

THE POWER OF READING: PRACTICES THAT WORK

by Linda Rief

In her book *Educating Esme*, Esme Raji Codell tells about reading aloud to her fifth graders every day after lunch. On this particular day, she is reading the story *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes. When she's done reading, Ashworth (one of her students) asks if he can tell her a secret, the way the poor, little girl carried her own secret of having only drawings of a hundred dresses. He shows her that he has half a finger missing and asks to tell the class. Ashworth shows he's missing half a finger and asks not to be teased. There is a hum, then silence.

Finally, Billy called out, "I'll kick anyone who makes fun of you!"

"Yeah, me too!" said Kirk.

"Yeah, Ash! You just tell us if anyone from another class messes with you, we'll beat them up and down!"

Yeah, yeah, yeah! The class became united in the spirit of defending their classmate. Ashworth sighed and smiled at me. The power of literature!

(adapted from Codell, 1999, p. 34)

I want my students to enthusiastically read and respond to literature. I want them to think and feel and react as deeply, as passionately, as powerfully as Ashworth and Billy and Kirk and the rest of the class did--because the story touched them as human beings. It is why Eleanor Estes told the story in the first place.

But *wanting* our students to read passionately, and *getting* them to, is not as easy as the simplistic words imply. On the other hand, it is not as difficult as the world of politicians and journalists would lead us to believe.

Max, an eighth grader who has already

told me that his intent is to do nothing during the year because "it doesn't count 'til ya get to high school," is the first one to class every day. I am reading aloud *Holes* by Louis Sachar, a mystery that forces the reader to put together clues introduced in a variety of smaller stories that often don't seem connected, but ultimately are tied together. It is the story of a boy unjustly accused of a crime and forced to endure inhumane treatment in a correctional institution at the hands of some mean-spirited adults. It's a puzzle that kids can connect to, especially adolescents who often feel that adults are not fair to them. With each chapter, more questions emerge and the reader wants the answers. It's a compelling story that forces even the most reticent reader to listen. Max is caught up in this story, in the voice reading to him, and in the thinking it forces him into.

Max enters the room each day with "I'm only here 'cause you're reading that book to us. You are reading that book today, aren't you?"

A year ago I was in Nebraska to present a workshop and read "When Harry Met My Nephew," a newspaper article written by Vicki Reynolds, a copyeditor for the local paper. She spent a week during the summer, while her nephews were visiting, reading the Harry Potter books to them at night. Her nephews fell in love with the books and loved the nightly reading. Her 11-year-old nephew loved the books so much he read them over and over again.

A month into the school year, Reynolds received a letter from her sister telling her not to send any more Harry Potter books. Her son was reading the books to the detriment of his *reading class*. He was

receiving a C- for reading, specifically because of the worksheets he had to fill out after reading short stories from a textbook. Reynolds continues, "*this is not a dumb kid. He scores in the top one percent nationwide on those standardized tests. And he loves to read. He devours books. He checks books out by the armload from the library. And he has a C- in reading. Go figure.*"

Reynolds goes on to say that she will abide by her sister's request. She felt tremendous guilt for introducing her nephews to these stories. How truly sad, I think. And I wonder, what's the purpose of a reading class, if it isn't to get kids reading?

What can we learn from Max?

Max loves being read to. He enjoys hearing different voices, especially if he is only asked to follow along. He is not lazy. He just does not know how to read well, and he is not going to admit that. The first few times we read a book aloud as a class, he never volunteered for a part, no matter how small. When I forced him to read aloud to me several weeks into the year (from a book of his choice, that he had been given time to practice reading), he read in a halting staccato with a clear emphasis on decoding, not on meaning-making. He "reads" thick novels, but almost never writes a response or reaction to that reading. He tells me he reads fast, looking for the action of the story, and doesn't like to write what he thinks.

As a struggling reader who won't admit how little he understands, reading aloud helps Max hear and understand the pronunciation of single words, as well as whole sentences that lead to layers of meaning. Filling the classroom with thousands of books, having a day of silent reading for the entire period, and leaving Max to his own devices as a reader is not enough. Reading aloud is one way to help Max truly enter a book. When he finds the

story compelling enough, he tries to figure out what's going on; hearing it out loud helps him make predictions based on evidence in the story; it helps him relate to the characters, hating some, feeling compassion for others, in the instance of *Holes*.

While he seldom responds in writing to books read on his own, he asks substantive questions and offers pertinent information in class discussion when we read a text together. These oral responses (when done in class and in response to these common readings) tend to transfer into his journal responses to each day's reading.

It's because of the struggling readers, who don't really read on their own when given the choice, that I must find time to read the stories together aloud. I make sure all kids have the book in front of them so they can follow along and *see* words as they *hear* words. When we read books aloud that the kids really enjoy, they look for more books by that author or similar story lines or genres on their own. They trust us with recommendations when we can say, "You really seemed to like *Holes*; I think you'd like this book too." We can use their oral responses to point out what thoughtful questions, what insightful comments, what great personal and worldly connections they made that they could also make in written responses to reading on their own.

For the sake of all of our students, I am suggesting we read at least four or five novels or plays a year as a whole class so we can engage all of our kids in the process of real reading/thinking about the meaning of those words on the page, even as we are teaching them to pronounce the words. In 50 minutes a day, it takes two weeks of reading to complete a short (around 200 pages) novel.

The most successful way I have found to do this is as reader's theater, where I have labeled and highlighted the speaking parts of a particular character for one book. For

instance, in *The Giver*, I have one book labeled Jonas, where all his speaking parts are highlighted. Another labeled and highlighted for The Giver. Another for Fiona. Another for the mother. And so on.

Whatever book we are reading aloud, I have copies of the books prepared in this way. I list all the parts on the board and note whether each involves a major, minor, or average amount of reading. Kids volunteer. We talk about listening to fluent readers and all we can learn from them. Each student gets the book highlighted with his or her part. Other kids get a book with nothing highlighted. As the year goes on, more and more kids volunteer, including the struggling readers who dare to take a risk, who feel more confident in their reading abilities, and like the idea of entering into an interpretation of a character through his or her voice.

I always read the narrator's part to keep the story moving. I put as much feeling into this part as I expect kids to put into their characters. In a class of fluent readers, I share the narrator's part, so more kids get a chance to read aloud.

This is not about testing kids to see how well they read aloud when it comes to their paragraph. It's about hearing voices of characters to understand the layers of a story. It's about helping all kids connect language and meaning by seeing and hearing it. By highlighting ahead, I am making a difficult task as easy as it can be, so we can concentrate on the most important task: taking meaning to and from a text, as we are learning words.

Kids enjoy reading aloud this way. It is not a game. They don't have to look for parts, and they like listening to the voices of classmates as the characters. Following along while someone is reading aloud is also the best way I know to help kids connect sounds with symbols and to gain fluency in putting words together. Especially in adolescence, kids become

defensive and say they hate reading before they will ever let us know they can't read. Giving kids watered down texts with simplistic language or didactic morals, or pulling them out for phonics instruction are not the most helpful forms of instruction for struggling, adolescent readers. In addition, by reading aloud in class, we can help kids take apart the layers of meaning through class discussion and questions that they often miss when reading a book on their own.

Because I know how helpful it is to see and hear words in the context of a whole piece, I try to put anything I am reading aloud to kids, or they are reading aloud to us, either on the overhead projector or as copies in front of them. Poems. Short stories. Essays. Letters. Their own writing. My writing. They need to *see and hear* them all in order to develop their own reading voices.

What can we learn from our experience as teachers?

Years ago, when a teacher poked his head into my classroom, stepped over kids sprawled on the floor--*all* reading--and sarcastically said to me, "Boy, you sure planned hard for this lesson!" I said, "You bet I did!"

In the classroom, we have to know our kids as adolescents, we have to know the background of the community from which they come, and we have to know them as individuals in order to make good choices about the books on our shelves, the books we choose to recommend, and the books we choose to read aloud as a whole class. We have to know what interests them and what else *might* interest them. And we have to know books and how reading works.

We have to work hard at finding ways to surround kids with great reading--fiction, nonfiction, poetry; classic and contemporary literature; multicultural, male, and female authors. Just knowing

books is a daunting task. We have to build classroom libraries by belonging to professional organizations and subscribing to journals that keep us informed about the newest books. We often have to come up with innovative ways to purchase or obtain the books. We have to find the time to take kids to our school or community libraries if we don't have the resources in our own rooms. We have to know books well enough ourselves to give booktalks and author introductions, or find trusted adults in the school and community who know books well. We have to learn to read aloud in practiced, theatrical voices that bring the books alive for our students. We have to find the time in our packed 50-minute schedules for real reading--individually, in small groups, and as whole classes. We have to teach kids to find meaning in and bring meaning to all that they read, through oral and written language. We have to take time to read ourselves.

What can we learn from our own history as readers?

Growing up, I was seldom read to, rarely introduced to books and authors, and helpless at finding books on my own. I owned few books. Through high school I read Cliffs Notes because I felt I wouldn't know the answers to the test simply by reading the book. I don't want these things to happen to kids.

I have been trying to catch up for years. I find books now through the recommendations of friends who know me and know what I like, or might like. When students see me reading, they trust me as a reader. When I allow them to choose what they read for themselves at least half of the time in my classroom, they know I trust them as readers. The trust is reciprocal. When I choose a read-aloud that might interest all of them, they're willing to try it. We recommend books to each other by posting lists by the bookshelves. We

construct personal posters that show who we are as readers and writers and mount these all around the room so we can learn from and share with each other.

We must make time in our classrooms to read. Friday is reading day. I may recommend an author or book at the beginning of the class, and we may read a passage we find significant at the end of the class, but we read. We read the book of our choice for most of the 50 minutes. My reading says to the students there is nothing more important that I, or you, could be doing.

But I also have students who do not take advantage of this reading day. I see no pages turn. I pull those kids together and tell them time is too precious for them not to be reading. We *will* read a book together as a small group; they can volunteer for speaking parts, or they can just read along as I read to them. It is no longer a choice.

My standing homework assignment to all of my classes is to read for 30 minutes a night, five nights a week. Their reading. Their choice. For pleasure. For information. For another class. Just read and record in their journal what they read and for how long. I keep a reading list and I keep an academic journal: my observations of the world--those things I want to remember about the world around me. Sometimes it is about books. Sometimes it is not. I ask the same of the students. Keep a reader's-writer's notebook--the seeds of ideas that you don't want to forget.

What can we learn from Vicki, her nephews, and Harry Potter?

This may be one of the biggest challenges we face as teachers. We are torn constantly between those things we know real readers do, and test mandates or governors' or principals' dictates that demand reading programs that depend on worksheets and one-word answers. We

List of Recommended Read-Alouds

Anderson, Laurie Halse. 1999. *Speak*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux.

A traumatic event near the end of the summer has a devastating effect on Melinda's freshman year in high school.

Curtis, Christopher Paul. 1995. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963*. New York: Delacorte.

The ordinary interactions and everyday routines of the Watsons, an African American family living in Flint, Michigan, are drastically changed after they go to visit Grandma in Alabama in the summer of 1963.

Fleischman, Paul. 1999. *Mind's Eye*. New York: Henry Holt.

A novel in play form in which 16-year-old Courtney, paralyzed in an accident, learns about the power of the mind from an elderly blind woman who takes Courtney on an imaginary journey to Italy using a 1910 guidebook.

Fleischman, Paul. 1997. *Seedfolks*. New York: HarperCollins.

One by one, a number of people of varying ages and backgrounds transform a trash-filled inner-city lot into a productive and beautiful garden, and in doing so, the gardeners are themselves transformed.

Hinton, S. E. 1995. *The Outsiders*. New York: Puffin.

Ponyboy is 14, tough and confused, yet sensitive beneath his bold front. Since his parents' death, his loyalties have been to his brothers and his gang, the boys from the wrong side of the tracks. When his best friend kills a member of a rival gang, a nightmare of violence begins.

Lowry, Lois. 1993. *The Giver*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Given his lifetime assignment at the Ceremony of Twelve, Jonas becomes the receiver of memories shared by only one other in his community and

discovers the terrible truth about the society in which he lives.

Mack, Tracy. 2000. *Drawing Lessons*. New York: Scholastic.

Like her father, Aurora is an artist. The great thing about art, Rory thinks, is you can bring back something you've lost and keep it forever. But when her father leaves the family, it's Rory who is lost.

MacLachlan, Patricia. 1991. *Journey*. New York: Delacorte.

When their mother goes off, leaving her two children with their grandparents, they feel as if their past has been erased until Grandfather finds a way to restore it to them.

Paulsen, Gary. 1993. *Harris and Me*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Sent to live with relatives on their farm because of his unhappy home life, an 11-year-old city boy meets his distant cousin Harris and is given an introduction to a whole new world.

Philbrick, Rodman. 1993. *Freak the Mighty*. New York: Scholastic.

Max thought he had never had a brain. All his life he'd been called stupid. Dumb. Slow. It didn't help that his body seemed to be growing faster than his mind. It didn't help that people were afraid of him. So Max learned how to be alone, until Freak came along. Freak had a little body and a really big brain. Together, Max and Freak were unstoppable.

Sachar, Louis. 1998. *Holes*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux.

As further evidence of his family's bad fortune, which they attribute to a curse on a distant relative, Stanley Yelnats is sent to a hellish correctional camp in the Texas desert where he finds his first real friend, a treasure, and a new sense of himself.

know that's not real reading. How can we figure out ways to help kids use these mandated programs as exercises for the real game of reading that we need to make time for during the week?

Kylene Beers often suggests to teachers who have no choice about reading programs that they and their students make a list on the board of everything that members of a football team must do in order to play the

game. The list usually includes everything from eating right to studying and memorizing the play book, to watching game films, to running drills, to playing scrimmages and doing the same play over and over again, to having the right equipment, to actually playing the game. Then, she has the teachers ask the students which part is the most fun. Naturally,

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playing the game. If they never were allowed to play, they would most likely give up doing everything else. But, they also agree that playing the game isn't enough.

Kylene then uses this example to look at what someone needs to do to be a proficient, fluent reader. In addition to reading all kinds of materials, students quickly suggest there are some techniques to be learned that help them read more skillfully. Perhaps we need to point out carefully to students that sometimes, like in football, we're working on skills and drills, and sometimes we're doing the real thing-- actually reading!

What if the reading teacher in this case had asked her students, "What do you read on your own outside of school? What would you recommend to your peers as must-reads?" What if she put that list up? What if she asked the kids to bring those books to school to read a favorite passage or do a book talk? It would tell the kids she values them as readers. And what if she used Kylene's football analogy with her students and said, "I have no choice about these drills, these worksheets, so what if you rewrote the worksheet based on the book you love the most or have recently read? What would that worksheet look like?" It might interest the kids more to pay attention to the exercise if they could connect it to a book they really liked. And what if she said, "If we can get these worksheets done to the best of your ability in half the time I've allotted, we could take 30 minutes three times a week to read the book of your choice, or a book together."

From Reynolds's nephew we know that *real* reading has to be *really reading*. From her sister, though, we know that parents trust us as teachers to help kids become proficient, fluent readers. They trust us to know how that happens. As teachers, we have to think about those things we ask students to do and thoughtfully critique

what we believe students are getting from that work. Teaching with traditional basals and mandated worksheets doesn't mean we have to totally abandon real reading. We have to find ways to make time for both.

Our students become readers when they are invited into books by adults and peers they admire and respect and who are passionate about reading and books themselves. They become passionate writers when they are reading books that matter to them as human beings.

Students can, and do, speak powerfully for themselves (Rief & Barbieri, p. 1):

When I read a good book my brain does back flips. Suddenly there are possibilities to be explored--new ideas. Suddenly I have questions, thoughts. Emma

I felt my soul tear and my eyes burn when I read Night. I felt the thunderous sound of fire drown out reality, and screams of their agony driven down my throat. I felt naked in the terror of what was, and what could be. As much as I understand Wiesel's terror; I knew I knew nothing. I think I hate this book. I find no joy in reading it. But I love this book for telling the truth. Kaitlin

I am reading a mouth-watering book! Just listen to this. A woman once asked John Viehman, "Why walk?" and he said, "Because the world looks different at two miles an hour? Because spring comes at you one flower at a time? Because a mountain reveals itself to who climbs it? Because I like the drama of crags and gullies emerging from a curtain of mist?" Seth

I think this is one of the most emotional books I've read. Every joy

Torey and Sheila had was fragile, like a weak berry branch in a heavy storm. I finished this book standing in the bathroom and cried. My mom, who had been passing by, asked if I was okay and spoiled the moment. Kaitlin

The power of literature. It keeps "their brains doing back flips".

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