CREATING A CLASSROOM WHERE READERS FLOURISH

Donalyn Miller

Standing in the hallway, monitoring students at their lockers before school begins, Emily wanders over to chat. I know that she is reading *Fever 1793* by Laurie Halse Anderson, a historical fiction novel about the yellow fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia when it was the first capital of the United States. The events in the book piqued Emily’s interest in medicine and epidemics, topics that intrigue her because of the H1N1 flu and endless discussions about the outbreak on the news.

Emily is full of questions: “Mrs. Miller, why did people back then have such weird ideas about diseases? Why did they drain people’s blood and feed them nasty herbs to cure them? Didn’t they know that mosquitoes caused yellow fever? Why do we know this now, but no one knew it, then?”

“Well,” I tell her, “scientists’ study of infectious diseases like yellow fever has occurred over time, and years ago, we did not know what caused many illnesses or how to treat them. There is a great nonfiction book called *An American Plague* by Jim Murphy that can give you more information about the 1793 yellow fever epidemic; would you like to read it? We have a copy in the school library.”

Emily agrees to read Murphy’s book next and heads off to science class, where I know her newfound interest in infectious diseases will serve her well. During the 10 minutes between the first bell and the second, I discuss the Japanese invasion of Burma during World War II with Brian who is reading Roland Smith’s *Elephant Run*, debate the negative consequences of time

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travel explored in Rebecca Stead’s *When You Reach Me* with Hanna, and define and pronounce *crenellated* for Grant, who declares that Christopher Paolini overuses this word in *Eragon*.

None of these students are in my first period language arts class, but their books provoke questions that cannot wait—every reading teacher’s dream. As a reader, I enjoy these conversations with my enthusiastic, engaged students, but as a teacher, I appreciate the intellectual power these children gain through reading. Heavy reading is the best predictor of school success. We know that students who read the most perform the best on standardized tests, not only in reading and writing, but in content classes such as science and social studies, too.

**Reading Volume Matters**

Numerous research studies prove that wide reading improves children’s comprehension, background knowledge, vocabulary, fluency, and writing (Krashen, 2004). Unfortunately, what we find in many schools is that the poorest readers read the least, often as much as three times less than their peers (Allington, 2006). The achievement gap between our strongest readers and our weakest readers grows wider each passing year, and many students, identified as struggling readers in the early years of their educations, continue receiving reading intervention and tutoring throughout their school lives.

No matter what instructional methods we employ, students must spend substantial time applying the reading skills and strategies we teach before they develop reading proficiency. This means that students must read and read and read to become good readers. Recognizing that improving students’ reading comprehension requires that they read a lot, the challenge for many teachers lies in motivating and inspiring our students to read in the first place. Developing, or struggling, readers often lack the experience and confidence to choose books for themselves, sustain reading for extended periods of time, or consistently apply reading strategies across texts. Dormant readers, who possess the reading skills needed for academic tasks, see reading as a school job, but not an activity in which they would willingly engage outside of school. How do we create a classroom environment that instills lasting reading behaviors in our students?

Examining the habits of lifelong readers, certain qualities emerge that we can explicitly model and teach our students. By redesigning our classrooms to support young readers as they practice and internalize the behaviors of avid readers, we can increase our students’ engagement and reap the benefits that heavy reading engenders. These classroom conditions include providing significant time to read and the opportunity to self-select books.

**Carve Out Time to Read**

Announcing “Ladies and gentlemen, come to a stopping spot” solicits groans from my students, but their complaints are music to my ears. I learned long ago that the only way I could guarantee that my students read was to dedicate time for them to read in class and watch them read in front of me every day.

The Commission on Reading’s report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, recommends that students engage in two hours of silent sustained reading a week, but with increasing curriculum demands and the need to prepare students for standardized tests, independent reading time has become a luxury in many classrooms (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Knowing that voracious readers...
“No single practice inspires my students to read as much as the opportunity to choose their own books does.”

make time to read every day, how do we carve out more reading time for students?

I set aside as much as 30 minutes a day for my students to read in class. During this reading time, I confer with students about the books they are reading, ask students to read to me while I assess their comprehension and fluency, and work with students in small groups.

If dedicating chunks of your instructional day for independent reading seems difficult, you can still find time in the school day for students to read more. Considering my own school day, I realized that there was a lot of wasted instructional time spent waiting in lines for picture day, field trips, the bus, and assemblies—time when my students could read.

After all, adult readers do this; we carry books with us for those times when we must unexpectedly wait. We read at the airport, at the doctor’s office, and on the train. Teach students to carry a book wherever they go and enjoy a few minutes of reading time. Those stolen moments add up over the course of a year.

Young readers learn what life readers know—keeping a book with you alleviates boredom! Taking this practice one step further, my students have learned to pull out their books whenever my classroom instruction is interrupted by visitors at the door, phone calls, and technology glitches.

Set Aside Bellringers and “When You Are Done” Activities
Maximizing wasted moments in the school day may garner as much as an hour per week of reading time for students, but we can allocate more reading time by eliminating instructional practices such as warm-ups and “when you are done” activities. At a recent conference, I asked the crowd to identify the true purpose of warm-ups and bell ringers, those activities that we have ready for students to complete when they enter our rooms at the beginning of class. Embarrassed, most teachers admitted that these activities were designed so that they could “take attendance” or “make sure students begin working.”

Common activities in language arts classrooms such as editing sentences, vocabulary study, or journal prompts may yield limited instructional benefits; none produce the same level of academic power as 15 minutes of reading time would. The same could be said for the lists of “when you are done” activities and enrichment folders so prevalent in classrooms. In my classroom, I tell students that they are never done—when they finish class work, they read. As much as 15 minutes of extra student reading time can be gained in class each day by designating reading as the only activity for any class time not used for instruction and practice.

Time to read motivates my students to read more at home, too. Captured by the books they read in class, they cannot wait to read until the next school day. Recently, I received an e-mail from a student’s mother, who discovered the night before that he had fallen asleep while reading Scott Westerfeld’s science fiction epic, *Leviathan*. Every morning and after school breaks, students swarm me to share how their love of reading and books bleeds over into their personal lives. As teachers and parents, we know that people who read when no one requires it are truly readers.

Provide Reading Choice
Although providing my students more time to read and teaching them how to steal more reading time dramatically increases the amount of reading they do, no single practice inspires my students to read as much as the opportunity to choose their own books does. Consider the last mandate or program implemented by your school district or campus. Thoughtful, informed educators may spend months reviewing programs, attending training,
and surveying teachers before requiring specific programs for all of the teachers at a campus, but when these programs are rolled out—how do we respond? We often balk at the mandates, unwilling to consider the merits of such programs or the value for our classrooms simply because someone else requires it; we are defensive.

Learners who lack input in decision making feel powerless and demotivated—this is true for adults, for teachers, and for our students (Cambourne, 1995). We may spend weeks designing the perfect novel units, carefully selecting interesting texts and crafting meaningful activities, only to discover that our students are not interested and plod through the book and our assignments.

The fact that no one text or activity can possibly meet the needs of the diverse range of reading levels and interests found in the typical classroom is another issue. So, how can we change our practices so that we accomplish our instructional goals and assure that our students will be engaged?

Rethinking my practices, I have done away with whole-class novel units and have allowed my students the freedom to choose their own books to meet classroom requirements.

When I reflect on the power of choice versus requiring specific books, I recall a recent conversation I had with students about Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, a futuristic novel that explores themes of power, loyalty, and courage. I never assigned this book to my students, but after book-talking it to my classes and offering the book to my after-school book club, *The Hunger Games* spread like wildfire.

Of my 93 students, almost 60 of them have read or plan to read this book. Discussing the popularity of *The Hunger Games* with six children during a table group conference, I was surprised to discover that all six were currently reading the book by choice.

When I asked one child, Adam, why this book was so popular, he told me:

You made the book sound so exciting, and I decided to read it because I thought I would be missing out. The book was amazing! I loved the action and terror of the Games, and I thought that Katniss (the protagonist) was a great character. When she volunteered to take her sister’s place in the Games, I thought it was so brave.

Curious, I asked:

Adam, knowing that this book is worth reading, with lots of topics we could discuss in class, what would you think about me assigning this book to the entire class to read? Most of you are reading it, anyway. Obviously, many students would enjoy it.

My comments sparked a wave of head shaking and protests from all six students: “No, no, please don’t! When teachers tell us we have to read a book, we hate it. We like it that we get to choose what we read.” Thinking about this conversation later, I see that my influence, my heartfelt recommendations, my ability to discuss this book with students, and my questions that probe their thinking were all teacher behaviors that I might use when teaching a novel to the entire class, but my students’ reactions reveal that the most important factor for them was that they could choose whether to read it or not.

For many of us, asking students to read devolves into a struggle to get them to pick up a book in the first place, so move the choice. Don’t provide students with the option of not reading—some will always choose not to read. Instead, ask students what book they will be reading today. Allowing them to choose what they will read gives them power and buy-in and removes the opportunity to refuse to read at all.

I challenge my students to read 40 books each year, in a mix of genres from nonfiction texts to fiction to poetry. Expecting my students to read widely exposes them to more genres, authors, vocabulary, and background knowledge than I could ever accomplish by teaching a few texts a year, and this practice helps students discover and develop their own reading tastes.

Reviewing my district’s curriculum and state standards, I redesigned my instruction around the knowledge and skills students must learn, instead of teaching specific books. All students learn how to infer theme, predict resolutions, identify figurative language, and so on, but each child chooses their own books to practice and perfect these skills.

**Introduce Books and Authors Through Read-Alouds**

For those students who lack reading experience and confidence in choosing books for themselves, I introduce books and authors through read-alouds, shared reading, and book
talks. Students are more interested in reading a book when they recognize the author, have read other books in the series, or heard about the book from another reader (Gambrell, 1996). I often use the first chapters of books as teaching pieces, then place the book on the chalkboard rail for students to enjoy. The books rarely last the day before a student checks it out to read.

When students do choose books to read, I condone their reading choices. I find it interesting that we often bemoan the fact that children will not read and then pass judgment about the books they do choose to read. Books such as The Diary of a Wimpy Kid series and Bone graphic novels are popular with young readers, but teachers often denounce such books because they are too short, lack literary merit, or contain too many pictures. Can we stop for a moment and admit that any girl who reads the entire Twilight series has read over a thousand pages of text? Surely, this is a powerful reading accomplishment!

I celebrate any reading my students do. When students see that I value their reading choices, they begin to trust themselves to select their own reading material and trust me to suggest more books. I tap into this reading relationship to move students toward more challenging, meatier books over time. By validating their reading choices, I send the message to my students that any reading they do is far preferable to not reading at all.

By dedicating reading time, recommending books, exposing students to a variety of texts and authors, and validating their reading choices, students’ interest and motivation to read increases. The more students read, the better readers they become. Students’ background knowledge on a host of topics, understanding of text structure and text features, written and verbal vocabulary usage, appreciation for authors’ craft and the nature of stories, and performance on a wide array of assessment measures tremendously improves as a natural outgrowth of the reading they do.

It is only through volumes and volumes of reading that many students internalize the reading comprehension skills and gain the reading experience they must acquire for academic success. Of course, hours and hours spent reading and the freedom to choose their own books lead many children to discover a love of books and reading—a path to enjoyment and self-learning that lasts long after schooling ends—an immeasurable gift.

REFERENCES