FOREWORD BY
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MIDDLE SCHOOL READERS
HELPING THEM READ WIDELY,
HELPING THEM READ WELL

NANCY ALLISON
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To my father
CONTENTS

Foreword by Laura Robb ................................................................. vi
Acknowledgments ................................................................. viii

1 The Teacher on the Sidelines of Independent Reading ......................... 1
   A Call to Change ................................................................. 2
   Parting Ways with the Whole-Class Novel ................................ 3
   Choice: A Critical Factor in Engagement ................................... 5
   Texts That Spur Growth ....................................................... 6
   How Not to Squander Independent Reading Time ......................... 6
   Handing Over Responsibility to Students .................................. 7
   Dovetailing Independent Reading in the Balanced Literacy Classroom 8
   The Difference a Change Can Make ......................................... 11
   Questions for Reflection ...................................................... 12

2 Planning for Engagement: Coloring and Contouring
   Students’ Expectations ......................................................... 13
   Students’ Prior Experiences .................................................. 14
   Shaping Students’ Concept of Reader ...................................... 15
   Do All Readers Lug Heavy Tote Bags? Modeling the Behavior of a Reader 15
   Windows on Their World: Reading Autobiographies .................. 17
   Inviting Students into the Reader’s World ............................... 20
   Book Talks: Plot Teaser Moments That Motivate ....................... 20
   Daily Exchanges: Sustaining Engagement, Confirming Membership 22
   Engaging Students Through Small-Group Sharing ..................... 23
   The Difference Engagement Can Make ................................... 25
   Questions for Reflection ...................................................... 26

3 Clever Matchmaking Between Students and Books ............................ 27
   Building a Robust Classroom Library ..................................... 28
   Making the Classroom Library Accessible ................................. 30
   Planning for Student Choice .................................................. 35
   Creating Excitement About Fiction ........................................ 36
   Launch a Shopping Spree for a Perfect Match ............................ 38
   Book Talking Nonfiction ...................................................... 42
   Book Shopping Record Sheets: Early in the Year Assessment Tools 44
   The Benefit of Time Well Spent ............................................. 49
   Making Good Choices in the Library ....................................... 49
# Table of Contents

4 Direct Instruction and Routines in the Independent Reading Classroom  
- Teaching Through Minilessons  
- Breaking Down a Complex Task: Three Types of Knowledge  
- Anchoring the Lesson in Common Texts  
- Using Anchor Charts to Hold Shared Thinking  
- Anchor Charts in Action: Lesson on Inferences  
- Reading Responses That Link Instruction and Practice  
- Teaching the Routine of Supported Independent Reading Time  
- The Difference Seamless Instruction Can Make  
- Questions for Reflection

5 Teaching Through Deskside Conferences  
- Deskside Conferences as Vehicles for Teaching  
- The Purpose and Structure of a Conference  
- Preparing for the Conference  
- Initiating the Conference  
- Focusing the Conference  
- Checking for Understanding  
- Keeping a Record of Deskside Conferences  
- The Difference a Conference Can Make  
- Questions for Reflection

6 Capturing the Attention of Our Disengaged Readers  
- Dealing with "Boring" Texts: The Abandonment Conference  
- Understanding What Keeps Readers Reading  
- Dealing with Distractions  
- Assessing the Comprehension of Disengaged Students  
- Using Questions to Engage Readers  
- Questioning the Author's Intent  
- Questions as a Response to Engage Readers  
- A Conference Focused on Questioning  
- Questions for Reflection

7 Differentiating Instruction Through Deskside Conferences  
- Today's Reality  
- Differentiating Instruction for Independent Readers  
- Delayed Readers  
- On-Level Readers  
- Gifted Readers  
- The Rewards of Supporting Independent Readers  
- Questions for Reflection

8 Teaching Comprehension in Fiction Texts  
- Redirecting Growing Readers  
- Story Structure: The Basis of Questions About Fiction
When I finished Middle School Readers I wanted to reverse time and relive sixth grade as a student in Nancy Allison’s class. For me, sixth-grade reading was one anthology for everyone, dozens of worksheets to complete each week, and unit tests that had nothing to do with the stories we read. I remember I failed a reading test on making inferences. I didn’t know what an inference was, so I checked all the statements under the paragraph. Most of the class failed. I can still picture our teacher’s angry face as she blamed us, insisting we failed because we didn’t listen, didn’t read directions, didn’t care. As an adult I can understand the teacher’s frustration but I still smart at the unleashing of blame on us, and how she could only see as far as what we couldn’t do. We hadn’t failed the test, we’d failed her.

That event could never happen in Nancy Allison’s class. Allison’s empathy for her students, coupled with a deep and inspiring knowledge of how to teach reading, supports every student’s growth whether they are developing, reluctant, grade-level, or proficient readers.

If you aspire to improve the reading skill of every student you teach, if you dream of a personal reading life for all middle school learners who step over the threshold of your classroom, and if you recognize that all students, even those who appear to be disengaged from reading want to read, then let Nancy Allison be your personal guide, your beacon, as you help students make sense of our complex world and lives through reading.

Weaving literacy stories of conferences with dozens of students into lessons that differentiate reading and offer students choice, Allison takes us into her own unique brand of reading workshop. There she shows the benefits of moving from one novel, one basal, one teacher choosing the books students read to inviting students to choose books on topics they care and are passionate about because reading such books helps every student move forward. With thought and clarity, and with honesty and a deep sensitivity to providing the finest road map for teachers, Allison provides research-based ways to support students’ book selection and to establish class routines. She also builds students’ mental models
of reading with read-alouds, which make visible to students how she works hard to comprehend the fiction and nonfiction anchor texts she shares.

We meet a diverse group of readers and come to understand the power of daily deskside conferences that honor each reader but also enable them to build skill and stamina with books they choose at their instructional reading level. Allison models how she supports disengaged readers with powerful questions that encourage these students to think carefully about their reading, to see and feel their progress. Allison’s teaching sense and know-how, her nurturing and gentle nudging to try again and work hard to construct meaning from reading comes across with every conference and sends the message that we must never give up on a student, even if that student appears to have given up on herself.

Ultimately, what Allison communicates to teachers is that to help students read fiction and nonfiction, to refine their knowledge of genre structure and reading strategies, we must engage in conversations with students that lead them to independence. Allison reminds us that independence isn’t something instantly bestowed on middle schoolers but something they both learn and earn. That is, they have to develop and cultivate the skills needed to solve their own reading problems as they take on more challenging texts. And teachers are on the sidelines of this transformation, coaching, clarifying, cheerleading.

Allison invites teachers to show students how to shop for or choose “just-right books” and what to do if students’ choices don’t work. Her literacy stories celebrate and emphasize the importance of choice. Like many of us, she’s done the one-book-for-all and the teacher-chosen books for students. However, if we are to improve the reading expertise of every student in our classes, then, like Allison, we must abandon what doesn’t work and meet our students’ diverse needs by differentiating reading instruction and using conferences to engage them with their reading.

The rich and detailed accounts that Nancy Allison shares in this book show teachers how to help students approach new genres, how to make inferences and connections, what to do when a text confuses a reader, and how to assess through reading response and reading logs. She leaves readers lingering over the idea that it’s we teachers who can and do make a difference in students’ reading lives. And that teaching reading is about learning from our students, helping them find joy in reading books they select, and watching them grow personal reading lives that can feed their emotional and intellectual selves and at the same time prepare them for the demands of high school, college, and the workplace.

Laura Robb
This book has been a long journey that would never have been possible without the guidance of two outstanding educators, Dr. Judy Wallis and Dr. Lee Mountain. Judy has taught me everything I know about reading and has always encouraged me to try new things and to explore new thoughts. She is never too busy to listen and always knows in exactly what direction to point me, including toward Heinemann. She has truly changed my life.

Dr. Mountain is a blessing to every life she touches. Her belief in her students and their ability to have something worthwhile to say has inspired countless educators to put words to paper. Her unfailing belief in me matters.

If I’m ever again caught in a whirlwind, I know who I want to be there with me: Kerry Herlihy and my husband, Harry. Thanks to both of you for helping me survive two frantic weeks in March. And thanks to my daughters and grandchildren who understood when I didn’t answer the phone.

Very sincere thanks go to Wendy Murray for her exceptional ideas and guidance and her belief in both me and this book.

Special thanks to Eric Lipper for paving the way for this book to be published.

Perhaps my greatest thanks go to my colleagues at Spring Woods Middle School. Thank you for taking a chance on a person you didn’t even know—and being willing to try something new because you wanted the best for your students. I learn from each of you every day and feel truly blessed to work with such student-centered professionals.

Very special and heartfelt thanks go in particular to Cynthia Chai, the principal who believed. Your support of literacy and your heart for children have made a difference in our students’ lives and in mine. Thank you.
When I was a student in the classroom many years ago, the expectation was that the teacher would deliver a lesson, the students would pay attention, the teacher would then assign work, and the students would complete it. We all got the same lesson and the same assignment and no one thought a thing about it.

But the world was a much different place back then. The term learning disabilities had not been invented yet and students who may have had them were often “held back.” Everyone in my school spoke English, so second-language learners were those of us on the “college track” who took Spanish or Latin in high school.

When I began my teaching career in El Paso, Texas, in 1971, I had no students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and, believe it or not, no students who didn’t speak English as their primary language—at least, not until December,
when Fernanda entered my classroom. She was newly arrived from Mexico and enrolled in my freshman English class. She did not speak one word of English. When I asked my principal what in the world I was supposed to do with her, he told me to let her sit there. And so that is what I did.

Four years later, I was teaching in a small school district south of Houston. I had no second-language learners—but I did have a senior named Seth with a diagnosed learning disability. Seth was a fresh-faced, freckled farm boy with a sunny smile. At that time, I was experimenting with individual reading assignments (not self-selected, of course, because I knew what my students should read), and Seth apparently expressed some concern to his counselor. The counselor called me in and said that Seth had something called dyslexia, a term neither I nor any of my colleagues had encountered before. I was told he had trouble reading so I should not make him do it. But, once again, I knew better—so I assigned Seth to Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and dug my heels in, determined he should read it. After all, this novel was very short with few vocabulary words he wouldn’t know. I thought that would take care of his pesky dyslexia problem.

For weeks, Seth dutifully sat with the book while others around him finished such things as du Maurier’s *Rebecca* and Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. As students completed their assigned books, I happily handed them the tests I had ordered from Perfection Form and graded them on their “understanding.” Finally, Seth said he had finished his book and I gave him his test, which, of course, he failed. His failure had nothing to do with me, I assured myself. I was probably the first teacher who had ever really expected him to read anything.

Seth and Fernanda, wherever you are, I am truly sorry.

**Today’s Reality**

Today, teachers are faced with significant challenges when planning their instruction. They are expected to meet the needs of every student in their class and this often includes students with special education modifications who are being placed in mainstream classes, students with Section 504 modifications that must be made, and English-language learners at various levels of competence in the language of instruction. Mixed in with all these challenges are “regular education” students at all levels of proficiency.

The task of meeting all these individual needs is daunting. How can I choose the right text for each individual reader? How can I plan lessons that account for varying levels of mastery? How can I move ahead when so many of my students are lagging behind?
I take my responsibility to meet these needs very seriously. I never want to make the same instructional mistakes I made all those years ago with Fernanda and Seth. Perhaps if I had known about supported independent reading when they walked through the door of my classroom, I would have handled things differently. I would not have let Fernanda just sit there. I would not have chosen a book for Seth and required him to read it—and I certainly wouldn’t have given him a test that I hadn’t even written myself. If I had known how to meet these two students where they were and help them with the problems they were facing, I would not have failed them so miserably.

But I know better now.

**Differentiating Instruction for Independent Readers**

A differentiated classroom enables all students to reach their full potential. The content is adjusted to meet varying needs. The teacher still must deliver the curriculum mandated by the district and the state, but the curriculum is broadened to include the needs of the individual students in the room.

Students who are still grappling with grade-level skills are given individual help. Students whose skills have surpassed what is expected by the curriculum writers are given challenges and instruction that pushes them to grow as well. And students who are learning to deal with texts written in a language different from the one spoken in their homes are steered to books with their needs in mind and they are given the support they need to read them.

In independent reading classrooms, students show their mastery of the content through varied means. Written reading responses can be adjusted to meet the needs of the individual learner; book discussion topics can be varied to allow even the most challenged of readers to participate. Individual conferences give students a chance to discuss their understandings and confusions in a safe environment that nurtures their growth. Reading responses, book discussion prompts, and conference questions are all designed to meet each learner at his or her particular point of need.

But deskside conferences are the heart of differentiation in an independent reading classroom. These individual moments set aside for readers to talk about their successes and challenges are different for every student.

No matter what other label students may bring with them, reading classrooms are basically filled with three types of readers: those who are progressing as expected, those who have fallen behind, and those who are surging ahead. The reasons they advance or fall behind is purely individual. Test scores and grades...
might show me who “gets it” and who doesn’t, but they can never tell me why. Only my coaching conversations with students who are learning the habits of readers can unlock the mysteries of my students’ achievement—or lack thereof.

**Delayed Readers**

I do not like the term *struggling reader*. Teachers use this phrase to describe all the students in their classrooms who are not making the progress they had hoped, but the term *struggling* is a misnomer. According to *Webster’s New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition* (Agnes 2002), to *struggle* is to “make great efforts or attempts; strive; labor.” In most cases, it is not the students but their teachers who are laboring with great and continued effort. Many of the students quit “struggling” ages ago. Like an adventurer trapped in quicksand, they have quit fighting it; they are floating on their backs, accepting their fate, and waiting for someone to rescue them.

Webster’s defines the word *delay*, however, as “to put off to a future time; postpone.” If a plane flight is delayed, it will, in fact, arrive eventually and the passengers will, indeed, reach their destination. They won’t get there when they were expected, but they will achieve their goal of traveling from Point A to Point B.

Below-level readers can be seen in this same light. They are not struggling; they are delayed. They have not developed reading skills and proficiencies on the planned schedule, but they are capable of catching up. They will need to be carefully assessed to determine the reasons for their delay and then provided with opportunities to strengthen the reading muscles they will need to accelerate their progress. It means they will need more focused attention than some of the other readers in the room who are sailing along at the expected speed—and they will definitely need to consume words at a rate far above what they have done in the past. But it does *not* sentence them to a lifetime of below-level reading performance.

**The Emotions of the Delayed Reader**

Research has given us valuable insight into the workings of the human brain. One body of research with immense implications for delayed readers is the research into emotions, particularly the brain’s reactions to a perceived threat. When the brain perceives a person is threatened in some way, it immediately kicks into the “fight or flight” mode, operating purely on emotion for the moment. Once the brain takes a closer look at the stimulus and determines it
is not, in fact, a threat, emotions calm down and the individual is able to respond more rationally. But what if the brain determines that person is being threatened? What happens then?

Emotion overrides thinking when people are threatened. At this point, in fact, people revert to survival mode in what Caine and Caine (1994) call downshifting and Goldman (1995) calls an emotional hijacking. Once individuals feel threatened they can see only two choices—fighting the thing that threatens them or running from it.

This is the situation that intermediate and middle school delayed readers encounter every day. They are continually asked to perform tasks for which they are not yet fully equipped, not just in reading class but in content classes throughout their school day. They know they have never been good at reading—the neon lights of failed tests and failed subjects have flashed in their faces for as long as they can remember. And they are still children, no matter how mature their bodies may appear. They respond in a purely human manner. They either flee from reading by pretending to do it or they fight their inadequacies by continuing to try to read books they don't understand or by acting out in class. Their continued inability to engage with texts leaves them farther and farther behind the students who are actually making expected progress—and the level of the threat increases as time goes on.

**Delayed Readers in the Classroom**

By the intermediate grades, delayed readers fall into two broad categories: those who are still trying and those who have already given up. By middle school, almost all of these challenged readers fall into the latter category and are not even pretending they care about reading. Whether they are receptive or hostile, the teacher's job as their guide is to spend enough individual time with these readers to begin to understand what is blocking their reading progress and then to offer focused support to engage them with texts, improve their skills, and lead them to a lifelong love of reading.

I know a delayed reader when I see one. It is the girl who never has a book at her desk ready to read. It is always at home or in her last period class or lost somewhere in the great unknown. “I’m sorry, miss,” she’ll say. “I’ll get another one.”

It is the boy who doesn’t get out his reading log or response journal—and dares me to notice and correct his behavior. He sits with arms crossed, head tilted back, feet splayed into the aisle. “Log in on your reading log,” I remind him. Who knew it could take so long to write a page number on a piece of paper? And who knew it would require so much sighing?
It is the girl who refuses to read at all unless I personally sit with her and get her started. And she will quit the minute I walk away.

It is the smiling boy who dutifully opens his book, logs in, and attempts to read it. He hopes his expression does not betray the fact that he is not understanding a thing he is reading. But his narrowed eyes and furrowed forehead give him away.

Whatever their demeanor, these students are keenly aware of the threat posed by this task they are ill-equipped to complete. And the threat will not go away until I equip them with the skills and confidence they need to become true readers.

A Conference with a Delayed Reader

Amir is a starving reader. Starving readers really want to read. They look at other students in the room who seem lost in the books they have chosen and want desperately to find that same type of pleasure in texts. But no matter how hard they try, they can't seem to make the words on the page make sense. They are hungry for guidance that will lead them to success. In a conference with a starving reader, my focus is on the basic strategies that skilled readers use to understand what they are reading.

Many of us have driven in fog and made it safely to our destinations, but much of the scenery along the way was missed, which is particularly disappointing if the view was the reason for the trip in the first place. That is how Amir reads. He spends so much time just trying to stay on the road, focusing on decoding and making it to the next sentence, picking up just enough meaning to keep him headed in the right direction. But along the way he misses so much of what the author has put there to help him enjoy his journey—and he does realize—and regret—that he is missing all that scenery. The focus of the conference for a student like Amir should be on helping him learn how to clear away the fog.

This particular day, Amir was reading a Geronimo Stilton book. This series is cleverly designed, a great mixture of texts, graphics, and color, which is pleasing to the eye. “What are you reading today?” I asked. “It looks really interesting.”

Amir showed me the cover of his book, smiling. He did not tell me the title or even say that it is a Geronimo Stilton book.

“It’s a good book, Mrs. Allison.”

“It looks like a good book, Amir. What is it about?”

“This mouse wants to go to Egypt, but then he decides not to go.”

I was fairly certain that Amir had missed something along the way. “I’ve never seen one of these books before, Amir,” I began. “Do you mind if I look at it?”

I picked up the book and read the summary on the back, which explained that poor, overworked Geronimo kept planning vacations and then emergencies at work would make him miss his plane. This certainly was not Amir’s take on the story.
Motivated readers with whom I have worked are grateful for guidance—they just are not aware that they need it. I chose my words carefully for my conference with Amir.

“Amir, you are on the right track. Geronimo did plan to go to Egypt—but I think you missed something important about why he didn’t go. Would you mind if we go back and reread that part?”

“That’d be great, Mrs. Allison,” Amir smiled, obviously relieved.

I had to decide the best focus for learning for Amir. Since his teacher had been working on plot structure with the class, I decided to see if he understood what kinds of information are given in the beginning of a book.

I pointed to the “plot mountain” poster (Figure 7–1) that his teacher had posted in the front of the room. “Remember when we drew that mountain and explained to you how authors plan stories?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Amir grinned.

“Can you explain that to me, Amir?” I asked.

He sat and thought a minute, very eager to please me by knowing exactly what to say. Finally he admitted, “I’m not really sure I understand that part, Mrs. Allison.”

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**Figure 7–1  **Plot Structure/“Plot Mountain”

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exposition</th>
<th>Rising Action</th>
<th>Falling Action</th>
<th>Climax</th>
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<tr>
<td>Readers expect to learn about the characters, setting, and problem.</td>
<td>Rising action starts when the reader knows the problem.</td>
<td>Falling action ends when the problem is solved.</td>
<td>The character changes in a way that helps the reader see how the problem will be solved.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Differentiating Instruction Through Deskside Conferences © 113
So, I began to reteach, hoping to start from a point that was clear to him. “Okay, Amir,” I began, “when we read a story, what are the five important parts?” “Character, setting, events, problem, and solution,” Amir rattled off. “I remember that because of that sentence Cinderella saw every pretty star.” “That is great, Amir,” I smiled. “Now let’s think about what the author does with those five elements at the beginning of a story.” When an author starts a story, he starts here on the flat ground,” I said, drawing a plot mountain on a sheet of paper and pointing to the left side of the chart. “We come into the story not knowing anything. We don’t know any characters’ names or if the story will take place in Texas or at the North Pole! We don’t even know what the problem will be yet. We can get some of this information from the summary on the back of the book—but that won’t give us all the information we need. We need to expect to find out all this stuff as we begin to read—we should be looking for information about the character, the setting, and the problem right from the beginning.” With that information in mind, Amir and I started again from the beginning. His instructions were to stop me every single time he learned something new about the character, the setting, or the problem. The book opened with Geronimo complaining how hot it was that August—and I stopped Amir. “What did you just learn?” I asked. “He’s hot,” Amir said. “Why is it so hot?” I asked. He was obviously stumped. “Reread that last sentence,” I said, “and listen for the information about what time of year it is.” As soon as he read the word August, a light went on for Amir. “It’s AUGUST!” he screeched. “That’s why it was so hot!” “Exactly!” I smiled. “That is some good reading! Do you think that maybe you missed some other things here at the beginning that might be important?” Amir is always honest—because he always truly wants to learn. “Yeah,” he said, “I think I did.” “Okay, let’s think of a way to help you catch all those details you missed the first time through. Do you think an organizer would help?” “Yeah, it might,” he said I asked if I could borrow a sheet of paper and then wrote C, S, P down the side—for characters, setting, and problem—leaving plenty of space to fill in information for each one. “These are the important things you have to figure out at the beginning of the book. Every time you learn something new about one of these things today, I want you to quickly write them down here—just enough words to help you remember. I’ll check back with you at the end of reading time.”
I kept my eye on Amir the rest of the time, watching him sit up straight, smile, and jot something down on his organizer as he read. When I went back at the end of the reading time, he had figured out that it was time for Geronimo’s vacation—but everyone at the newspaper where he worked depended on him. As he was showering to leave for trip 1, the phone rang, he had to rush back to his office, and he missed his plane. “So, what is Geronimo’s problem?” I asked.

“His work keeps calling him for help and then he misses his plane,” Amir explained. Finally, he understood.

For that day, Amir had made progress. But he still would need regular conferences, and his responses needed to be assessed daily. As soon as he seemed confused again, another conference added one more piece of the reading puzzle so he could begin to understand on his own.

**On-Level Readers**

For too long, educators accepted the fact that some students just were not achieving and offered many logical reasons why this was true. It is no wonder that politicians have called educators to task and forced them to raise their expectations. But all the current emphasis on students who are not reaching expected levels of proficiency leaves those who are at grade level in the shadows. If all the attention is directed to those who are behind, what will happen to those who have—to this point—kept up?

Because teachers must focus more and more attention on below-level readers in order to meet the demands of current legislation, many on-level readers have been left mostly to their own devices. They are often taken for granted—just give them a book and ask them to read it and all will be well. But, all is not well with many of these readers; they are often some of the most disengaged readers in the room. No one has shown interest in their reading in a while because they are doing just fine—so they often take very little interest in reading themselves. Although these students are very capable of reading, their motivation often wanes. Lesesne (2006) maintains that 75 percent of graduating seniors in high school vow to never read a book again. Surely teachers want a better reading future than this for their students.

There is a real danger that on-level students will stall in their development if they, too, are not provided with focused instruction designed to help them grow. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) point out that texts at advanced levels include more complex sentences, more multisyllabic words, more sophisticated and mature themes and ideas, and more literary features such as figurative and literary
language. Readers are asked to do increasingly more inferring and to track more characters and subplots. Theme, symbolism, tone, and mood assume more and more importance.

Peer culture can work against on-level students. In far too many classrooms at every socioeconomic level a pernicious attitude sets in that it’s not cool to be smart or to like reading. We can’t eavesdrop on every student exchange in the hallway and outside of school, but we must work even harder to redirect students’ antiacademic attitudes. If teachers decide that on-level readers no longer need help, these students are in danger of being like the baseball player who is so excited about the ball he hit over the left-field fence for a walk-off homerun that he forgets to tag home plate as he goes by. Teachers have celebrated too early—and their students are the ones who will pay.

**The Needs of On-Level Readers**

By the time they reach the intermediate grades, on-level readers have mastered the skill of decoding. They will, like all readers, sometimes encounter words that are unfamiliar and may have trouble pronouncing them, but at least they will be able to make a credible attempt. They will understand how fiction texts are constructed, though they may still find nonnarrative expository texts challenging. Many of them, however, are stuck in a genre or in a series; many are only going through the motions. Their ability to perform at expected levels on assessments has given them the enviable ability to fly under the radar—and unless teachers realize their needs are worthy of focused attention, these readers are in danger of stalling out and failing to make continued progress.

Students who are proficient in grade-level texts may continue to read at this comfortable level and not make the leap to more sophisticated reading unless supported by a more skilled reader who can help them manage the challenges higher-level texts provide. Because supported independent reading gives teachers time to work with every reader in the room, teachers are better able to meet the needs of these proficient but still growing readers.

**Pushing On-Level Readers**

Because they are reading “on level,” these readers are ready to branch out and explore new genres, learning what to expect from each one along the way. They have met educational expectations because they have been reading, but many have now reached a plateau and are rapidly losing interest in the books they once loved.
These students need the benefit of teachers who understand that readers go through predictable phases on their way to a lifelong dedication to reading. Many who once enjoyed chapter books in the phase known as “unconscious delight” (Carlsen 1994) are now ready to move on to the phase where they read about people whose situations and problems are much like their own in a phase Lesesne (2006) has termed “reading autobiographically.” Later they will want to read about places and experiences they have never known and live out the adventures through characters in books or they will want to explore philosophical issues that interest them (Carlsen 1994). By understanding the progression of reading interests, we can nudge these capable readers into new genres that may captivate them and keep them on track in their development.

As I work with these readers whose scores tell me they are proficient, I need to remember their proficiency may be minimal and in jeopardy unless I continue to help them engage with texts and learn more about the various types of reading they can explore. My goal is to help them read with a sense of joy rather than with a sense of duty so they will continue to be both capable and dedicated readers.

**A Conference with an On-Level Reader**

Marcus is a page turner. Page turners are students who are perfectly willing to have a book, log it in on their reading logs, hold it in front of them for thirty minutes, and regularly turn the pages. They just are not willing to actually read it. They have been playing the independent reading game a long time. But the rules must change. The focus in these conferences goes beyond looking at the words the author has put on the page to understanding the author’s purpose.

Marcus is a delightful young man—perpetually upbeat, socially strong with both adults and peers, compliant, and attentive. He just doesn’t particularly like to read. His mother takes him to the city library and buys him books at book stores. He is *never* without a book—or a perceived intention to read it. The actual reading, however, often does not happen.

Marcus does not change books every day—he keeps one about the amount of time he figures I would believe it takes him to read it and then he produces a new one. His responses are skeletal, but sometimes close enough that they might not draw my attention. But when I ask him what has happened in his book so far, the lack of specificity in his responses clearly shows he is either not reading or not comprehending.
This particular day Marcus was “reading” the biography of a wrestler. He had been “reading” it for a couple of days and was now on page 37. I approached his desk and said, “A wrestling book, huh? What have you learned that’s interesting?”

“Well, there’s this guy named Stone Cold Steve Austin, and he’s a professional wrestler.”

Obviously Marcus knew this before he ever picked up the book, so I pushed harder. “What can you tell me about him?”

“Well, he’s a really good wrestler. A lot of people really like him.”

“Is that why you chose this book?”

“Yeah, I’m interested in pro wrestling.”

“This book is a biography. Biographies help us learn what well-known people are like in their real lives. What have you learned about Steve Austin as a person?”

“He’s a really good wrestler.”

And the cycle continues.

It could be that Marcus was just in a book he couldn’t understand, but when I asked him to go back to the beginning and read the first several pages to me, it was clear that this book was a good choice for him; he just had not been reading it. His eyes may have been going across the words—but his mind had been elsewhere the whole time.

“Marcus,” I began, “I feel like you haven’t really been reading this book—you’ve just been holding the book and looking at the words. Reading in nonfiction means you’re trying to learn something from the words on the page—do you feel like you’ve learned very much?”

“Not really, Mrs. Allison,” he admitted sheepishly.

“The good news is that that isn’t happening because you can’t read this book—you just haven’t been doing it. Is that a fair thing to say?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okay—tell me what you want to do. Do you think you can start over with this book with the intention of actually reading it or do you need to pick another?”

“I’ll start this one over.”

“Okay, that sounds like a good plan. I’m going to come back to you near the end of reading time and let you tell me what you’ve learned about Steve Austin today—okay? When we read nonfiction, we should always expect to learn something new.”

Marcus now had a purpose for reading. There had been a clear explanation of what he should expect from biographies and he was allowed to decide whether or not he would continue in the book he had. He will still need to be checked on regularly—when book holders know their teachers are serious about them actually reading, they usually actually read.
**Gifted Readers**

Even though gifted students have just as many special needs as their learning-disabled classmates, the current emphasis on every child performing at grade level works against them. These students left grade level in the dust long ago. They are often given more grade-level work rather than work at a higher intellectual level—and they are constantly asked to help their struggling classmates, who often resent the help.

This is one reason why, according to DeLisle and Galbraith, “Some of the most talented students in the United States actually choose to drop out of school altogether” (2002, 28). Reis and McCoach list “underchallenging, slow-moving classroom experiences” (2002, 83) and the need to conform to their peers as reasons why many gifted students suddenly become underachievers.

In classrooms filled with students of varying abilities and interests, it is often the gifted child who becomes invisible to the teacher. These students can perform on grade level with very little effort, and much of their teacher’s time and energy is focused on the students who are not performing as well.

Unless we make a commitment as educators to notice the gifted children with whom we are privileged to work and offer them the same level of challenge placed in front of the other students in the room, we are accepting and even encouraging their underachievement. Rimm (in Winebrenner 2001) cautions that “when gifted children lack motivation, it is not genetic but taught” (xi).

As teachers, we have a professional responsibility that all the children with whom we work, including the gifted ones, are challenged to develop their full potential. Even gifted children should be presented with texts for which they will need teacher support and guidance. They should not be sent off to a corner of the classroom to work independently on assignments that fail to challenge or interest them.

Finding books at appropriate reading levels for gifted intermediate students presents its own set of challenges, since many of the books at the proper level deal with issues and ideas that are far above the emotional maturity of these students. These higher-level books are written for adolescents who are beginning to grapple with such things as identity and sexual encounters. Books written for this age are more graphic and contain more profanity than those written for younger students. There are, however, many books written at a lower reading level, such as Spinelli’s *Maniac Magee*, that offer a great deal of complexity if the reader is prompted to look for it. These students are not too young to learn about more sophisticated devices such as symbolism, motifs, and antiheroes.
Because supported independent reading individualizes instruction, it is a powerful vehicle for working with gifted students in a regular classroom setting. Supported independent reading gives these students a chance not only to move at their own pace but also to dig more deeply into texts than they have before.

Many of the gifted students with whom I have worked trade speed reading for deep understanding. They can breeze through texts at a lightning pace, astounding their classmates with their ability to read the newest Harry Potter book in a weekend. But these students are not as challenged by reading longer texts as they could be by reading texts more carefully.

**A Conference with a Gifted Reader**

Felix is a speed reader. If reading were a highway, he would have been given so many tickets by now he would never drive again. For him, reading is effortless; he has been known to start, finish, and comprehend up to ten books a week. He delights in taking books other students have finished and breezing through them in less than a day, not to the delight of his classmates. His entire reading identity seems to be tied up in reading faster and more prolifically than anyone else. But he is not seeing all the wonderful layers of meaning evident in many of the texts he is jetting through, even though he is intellectually capable of doing so.

One book he started during independent reading time and finished overnight was Louis Sachar’s amazing *Holes*. This book has many layers of meaning and incredible artistic devices, including frequent flashbacks that wind up tying various story lines together. Felix had watched several classmates take two weeks or longer to read this book, but they had rejoiced in such things as discovering that Zero and Madame Z were related. Felix read right through that part as if it weren’t amazing at all.

The other students were astounded he finished that book overnight but felt somewhat vindicated when, uncharacteristically, he failed a test on it. Even that didn’t seem to faze Felix. When I asked him why he thought he did so poorly on the test, he just said, “Maybe I read it too fast.”

I wanted him to understand exactly how much he had missed. “Felix,” I said, “*Holes* is one of the best books I’ve ever read. It is beautifully written and carefully structured and every single detail is important. Sachar did a masterful job of creating characters we would love and dropping hints about how their pasts and their futures would intertwine. Did you catch any of that?”

“I like the book, Mrs. Allison,” Felix said, eager to pick up the Charlie Bones book he had started that day. “I just read it too fast. No big deal.”
“Felix,” I said, “It is a big deal. You are such a good reader—but you seem to think reading a book quickly is more important than reading it well.”

Felix looked at me like I had just landed from another planet. “I don’t understand what you mean,” he said.

“You read Holes in less than twenty-four hours. I’m a fast reader, too, but I slow down when I read beautifully written books so that I can think about all the incredible things the author has done. Even Stanley’s name is a masterful touch—it’s the same when read forward or backward. Every character’s name is perfect and significant in some way. And the way he plays with time, using the past to drop hints about how Stanley’s problem will eventually be solved—that book didn’t just happen. It was carefully crafted by a master storyteller—and it deserved the Newbery award it won.”

Felix continued to give me that creature-from-another-planet stare. “Great, Mrs. Allison, I’m glad you really liked that book. Now can I get back to Charlie Bones?”

The first chapter of Holes is a masterpiece full of irony and intentionally short sentences. Felix could tell me that the story took place at Camp Green Lake but was reluctant to waste any energy on the reason why Sachar would have set this story in such an odd place. Even after I explained the idea of irony, Felix continued to be interested only in getting me to release him from any obligation of thought so he could fly through the Charlie Bones book sitting on his desk at the moment.

Felix already has enough problems relating to the mere mortals around him, none of whom understand his desire to be a paranormal investigator when he grows up, since none of them is quite sure what that is. Felix marches to a different drummer, as do many gifted students. His only connection to the students around him is his reading of the same books they read—he does not want to read them differently.

Speeding readers need to be slowed down before they begin a text. They need to be steered to texts that will lend themselves to a higher level of thought and an examination of author’s craft. (See Figure 7–2.) Then they must be given response assignments that help them master these higher-level skills.

The Rewards of Supporting Independent Readers

A requirement that teachers differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of their students provides a significant challenge for today’s educators. Deskside conferences during supported independent reading provide a structure for
easily meeting this challenge. Students are assessed in and guided through books they have chosen and are motivated to read. Teachers meet them at their points of confusion and offer advice to help them meet the demands of increasingly complex texts. Rather than being overwhelmed by the needs of a classroom full of diverse learners, teachers are able to provide focused, individualized instruction that helps all students grow.

Students in this environment learn to view themselves as readers. They see themselves as competent problem solvers who can meet challenges head on and use deliberate means to overcome them. They know what kinds of books engage

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**Figure 7–2** Books to Focus Gifted Readers on Higher-Level Thinking

- Holes by Louis Sachar
- Walk Two Moons by Sharon Creech
- The Last Book in the Universe by Rodman Philbrick
- The Giver by Lois Lowry
- The Westing Game by Ellen Raskin
- Chasing Vermeer by Blue Balliett
- Red Rider's Hood by Neal Shusterman
- Criss Cross by Lynne Rae Perkins
- Whirlygig by Paul Fleischmann
- Things Not Seen by Andrew Clements
- The Afterlife by Gary Soto
- Kira-Kira by Cynthia Kadohata
- Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli
- Maniac Magee by Jerry Spinelli
- The Outcasts of 19 Schuyler Place by E.L. Konigsberg
- The Same Stuff as Stars by Katherine Paterson
- Seek by Paul Fleischmann
- Tangerine by Edward Bloor
- The Only Alien on the Planet by Kristen D. Randle
- The Tale of Desperaux by Kate DiCamillo
- The Tiger Rising by Kate DiCamillo
them and understand the craft behind an author’s words. They learn to read with joy.

But an independent reading classroom that includes supported independent reading nurtures teachers as well as students. By working every day with developing readers, teachers come to a deep understanding of the nature of reading and the challenges it presents. Teachers grow as educators as much as students grow as readers. They learn to teach with confidence and joy.

**Questions for Reflection**

Deskside conferences help both teachers and students grow. As you think about implementing deskside conferences in your own classroom, consider these questions:

- How might you remind yourself to listen carefully to students as they share their challenges and successes with you? Have you tried counting thirty seconds as you await a student’s response?

- Do you catch yourself posing a question and then rephrasing it or rushing in with an answer too soon—before the child has a chance to speak?

- What might help you strike the right balance between “stealing the hard work” from the student and not prompting enough?

- In another light, how might you become more forthright about offering advice to students and watching to see if that advice helps them become better readers?

- In general, think about ways you can become a keen observer of each of your students. What is the body language telling you? Voice? Level of eye contact? What do you know about the student’s life in school and outside of school that can inform your “read” of the child? If the spirit of the conference doesn’t seem convivial, why might that be so? What might you be doing to close down a student’s thinking and comfort?

- Do you feel comfortable pushing even your most accomplished readers to read more widely and deeply?
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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