of their classmates. Of course, this is discouraging and school becomes a still more unhappy place. Cadence's school attendance was poor, sometimes attending only two days a week. Blaming this on her lack of chance to take an elective is perhaps too pat, but it clearly pertained to her avoidance, her low motivation, and her sense of little agency.

Ted: *Noting that we include your five recommend steps (grounded by multidisciplinary research evidence) that teachers can follow with identified "struggling" readers, offer us some parting 'big picture' advice.*

Stephanie: I recently read aloud, "The Raft" by Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen to my eighth-grade reading class. In one chapter, Robbie, the main character, is stranded at sea on a raft after her plane crashed. She finds herself thinking about albatrosses. She remembers that albatrosses will usually remain with their eggs until they hatch. At some point, however, when a hatching proves hopeless, they leave.

Just like the albatross, at some point we need to realize that our current practices for reading intervention at the middle level, are too often neither equitable nor engaging to the students who need our support. We need to start over. Much of the work will be by teachers like me, but we also need to reframe the larger context. There are a lot of Cadences in a lot of different classrooms. I can and should try my best with students like her, but her challenges are complicated enough that the system should not exacerbate them. To clarify, Cadence is not a failed albatross egg. But our classrooms, as is, might be failing nests. We need to think very differently about structures that make remedial reading a pejorative label and a trap. As a teacher, I can and must mitigate some of that—I need to excite students about reading and to help them develop strategies to be successful—but that work isn't just mine.

Five Steps for/from the Classroom Teacher (by Dr. Stephanie Malone)

*For additional information regarding the topics listed below, please see the reference section located at the end of the article. Note – Alphabet letters here match the referenced citation at the end.

1. Avoid extrinsically motivating students over a long time period.

    *Extrinsic motivation, like prizes and rewards, may encourage students for a single class period, but it does not help grow a real passion for reading. Instead, think of methods to get your students intrinsically motivated and engaged with reading. [**Please see references: D, F, K, L, N, O, R**]*

2. Listen, *really* listen, to your students.

    *When we take a step back from 'teaching to the test' and listen to students' voices, we discover their goals and needs and help them develop a sense of place and agency in our classrooms. We need to provide experiences for students to develop a sense of agency (e.g.,) in the classroom learning environment, so they can begin developing confidence to see themselves as readers. [**Please see references: B, C, J, Q, S**]*

3. Advocate for students. Change your teaching moves.

    *Tailor instruction around student needs instead of a one-size fits all method. Create open dialogue with your administration team about interventions and strategies that you believe are beneficial to your students. Stress why your proposed instructional approach provides both equity and a high level of engagement to your students. Try new things. Always. (This expands your repertoire and models to students that they too can pursue different strategies.) [Please **see references: E, H**]*

4. Provide high-interest (rich) literature for your students to read and practice their literacy skills.

    *All too often students who are placed in a reading class are stuck reading disengaging reading material that someone else picked. While we face some inevitable constraints related to students' text levels, a student will persevere longer with a 'harder' text that interests them than with an 'easier' one that feels irrelevant or reminds them of their limited skills. We need to know their interests and passions, not just their reading levels. [**Please see references: A, G, I, U, V**]*

5. Don't give up on students even when you feel exhausted and frustrated.

    Teaching is a high-energy performance where lesson preparation and delivery matters to student learning. Learn to pause. Reflect on the situation and adjust your teaching accordingly. Not having your best day happens, but you can still control what you do on the day after that.

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The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit http://www.greatlakesequity.org.

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Dr. Edmund 'Ted' Hamann's primary scholarly interests are in three overlapping areas: (1) how transnational movement of students and families is responded to by schools (particularly movement between the U.S. and Latin America); (2) how educational policies are cultural productions transformed in their conversion to practice (particularly collaboration across tiers of the educational system, like state departments of education working with schools); and (3) how school reform is/is not responsive to various student populations (particularly transnationally mobile students and English language learners).

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