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The Power of Authentic Texts

Effective Pathways to
Developing a Reading Culture
and Student Success

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Dear Administrators,

The spring of each school year can be an anxious time. Your state’s test scores arrive, and reading scores may not have improved enough. The education team at Penguin Random House understands your concerns for staff and students. To support you, we’ve asked three experienced educators to write a white paper that shows the effective pathway to developing skilled readers: use the best books.

Dr. Molly Ness, Professor of Education at Fordham University in New York City and author of Think Big With Think-Alouds, opens the white paper by sharing her journey as a reader. She includes her work with teachers and the research that supports using the finest books in elementary, middle, and high school. Next is the piece by Laura Robb, coach, teacher, and author of more than 35 books on literacy. You’ll see how the literacy stories she shares serve as examples of the progress striving readers make when they use books for daily independent and instructional reading. The last part, written by Evan Robb, Principal of Johnson Williams Middle School in Berryville, Virginia, and author of four books for administrators, offers you a map for transitioning to using books across the curriculum. Evan suggests how to get started and move forward with an initiative to create a school full of readers and closes his piece with 10 ways to foster reading in your school.

Taking the first steps to change can be challenging: How do I know what books to purchase? Where do I purchase all these books? Your media specialist can team with teachers to determine the books they need for class libraries and instruction. He or she will know where to purchase the highest-quality books.

Read the white paper. Share it with administrators and teachers and then, together, develop a plan to build a culture of reading that will improve all students’ reading skill and increase their joy in reading.

—The Penguin Random House Education Team

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Power of Authentic Literature

by Molly Ness, PhD **1**

Yes! Books Matter: A Teacher’s Perspective

by Laura Robb **9**

Be a Reading Principal: Create a Culture of Reading in Your School

by Evan Robb **19**

The Power of Authentic Literature

by Molly Ness, PhD

I cannot remember a time when books were not a central element of my life. As a child of the 1980s, my mother would drop me at the public library, and I'd clear the shelves of every Judy Blume, Carolyn Haywood, Lois Lowry, and Cynthia Voigt title. I inherited reading culture from my parents, whose monthly book clubs were a key facet in their social networks. The nights that they hosted book clubs were my favorite, as I eavesdropped on grown-up conversation and snuck extra portions of dessert. At holidays and birthdays, the best gifts were books. Each newly opened book would be passed around, with family members proclaiming, "I get to read it next when you're finished."

When I began my teaching career in 1999, I aimed to share that love of reading with my students. Given only the state standards, I walked into a bare classroom in Oakland, California—we had no core program, no classroom libraries, and a school library that had been shuttered because it lacked a librarian. I was overwhelmed with where to begin in creating an effective and welcoming classroom, but it was obvious that books would be the central focus of my instruction. Given a \$400 budget from my school, I spent hours building my classroom library—carefully selecting new releases at independent bookstores, ransacking discard piles from public libraries, and perusing the shelves at Goodwill and yard sales. Having no textbooks and no core curriculum was both a challenge and an opportunity. I was often directionless, not knowing what to teach and how to teach it, but, on the other hand, I could be entirely responsive to my students' needs and interests. With this relatively small budget and an even smaller classroom library, I embraced two instructional components as nonnegotiable daily occurrences in my classroom: an interactive read-aloud and 20 minutes of independent reading.

I embraced authentic text because of its rich language, its ample opportunities for thoughtful analysis, and for the ways that it engages readers.

The Power of Authentic Literature

In hindsight, I realize that my instruction as a novice teacher was based on authentic literature. Twenty years later—in my role as a reading researcher and teacher educator—I continue to encourage English language arts instruction built upon authentic text. According to the International Literacy Association, authentic texts "are used in everyday life but not solely or mainly for the purpose of instruction." As a lifelong reader, a novice teacher, and a teacher educator, I embraced authentic text because of its rich language, its ample opportunities for thoughtful analysis, and for the ways that it engages readers. Literature plays an essential role in the classroom, as authentic text "[launches] students into personally meaningful and intellectually stimulating opportunities to read, respond, comprehend, and inquire" (International Literacy Association, 2018). Unlike passages that are contrived solely for instructional purposes, authentic text invites readers to become engrossed in an entire text, to explore meaningful themes and ideas, and to see the world in a new way (Huck, 1977).

Read-Alouds from Authentic Text

In my 1999 classroom, the interactive read-aloud occurred immediately after an hour-long block of lunch and recess. Initially I embraced the read-aloud as a ritual to calm the students' energized bodies and bring their unfocused minds back into the classroom. Soon, I embraced the read-aloud as the driving force of instruction. Our vocabulary words naturally emerged from the text, as did our word study. Comprehension and writing went hand-in-hand. Just as a teacher never forgets her first group of students, I never forgot the books that I read aloud my first year of teaching: *The Outsiders*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Hatchet*, and *Frindle*.

Decades of research highlight the instructional benefits of read-alouds. Effective read-alouds increase children's vocabulary, listening comprehension, story schema, background knowledge, word recognition skills, and cognitive development (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; International Literacy Association, 2018). As a classroom teacher, I witnessed the socioemotional and motivational benefits of read-alouds. My students—placed at the time in my English language development classroom—spoke over a dozen languages at home, and their cultural and familial backgrounds were as diverse as their languages. Our shared books unified us

Read-alouds benefit readers of all ages; a preschooler may acquire different skills from a read-aloud than a middle schooler, but the benefits are equal in value.

and gave us a common language; we all cheered when Charlie discovered the last golden ticket, and we all were saddened when Leslie died while trying to swing her way alone into Terabithia. These read-alouds were also central in motivating my students to read, an observation backed by a robust body of research (Artley, 1975; Cunningham, 2005; Palmer, Codling, & Gambrell, 1994).

Let me be clear that at the time, I was teaching sixth grade. My students had long outgrown the traditional "sitting on the rug in front of the teacher" format of a read-aloud, but they still reaped ample benefits from our read-alouds. Though often left to the purview of elementary school teachers, read-alouds benefit readers of all ages; a preschooler may acquire different skills from a read-aloud than a middle schooler, but the benefits are equal in value (Albright & Ariail, 2005; Laminack, 2018; Pergams, Jake-Matthews, & Mohanty, 2018). Furthermore, read-alouds must not be confined to English language arts instruction. I taught my students in a combined two-hour block integrating English language arts with social studies. With thoughtfully chosen, content-rich texts, reading aloud is powerful across content areas (Oliveira, 2015).

Independent Reading of Authentic Text

In its 2018 Literacy Glossary, the International Literacy Association defined independent reading as:

Reading on one's own. Can occur inside school, when teachers provide scheduled time for all students to read self-selected print or digital texts, or outside school, when students are self-motivated to read. The goal is not only to read but also to enjoy reading; as such, independent reading is not tied to assessment, formative or otherwise. Teachers may offer suggestions about texts on the basis of students' self-identified interests, confer with students about the texts they are reading, or engage students in peer discussions and shared booktalks.

Every morning in Room 207 began with 20 minutes of independent reading. In my classroom, this translated to students reading a text of their choice. I was careful not to judge their choices with a “Haven’t you read that before?” or deter them from choosing a text that might have been too difficult. Furthermore, my students could choose to read the sports section of the newspaper, *Teen Beat* magazine, or the Archie comic books. As this was 1999, the publishing market had not yet exploded with engaging informational text or graphic novels; if those text forms had been available, I certainly would have encouraged students to use them during independent reading. My favorite days were the mornings after I visited the bookstore; to entice reading, I’d hold up my latest purchase, briefly explain the plot, and read the inside flap or back cover. I quickly noted that those books were the first to fly off the shelf.

Those 20 daily minutes were not entirely silent; desks squeaked as students shifted into comfortable seating, there was the pitter-patter of sneakers as students abandoned books and returned to the bookshelf in search of a new one, and I frequently checked in with students to converse about their reading. In between breaking up squabbles of whose turn it was to read the newest *Captain Underpants*, I snuck in some reading myself—as I aimed to model the behaviors I wanted to foster in my students.

Within five minutes of our independent reading time, a hush fell over the room—with the flipping of pages being the only sound. My students were “in the reading zone,” not because they aimed to earn points or a pizza party, or to record minutes in their reading log—but because they were engaged in authentic text with engaging characters, significant action, and inviting narratives (Atwell, 2007).

I prioritized independent reading because I valued student choice of text and the opportunity for students to consolidate the skills and strategies I was teaching in engaging formats. Research demonstrates that without extensive independent reading practice, reading proficiency lags. The best readers are those who read the most and the poorest readers are those who read the least; the more that students read, the better their background knowledge, comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, self-efficacy as readers, and attitudes toward reading for pleasure (ILA, 2018). With voluminous reading, students increase in their language sophistication, reading comprehension, writing skills, and overall achievement (Mol & Bus, 2011). A milestone study in 1988 found a direct correlation between the time students devote to daily reading and their reading proficiency and comprehension scores.

TABLE 1**Variation in Amount of Independent Reading**

(Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988)

Minutes a Day	Words a Year	Percentile Rank for Reading Volume
67.3	4,733,000	98th
33.4	2,375,000	90th
16.9	1,168,000	70th
9.2	601,000	50th
4.3	251,000	30th
1.0	51,000	10th
0		2nd

Yet despite the promising results, independent reading is not yet a ubiquitous practice in classroom instruction. While 77 percent of teachers include independent reading and/or read-alouds in their instructional routines, only 36 percent do so on a daily basis (Scholastic, 2018).

The Need for Authentic Text in School and Classroom Libraries

My 1999 classroom library simply could not meet the needs of the 70-plus students who came in and out of my middle school classroom in one day. Though well-intentioned in including daily read-alouds and independent reading, I lacked the resources I needed to build a well-stocked classroom library with rich authentic text.

An abundance of high-quality authentic texts positively impacts students' reading identities, practices, habits, and proficiency. Students who have access to quality books in their classrooms read 50–60 percent more than students without classroom libraries (Capatano, Fleming, & Elias, 2009; Neuman, 1999). Well-stocked libraries also give students more choices, increasing the likelihood that they develop as motivated, skilled readers who read outside of school (e.g., Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Krashen, 2011). Additionally, when students self-select from authentic text, they assume agency, pursue personal interests, and increase their reading motivation (e.g., Guthrie, Hoa, Wigfield, Tonks, & Perensevich, 2006; Pilgreen, 2000). Motivated readers, in turn, are more likely to read. Quite simply, reading begets reading (Allington, McGill-Franzen, et al., 2010; Guthrie, Klauda, & Hoa, 2013; Krashen et al., 2011; Pilgreen, 2000; Reutzel & Juth, 2014).

The Need for Inclusive Literature

Not only did my classroom library fall short in quantity, it fell short in high-quality inclusive literature. My students needed and deserved literature that was reflective of their lives and identities. Many metaphors have been used to describe the power of children's literature—books serve as a mirror to reflect the reader, as a window to see the lives of others, and as sliding glass doors that enable readers to transverse between groups and worlds (Bishop, 1990). Galda and colleagues (2013) argued that the purpose of literature is to see oneself and others, to recognize oneself in others, and to understand our common humanity. Boyd and colleagues (2015) contended that, “to educate all children appropriately, teachers need more books that depict diverse lifestyles, opportunities, beliefs, choices, and worldviews” (p. 380). Recent social media campaigns, such as #WeNeedDiverseBooks and #ReadInColor, as well as position statements from organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English (2018), draw attention to the “paucity of diverse books in the marketplace.”

What's more, we must be intentional about pushing our definitions of culturally diverse literature beyond race, ethnicity, and language to include the following aspects: “physical and mental disabilities, socioeconomic status, language variations, dialect differences, and religion . . . various family structures, such as foster families, and sexual and gender identity” (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007, p. 349). Though significant progress has been made to publish diverse and inclusive literature, the current demographics of the United States are not yet reflected in children's books, particularly in terms of ethnicity and disability (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2018). Teachers, school librarians, and school leaders must make concerted efforts to stock classroom and school libraries with high-quality authentic texts that are diverse and inclusive.

When Students Lack Authentic Text

At the time, I was one of the few teachers in my district who did not rely upon a basal reader. While I had the flexibility to select the authentic text of my choice and allow that text to serve as the hub for the spokes of effective instructional components, many of my colleagues were bound to teachers' manuals and scripted materials. In fact, basal readers—complex collections of truncated reading selections, instructional materials, and assessments—are used by 74 percent of teachers (Dewitz & Jones, 2013). Recently the label has shifted away from basal to core reading programs, denoting that the core is the essential component in the reading program.

Much has been written about the potential shortcomings of basal readers (e.g., Walsh, 2003). Too often, core programs overemphasize isolated skills instruction while undervaluing background knowledge. In an analysis of teachers' manuals, researchers found very little teacher modeling and student-guided practice. Further, basals often provide students with minimal exposure to print and very little actual reading (Allington, 1977). As Dewitz and Jones (2013) explain, basal programs fall short in both the quality and quantity of read-aloud experiences.

What I Did Then and What I Know Now

Like all reflective teachers, I continue to think back to my first years of teaching. Some of those memories make me cringe. I wish I could apologize for publicly shaming the students whose names I wrote on the board as part of my poorly designed behavior management. I wish I could have better served Roger, who at twelve years old still struggled with letter-sound correspondence. My “Do Now”—having students copy and correct grammatically incorrect sentences—needs serious revision. My differentiation was almost nonexistent, and I'm ashamed to confess my homework policy.

But I also look back with some pride, knowing that in reading aloud and carving out time for independent reading, I contributed to the likelihood that my students would embrace reading as a lifelong practice. Instead of harping on my mistakes—however well-intentioned they were—I choose to embrace the adage, “When we know better, we do better.” After 20 years in literacy education, decades of both consuming and producing reading research, and countless classroom visits and conversations with skilled teachers, I now know better. I know that our investment in high-quality books and our classroom instruction around those books are transformative. I know that our students' reading achievement and motivation increase as teachers and school leaders invest both time and financial resources in authentic books. I know that we must push aside core programs because our children deserve to dive into page-turning books. And I know that if we aim to grow real readers, our children deserve real books.

...

I know that our investment in high-quality books and our classroom instruction around those books are transformative.

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Yes! Books Matter: A Teacher's Perspective

by **Laura Robb**

It was 1963—the year my life changed. That year, teaching claimed my heart. My husband and I moved from New York City to Winchester, Virginia, so he could teach voice at Shenandoah Conservatory. In New York, I was a copywriter for an ad agency. No ad agencies in Winchester. In August of that year, I obtained a job teaching sixth grade in a rural elementary school in Gainsboro, Virginia.

The principal gave me a Ginn sixth-grade reader and workbook along with these directions: “Cover one story a week and complete two to four related workbook pages.” Sounds doable, right? Here’s the caveat: out of 28 students, only six could read at grade level or above. “Just read ‘em [the stories] out loud,” was his advice. “Some will get it, others won’t.” Determined to have all my students reading, I searched for books in the school.

Not one class had a library. The school library was small, its books were old and threadbare, and students could only check out one every other week. I knew that listening to one story a week wasn’t enough—my students needed to read more. I erased the principal’s words from my mind, closed the door of my classroom, and devised a plan to find books for my students.

The next day, my husband and I each checked out the maximum number of books from our community library and brought them to my classroom. My parents packed up four large cartons of books stored in their attic—books my brother and I loved: *The Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew*, *The Bobbsey Twins*, collections of fairy tales and folktales, and classics such as *Treasure Island*, *The Secret Garden*, and *The Wind in the Willows*. I read aloud every day, and students read independently for 30 minutes a day, choosing books displayed on windowsills, on my desk, along the chalk tray, and underneath the chalkboard. Soon the Ginn readers were stacked in a back corner, gathering dust.

I didn’t know much about the art of teaching reading that first year. What I did know was that to love reading, to want to read, children needed wonderful books. Moreover, giving them time to read books they chose and could read was a sure way to develop their love of books and turn them into lifelong readers.

Now, 55 years later, I’m still teaching children, coaching teachers, blogging about reading, and writing books about teaching reading and writing. Each day, I learn from my students, from conversations with teachers, and by reading professional books and journals, as well as online articles. And what I learned that first year from those sixth graders is still true today:

- Programs don’t know the students you teach and lack the flexibility with materials to reach all readers. Teachers know the students, their interests, and their instructional reading levels, and with access to books can meet the needs of all children in their classes.

What I did know was that to love reading, to want to read, children needed wonderful books.

- To love books and reading and to develop reading skill, children have to read wonderful books relevant to their lives. Teachers can suggest books that support every child’s reading progress!
- Teachers who read aloud every day enlarge students’ background knowledge and vocabulary and tune their ears to literary language.

Children also need access to books. This means rich libraries in ELA and content classes. This means skilled teachers who know how to support developing and advanced readers. This means the heart and soul of a school is its media center with a media specialist who continually updates the collection and seeks input from students and teachers. This means independent reading happens every day. This means students read the finest books for instruction instead of one story a week from a grade-level basal anthology. This means students discuss books and write about their reading in notebooks instead of completing fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice worksheets.

That first year, more than half of my sixth-grade students read three or more years below grade level. This picture hasn’t changed. For the past few years, I’ve been training teachers and teaching fifth- and sixth-grade students who arrive at school reading at a K to 3 instructional level. The results from the NAEP test (National Association of Educational Research), the nation’s report card, and research studies reveal a huge

To love books and reading and to develop reading skill, children have to read wonderful books relevant to their lives.

literacy gulf between children living in poverty and those living in middle class and professional homes. Sadly, this gulf between children living in poverty and working class and professional families starts soon after birth (Hart & Risley, 2003; Pearson, Duke, McMillon, & Cabell, ILA 2019 Conference; Rowe, 2012).

Children living in poverty hear less meaningful talk, have little to no age-appropriate books in their homes, don’t visit public libraries, and aren’t read to daily by parents or adult caretakers (Neuman, 2006). By kindergarten, the literacy playing field favors working class and professional families, and children living in poverty and English language learners are already at a disadvantage. In fact, children living in poverty enter school six or more months behind their peers who have experienced rich talk and daily storybook reading.

At the risk of sounding Pollyannaish, I believe that this gap can be bridged. In my book *Literacy Links* (Heinemann, 2000), I describe how my fellow teachers and I helped close this gap in Woodstock and Winchester, Virginia, by using these three learning practices to enlarge kindergarteners’ literacy background:

- 1. Storybook reading.** Teachers, along with senior citizen and high school student volunteers, gathered two students under each arm and read to them four to five times a day. By the end of the year, each child had listened to at least 900 storybooks.
- 2. Meaningful talk.** Teachers took small groups inside and outside the school to talk about the cafeteria, library, nurse’s office, gym, and music room, as well as trees, the seasons, weather, etc. Rather than talking *at* children, teachers opened conversations that valued children’s questions, hunches, and thinking.
- 3. Play.** Children played to learn in centers such as grocery, library, blocks, painting on easels, dress-up, etc. Meaningful talk with peers and their teacher was part of their play and enabled children to process and absorb new experiences.

The Big Takeaway

Reading aloud and interactive talk narrowed the literacy gap for these literacy-deprived kindergarteners. The same has been true for the fifth- and sixth-grade students at Daniel Morgan Intermediate School in Winchester, Virginia. There, ELA teachers received starter class libraries of 600 books, and each grade-level ELA team shared seven genre units of study with 120–140 different books on reading levels that reflected the instructional reading ranges in their classes.

A combination of 15 minutes a day of independent reading and 20 minutes a day of instructional reading meant these ELA students read 35 minutes a day. Furthermore, students reading on a K–3 level had an extra 63-minute intervention reading class daily that included guided reading, word study, notebook writing, and independent reading. By the end of the year, most students' reading levels had progressed one to three years.

Books matter! Volume in reading matters! Yet, with the pressures of high-stakes testing, districts all over the United States are still searching for a magic bullet—a quick solution to students' low reading scores.

The Problem with Reading Programs

Educational publishers still continue to develop programs for students in elementary and middle school that promise major gains in reading skill and high scores on state tests. However, unless students read widely and voluminously, these programs won't work, and here's why:

Basal Reading Programs: These grade-level reading programs feature myriad components: a basal anthology of excerpts from novels as well as poetry and short texts, unit tests, reading workbooks, spelling workbooks, vocabulary workbooks, phonics workbooks, online computer-graded assessments, and a teacher's guide explaining how to implement the program. To accommodate a range of instructional reading levels, some publishers include guided reading texts that are short (16 to 24 pages); however, these short books don't offer children the volume in reading they need, nor are they the beautifully written and illustrated texts that engage learners.

One-size-fits-all programs do not meet the needs of children reading below or above grade level. In fact, these programs raise many questions that administrators should ask before they invest up to a few million dollars in them: *Why read excerpts from a book? Why not read the entire book? Do unit tests assess reading skill or the reading taught and practiced in the program? Why ask students to complete worksheets that emphasize isolated skills? Where are the authentic literacy experiences that prepare students for their future education and careers?*

Computer Reading Programs: Though these programs keep students working quietly on short texts at their instructional reading levels, they can't advance students' reading skill. First, reading is social, and good readers deepen their knowledge of books by discussing themes, personality traits, why characters and people change, etc.

What's more, texts on computer reading programs are short, and the assessments on passages emphasize recall of facts. In a research study on students who scored high on the PISA reading test (Program for International Reading Assessment), Brozo, Shiel, and Topping (2008) found that these students did a large amount of leisure (independent) reading, and they read long texts. I have noticed

that students whose sole experience is with computer reading programs have difficulty reading and enjoying long texts. What flummoxes these students is their ability to hold, in their memory, information from early chapters that they will need to understand what’s happening in later chapters. This kind of reading stamina is developed by reading long books.

Synthetic Phonics Programs: The purpose of these programs is that learning to read—practicing the relationships between letters and speech sounds and blending these sounds to read whole words—comes before reading to learn. I’m reminded of the day my three-year-old grandson, Lucas, and I ran down a hill. At the bottom of the hill was a STOP sign for cars. Lucas put his hand in front of me and said, “Stop, Grandma! That sign means we have to stop.” Words have meaning—even that one word, *stop*. It’s impossible to separate reading and meaning; from the moment children break the code and read, they construct meaning.

By third grade, many students are “stuck” in synthetic phonics programs, reading controlled phonics-based books to “learn to read.” The result is children aren’t reading outstanding and engaging books that enable them to move forward and experience joy in reading because they comprehend and relate to the stories and information.

When programs are one-size-fits-all, when the emphasis is on factual knowledge instead of using facts to think, problem solve, and analyze, and when choice and volume in reading disappear, then reading scores on state tests either go down or remain flat.

A Cautionary Story: Teach Children, Not Programs

An excellent example of fidelity to programs having a reverse effect on students’ reading skill can be found in the city of Pittsburgh’s 2019 reading scores, as highlighted in this September 3, 2019, headline: “Early Grade Reading Scores at Pittsburgh Public Schools Drop Sharply, Despite Millions Spent on Educational Technology.”

Schools filled with wonderful books provide the access and equity students need to become readers.

In 2015, the city of Pittsburgh was considering two proposals: one for elementary children and one for grades 4 on up. I had partnered with literacy leaders in Pittsburgh schools and Scholastic to develop reading units of study and class libraries that were relevant to students’ lives, their interests, and the diversity of reading skill among students. In addition, there would be ongoing training for teachers on using fine literature to teach reading and differentiate instruction. This proposal and a similar one for grades K to 3 were not adopted. Instead, the superintendent, against the recommendations of a teacher advisory committee, purchased an EdTech program costing millions of dollars. In 2019, state test scores for third graders dropped from 11.7 percent of students reading below basic to 17.9 percent—an increase of more than 6 percent. Moreover, the news article reported that among African American third graders, “the percentages are even more alarming—62 percent can’t read proficiently or on grade level.”

Without volume in reading and discussing books and without daily teacher read-alouds, students did not make progress. Skilled reading teachers and schools filled with wonderful books provide the access and equity students need to become readers.

10 Shifts Schools Can Make to Create a Culture of Reading

In our book *Schools Full of Readers* (Benchmark Education, 2019), my son Evan Robb and I invite administrators to create literacy teams who take their school's reading temperature. Consider whether the teaching and learning practices in your school offer authentic literacy experiences that reflect how adults use reading and writing in the real world, such as:

- Collaborating with a partner or group
- Generating ideas through inquiry
- Reading and discussing books
- Writing stories and writing about reading
- Following directions
- Reflecting on reading and writing

Creating a culture of reading in a school often requires making some significant shifts. Here are 10 shifts that can help you develop a school full of readers:

1. **Three Layers of Reading.** Daily teacher read-alouds, independent reading of self-selected books, and instructional reading all need to be in place for students to improve and become proficient readers who read at grade level or above. To achieve this reachable goal, schools need an abundance of the finest books in every classroom, the media center, and the book room.
2. **A Book Room.** Book rooms serve ELA and content-area teachers because they house books for ELA units of study and content books on diverse readability levels for social studies, science, math, the arts, and sports. Covered with shelves, this large room enables teachers to select books that meet the needs of classes with students at different instructional reading levels. For example, in social studies, sixth graders study colonial America, but half the class can't read the textbook. In the book room, teachers can check out books on colonial America at different instructional levels and keep all students engaged in the reading and discussions.

One program, one textbook, one novel can't meet the needs of all students in a class. The shift here is to purchase seven or eight copies of texts for a genre or theme study and have small, guided reading groups using books they can read and learn from. Or, for instructional reading, teachers can have each student read a different text, one that meets his or her instructional needs. By storing these books in a book room, all teachers have access to complete units, to books for guided reading groups, and to books on content-area topics that meet the needs of the wide range of reading skill among students in content classrooms.

3. **Student-Centered Classrooms.** Once teachers move from "my classroom" to "our classroom," student-centered learning is a possibility. In classrooms using a student-centered approach, learning is active, and students have choices; they work with a partner or group on projects and presentations, confer with peers, and use inquiry to drive their reading and research. Seating is flexible and can change as the kinds of learning experiences change.

Negotiation is an important part of student-centered learning. With their teacher, students can

negotiate behavior expectations, deadline dates for work, room arrangements, and diverse ways to showcase their learning. In these classrooms, teachers offer students multiple opportunities to improve communication, become passionate about reading and learning, hone critical thinking and problem solving, and develop empathy for others as they read books about diverse cultures and religions.

- 4. Daily Teacher Read-Alouds.** Read-alouds offer an outstanding way for teachers to build students' background knowledge, tune their ears to literary language, extend their understanding of a topic or theme, enlarge their vocabulary and understanding of how genres work, and develop their listening capacity. In addition, students hear expressive, fluent reading and observe their teacher modeling how to respond and react to texts as well as how to apply strategies such as making inferences and finding themes.

When daily teacher read-alouds are interactive, students have multiple opportunities to observe a teacher's model and then practice and apply a strategy, figure out a word's meaning using context clues, raise questions, and connect ideas within a text.

- 5. Class Libraries.** My middle school students tell me they love having a class library because "books are at our fingertips and we can shop for two to three books to keep in our cubbies." Filled with books teachers order as well as books students suggest, class libraries provide immediate access for self-selecting books to read. Independent reading provides students with the practice needed to improve their reading skill and enlarge their vocabularies and background knowledge. They also develop literary tastes as they discover genres and authors they enjoy reading.

A good starter ELA library has 600 to 800 books on a wide range of reading levels, genres, and topics that interest students, are relevant to their lives, and represent diverse cultures. A rich class library has 1,500 to 2,000 books. Once a year, libraries should be updated with recently published books and threadbare books should be replaced.

- 6. Conferring Supports Readers.** Conferring with their teacher about reading is critical to students' progress because it provides valuable feedback and individualized instruction. During conferences, teachers can support students who need help, boost students' self-confidence as readers, honor their book choices, recommend books, discuss notebook entries, and encourage students to reflect on their reading life and progress. Teachers come away from conferences with insight into how a student processes information, and data that enables them to determine instructional moves. An ongoing process, conferring can be done with individual students or small groups, and teachers can carve out time to confer while students read independently.

- 7. Class Libraries in Content Subjects.** When teachers in content subjects have class libraries, they send the powerful message that reading matters in every subject, and a culture of reading flourishes. Recently, an intermediate school I work in created 250-book class libraries in science, social studies, and math. Students use "class library books" for collaborative projects and research and check out books on topics that interest them.

- 8. Readers' Notebooks.** When students write about reading in notebooks, it boosts comprehension. Even kindergarteners write in notebooks—for them, drawing is writing. Research

completed in 2015 by Graham, Perrin, and Santangelo states that by writing about books they can read, students boost their comprehension of the book by 24 percentile points! With readers' notebooks, students learn how to organize ideas on a page and write informal responses such as lists as well as short paragraphs.

9. Formative Assessment. As opposed to summative assessments that evaluate what students have learned, formative assessments support students' learning. Formative assessments include teachers' observations, students' notebook writing, conferring, and students' participation in day-to-day learning experiences. The overarching goal of formative assessments is to support teachers' instructional moves and improve students' learning, engagement, and motivation.

10. A Media Center and Media Specialist. Media centers are the heart and soul of a school and serve the entire school community. Staffed by a media specialist who continually updates and enlarges the collection, media centers also have makerspaces for creative and innovative thinking, comfortable reading spaces for students, and an area where students can discuss books, collaborate to do research, and plan projects. Media specialists inform staff of new books, support teachers by gathering books that students need for a project or a unit of study, and order multicultural books that meet the instructional and independent reading needs of all students.

Support Changes with Ongoing Professional Learning

Teaching with outstanding literature requires a skilled teacher who knows his or her students and continually responds to their needs. Becoming a skilled teacher is a never-ending journey, as how children learn and the skills they need for their future are always evolving. Ongoing professional learning at the building level helps teachers continually grow and adapt to a rapidly changing world.

Innovations of the past such as filmstrip machines and educational programming on television have disappeared. Technology changes rapidly: the flip phones of yesterday have transformed into today's smartphones, and instead of two to three large computers in a classroom, students can explore the internet and watch videos on handheld computers. We don't know what the world will be like for future generations, but we do know that instead of memorizing facts, students will need to analyze data and facts, think critically, solve problems, and work in teams to be connected to the global community.

Teachers who are ongoing learners work in schools that value professional learning and include these opportunities:

Flipping Traditional Meetings. Principals can transform full faculty, team, and department meetings into professional learning communities by using this time for professional study instead of schedule updates and other announcements that can be emailed to staff. Rather than passively listening, teachers sit in small groups, read professional articles or excerpts from a professional book, discuss, write in notebooks, and plan how to present information to colleagues. Now, teachers practice learning in ways their students should be learning, and these experiences can make transitioning to student-centered learning easier.

Students will need to analyze data and facts, think critically, solve problems, and work in teams to be connected to the global community.

Observing Other Teachers. Visiting classrooms in your school and inside and outside of your district can help teachers imagine concepts such as flexible seating, collaborative learning, and conferring. Often, these visits are the beginning of relationships that encourage communication, sharing materials, and having meaningful conversations about teaching and learning.

Using Social Media. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are places where teachers can read articles recommended by other professionals, watch short videos, pose questions, and learn from educators all over the world.

Developing a Personal Learning Network (PLN). In addition to the professional learning provided by their schools, teachers have begun to understand the value of having a PLN on social media. Teachers who recognize the importance of continually learning with and from others as well as contributing to educational conversations boost their teaching and learning skill by interacting with educators who understand the value of schools full of books.

How Do I Know My School Has a Culture of Reading?

Here are look-fors relating to what students do.

- ELA classes start with 15 minutes of independent reading.
- During ELA classes, students shop for books in their class library and keep two or three in a cubby so that once they complete and return a book, another is beckoning them to read.
- On bus rides to and from school, many students read.
- During lunch and library time, you hear students talking about a great book.
- When teachers say, “Time to put your books away,” sighs from students indicate they want more time for independent reading.
- Class libraries have current and relevant books for students to check out and read.

Here are look-fors relating to what teachers and administrators do.

- During some planning periods, teachers collaborate and talk about books for daily read-alouds and for instruction, discuss professional books and articles, and watch videos to enhance their teaching skill.
- In classrooms, teachers display books on windowsills, on their desk, and under the chalkboard.
- Teachers invite students to suggest books for their class library.
- Teachers use and share websites with colleagues and students for book recommendations.
- Teachers confer about reading with every student.
- Teachers and administrators post books they are reading on their doors.
- The principal reads aloud to classes and “catches” students reading independently in order to compliment them.
- The principal annually budgets funds for adding books to class libraries, the media center, and the school’s book room.

Shift Mindsets: Create a Culture of Reading

In 1977 Richard Allington wrote an article titled: “If They Don’t Read Much, How They Ever Gonna Get Good?” Near the end of his article, Allington notes: “The best way to develop reading ability is to provide abundant opportunity for experiencing reading.” Sadly, more than 40 years have passed since he published the article, and school districts continue to be enticed by publishers promising that their program will solve every student’s reading deficits.

So instead of programs and their promises, how can we build schools full of readers who, because of the volume they read, score high on state tests? Consider these three elements—grounded in hard work and communication among all members of a school community—that have one common purpose: to prepare students for their future by giving each one the gift of literacy!

1. **Powerful and Purposeful Collaboration.** Teachers, administrators, staff, and families work together on a reading initiative, using strength and intentionality to meet goals.
2. **Schools Filled With Skilled Teachers and Leaders** who have a growth mindset and continually learn with administrators to refine their practice in order for all students to become avid readers who can think critically.
3. **Books, Books, Books.** Recognize that choice and volume matter, and purchase the finest books relevant to students’ lives to meet the reading needs of every child.

The magic bullet, the quick fix, doesn’t exist. To become readers, children need to read books they can choose themselves and books that are relevant to their lives!

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Be a Reading Principal: Create a Culture of Reading in Your School

by **Evan Robb**

My journey to becoming a reading principal was long and at times bumpy. Today, I am a reader, but that was not always true. As a child, I was not interested in reading. Playing basketball and soccer with friends was high on my list of to-dos after school. Like many students, I worked diligently to avoid reading and became skilled at fake-reading—turning the pages to convince teachers and my parents that I was reading—but there was never a connection between the book and me.

However, I was lucky because I lived in a home where reading was a common occurrence. My mom read aloud every evening to my sister and me. On weekends, the family gathered in the living room to read our own books, and frequently my parents discussed books at dinner. As I moved from elementary and middle school to high school, avoiding and faking reading became harder and harder. Perhaps it would have felt easier if I had been born into a family that didn't care much about reading.

Although I did my best to only read school assignments, eventually reading found me in a unique way. When I was a teenager, I enjoyed James Bond movies and watched my favorites two or three times. I had no idea, until a friend told me, that the James Bond movies I loved watching were originally books by Ian Fleming. One Saturday morning, I walked to our local library, a place I only visited when I had to complete schoolwork, and found several books by Ian Fleming. And I read one, then another and another. Quite unexpectedly, reading had relevance to me and was no longer a chore. I craved more time to read those books with the same titles as the movies: *Dr. No*, *Goldfinger*, *Diamonds Are Forever*, and *From Russia, With Love*. I would read the book, watch the movie, and debate which was better. For me the books were better, allowing me to step into the story, live the life of James Bond, and make my own movie.

I worked diligently to avoid reading and became skilled at fake-reading—turning the pages to convince teachers and my parents that I was reading—but there was never a connection between the book and me.

Yes, I became a reader—an avid reader who believes there’s nothing better than finding a book I can’t put down. Moreover, my personal reading journey helped me realize that entering the reading life happens at different points in time for students. Having richly stocked class libraries and school media centers in elementary, middle, and high school can, hopefully, hasten the moment of finding the book, series, or author that makes reading relevant and wonderfully exciting.

Now, as principal of Johnson Williams Middle School in Berryville, Virginia, my passion for reading and finding connections to books has helped me to work with staff and students to create a culture of reading in my school and other schools, as well as cowrite a book with my mother, Laura Robb, called: *Schools Full of Readers* (Benchmark Education, 2019). To create a school full of readers in your school, you need to first develop a positive school culture that inspires staff, students, and parents to transform this important initiative into a reality.

Creating a Positive School Culture

Eventually, if we stay long enough in a leadership position, we learn certain truths about cultivating a positive school culture. What you communicate, focus on, and practice day in and day out becomes the culture of your school. Culture can be hard to define, but most people can tell if a school’s culture is positive, upbeat, and student focused because they can see, sense, and feel it.

To start this journey, consider some key understandings about schools that have positive cultures:

- Teachers want to work there.
- Staff recognizes students’ achievements in all areas of school life.
- Parent involvement supports teachers and staff.
- Administrators empower teacher leadership.
- Administrators, staff, and students continually build trusting relationships.
- Office staff welcomes visitors with warmth and enthusiasm.
- Strong communication among administrators and staff exists.
- Staff feels valued by administrators and peers.
- Administrators collaborate with staff to learn and create positive change in an inclusive environment.
- A growth mindset—the belief that growth and change can occur through hard work—exists among administrators, staff, and students.

As you read on, remember this additional truth I have learned: culture is not accidental. It is the principal who can and should be a catalyst for building a positive culture. So, my challenge to you is this—become a catalyst for positive change, and with purpose and intentionality build your school’s reading culture. Remember, you have to walk your talk. No principal can promote an initiative if he or she doesn’t model it and believe in it. To be a reading principal, to champion a culture of reading, you must be a reader.

Getting Started

When you launch a reading culture initiative, it is important to come to an understanding of why the initiative supports students. Research aside, students who are avid readers do better in school, respect and honor diverse cultures, and improve their critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. But there's a lot of competition for students' time these days. Many students are so busy after school, there's little time for reading; moreover, for some students, video games can be more appealing than a book. So, I see a need to look differently at the time we have during the school day in order to make reading a focus. If one person or a few staff members believe in the value of this, your school might have a few classes focusing on reading. That's not enough; students deserve better. The real power behind change is the impact of an entire school pooling and directing its energy to create a culture of reading. Imagine a staff and principal united to develop a school-wide culture of reading. Imagine how this unity can impact the lives of students.

Start by creating a leadership team made up of seven or eight staff members committed to developing a culture of reading. This group might consist of your media specialist, English teachers, and some department chairs. At your first meeting, ask this team to reflect on and discuss these questions/prompts:

- What is a culture of reading? Why is it important? What are signs to look for?
- Have you had a group conversation to best understand the “as is” state of reading in your school? If not, do this so you know what's working and which areas need attention.
- Are students reading self-selected books independently?
- Does your school have a focused and intentional reading curriculum with units of study that include wonderful books relevant to the students' lives? Or is curriculum based on what each teacher wants to do or a one-size-fits-all program?
- Do classroom libraries and the school media center have a wide range of inclusive literature and diverse genres? Are there enough books for students to choose from?
- How do you and the staff in your school promote reading?

The real power behind change is the impact of an entire school pooling and directing its energy to create a culture of reading

Moving Forward

Once you and your team have explored these questions, you will better understand the state of reading in your school and can use this information to develop an action plan to enhance the school's reading culture. But before you do so, consider collecting more feedback by inviting staff to weigh in with suggestions. I realize this can slow the process, but the best way to create substantive change is to involve as many staff as you can. I encourage trying to get everyone on board, but the reality is that might not happen. This is okay. Effective change can't always wait for 100 percent buy-in. However, by being inclusive, you have ensured that everyone has a chance to be involved, share ideas, and participate.

In tandem with this staff collaboration, the principal should personally reflect on these longer-term questions:

- How are you consistently promoting reading?
- Is your school schedule designed to allow for independent reading?
- Does the schedule enable teachers to meet readers' diverse needs?
- Do teachers have the expertise to teach reading using the best books? If not, consider organizing a book or article study to make time for professional conversations on reading. Attend these studies to show your support and that you are learning, too!
- Does your annual budget adequately fund classroom libraries and your school's media center? With the reality of annual book loss and the need to keep book collections in classrooms and the media center current, purchasing books at the start of each school year is a must.
- Are you working with your media specialist to consider how your school's media center could transform over time to better promote reading? If your school does not have a media specialist, how can you work with teachers to collectively promote reading?

Set aside time at a faculty meeting for all staff to enhance their understanding of the school's journey toward a culture of reading. Faculty meetings are opportunities for you to inspire everyone by tapping into your vision and the collective ideas of your team and staff and telling the story of where the school was, is, and can be. In addition, invite staff to go deeper and explore questions that move the initiative forward. To accomplish this, I suggest you group staff by department and have them answer these questions:

- If we have a goal to increase reading in the content area, what are the needs in your classroom and department? Rank in order the top three needs for your department.
- Do you need more books, articles, or online access points for students? If so, be specific.
- How can reading be integrated into your classroom and across your department? Brainstorm ideas as well as pointing out the successful efforts of teachers in your department.
- How can the media specialist assist you as you teach specific units and engage in project-based learning or research projects?
- How has the media specialist already assisted you?

Notice, Note, and Support Content Teachers

No school can have a culture of reading if reading only takes place in ELA and English classrooms. An inclusive and collective effort can help all teachers understand that they are reading teachers because reading to learn, gain background knowledge, think, and solve problems is part of all subjects.

There will be times when some content-area teachers might see integrating reading books related to their curriculum as one more thing added to their already full plate. Make sure you explain that you're not asking them to teach reading like an ELA or English teacher, but to use reading in ways a historian, scientist, mathematician, artist, or athlete would use reading in their discipline. The journey is to find natural points for reading integration that can deepen students' understanding of a topic, issue, concept, experiment, or technique. Such reading can include short articles, poems, folktales, and books.

Take a Collaborative Approach

For true change to take effect, staff will need to see, feel, and understand how the change makes their life better and enhances learning for students. Some staff will be excited to think differently about their subject, and they can be catalysts for change in your school. Use and build on their excitement, enthusiasm, and motivation to seek and understand new ways to increase reading in their classrooms. Encourage all enthusiastic staff to share what they have tried at team, department, and full staff meetings. As positive reactions spread among teachers and support for the initiative grows, the journey to becoming a school of readers can move forward at a faster pace.

Now, you can partner with teachers and students to inform and promote new and exciting ways reading occurs in and outside the school. Excited teachers and students have an infectious impact on others and increase the likelihood of more taking the plunge and joining in the reading initiative! Staff can become deeply involved with building a culture of reading by using the tips that follow to encourage collaboration and interaction among staff and students.

Reading Themes. Invite grade-level teams or departments to create reading themes for instructional units or independent reading. For example, overcoming adversity and/or obstacles could be an inclusive theme.

Article Shares. Encourage members of your school leadership team to share articles and videos related to the importance of reading books with teachers in your school. Teachers can discuss these at team and department meetings or raise questions and note comments online.

Feature Authors, Series, or Genres. The media specialist and classroom teachers can shine a spotlight on students' favorites, new books, and teacher recommendations.

One Book. Consider a one-book promotion where all students and staff read the same book. (Students who are developing readers can listen to the book.) This is a great way to generate grand conversations about reading across the entire school.

Student Podcasts. Ask the media specialist and teachers to have students volunteer to create podcasts on books they loved! Post these on the school's websites for parents, other students, and staff to hear.

Change takes time. Dozens of small steps over time pile up and can lead to meaningful changes! Raise awareness, share articles, ask questions, provide support, and make sure you don't give up! There is one way I can absolutely guarantee a school will not have a culture of reading: never try. Don't be that principal and school.

Always Remember!

Effective and lasting change will never come from the top-down decisions. Positional authority can give you the power to make others do and comply, but it cannot make others care, invest, work hard, and inspire and support others! Instead, take the time to focus your thoughts, communicate, collaborate, and paint a vision of a school full of readers so that as you partner with staff and students, you'll find pathways to that goal.

Ten Ways the Principal Can Foster a Culture of Reading

1. Fund class and school libraries. Budgets are tight; money should be targeted toward what the school values. Schools with reading cultures spend money on books.
2. Become a role model. There is true gain in making sure your words are consistent with your actions. Be a reader, talk about reading, lead by example!
3. Share the research. Our profession, at times, has been guided by presumptions and assumptions based on experiences or accepted myths. It is your responsibility to know the research and best practice and share that information with staff.
4. Read aloud to students. Reading out loud to students sends this clear message: reading matters and you are a reader.
5. Discuss reading at team, department, and faculty meetings. If reading is to be a priority for your school, you should talk about reading and the school's culture of reading during both formal meetings and casual conversations.
6. Drop into classes during independent reading. What a powerful message it sends to students when you visit classes to catch and compliment students for reading!
7. Short book talks and reviews. Consider posting a running list of books in the media center or on a bulletin board near your office for students to read and then review or book talk. They will enjoy choosing a book recommended by you.
8. Ask teachers to post what they're reading. Imagine the impact of staff posting what they have read, are reading, and want to read on their classroom or office door. This sends a strong message to students that adults in this building are readers, too.
9. Commend exemplary reading teachers. Everyone thrives on positive feedback. That's why it's important to take the time to recognize and provide specific praise to staff leading the cultural shift in the school.
10. Promote reading beyond the school. Inform your community by speaking about reading at school events and by harnessing the many ways technology and social media allow you to spread a consistent and positive message about a school full of readers.

Closing Thoughts

A culture of reading requires a team effort, but it also requires intentional leadership. Remember, you are the catalyst for change. The change will not occur if the principal does not lead and actively take part in the collaborative team's process. When a community of professionals focuses and commits to the daily steps needed for change, a new culture can develop and flourish. Work with your team to create a school that has a culture of reading. The destination is important but so is the journey. Become the "reading principal" for your school and inspire staff and students to be the readers, thinkers, and problem solvers the world needs!

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