Dispelling the Myth of the Perfect Reader

SUMMARY

To determine why some students feel estranged from the reading process and to create serious, motivated readers, a veteran middle-level reading specialist says it's first necessary to deconstruct the myths that surround what it means to be a good reader.

Reading is a complex process. It is more than simply being able to pronounce words; it is the ability to engage with texts through the use of metacognitive strategies. Reading involves the use of prior knowledge, syntax, grammar, graphophonics, the reader's knowledge of the concepts of print, and the meaning derived from them. To read effectively, we must activate all these systems of language simultaneously. In order to master the art of reading, we must then be able to verbalize the steps we have taken to comprehend.

For the middle-level reader who struggles with a text, that student's ability to explain what caused the problem usually amounts to phrases such as: "I hate to read" ... "Reading is boring" ... "I'm no good at this reading stuff." These remarks are indicative of the frustration students feel when they are not empowered with the proper tools or vocabulary to explain their own struggle. These developing readers and writers are likely to respond by attempting to contradict any view of themselves as literate, instead assuming an attitude of apathy and defeat.

As a reading specialist in a middle school, I work to uncover the root of why students feel disenfranchised from the reading process. To create authentic and motivated readers, I must first deconstruct the myths that surround what it means to be a "good reader." Students often fail to recognize or verbalize their own strengths because they

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harbor unfair expectations of what they should be able to achieve as a reader. By instilling a common language and a myriad of opportunities for reflection, teachers have the ability to harness the power of talk to generate transformative thinking in the areas of student literacy.

Deconstructing the Myths

Good readers only read great works of literature.

How often are students given choice over what they can read in the classroom? What literature is valued by the educational system? In the traditional English classroom, the answer would be the literary cannon, which is composed of classic works of literature that have been universally deemed as must-reads for all students in English classes. Even teachers who pride themselves on providing students with a multitude of genres and opportunities for reading may unknowingly be biased toward certain types of literature. Students need to see themselves reflected in what they read, especially middle-level students. By allowing students to select from the high-interest, high-quality young adult literature that is available, we increase the potential for students to take more risks in their attempts to comprehend and immerse themselves in the material. We need to allow struggling students to gain a measure of success by letting them begin their journey with materials that appeal to their personality, culture, gender, hobbies, and interests. Unfortunately, classrooms are often set up and centered on a cultural ideology or backdrop that is traditional, white, and upper class. This marginalizes the experience of every student who brings a more diverse cultural palate or experience to the classroom, or whose taste may not be classical works of literature. This is not to say that we ignore the works of literature that have been deemed classics; they, too, are critical for students' growth and development. However, students must be afforded opportunities to engage and enjoy texts that appeal to their unique sense of taste, even if the teacher doesn't consider those works to be "worthy" literature.

When working with developing readers it is important to respect and validate our students' individual literacy.

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Allowing student choice, and respecting those choices, communicates to our students that we do view them as equal contributors to the reading community we strive to develop.

Good readers can read really fast and they never make a mistake.

When I was a freshman in college, majoring in literature, I struggled painfully through reading *Moby Dick*. I was often behind the rest of my class with reading. I had to read passages more than once in order to do the necessary critical analysis that my professor expected. I found myself disassociated with the text, unable to make connections with the language, and uninterested in the development of the characters and their struggles. I hated reading *Moby Dick*. Even now, years later, the cover of that novel causes me to shiver. I share this story with my students each year because I do not want to be another mythical reader for them. Although a highly proficient reader, I am also a reader who has struggled. What I reinforce to my students in telling them my story of *Moby Dick* is that there is no perfect reader.

Even the most skillful reader struggles at times; however, the proficient reader understands that reading is not solely about the recognition of words, but the buildup of knowledge and meaning that is acquired by interacting with the text. We cannot expect students will be consistently fluent with all texts. In fact, we must let students know that even the best of readers will "miscue," which is when a student's observed response in reading differs from the stated language of the text. (Goodman, 1993) It is more likely miscues will occur when students are encountering text for the first time or working with an unfamiliar genre. Miscues should not be viewed as mistakes, but rather as opportunities to gain valuable information regarding the ways a reader processes language. The student who is overly concerned with perfection is more likely to misread the text out of a basic fear of being wrong. Fluency can be interrupted by a student's fear of taking risks or essential gaps in the background knowledge necessary to understand the concepts being presented in the work. Students' perceptions about the reading process have a direct impact on their overall performance. (Harste & Burke, 1980)

It is essential that we deconstruct the myth of the perfect reader as someone who reads quickly and effortlessly. We must encourage students to jump headlong into reading with a willingness to make mistakes, get messy, be playful, and use language as a vehicle for discovering insights about themselves. Inviting students to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses in reading is one of the most effective ways a teacher can increase the likelihood of turning

the reluctant student into the lifelong pursuer of literacy.

Why Reflection Works

We must listen to the stories our students tell. Students do not always have the proper language to explain what they are doing or failing to do as readers. We must embolden students with that language to further their pursuits in the areas of literacy.

A seventh-grade boy taught me this.

My student's name was Carmine. He was a hard-working student who struggled with inference. One day, I was reading aloud to Carmine and his peers. After a page or two, I asked my students to continue reading the chapter silently. Carmine begged me to continue reading aloud. He told me he enjoyed the text so much more when it was read to him. The other students nodded their heads in vigorous agreement. This is a teachable moment in the reflective classroom. I decided to explore the reasons why my students enjoyed having texts read to them rather than engaging the material on their own. It was obvious that my students' comprehension greatly increased when being read to as opposed to reading silently, but I wanted to look for specific reasons why this occurred.

I asked the students to explore, in writing, if they would prefer being read to or reading silently. They were required to give specific reasons for their choices. When we shared our responses, Carmine said, "My teacher is so much better at doing the voices of the characters than I am. How does she know how each character says his or her lines?"

A response such as Carmine's is very telling. Although Carmine does not have the vocabulary to express it, he is actually stating that he does not have proper knowledge of how to fully use literary devices such as intonation, implied characterization, dialect, and dialogue. From a simple student reflection, I realized that my entire class could benefit from a specific lesson that allowed students to explore these particular devices.

Carmine and his classmates showed me the value of reflection. After that lesson, I realized my students need to be able to talk with me about what specific aspects of reading cause them to struggle. Reflective literacy journals are an excellent way to ensure that students have a platform and a safe space to voice their feelings.

The reflective journals we use daily in our classroom are simply black-and-white notebooks that we store on a shelf in the room. Entries contain students' responses to teacher, class, or self-generated questions about the reading and writing processes. The responses I read in these journals

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dictate the mini-lessons I will teach my students, and the strategies and vocabulary I will supply to embolden their learning.

It is important to mention that these are process-driven, not content-driven, journals. A content-orientated classroom is generally one that centers on a set curriculum that is driven by the teacher, as opposed to a process-oriented curriculum that believes the student is a pivotal shareholder in all decision-making regarding learning and instruction. In *The Schools We Have, The Schools We Need* (1998), Richard Allington stresses the importance of process over content when he states, "Unfortunately, we assign children work to complete and confuse that with teaching. What all children need, and some need more of, is models, explanations, and demonstrations of how reading is accomplished...yet much of the work children do in school is not accompanied by any sort of instructional interaction." (Allington, 1998)

Reflective journals allow students to interact with the text, their teachers, and with their peers. Reflective journals require students to strive to comprehend, but are designed to provide them with a place to investigate what leads to enhanced meaning and what creates gaps in understanding. Students' focus might be on syntax, strategies, vocabulary, understanding their own miscues, graphophonics, and utilizing metacognition, all as a means of constructing deeper insights with text. Constance Weaver describes process learning best when she writes, "We want students to understand the role of reading in the construction of knowledge, and so we provide opportunities for them to use reading and writing to learn. To do so, we help them develop questions that they want answered and help them find ways to discover their own answers." (Weaver, 1998)

Using reflection is a powerful tool to further your students' relationship with themselves in becoming stronger, more successful readers and writers.

It is important that teachers recognize they have an important role in fostering students' ability to reflect. At the middle level in particular, students are often very self-conscious. This is a time of incredible change and growth, as students strive to be more autonomous from parents and educators. This self-conscious behavior can manifest as disinterest but usually is based on fear or self-doubt. Providing students a safe space to explore their feelings is pivotal. However, just providing students with the vehicle for this type of exploration may not be enough. Students at this level of their

intellectual development in particular need to see models of what reflection looks like. Early adolescents have a tendency to generalize their ideas and look at things very literally. In order to scaffold students' attempt to reflect on a level that will increase their overall literacy potential, teachers must be willing to diligently demonstrate what good reflection looks like and be willing to step in when reflections are off base.

Regardless of what methods of reflection are used, realize talk is powerful. The teacher who is cognizant of the need for students to share their fears and insights, and who provides students with access to language and strategies that build on sharing, is the teacher who will inspire more successful and authentic literacy in the classroom. Through the power of talk, new definitions of readers can emerge.

METHODOLOGY

The Many Ways to Use Reflection in Your Classroom

Although reflective journals are an effective means of encouraging students to hold conversations about the reading process, they are by no means the only way to employ students in the art of reflection. Other methods include:

- Using exit cards, Post-it notes, graphic organizers, surveys
- Creating guided reading circles and book groups
- Using student-directed mini-lessons
- Socratic circles
- Reader's theater
- Student-led miscue analysis
- Conferences
- Peer-reading/writing partners
- Ethnographic studies
- Writing literacy memoirs
- Writing wikis and blogs
- Interviewing

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