

# Independent Reading: The Importance of Choice and Time for Student Learning

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A few weeks ago I read with interest the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*'s article on a metro school district's decision to remove books from their school library. I wondered, "*What kind of crazy idea is that?*" It intrigued me enough to keep reading. Upon doing so, both to calm my initial reaction and gain insight regarding this decision, I found that the leaders of the school no longer wanted to try and "duplicate what area public libraries offer" (Louwagie). The referenced books were what the Common Core calls "informational texts." Teachers were to focus their efforts on educating the students on how to find reliable information electronically.

While students and teachers, principals and districts – even the State of Minnesota with the new MCA-III – have to face these types of decisions transitioning to the Common Core standards, there has been an overwhelming response to what many feel is the lost presence of literature. Recently I was at the Department of Education, listening to Charon Tierney, English-language arts Education Specialist and president of Minnesota ASCD. A group of social studies teachers and curriculum specialists were discussing literacy. Ms. Tierney clarified for the group that while informational texts – literary nonfiction pieces, including "biographies and autobiographies; books about history, social studies, science, and the arts; technical texts, including directions, forms, and information displayed in graphs, charts, or maps; and digital sources on a range of topics" (Minnesota 45) – are important, it is expected that literature is still taught. What may be different now, or at least new to some, is that literature needs to be taught – it is more effective and valuable for learning – *in conjunction* with informational texts.

As a curriculum specialist, part of my work is in helping fellow educators with this balance of literacy, so I was pleased to hear the comments as they confirm the work being done in my district. The comments also help to shift the debate away from whether the text is informational and focus instead on the importance of reading. What matters, what needs to be different, is that students are given time to read. Our work has found that when students are provided some choice and independent reading time their learning increases.

## A little background

As former English teacher of eighteen years, I still love a good story. When I began my career I knew that not all of my students would love stories (literature) the same way I did, so my ultimate goal was to help them at least appreciate it. Robin Williams's character John Keating in 1989's *Dead Poets Society* quotes Henry David Thoreau and "sucking the marrow out of life" as literature and poetry move beyond the page and into these young boys' lives. To inspire my students in a similar fashion would be so wonderful.

Flash forward to 2010 with my school district in the midst of its Response to Intervention (RtI) work. One of our first responses was in creating a course called Reading Plus. This class assists students who are at risk of not achieving state standards in reading and may not meet the designated performance levels on the State reading assessment. Taught by reading specialists for both sixth and seventh graders, this course offers the opportunity for students to receive focused instruction and assistance in reading.

Specifically, Reading Plus students meet every day as a "tier 3 intervention," having received regular language arts instruction but then getting a "double dose" of literacy instruction the same day. It is expected that the students are provided with literacy skills and strategies that will help them meet both district and state reading standards. Among their resources, the Plus instructors use social studies topics and informational texts in their instruction, but what teachers have found as their best tool is literature.

## Our approach

In 1987 Nancie Atwell wrote *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents*, still a great resource on how to set up a class with reading and writing workshops. In her book, she describes how her direct instruction comes in the form of mini-lessons and how a majority of the class time is spent on authentic writing and reading. Her "workshop" approach helps make the class a student favorite because it provides time "where they routinely collaborate with other students and the teacher, where they have some degree of ownership

of the educational product, and where they can be active. Learning is more likely to happen when students like what they are being asked to do” (Atwell 38).

Flash forward again, now to 2009 when Donalyn Miller wrote *The Book Whisperer*. About 25 years after Ms. Atwell invited teachers to provide their students with choices in reading and writing, Ms. Miller cites Atwell’s key components of a reading workshop (Miller 16) and expands on it, creating a great resource on how to get students reading:

Reading changes your life. Reading unlocks worlds unknown or forgotten, taking travelers around the world and through time. Reading helps you escape the confines of school and pursue your own education. Through characters – the saints and sinners, real or imagined – reading shows you how to be a better human being. (Miller 18)

Many of my colleagues have heard Donalyn Miller speak. Her book has been purchased for both individual reading and as a book study at one high school. In my district, her approach has become a means by which multiple classroom teachers go about their daily and weekly business with the obvious outcome of students reading like they never have before.

The experiences Ms. Atwell references and Ms. Miller continues to reference have provided me with specific information that has impacted my ideas, actions, and instruction. Having now had my own experiences, I began to help develop the Reading Plus program, using Atwell and Miller as the basis for the contributions.

The major qualifier for students to participate in Reading Plus is a score below the designated performance levels on the State assessment in reading. Reading Plus students lack basic reading skills, such as oral reading fluency, reading comprehension skills, adequate vocabulary knowledge, the ability to obtain information from nonfiction texts, and retention of content. Once a part of the course, as mentioned, they receive their English-language arts standards in one class along with daily literacy instruction in another. Specifically, this literacy instruction is to monitor progress in fluency as well as comprehension. Each student is to increase her/his MCA reading score by three points each year while showing growth in vocabulary and comprehension skills. The goal is to increase oral reading fluency by twenty words per minute by the end of the school year.

The specific resources Reading Plus uses are Sopris West’s *The Six-Minute Solution: A Reading Fluency Program* (Intermediate Level 2007), the Read Naturally program (in some schools), Sopris West’s *Rewards* (also in some schools) and classroom choice independent reading libraries (in all schools), which includes social studies supplemental texts. These libraries are high-interest books of various genres and reading levels. Both fiction and nonfiction are included with graphic novels among the offerings. Students who did not like reading, who struggled at reading, who often times did not even own a book, have been given the choice of titles and the time needed to read.

### Reading Plus specifics

Each Reading Plus teacher purchased books by going to bookstores – Borders going out of business *did* have a benefit for us – scrounging garage sales, and working with a national publisher like Follett Educational Services and local groups like Kubitz Educational Services in Hamel and Custom Education Solutions in Champlin. Books were chosen for both student interest and reading level. These libraries have been developed and refreshed with current titles each year.

Reading Plus provides students structured reading practice that helps improve oral and silent reading fluency and comprehension skills. Teachers initially administer a formative assessment to assess the student’s reading level and then use record-keeping charts and graphs to guide both large group and individualized instruction. Reading strategies are taught to improve comprehension with formative and benchmark assessments done throughout the year.

### Beyond the Plus classroom

In 2010 the English-Language Arts curriculum review cycle concluded with new textbooks and novels for the classrooms. At that time it was determined that whole-group instruction on the same novel would occur only one or two times a year. Time working with literature would be in Literature Circles and independent reading.

*The Book Whisperer* advocates student choice, the availability of texts – best if within the classroom and/or home – and time to read in order to create the necessary volume to achieve higher levels of comprehension and thinking. We have found if not provided choice or time, students do not read. The ability to offer time to students is a huge challenge for high school instructors, especially as they feel the pressure to not only cover a large amount of content but also to prepare for district, state, and (often) national tests.

Yet many teachers have taken on the challenge of increasing literacy across disciplines. In addition to the required reading time during a certain day of their advisory/homeroom periods, middle-school students carry books with them to all their classes. When done with their daily work or completion of an assessment, students read. For some – this has become a great problem to have – students either hurry through coursework in order to get to read or are reading secretively like under a notebook or on a lab and thereby not paying attention to the lesson at hand. Positively, students discuss books, share copies of books, and check out books – one high school, built in 2003, reported last year that more books have been checked out than ever before. Teachers post what they are reading on their doors and in their email signatures. There are book studies and book “commercials” (like an oral book review). And in another high school, teachers used some of their funds to purchase books that mirror the different disciplines. So in an art classroom, there were both literature and informational texts based around art ideas and concepts. Reading has become the “thing” to do, and teachers are acknowledging its importance. For the students that rarely read, they now are being taught how each discipline’s texts “work,” and for those that once did read but had lost touch with it, now they are reveling in the opportunity of independent reading time.

### Observations and findings

Last June Scholastic promoted summer reading. Their mantra of “reading requires practice” was supported with tips on how to assist in this endeavor. It is interesting to see that their number one tip is about choice:

- Don’t underestimate the POWER OF CHOICE. According to the recent *Kids & Family Reading Report*, 91% of kids say they are likely to finish a book they have picked out themselves. Help your child find a book that matches her/his interests. Building on a student’s interests can stimulate an interest in reading, even among reluctant and struggling readers.
- Make books ACCESSIBLE. Having books all around the house or while traveling in the car are great ways to encourage your kids to pick one up and read. Audio and eBooks are great options too!
- READ EVERY DAY: Children who read widely and frequently are higher achievers than students

who read rarely and narrowly. As kids spend more time reading for fun, their reading achievement increases.

- Most of all, summer reading needs to be FUN for kids. (Scholastic)

While not told to follow these tips directly, the Reading Plus educators follow this “process” that aligns with Scholastic’s tips. Along with their direct instruction, they have put these tips into practice. Anecdotally, the students are responding like never before, especially from this particular group. They are excited to be in the class and to see their progress. They say, “Our classroom library has better books than the media center.” Reluctant readers have become hooked on graphic novels, and all the students truly do not want to stop reading. While unheard of before, these students not only are reading texts they have chosen, they also have the next book in mind that they want to read. One student even asked the teacher, “Do we have to stop reading today? Can’t we just read the whole hour!”

As the district gathers “hard evidence” (fluency and comprehension growth) through benchmark assessments, the teachers are having the same reactions as the students. “My students get so excited to open up a new book and smell it. There are students who are not even in my class who want to check out the books from my library.” The instructional opportunities above and beyond the regular English class have increased student self-efficacy of reading both informational and narrative texts. A class of reluctant readers is now reading thousands of pages and 20-plus books a year.

Yet again, it is not just in the Reading Plus classroom. In April 2012, two of my colleagues, Shaunna Roberdeau and Michael Zeman, decided to answer the question: *In a co-teaching classroom, how do independent reading, frequent assessments, and regular interventions lead to students becoming engaged and motivated scholars?* Many of their findings are fascinating, but what stands out is their data that illustrates the importance of independent reading in a student’s life:

We collected data for two months in our English 10 team-taught classes. Students were chosen to be in these classes because they were at risk for failing the MCA-II Reading test from the state of Minnesota. They are students who came into our classes in September thinking that they were not readers and they did not like English class. Our primary goals were to get books into students’ hands, get them reading, and see

how their grades and attitudes changed. Our study took place at a high school that is in the western outer ring of suburbs of Minneapolis. All research was completed in seven weeks in March and April. Research tools used were book tests, daily work tests, practice MCA reading tests, observations, student surveys, and student interviews.

Students in our co-taught English classes are currently scoring about 79 percent on daily work tests. These tests are mainly on comprehension of short stories, plays, literary terms, etc. Standing alone, that fact means relatively little. However, when it is compared to scores in September on the same kinds of skills and reading it means much more. In September these same students were scoring an average of 62 percent on daily work tests. There is only one variable: independent reading.

(Roberdeau and Zeman)

While wonderful, what may be even more exciting are the results these students had with their Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments practices. In the fall these students had a class average of 52%. After their year of co-teaching, regular interventions, frequent assessments, and independent reading, the same students scored 77% in the spring: an increase of 25%! The best part – as if that were not enough – is that the time committed to that choice, independent reading was only ten minutes each day.

### Questions and challenges

While impressive, this data does not excite everyone, and not enough teachers have put this to work in their classrooms. Not everyone sees the impact reading can make but instead remain focused on the pressure to cover so many standards and to prepare students for so many standardized tests. Time to read is a luxury it seems, so the debate over whether it is literature or informational texts does not seem to matter. How can it matter if students are not reading at all?

And if they are given the time to read, is there such a thing as "simply reading"? Is time spent reading in school "wasted time"? Must information be given directly by an instructor a majority of the time, or can the majority of the information be drawn from a text or inferred by a student critically reading and thinking? While these questions may be rhetorical, it does seem important to know the benefits gained in "reading a good book." Entire books, articles, and volumes of research (the

November issue of *Educational Leadership* was dedicated entirely to reading) have been done on this subject matter. There certainly is data available. But even when that data is at one's fingertips, are educators empowered to truly give class time to reading? Can the benefit of both guided reading instruction and independent reading be seen?

It is not as simple as just providing students time. Setting up and managing reading workshop does require planning, effort, and skill to "do it right." Positive results are not always immediate, and many abandon the practice before those results are seen. But purposeful planning and the opportunity of time is a great first step that we continue to develop and monitor closely. It has changed the culture of our buildings, and the strong emphasis on literacy across the disciplines is most definitely making a positive impact.

"If students are not making strong progress, they need no less than 50 minutes of reading each day at school and more at home," says Jennifer Serravallo, teacher, author, and literacy consultant. Reading Plus is making this happen, and while a single teacher typically cannot offer these minutes alone, when a group of teachers makes this effort to support students, the outcomes are promising. If students have books, if they are given the choice of which ones to read, and if they are actually given the time to read them, whether in a Reading Plus period or a regular social studies classroom, wonderful results will occur.

### Conclusion ~ hopes for the future

In 2005 – eight years ago already – a "tipping point" occurred as students aged 8-18 in the U.S. spent more time reading online per day than reading offline: 48 minutes per day vs. 43 minutes per day (Kaiser). In contrast, back at the metro-area high school, a senior female said that while she was fine completing her research on-line, she preferred reading her novels and popular titles on paper. "That's apparently true for others, too. When sophomores [at that same high school] had to choose a book to read over winter break, only two out of nearly 60 chose e-books" (Louwagie). While the debate plays out over electronic or paperbound, whether literature or informational texts, what educators, administrators, parents, and community members alike should act upon today is in figuring out how to best offer reading time and choice to kids.

Students are reading for the teachers in my district that have built this opportunity into their lessons. A good book is wonderful, but what is more wonderful is that we are finding real value behind the opportunity of choice and time to read a book.

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