

Do as I Do

Teachers Who Read Children's Books

IN
THE
TRENCHES

by June Locke

Elementary school through high school

“If you want your students to love books, then you need to love books,” reports one of the teachers on our fourth/fifth-grade teaching team. All students in these classes have independent reading time, listen to read-alouds, and participate in literature groups or circles. “The kids say, ‘Let’s have a Read All Day day!’ It’s never enough for them. They beg to read,” one teacher says. They sometimes study genres, authors, or illustrators. They listen to book talks by their teachers and librarian, and they present book talks for each other. They do extensive research projects using trade books as part of the social studies curriculum. And just as important, their teachers are readers.

Why do the teachers in my public school enjoy reading children’s books? Why do they leave for summer vacation with a stack of library books to read? Why do they cluster around the photocopy room talking about the latest book by Jerry Spinelli or Pam Muñoz Ryan? In putting together my thoughts for writing this article, I talked with some of the fourth/fifth-grade teachers about their commitment to reading children’s books. Below are their responses.

High-Quality Books

One teacher notes, “It’s amazing the literature that’s available.” These

teachers appreciate children’s books, enjoy reading them, and want to keep up with current trends in children’s literature. The books available today are much more varied than those published when the teachers themselves were children, and have a clarity that is sometimes lacking in adult books. Just as young readers do, these teachers learn about places and people beyond their own experience when reading children’s books, and gain additional insights into children’s points of view.

A Reading Community

When they first began teaching, some of these teachers worked with colleagues who read and talked about books, and they follow these role models. Sharing their reading experiences builds camaraderie and knowledge. The teachers learn from one another, and, as Frank Smith says in *The Book of Learning and Forgetting* (Teachers College, 1998), they belong to a club of learners. “If I didn’t read, I’d feel left out,” one teacher says.

Book-Talking with Students

One teacher suggests that, just as some grown-ups talk among themselves about the books they’ve read, it’s the same with kids. “It’s what people do.” And the students like to see their teachers reading children’s

books; it makes them more excited about their own reading. These teachers have great fun talking to children about the books they’ve both read, and they recommend books to each other. When teachers finish a book, they recommend it to a specific student who they think will like it. The student passes it on to someone else, and the word spreads. Veteran teachers suggest books that were popular in the past and broaden the children’s menu.

The teachers feel that they need to be knowledgeable in order to guide the students’ reading. One teacher reports that students ask her at least a dozen times a day, “Is this a good book?” And, if students are to make meaningful connections and comparisons among books, the teacher should be able to guide them to titles that are related. In our diverse school, students need to have a wide variety of entry points to literature, by experience and by reading level, and this requires a lot of knowledge on the teacher’s part.

Reading and the Curriculum

Reading for specific reasons tied to the curriculum is a priority; teachers at my school are committed to finding the best read-alouds or topics for students to respond to in their literature journals. These teachers also use examples of literature as models

for writing, such as *Two Bad Ants* by Chris Van Allsburg (Houghton, 1988) and *The Wanderer* by Sharon Creech (HarperCollins/Joanna Cotler, 2000) for teaching point of view. Professional titles, such as *Craft Lessons* by Ralph Fletcher (Stenhouse, 1998), help provide a direct link between teaching writing and examples of children's literature.

What Can Librarians Do?

- Develop a strong library collection to help foster teachers' reading. The teachers at my school value quality, currency, and broad diversity in our library collection, including excellent professional resources.
- Include multiple copies of selected titles for literature groups and research in the library. This may mean that the librarian, teachers, and principal need to explore ways to use money normally earmarked for textbooks to buy multiple copies of trade books instead. I share reviews and new titles and work with the teachers to select these materials.
- Keep up with new titles—read! The librarian needs to stay informed about what's going on in the field of children's literature: read professional books and journals (like *Book Links!*), participate in online discussion groups, attend conferences, and read lots of children's books.
- Share your knowledge. Hold a "book tea" after school to give teachers a chance to preview and reserve new books. Route new books to specific teachers who might be interested. Organize times for teachers to talk about books together. Provide thematic

collections, such as historical fiction set in the 1800s, to support classroom units of study. Recommend books for literature groups or other curricular use. When one teacher at my school switched to the fourth grade from a lower grade, I gave her a stack of age-appropriate books for the summer, and she read them on her tenth wedding anniversary trip.

What Can Teachers Do?

- Make reading children's books part of your routine. Listen to a book on tape while you're commuting to work, read a children's book while you're walking on the treadmill, or read during your students' independent reading time. Set a goal to read a certain number of books during summer vacation. Find a way to build reading into your schedule.
- Keep lists. Set up a notebook, note card file, or electronic database to keep track of your reading. List favorite books to read aloud, books for specific kinds of readers, books that have curricular tie-ins. Don't make it fancy or hard to use; create something that works for you.
- Talk to other teachers; start a book group. Part of the fun of belonging to a reading community is talking with others about the books that they've read. This can be an informal chat while eating lunch, or a more structured book group.
- Develop a strong collegial relationship with your school librarian. Let your librarian know what kinds of books you're interested in and would like to use in your classroom. Ask for recommen-

Listed below are articles from past issues of *Book Links* that relate to reading strategies. For information on how to obtain back issues, see p.3.

- "The Fishbowl: A Strategy for Assessing Independent Reading," June/July 2001, p.28
- "Literature Circles," December 2001/January 2002, p.41
- "Giving Readers a Voice: Book Discussion Groups," February/March 2002, p.28 (Available on the *Book Links* Web site through the "Archive of Online Articles" page at <http://www.ala.org/BookLinks>)
- "Revive Your Readers with CPR: A Classroom Reading Revival," August/September 2002, p.60
- "Reading & Writing: What Is Fundamental? A Teacher's Manifesto," April/May 2003, p.26
- "Ten To-Dos for Successful Read-Alouds," March 2004, p.10

dations. Stop in the library to browse at least once a week.

Teachers are role models in the reading community. If children see the joy and excitement that reading can bring to adults, they will understand that books are special, that people talk about them, share them, and are excited about them. When teachers read and talk about children's books, it becomes the standard for students, and they beg for more reading time so they can do as their teachers do.

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