

# Instilling a Lifelong Love of Reading

By Sarah Parks Duncan



Make reading a habit with these key strategies.

Each year, teachers are overwhelmed with too much to cover and an endless list of things to accomplish between the first bell

and the final report card. In addition to helping students master mandated curriculum and prep for standardized tests, there seems to be a never-ending stream of surprise fire drills and last-minute assemblies that rob instruction time. But between all the business and bustle of the school year, don't forget to help students cultivate one of the most

important habits they can possess: the practice of regular reading.

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All teachers should encourage students to become lifelong readers. People who read frequently possess stronger literacy skills overall—larger vocabularies, enhanced writing abilities, improved spelling, and better awareness of grammar and punctuation rules (Krashen 1993). Moreover, those who read regularly for pleasure are healthier, more active citizens. National data shows that habitual readers are more likely to exercise, volunteer, and participate in community activities (National Endowment for the Arts 2007). Most importantly, once a child or teen becomes a proficient reader, he or she always will be able to learn through the world of books, magazines, newspapers, and the Internet.

With current pressures from No Child Left Behind, the classroom focus often is limited to teaching students how to read and comprehend texts—even though inspiring a love of reading is equally important. Following the release of the National Reading Panel (NRP) report in 2000, many schools stopped giving students time to enjoy reading during the day. The change was implemented because of the panel's conclusion: not enough available research attested that the practice of reading improves fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development. Several researchers have criticized the NRP's report for misinterpreting studies and overlooking others; additionally, commonsense arguments support the idea that to be a better reader, it is necessary to *read*, just as students must practice math and sports to improve (Garan and DeVoogd 2008).

As the debate over reading instruction continues, teachers are hard-pressed to help students see the joy in reading when associated only with isolated reading skills and drills. For students with low reading

abilities, failing grades on reading tests can further reinforce negative attitudes and make the idea of reading as a leisure activity unimaginable. By motivating students to read and develop a reading habit, teachers can positively affect students' lives and empower them as lifelong learners. Even if teachers are concerned only with enhancing reading skills, current research suggests that reading ability and desire to read are equally important factors in students' reading achievement (Fink 2008).

So how can teachers help their students become readers? The following suggestions can go a long way in motivating your students to view reading as an enjoyable pastime instead of a school-based task.

### Be a **Reading Model**

Students are most likely to be motivated to read by adults: parents rank first, with teachers second, and librarians third (Hughes-Hassell and Lutz 2006). Though many students become readers because of parental and home influences, teachers should never discount the reading potential of students who come from environments where reading is not valued. Research has shown that teachers can have strong and lasting effects on students' reading attitudes and practices (Pitcher et al. 2007). Teachers should adopt an enthusiastic attitude toward reading and openly discuss their personal reading lives with students. Sharing book recommendations or just mentioning a recent enjoyable reading experience can help change the perceptions and beliefs of nonreaders.

Unfortunately, not all teachers read for pleasure. Nathanson, Pruslow, and Levitt (2008) found that most graduate education students viewed reading as important, yet many were disinterested and

did not engage in regular personal reading. Applegate and Applegate (2004) referred to this circumstance as the "Peter Effect," alluding to the Apostle Peter's confession that he could not give what he did not have. Teachers can't expect students to be excited about reading if they themselves are not personally engaged in reading for pleasure.

### Give Them **Choices**

Providing students with the opportunity to choose what they read helps them to invest in their own learning. Choice fulfills an important need in older children and adolescents; autonomy empowers students intrinsically and gives them a feeling of self-control (Gaskins 2008). Once students perceive that the teacher respects their right to choose their own reading selections, then they will respond by increasing their effort and taking control of their own learning (Wigfield 2004). Additionally, research data indicates that when teachers offer reading choices, students are motivated to read more (Moss and Hendershot 2002).

When students are asked what motivates them to read in school, having choice in what they read is one of the most frequently cited responses (Lesesne 2003). To increase student enjoyment while also meeting curricular demands, teachers can present students with different levels of choice. A trip to the school library to select any book on the shelf is a wonderful way to let students explore and sample. Students also can be motivated with more limited options such as choosing their own text within a specified genre or picking from a list of reading selections.

### Provide **Reading Time**

One of the most effective practices for helping students become readers is the use of Silent Sustained

Reading (SSR) in the classroom. Known by many different acronyms—such as DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), USSR (Uninterrupted Silent Sustained Reading), and SQUIRT (Sustained Quiet Uninterrupted Reading Time)—the idea of independent, free-choice reading has been around since the late 1960s (Pillgreen 2000). A large number of studies support the use of SSR as a way to improve reading attitudes and to help students see reading as a pleasurable activity (Chua 2008). In contrast, many teachers and administrators reject SSR because they view the time as recreational rather than educational. However, time spent reading is the most effective way to help students develop their reading processes and should be viewed as an essential part of literacy development (Allington 1994).

A common complaint about SSR programs is that a number of students do not read during the specified time; yet, teacher involvement can effectively combat this problem. Methe and Hintze (2003) found that more students participated when the teacher was modeling engaged, enthusiastic reading instead of grading papers or doing other tasks. Also shown to be effective are brief teacher conferences with unengaged readers to discuss the reading assignment (Bryan, Fawson, and Reutzell 2003).

### Provide **Access to Materials**

Teachers should give students easy access to high-interest

reading materials by setting up a classroom library. When books are within reach, students are more likely to pick them up and read them. Volumes of research point to the importance of a print-rich home environment in creating lifelong readers; for students without that advantage, however, the classroom library must function to give students access to reading material. Classroom libraries also help promote positive reading attitudes and lead to improved reading performance (Young and Moss 2006).

In stocking a classroom library, teachers should select the kind of texts that are popular with students—not just the books that teachers feel students “should” be reading. Teachers need to broaden their concept of reading material and supply students with a wide range of fiction and nonfiction books, including not only age-appropriate books, but also what Lesesne (2003) referred to as “sub-literature”—comics, series books, magazines, and other materials not traditionally read in school. For those students intimidated by books, a magazine or comic book might be the best way to ease them into reading by offering a comfortable, risk-free reading experience.

### Read **Aloud**

Reading aloud to students is a strong motivational tool that effectively increases students’ reading interest and engagement at any age. Though reading aloud is a frequent practice of teachers in primary grades, many teachers neglect the practice once students can read on their own; yet studies

show that students in middle and high school are motivated by listening to reading and enjoy it (Pitcher et al. 2007). In addition to motivation, the many cognitive benefits from listening to reading include improved vocabulary, listening comprehension, visualization ability, and syntax and usage understanding (Beers 2003).

Teacher read-alouds bring literature to life within the classroom! For readers who are reluctant to pick up a book or unable to understand one on their own, the practice provides an avenue into a love of reading by exposing students to the excitement of a story. Teachers should approach reading to the class as a performance by selecting a high-interest story or text and reading it in a way that captures and holds students’ attention. Audiobooks can accomplish some of the same things and are a good option, but they can’t really replace the “live” listening experience created when you take the stage and read to your students.

### Provide **Opportunities to Connect**

After students engage in reading experiences, teachers should follow up with discussion—a natural after-reading activity for most lifelong readers. In fact, one of the strongest shared traits of children and teens who are readers is regular social interaction to discuss books with friends or family members (Strommen and Mates 2004). Also, collaboration in the classroom helps increase students’ intrinsic motivation to read and learn. Being part of a group increases a student’s feeling of “relatedness,” which fills a

need in children and young adults, helping them to feel accepted, connected, and more motivated in the classroom (Antonio and Guthrie 2008).

Chats about reading can focus on a discussion of text that encourages students to share their connections and reflections. One way to do this is through literature circles, which are modeled after real-life adult book clubs. Literature circles offer students input into choosing a shared reading selection for their small group, and scheduled discussion meetings give students a chance to share their thoughts and connections (Daniels 1994). Another way to integrate after-reading discussion is to invite students to report on recent good and bad reading experiences. This is a great way to share book recommendations and support a community of readers.

### Keep Reading Fun

Using the strategies described can improve students' reading abilities and help them to develop positive reading attitudes. Don't let the pressure of standardized reading tests make you miss out on giving students the gift of a reading habit. When you feel the stress getting to you, pick up a good book for yourself and remember this quote from Jim Trelease's *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (2001, xix): "What we teach children to love and desire will always outweigh what we make them learn." ■

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