

Are They Really Reading? Expanding SSR in the Middle Grades
By Jodi Crum Marshall
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What kind of class is this? It was my first teaching assignment and I was hired to be the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade language arts teacher at a low-performing middle school in a low-income area in rural Florida...I was one of ten teachers piloting a literacy project classroom that was new to my county. My classes consisted of two-hour blocks of time with the lowest-performing students in each grade...I am sure you can imagine what types of students were given to the new, first-year teacher who asked for all the students who needed reading help.

Jodi Crum Marshall's book opens with this desperate scenario. But determined to make a difference for her struggling readers, she forged a classroom environment where students learned to take reading risks, where their reading interests soared, and where their voices became the driving force behind literacy instruction. *Are They Really Reading? Expanding SSR in the Middle Grades* provides middle level educators with a first-hand glimpse into one teacher's trials and ultimate instructional success.

Research suggests that middle school students need opportunities to select reading materials selected at their instructional level in order to increase their reading growth. Thus, many schools insist upon a practice known as Silent Sustained Reading (SSR). Many times the middle grades classroom emphasizes content and class sizes are larger. Despite the goals of SSR, Marshall recognized that all too often, struggling readers remain mute in hopes of appearing invisible. Although troubled readers fail to advance their skills in this challenging milieu, they might succeed in their quest for anonymity. She overheard her own students reveal, "She [the teacher] likes to read every day. Just look like you're reading. It's only for ten minutes. It's easy!" Their remarks clearly indicate that so called SSR was ineffective and a waste of time.

Instead of throwing her hands up in despair, Marshall sought the experts on young adolescent apathy—her students! Who better to consult her? Their honesty led to introspection and thus, a reading program they named Supporting Student Literacy (SSL) was born. By using classroom conversations to guide change, Marshall heeded students' recommendations with the use of class time, the kinds of books offered, and supportive structures to improve literacy. *Are They Really Reading? Expanding SSR in the Middle Grades* provides her own journey into rethinking reading instruction and offers her readers the opportunity to view her evolving classroom.

The book reads like a "How-To" manual offering its readers practical suggestions and reproducible materials to make the most of their classroom time. Throughout the chapters, valuable quotes probe thinking while text boxes list helping hints and tips. The book's appendices offer forms, book lists for teens, and answers to a bevy of questions that might arise during implementation. With student pictures and writing samples, it appears almost as though Marshall invites her readers into her classroom.

Middle level educators and administrators alike would certainly value Marshall's concise direction towards implementing an effective SSR program. It would distinctly benefit language arts teachers and special educators. In fact, *Are They Really Reading? Expanding SSR in the Middle Grades* assist study groups seeking to ameliorate reading test scores. Because the book provides a roadmap for those educators seeking to prosper struggling readers, it could potentially impact student achievement and promote life-long reading success.

--reviewed by Gena Bramlett