I’m required to teach specific standards in my content area. That’s a good thing. My challenge is not teaching standards. It’s understanding why students are bored in class and finding ways to get them engaged. Many teachers think students are just lazy. I don’t think that’s the problem. My hunch is they are bored with the reading materials I am using to teach the standards. I feel like a chef. Each day I plan a meal of delicious readings, but students don’t even nibble. I suspect it’s the curriculum. I need to find ways to make my curriculum more appetizing.

A middle grades language arts teacher

Developing and implementing curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory is central to successful middle grades education (Erb, 2005; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2003, 2010). However, as the language arts teacher quoted above suggests, it can be difficult to create curricula that meet these and engage students: “...meet these criteria and engage students”. She does just that. She frames the problem differently than other teachers might frame it (students are bored, not lazy), she generates hypotheses (“my hunch is...”), and she proposes thoughtful action (“I need to find ways to make my curriculum more appetizing”). Finally, this teacher is an inquirer driven by a question all middle grades educators should consider: When addressing student motivation and engagement, is the curriculum a problem, a solution, or both?

This article was inspired by this language arts teacher’s inquiry. It focuses on the exploratory aspect of effective middle grades curriculum and describes “way-in” books as a tool for encouraging student exploration of content in all subject areas (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). I describe what way-in books are and how they can be used to support student exploration across the curriculum, and I share collections of way-in books organized by content area along with strategies for using them in the classroom.

Way-in books

Simply stated, way-in books can interest students in topics for which little or no interest currently exists. Way-in books are high-quality, often award-winning texts that provide students a “way in”—an unexpected entry into

This article reflects the following This We Believe characteristics: Meaningful Learning — Challenging Curriculum — Multiple Learning Approaches
a world of topics they might find interesting to explore. They are tools for exploration, a way to inquire—an opportunity to pose questions, arouse curiosities, and pursue anomalies about topics of unexpected interest that hopefully will capture their imagination. For example, *What's Your Angle, Pythagoras* (Ellis, 2004) is a way-in book in mathematics because it presents the Pythagorean theorem in simple terms students can understand and makes it relevant to real life. *June 29, 1999* (Weisner, 1995) is a way-in book in science because it demystifies the scientific method and makes concepts like independent and dependent variables interesting and understandable for students. *Hiroshima, No Pika* (Maruka, 1982) is a way-in book in social studies because it connects a major historical event—the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the devastating aftermath it had on human lives—to characters with whom students can identify.

It is also useful to define way-in books in terms of what they are not. Way-in books are tools to support exploratory curriculum, but they are not a panacea for all problems in content area reading. Way-in books are not intended to help teachers teach topics in which they themselves have little interest but feel obligated to teach. They cannot be expected to compensate for teacher dislike or apathy for a particular topic. Way-in books are not sneaky tricks or clever ploys to deceive students into exploring topics in which they have no interest but still have to learn “whether they like it or not.” The rationale for using way-in books is they help students explore topics for which they already have some interest or topics teachers think they may have some interest in but have not yet had the opportunity to explore. Finally, the exploration of way-in books is not supposed to be the actual instruction on a topic, nor should way-in books be the primary source for teaching specific content area material. Rather, they are a resource teachers can use to initiate exploration of a topic—to ignite interest, capture attention, and spark imagination.

### Way-in books across the curriculum

Teachers can use way-in books to promote student exploration of topics across the curriculum. In this section I share examples of selected way-in books in each content area and connect them to key topics and national standards.

### English language arts

Inference is an important concept in language arts related to the national standard requiring students to apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts (International Reading Association/National Council for the Teaching of English [IRA/NCTE], 1996). An inference is “a statement about the unknown made on the basis of the known” (Hayakawa, 1939) that requires readers to “lift up the words and go beneath them” (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). The book *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* by Selznick, 2007 and the other titles listed in Figure 1 highlight the topic of inference. *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, a 2007 National Book Award Finalist and the 2008 Caldecott Medal winner, integrates three popular genres: picture book, graphic novel, and film. It is a fascinating story of an orphan boy who maintains the clocks in a Parisian train station while also trying to solve the mystery of a mechanical man. The book is 544 pages and includes more than 300 gray-toned pencil drawing illustrations that continually propel the story forward.

**Figure 1** Way-in books about inference

| The Incredible Book Eating Boy (Jeffers, 2006), 2007 Blue Peter Book of the Year |
| Beneath the Surface (Crew, 2005) |
| The Last Resort (Lewis, 2002) |
| The Watertower (Crew, 1999) |
| The Collector of Moments (Buchholz, 1997) |
| The Wretched Stone (Van Allsburg, 1991) |
| The Invention of Hugo Cabret (Selznick, 2007) |

The Standards for the English Language Arts (National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association, 1996) provide that students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience. The way-in books in Figure 2 give students opportunities to explore a range of human
experiences including homelessness, abandonment, and family hardship.

_Woolvs in the _Sitee_ (Wild, 2006) was short-listed for three top children’s book awards in Australia. This story is about a teenage boy who lives in a derelict building in a deserted city. The boy is terrified by the outside world, in large part because he believes there are “woolvs” lurking outside his apartment, waiting to pounce on anyone who dares to go outside. Tempted one day by what he perceives (wrongly) as blue sky, he ventures outside, only to be saved by his only friend, Mrs. Radinski, who also lives by herself in the building. The “woolvs” are never identified, and the story ends with a sense of hope as the boy issues an invitation and challenge to readers by stating, “Join me.” A real strength of this book is that it requires readers to deal with ambiguity and be able to entertain and discuss a host of possible interpretations and themes.

_Earrings_ (Voist, 1993) is a humorous book about a young girl who desperately wants pierced ears. She uses many arguments to try to convince her parents to let her have pierced ears, but to no avail. For each argument, her parents use a counterargument. In the end, she promises her parents will never hear her ask again once they allow her to have pierced ears. This book will appeal to adolescent girls or boys who have really wanted something but have had to convince their parents first. Students can use these personal connections as the basis for a personal narrative or a piece of persuasive writing. Moreover, this book and the others listed in Figure 3 can help students learn about the argument/counterargument text structure and how to use this structure to write persuasive arguments, as required by the standard for using spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish students’ own purposes (IRA/NCTE, 1996).

**Social studies**

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) standards call for experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity (NCSS, 1994). Figure 4 lists a variety of way-in books to help promote exploration of these themes. _The Hello, Goodbye Window_ (Norton, 2005) winner of the 2006 Caldecott Medal, is a charming book about the special relationship between

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**Figure 2** Way-in books dealing with dimensions of human experience

| Woolvs in the Sitee (Wild, 2006) |
| Gettin’ Thru Thursday (Cooper, 1998) |
| The Aunt in Our House (Johnson, 1996) |
| Way Home (Hathorn, 1994) |
| Fly Away Home (Bunting, 1991) |
| Tight Times (Hazen, 1979) |

**Figure 3** Way-in books related to persuasive arguments

| Earrings (Voist, 1993) |
| I Wanna Iguana (Orloff, 2004) |
| Detective LaRue: Letters From the Investigation (Teague, 2004) |
| The Perfect Pet (Palatini, 2003) |
| Dear Mrs. LaRue: Letters From Obedience School (Teague, 2002) |
| Mr. Blueberry (James, 1996) |

**Figure 4** Way-in books dealing with culture and cultural diversity

| The Hello, Goodbye Window (Norton, 2005) |
| First Day in Grapes (Perez, 2002), 2004 Pura Belpré Honor book for illustration |
| The Pot That Juan Built (Andrews-Coebel, 2002), 2004 Pura Belpre honor book |
| Uptown (Collier, 2004), 2001 Coretta Scott King illustrator award winner |
| Smoky Night (Bunting, 1994), 1995 Caldecott Medal winner |
| Amelia’s Road (Altman, 1993), 1994 Choices award winner, Cooperative Children’s Book Center |
grandparents and grandchildren. It is a thoughtful and respectful introduction for children to the topic of intercultural and interracial relationships. The illustrations are superb, colorful, and childlike, and make the book a very satisfying read. It tells the story of a little girl who shares a special window with her grandparents, Poppy and Nana. On each visit, they say hello to each other through a window off the kitchen, what the little girl calls the “hello” window. Then, they spend the day enjoying each other’s company by having a tea party, working in the garden, eating pizza, taking a nap, and just being together. When it’s time to leave at the end of the day, they say “goodbye” through the same window.

The books in Figure 5 address the social studies standard dealing with time, continuity, and change. *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* (Baker, 1987) deals with environmental issues affecting her native country, Australia, and other countries around the world. Baker sets her story in the ancient Daintree Rainforest, the largest pristine area of rain forest left in Australia. A young boy and his father visit the area one day and, while his father fishes, the boy wanders alone through the rain forest imagining what the area was like long ago. After enjoying the day, they promise to return; but all the people, boats, and hotels they see in the area make them wonder if the forest will still be there when they return.

*Riding the Tiger* (Bunting, 2001) is an allegorical fantasy that tells the story of Danny, a young boy who is bored and lonely but becomes excited when he meets a tiger in his neighborhood. He climbs up on the tiger’s back and off they go to cruise the neighborhood.

Suddenly, everyone gives them respect. For the first time, Danny feels important, noticed, even admired by those who, heretofore, never gave him a passing glance. Soon, though, he realizes it is not admiration but fear people are showing. He tries to get down off the tiger’s back but learns it is not as easy to get off as it is to get on. This and the other books in Figure 6 highlight the topics of conformity, gangs, and the loss of control, which address the national standard dealing with individual development and identity (NCSS, 1994).

The books in Figure 7 address the national standard requiring social studies programs to provide for the study of interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions (NCSS, 1994). *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006) is a unique work of art, both in content and style. This book, except for some brief inventive language, is a wordless graphic novel that tells the story of one man who leaves his homeland to journey to a new and unfamiliar country.
to make a better life for himself and his family. The journey is told from the traveler’s point of view and shows his confusion and difficulty understanding a different language; interpreting the actions and behaviors of others who both look, speak, and act differently than himself; and making sense of a strange, new world. The book focuses on the problems of immigrants and the process of immigration, told not by those who observe it but by those who experience it.

**Figure 8** Way-in books dealing with patterns, relations, and functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Warlord’s Puppeteer</td>
<td>Pilgard</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patterns in Peru</td>
<td>Neuschwander</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Dogs Were Dinosaurs</td>
<td>Schwartz</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sir Cumference and the Sword in the Cone</td>
<td>Neuschwander</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If You Hopped Like a Frog</td>
<td>Schwartz</td>
<td>1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spaghetti and Meatballs for All</td>
<td>Burns</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mathematics**

*The Warlord’s Puppeteer* (Pilgard, 2003) is a book about Chuan, a young boy who lived in ancient China when warlords ruled the land. Chuan is traveling back to the warlord’s palace with an artist to whom he is apprenticed and, along the way, they join a troupe of puppeteers. Bandits rob the troupe of all of their puppets, so they must make new ones. As he helps make the new puppets, Chuan learns about mathematical relationships, especially the proportional 6:1 relationship between the length of a puppet head and the length of a puppet body. Students can extend this concept to learn general lessons about scale and proportion. This and other books in Figure 8 highlight the topic of representations of functions and highlight the algebra standard that students understand patterns, relations, and functions (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM], 2000).

The books in Figure 9 highlight the topics of angles and side lengths of polygons and address the national geometry standard that students analyze characteristics and properties of two- and three-dimensional geometric shapes (NCTM, 2000). *The Greedy Triangle* (Burns, 1994) is a book about polygons and their attributes. It tells the story of a triangle that is always busy doing what triangles do: holding up roofs, supporting bridges, catching the wind for sailboats, and being slices of pie. One day the triangle becomes dissatisfied with life and goes to the shapeshifter for help. It asks the shapeshifter for one more side and one more angle. Suddenly, the triangle becomes a quadrilateral. The triangle gets tired of being a quadrilateral and visits the shapeshifter to ask for one more side and one more angle. The triangle becomes a pentagon. The triangle becomes new polygons with increasing numbers of sides and angles. In the end, the triangle returns to a triangle, glad to have its old shape back again.

The books in Figure 10 highlight the topics of ratio, proportion, and fractions and address the number and operations standard that students understand numbers, ways of representing numbers, relationships among numbers, and number systems (NCTM, 2000). *If You Hopped Like a Frog* (Schwartz, 1999) is an imaginative book that introduces the concept of ratio by comparing what humans could do if they had the bodies and attributes of different animals. For example, if a person
could hop like a frog, she could hop 20 times her body’s length. If a person could high-jump like a flea, he could jump almost 70 times his own height. This book makes ratio understandable and informative, and, as a bonus, the author includes interesting word problems at the end of the book for students to apply and extend their understanding of ratio and proportion.

**Science**

*Gregor Mendel: The Friar Who Grew Peas* (Bardoe, 2006) is a book about the world’s first geneticist. Gregor Mendel discovered one of the fundamental principles of genetic science—that animals, plants, and people all inherit and pass down traits through the same process, following the same rules. The book introduces the subject of genetics and describes the scientific method through experimental design. Through the life and work of Gregor Mendel, students see how scientists do their work: posing problems, planning an experiment, controlling for variables, collecting data systematically, analyzing data, reporting findings, and drawing conclusions. This and the other books in Figure 12 provide a way in for students to explore the topic of experimental design and for teachers to address the standard that students develop the ability to do scientific inquiry (National Research Council [NRC], 1996).

**Figure 10 Way-in books about numbers and operations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Author, Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If You Hopped Like a Frog</td>
<td>Schwartz, 1999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beanstalk: Measure of a Giant</td>
<td>McCallum, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Dogs Were Dinosaurs</td>
<td>Schwartz, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polar Bear Math</td>
<td>Nagda and Bickel, 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Warlord’s Puppeteers</td>
<td>Pilgard, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Place for Zero</td>
<td>Lopresti, 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Riddle, One Answer</td>
<td>Thompson, 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inchworm and a Half</td>
<td>Pinczes, 2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 11 Way-in books about measurement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Author, Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How Tall, How Short, How Far Away</td>
<td>Adler, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Estimations</td>
<td>Goldstone, 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Estimations</td>
<td>Goldstone, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measuring Penny</td>
<td>Leedy, 2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Big Is a Foot?</td>
<td>Myller, 1991</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*How Tall, How Short, How Far Away* (Adler, 2000) introduces different historic and contemporary measuring systems, including the Egyptian system, the inch-pound or customary system, and the metric system. It also presents problems that invite students to apply these systems in real-life situations and offers conversion tables. This and the other books in Figure 11 allow students to explore the topics of estimation and measurement related to the national standard that students understand measurable attributes of objects and the units, systems, and processes of measurement (NCTM, 2000).

**Figure 12 Way-in books about experimental and observational inquiry**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Author, Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What’s the Matter in Mr. Whiskers’ Room?</td>
<td>Ross, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science Verse</td>
<td>Scieszka &amp; Smith, 2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Archimedes’ Bath</td>
<td>Allen, 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 29, 1999</td>
<td>Weisner, 1995</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students should know and be able to use the scientific method (NRC, 1996), and Figure 13 lists a variety of books teachers can use to provide a way in to this standard. *Snowflake Bentley* (Martin, 1998), the 1999 Caldecott Medal winner, is an excellent book for teaching students about observational inquiry. It is a biography of Wilson Bentley, a self-taught scientist from Vermont who photographed thousands of delicate snowflakes. From
these photographs, Bentley discovered two truths about snowflakes: No two are alike, and each one is exquisitely beautiful. This book features historical and biographical data in the margins of each page to supplement the narrative text.

**Figure 13** Way-in books about observational inquiry and the scientific method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Snowflake Bentley (Martin, 1998)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rachel: The Story of Rachel Carson (Erhlich, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galileo's Journal (Pettenati, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tarantula Scientist (Montgomery, 2004), 2005 NSTA outstanding trade book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Man Who Made Time Travel (Lasky, 2003), 2004 NSTA outstanding trade book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonardo: Beautiful Dreamer (Byrd, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking With Henry (Locker, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starry Messenger (Sis, 1996), 1997 Caldecott Honor book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theodoric's Rainbow (Kramer, 1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sky Tree (Locker, 1995)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flood Fish (Eversole, 1995)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A Drop of Water* (Wick, 1997) teaches concepts in physical science through stunning photographs and informative text depicting the interesting nature and curious behavior of water. The artist/author uses special effects to create photographs of phenomena that appear improbable and almost impossible, and these images become a way in for students to explore concepts such as molecules, surface tension, capillary attraction, condensation and evaporation, and refraction. This and the other books in Figure 14 offer opportunities to explore topics in physics and chemistry (e.g., light, color, forces, motion, simple machines, electricity) and relate to the national physical science standard that students understand properties and changes of properties in matter, motions, and forces (NRC, 1996).


**Figure 14** Way-in books about physics and chemistry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Drop of Water (Wick, 1997)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What's the Matter in Mr. Whiskers' Room? (Ross, 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where Does Electricity Come From? (Mayes, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forces Make Things Move (Bradley, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Light (Bang, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Island That Moved (Hooper, 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Face the Wind (Cobb, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hello, Red Fox (Carle, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain Dance (Locker, 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forces Around Us (Hewitt, 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Do You Lift a Lion? (Wells, 1996)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marbles, Roller Skates, Doorknobs (Lampton, 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seesaws, Nutcrackers, Brooms (Lampton, 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Can't You Unscramble an Egg? (Cobb, 1990)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Doesn't the Earth Fall Up? (Cobb, 1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Way Things Work (Macaulay, 1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Way Things Work (Macaulay 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving Heavy Things (Adkins, 1980)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of information about the design and function of the human body. Unlike middle grades biology textbooks, however, the text is engaging and understandable and complements the colored-pencil illustrations. Together, they help readers comprehend a variety of important concepts including cell structure and function, DNA, organs and organ systems, heredity, and reproduction. This and the other books in Figure 15 explore the human body and other living systems, supporting the standard addressing the structure and function in living systems, reproduction and heredity, and regulation and behavior (NRC, 1996).

NRC (1996) calls for students to understand properties of earth materials, objects in the sky, and changes in earth and sky, and teachers can use a variety of books to give students a way in to these topics. Arctic Lights, Arctic Nights (Miller, 2003) was recognized in 2004 by NSTA as an outstanding trade book in science. It is a fascinating account of the unusual features of the dynamic and changing light of the Far North, specifically Alaska and the Arctic. It describes unique light phenomena like the midnight sun colors, dancing northern lights, pink alpenglow, blinks, diamond dust, glints, and flat light. It also discusses the way indigenous animals adapt to the temperature and daylight changes each month of the year. Of particular note are the unique illustrations. Beginning with summer solstice, a yellow border symbolizing daylight runs across the top of the page. Continuing month by month, the yellow border becomes increasingly darker, indicating the presence of less and less sunlight each day. The book ends as it begins, with a yellow border at the top indicating the summer solstice. A helpful glossary is included.

### Figure 15 Way-in books about living systems and the life sciences

- *The Way We Work* (Macaulay, 2008)
- *What a Family!* (Isadora, 2006)
- *Have a Nice DNA* (Balkwill, 2002)
- *Phineas Gage* (Fleischman, 2002)
- *The Heart: Our Circulatory System* (Simon, 1996)
- *Amazing Schemes Within Your Genes* (Balkwill, 1993)
- *DNA Is Here to Stay* (Balkwill, 1992)
- *Cells Are Us* (Balkwill, 1990)

### Figure 16 Way-in books about earth and space science

- *Arctic Lights, Arctic Nights* (Miller, 2003)
- *The Incredible Water Show* (Frasier, 2004)
- *Mountain Dance* (Locker, 2001)
- *On the Same Day in March* (Singer, 2000)
- *Cloud Dance* (Locker, 2000)
- *The Drop in My Drink* (Hooper, 1998)

### Using way-in books

Teachers can use a variety of content area reading strategies with way-in books. Here, I highlight four strategies teachers in any subject can use: What’s New, What’s the Big Idea?, Idea Bag, and Discovery Circles.

### What’s New

Young adolescent learners like to explore new, interesting, and surprising information. The What’s New strategy harnesses this affective quality to focus students on what’s new in a text (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1995). Students browse a collection of way-in books, each addressing a different theme, then organize themselves in small groups based on the theme they want to explore. If only one copy of the book is available, one student can volunteer to read aloud to the group. If multiple copies are available, students can read silently to themselves or aloud to another group member. As students read, each records on a sheet of paper labeled “What’s New”
any information they find new, different, interesting, or surprising. The activity concludes as students share and discuss their surprises with the group.

What’s the Big Idea?

Many middle grades students are quite adept at identifying trivial information in a text, but they often miss the substantial big ideas.

A big idea can be the main point of a book, magazine article, argument, or film; the moral of a story or the underlying theme of a novel; what an author, poet, speaker, or artist is really trying to communicate; and, finally, the life lessons and deeper understandings a reader, listener, or viewer takes from a text, a work of art, or a performance. (Walmsey, 2006, p. 282)

Inquiry Bag

Exploration and inquiry are at the heart of learning across the curriculum. This strategy helps students see themselves as inquirers and take an inquiry stance on learning. It also helps students see reading as a tool for learning and as an opportunity to explore and investigate topics. Students browse a text set of way-in books and organize themselves into small groups based on the theme they want to explore. Each group shares a stack of index cards placed in the middle of the table next to an inquiry bag, which can be a decorative bag or just a brown paper bag. While reading, students jot down on each card any information they find interesting, surprising, or important. If students need scaffolding to complete this activity, teachers can give them the following prompts to guide their thinking:

- I wonder …,
- I didn’t know …,
- I’m surprised …,
- What if …,
- How might …,
- Why would …,
- I didn’t realize …,

and so forth (Hoyt, 2000). After reading, students place their cards in the inquiry bag, then they select one card at a time, read it aloud to the group, and use it to facilitate a discussion that focuses on exploring the theme in depth.

Discovery Circles

Talk is important to reading, writing, and learning. It provides learners a way to have “grand conversations” with each other about books (Peterson & Eeds, 2007). Discovery circles build on and extend the concept of literature circles (see Daniels, 2001; Daniels & Steineke, 2004) by “allow[ing] students to work in small collaborative groups to read, talk, and write about content and features in nonfiction books” (Kristo & Bamford, 2004, p. 209). Although similar to literature circles, discovery circles focus only on self-selected nonfiction texts about themes students wish to explore. During or after reading, students record their new understandings, information, or insights by using nonfiction writing formats (e.g., journals, reports, graphs, charts, outlines, sequences). Afterward, students
meet as a group to discuss their reading and written responses to the text.

Conclusion

Frank Smith (1981), an internationally acclaimed reading researcher and educator, once suggested that student reading achievement would be enhanced if, at some point in time, teachers turned children over to authors. This is an intriguing idea, particularly in the content areas. Consider how turning students over to real authors (i.e., theorists, historians, researchers) would give them access to their work and how they do their work. For example, science teachers would turn students over to the work of real scientists like Richard Feynman, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, to learn about the development of the atomic bomb and the solution to the puzzle of the Challenger disaster; Albert Einstein for his theory of relativity; Marie Curie for her discovery of radium; Watson and Crick (with Rosalind Franklin) for their discovery of the double helix; and Kary Mullis, a biochemist and Nobel Prize winner for his invention of the polymerase chain reaction used in DNA fingerprinting.

Likewise, math teachers following Smith’s suggestion would turn students over to the work of real mathematicians like Pythagoras to learn the relationship between the Pythagorean theorem and constructing a building; Fermat to learn about his theory of numbers (more commonly called “arithmetic”); Newton to learn about his law of universal gravitation; Euler to learn about the history and use of algorithms; and, for a more recent example, the fascinating life and mathematical genius of Nobel laureate John Nash.

This article suggests ways to help teachers “turn students over to authors.” I hope the work of these authors will provide students an invitation to explore curriculum, an opportunity to linger in text instead of moving quickly from one book to another (Lewison, Leland, & Harste, 2008), and, ultimately, a way in to topics or themes that will have enduring value in their lives. School may then become the world Stephen Parlato (2003) envisioned when he wrote:

There once was a world where everyone loved books. Everyone loved to read so much that when they read their books, they became what they read. When they closed their books, they became themselves again … only smarter. (p. 1)

Extensions

Familiarize yourself with awards and special recognitions for young adolescent literature in your subject area. Work with your school’s reading specialist or literacy coach to develop ways to use these books as ways in to engaging instruction.

References


Literature Cited

Science


HarperCollins.


Social Studies


Mathematics


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**English/Language Arts**


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